

Red Wolves howling

They're the only true wolves in Africa and only a few hundred remain in the highlands of Ethiopia. So tracking rare Ethiopian wolves is a unique and unforgettable wildlife experience.

✎ KERI HARVEY

Warm morning sunshine bathes Bale Mountains National Park in southern Ethiopia, home to endemic mountain nyala and highly endangered Ethiopian wolves. It is 8:00am as we breakfast on chilli-laced omelettes and potent Ethiopian coffee. "I think we should be up on the plateau by 9:00," says our guide Solomon Weldu, as he sips his strong, black brew. "The wolves don't like early morning because it's too cold for them, but as it warms up they will start waking up. Then they go hunting and they are easier to spot."

We bundle into the 4x4 vehicle, taking with us scarves and sweaters and caps. At over 4 300 metres high, the Sanetti plateau in Bale Mountains National Park is wild, cold and often windswept, but this is the chosen habitat of these rare, red wolves. Slowly our vehicle claws its way higher and higher up the mountain dirt road, edging ever closer to where the wolves live. Past little villages on the lower slopes, the vegetation grows ever sparser as we move skywards. And then

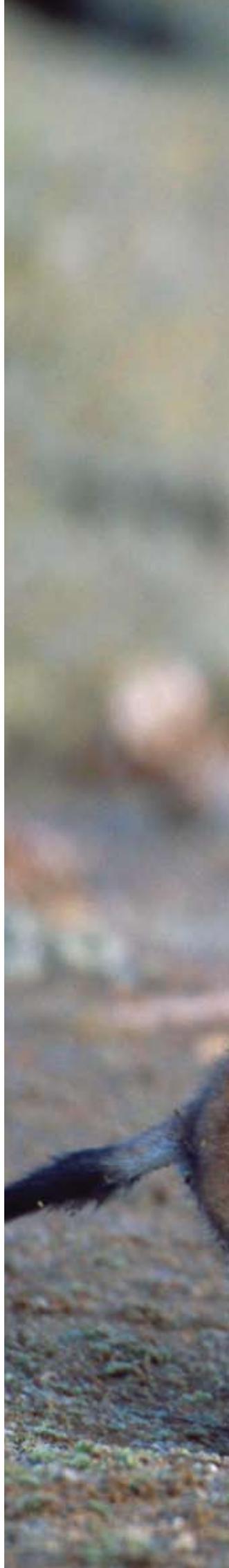
we land on the level of the Sanetti plateau, an afro-alpine moorland with swirling mist and cloud. The vegetation is scrubby and wind-swept, with only giant spiky lobelias, some standing five metres tall, punctuating the landscape. Closer to ground level, pom-poms of grey everlasting bushes give the area a surreal appearance.

Locals call the wolves *ky kebero* in their Amharic language, which translates into 'red jackals'. They have also long been called 'foxes', until genetic work clarified their status as true wolves. Ethiopian wolves have burnt orange coats that appear fox-like, and they hunt and bark like jackals, but their closest relatives are actually the grey wolves and coyotes of North America.

With just a handful of Ethiopian wolves in existence across the country, the Sanetti Plateau offers the best chance of seeing these rare animals in the wild. They're easier to spot here, as the plateau is flat and the vegetation sparse. When the sun warms the day, the wolves slowly wake up hungry after the long, cold night. Breakfast is their top priority, their favourite pickings being giant mole rats.

We scan the surrounding landscape with powerful binoculars. A half hour passes and we watch intently for wolves. Then Solomon's trained eye sees one. "Look to your left," he says, "there in the distance, but he's moving very fast, too fast to see properly." Patiently we keep scanning the area for the sleek orange wolves, determined to see one clearly – and up close if possible. The wolves are too quick to track on foot and the air up here at over 4 300 metres is raspingly thin and cold, so spotting Ethiopian wolves from a vehicle is far more efficient.

Then, as the sun breaks through the mist we see another wolf, standing stoically staring straight ahead. Solomon edges the vehicle closer for a better view and we sit quietly and in awe of this rare animal going about his morning rituals. After they've patrolled their territories, the wolves start hunting for breakfast. This wolf is watching for any sign of a giant mole rat. Lithe and elegant, the wolves hunt alone. They stalk the kilogram-heavy rodents and pounce on them when ready for the kill, often digging up their nests to snack on their young, too. ▶





We drive on slowly, staying at a non-threatening distance while following the lone wolf on his morning hunt. A second wolf comes into view and he, too, is on the hunt, his stomach chasing him to find food fast. Before long, the first wolf stops dead in his tracks, nose to the ground. Then he pounces on a mole rat with all fours and swiftly makes off carrying his hairy breakfast with him. It's a short, sharp affair. Three blinks and you'd miss it. On the Sanetti plateau it's a matter of being quick or going without.

Precision hunters, the Ethiopian wolves in Bale do sometimes band together to hunt bigger prey, such as hares, hyraxes and even small antelope – but they are primarily lone rangers. In contrast to their hunting tactics, the wolves are very social animals. Packs can number up to 13 adults, and are always dominated by males because the males remain in their natal ranges.

Quite the opposite, females venture off to seek breeding opportunities elsewhere. However, every pack – which may have a range of up to 13 square kilometres – is ruled by an alpha pair, and the whole pack helps to raise the pups.

Listed as Critically Endangered, the Ethiopian wolf is an endemic species that also feeds on an endemic species. This means that conservation and protection on two fronts is needed to save these wolves from extinction. Over half the world's Ethiopian wolf population lives in the Bale Mountains, with other tiny populations occurring in six isolated mountain ranges across Ethiopia, including the iconic Simien Mountains. Seeing wolves in any of these other ranges, however, is pure luck.

Ethiopian wolves didn't always live in such small pockets or at such high altitude. Humans have forced them further up the mountain as farmers cultivate higher up the

mountainsides and into the wolves' territories. With this encroachment, the wolves are at greater risk of contracting disease from domestic dogs – a real issue that nearly wiped out the wolf population in Bale 20 years ago.

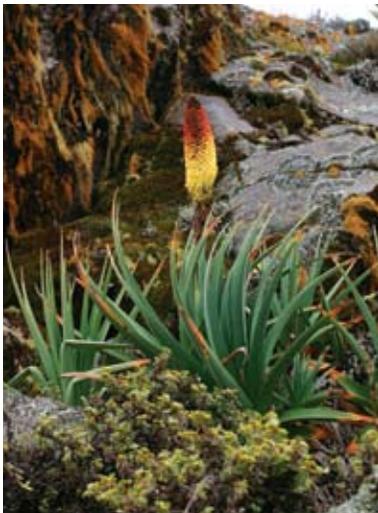
Interbreeding of wolves with domestic dogs is another problem facing Ethiopian wolves. The result is hybrid pups, which are also fertile, and which, if they continue to reproduce, will extinguish the wolves' unique gene pool. And of course, as the wolves' fragile habitat is nibbled at by farmers, there is less food for them because there is less food for their food. In the nick of time, the Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Project curbed the extinction of the wolves, but continue to fight the good fight to save these rare creatures across Ethiopia while also focusing international attention on the critical status of the animal and their necessary conservation as Africa's only wolf.



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As the mist continues to swirl across the Sanetti plateau we stop the vehicle to walk a little in rare wolf territory. Breathing is difficult at such altitude, so we take it slowly. We've seen six wolves this morning, more than we ever expected. Then, as we stand gazing across the plateau, feeling like we are literally on top of the world, a wolf dashes just metres in front of us. He's an orange blur of speed, too quick to even see clearly, but more than enough to give us a shiver of delight. And an indelible memory of Ethiopia's rarest. *