

Protecting Kenya's National Parks

Training the Kenya Wildlife Service Airwing

I often wear a little leather choker with two bronze elephant tusks. I picked it up a few years ago in a Nairobi gallery called Matt Bronze, and it reminds me of the wild things that still live in Kenya. Sometimes I wonder if they'll still be there the next time I return, or the next time after that, or 10 to 20 years from now, and if so, will they be living free? Will elephants still walk slowly into the sunset in herds of a hundred or more—a bull, mothers, aunts, sisters, sons and daughters, a perfect family unit—or will they become rarer and possibly extinct? Will the parks be fenced and come to resemble large zoos or will they remain as they do now, places that time hasn't touched or wounded?

Undoubtedly, Kenya's animals, especially elephants and rhinos, will become increasingly endangered as they're subjected to warfare by bad neighbors—lawless countries ruled by warlords—and greedy consumers who hire poachers, men with no chance of finding



work who are desperate to feed their families. Human encroachment due to an expanding population also is to blame, and some animals are killed for bush meat (aka "dinner"), while others are killed by farmers or tribesmen in territorial disputes.

Luckily, there's the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), whose mission is to "sustainably conserve and manage Kenya's wildlife and its habi-

tat." The KWS Airwing's 12 pilots focus on taking care of 33 national parks, reserves and sanctuaries, and they fly missions and patrols primarily in Huskies, Super Cubs and Cessna 180s. The KWS Airwing also flies a Bell Long Ranger to support ground rangers and a Cessna Caravan to support elephant relocation projects. The pilots fly their missions over thousands of square miles of territory ranging from coast, savannah and desert to forest and mountains; they largely operate off of dirt and gravel airstrips—some short, some straight, some crooked—and often at high altitudes. Except for the coastal region, most of Kenya sits on a high plateau ranging from 2,000 feet MSL to Mt. Kenya National Park, where the patrolled area of Mt. Kenya sits on the equator at almost 19,000 feet MSL, making it the African continent's second highest peak after Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Patrols are done low and slow, often at 200 feet AGL. The pilots look for dead and injured animals, signs of poachers, lost tourists and illegal cattle in the parks (tribesmen often illegally graze livestock in the national parks, especially during times of drought). The pay is low, the days are long and the flying is risky.

While they're skilled, the pilots are often low-time, and until 2000, there was no system for recurrency training in place, a combination allowing any pilot to develop bad habits. The KWS's accident rate has been high in the past, but not all of the incidents are the fault of the pilots. For example, at Tsavo National Park, a Husky was recently dragged out of a shade hangar and destroyed by a frisky young elephant. Animals often cross the airstrips—giraffes, zebras, elephants, warthogs, ostrich, etc.—and are potential hazards. Maintenance also is an issue because of the

bush nature of the airstrips. Perhaps the only thing that KWS pilots don't have to worry about when flying patrols is other traffic.

I've been going to Kenya as a CFI since 2000, when Dr. Bill Clark, a wildlife expert, pilot, member of the Israeli Wildlife Service and long-time contributor to the efforts of the KWS Airwing, organized the first of an ongoing program of recurrency training for the KWS. Recently, we completed our sixth session at Kilaguni Airstrip in Tsavo West, training each of the 12 KWS pilots. The idea behind Dr. Clark's efforts has been that if we can teach discipline and precision and provide some

focused on Super Cub and Decathlon training. For the first time, we had a formalized ground school focusing on risk management, which was provided by John and Martha King of King Schools, and it was very well received.

Thanks to the generous support of the Lindbergh Foundation, we had one of the best and most comprehensive training sessions ever. The foundation's mission is "to improve the quality of life through a balance between technology and nature." It's a perfect match and a

great combination of efforts to help save some of Earth's most precious natural resources. Learn more at www.kws.go.ke, www.lindberghfoundation.org and www.pattywagstaff.com. P&P

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Earth Day At Sun 'n Fun

Earth Day is Wednesday, April 22, 2009. Sun 'n Fun is planning a day of activities and will also have an eco-friendly technology exhibit area. A documentary by Miles O'Brien about this year's KWS training will be screened; check your Sun 'n Fun schedule for exact details.

aerobatics and unusual attitude training to this group of gifted and dedicated pilots, then the accident rate would drop, benefiting the pilots, the airplanes and the park's great resources—i.e., the animals.

After training at Amboseli (at the base of Kilimanjaro) for the program's first two years, the training has moved to Kilaguni, where there's a Serena Lodge adjacent to the airstrip, giving us more time to train and a quicker walk to the showers at the end of the day. Over the years, we've trained pilots in a variety of aircraft—from a Zenair with a giraffe paint scheme to Cessna 180s and 182s, Super Cubs and Huskys. We've given specialized aerobatic and unusual attitude training in a Cessna 150 Aerobat and, more recently (thanks to the generous contributions of friends), a Super Decathlon dedicated to training.

It's through the combined effort of the KWS, Dr. Clark, the volunteer CFIs, the KWS pilots and the sponsors of the training program that the KWS Airwing's safety record has dramatically improved since 2000. I'm hopeful that the recurrency training, which is necessary for all pilots on an ongoing basis, and the unusual attitude and aerobatic training have contributed to the cause of safety.

This year, we were joined by Dr. Rich Sugden of Jackson, Wyo., who shared the pilot training with me. Dr. Sugden spent hours in the Husky's backseat, while I

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