



The population of endemic Ethiopian wolves in their stronghold of the Bale Mountains has been halved by an epidemic of Canine Distemper Virus that spilled-over from domestic dogs

Ethiopian wolves, the most endangered of all African carnivores, teeter on the brink of extinction. In their stronghold in the Bale Mountains wolves live in close contact with people. Whilst this coexistence is encouraging, it places the wolves at great risk of catching diseases from domestic dogs used to herd livestock. The Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme (EWCP), in partnership with the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA), has been actively protecting the wolves in Bale Mountains since 1988.

In July 2015 Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) was detected in the abundant population of domestic dogs surrounding wolf habitat in the Bale Mountains National Park (BMNP). By September 2015 CDV had spilled-over to the wolves, and many died between then and March 2016. In total the carcasses of 30 wolves were found in the Web Valley, the Sanetti Plateau and East Morabawa, three core populations intensively monitored by EWCP and BMNP staff. An additional 31 adult wolves are unaccounted for from 19 wolf packs, representing an average decline of 52% in these populations, when compared with the estimated size of these populations in March 2015.

As a result, there are currently an estimated 130 adult Ethiopian wolves surviving in Bale Mountains (not including the pups born during the year). This is just about half of a population of 250 adults that would live in Bale in normal circumstances.

“The situation is dire. Although some 200 Ethiopian wolves live in other populations in the Simien, Arsi, Wollo and Menz, the Bale Mountains remain the stronghold for the survival of this emblematic canid and their survival relies in the effective management of disease risks in the future. For that purpose, EWCP, BMNP, Frankfurt Zoological Society and EWCA are working together on an integrated disease management plan to tackle the risk of disease, which we hope to implement soon in the Bale Mountains”, said Professor Claudio Sillero, EWCP founder and director.

What happened?

EWCP wolf monitors found the first carcass on 30th September in the Web Valley, and CDV was swiftly confirmed by the Animal and Plant Health Agency in the UK. Intense monitoring found that wolves in Morabawa to the south were also dying, with two carcasses found in October. By January, the virus had reached the wolves in the Sanetti Plateau. The wolves in Bale were recovering from a rabies outbreak in 2015, and as a result most wolves were

protected against rabies, but that did not prevent CDV infection. The last dead wolf was found in March, and observations by EWCP wolf monitors pack composition have stabilized, with many pups surviving the epidemic.

CDV is highly virulent, and progressed slowly across the Bale population, as opposed to rabies that spreads like wildfire. In the past rabies had been contained by capturing and vaccinating wolves, an expensive and difficult task, but successfully accomplished. EWCP had been trialling a CDV vaccine when the outbreak unleashed. Once permission was granted in February, EWCP was able to extend the CDV vaccination trial to assess its efficacy in protecting wolves in Chafadalacha, east of Sanetti. This vaccination campaign is ongoing. In the meantime the BMNP, FZS and EWCP are continuing an awareness campaign with the woredas and local communities in and around the BMNP to control the dog population.

What's next?

Protecting Ethiopian wolves from infectious diseases requires an integrated approach, the involvement of several partners and strong political support. Such a plan has been proposed by EWCP and is currently under consideration by the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority. The integrated disease management plan proposed will fight the scourge of disease in many fronts, from excluding domestic dogs from the National Park, vaccinating dogs and the use of preventive vaccination to protect the wolves themselves.

After successful trials, EWCP and its partners are ready to implement a widespread preventive oral rabies vaccination in the now fragile Bale population, pending approval of this plan. Developing ways to prevent CDV infection is also a priority and trials are already under way.

More information

The Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme (**EWCP**) is a WildCRU (www.wildcru.org), University of Oxford endeavour in partnership with the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA) and the Regional Governments. The Born Free Foundation (www.bornfree.org.uk) and Wildlife Conservation Network (www.wildnet.org) are the main donors that enable EWCP to protect the world's rarest canid. EWCP has been actively protecting the wolves in Bale Mountains since 1988.

E: info@ethiopianwolf.org

T +251 911 864698 (Eric Bedin)

T +251 911 064898 (Edriss Ebu)

T +44 1865 611113 (Claudio Sillero)

For more information on Ethiopian wolf conservation go to www.ethiopianwolf.org