

ONE ON ONE

3

The African painted dog might not have the widespread appeal of a panda or a whale but a Perth man has put his life on the line to try to save it from extinction, writes **Steven Hounsome**

What springs to mind when you read the words "endangered animal"? The snow leopard? Blue whale? Giant panda? It's not likely the African painted dog is the first on your list, but it is for zoologist John Lemon.

For him, the protection of this somewhat maligned carnivore has become a life's work.

With his solid handshake and looking perfectly at home in King Gees and workboots, the reason he gives for being so attracted to the dogs may be surprising: it's their compassionate character. "They look after their weak and injured, and when they make a kill, the puppies are the first ones to eat — that's what draws me to the dogs, their caring nature," explained Mr Lemon, an acting curator at Perth Zoo.

"I think they're brilliant. Humans could take a leaf out of their book."

The 35-year-old was born and raised in Dubbo, NSW, and became fascinated with animals at an early age. He drove cattle on his grandmother's farm and worked after school at his local pet shop. In 1989 his dream of working full-time with animals came to fruition when he landed a job at Australia's biggest open range zoo — Western Plains, in his home town.

He specialised in African carnivores and primates, taking a particular interest in the painted dog, and he was involved in breeding around 100 of the species at the zoo.

Fast-forward to 2000 and a NSW Zoo Friends Fellowship enabled him to travel to Zimbabwe to see the dogs he had worked with for so many years in their natural habitat. The trip would prove to life-changing.

"I just fell in love with it and I promised to myself I would try to do more for the dogs," he said. "In 2002, I quit my job and went full-time to build the world's biggest painted dog rehabilitation facility. I spent all my superannuation and stayed until I ran out of money."

In 2003, he and several colleagues established an organisation dedicated to protecting the animal, Painted Dog Conservation Incorporated. At this time he also took a job at Perth Zoo and has been travelling between WA and Zimbabwe ever since.

Perth Zoo has nine painted dogs and the animal is not, perhaps, an immediate crowd-pleaser with its spindly legs, shrill cry, patchy colouring and a penchant for rolling in elephant faeces.

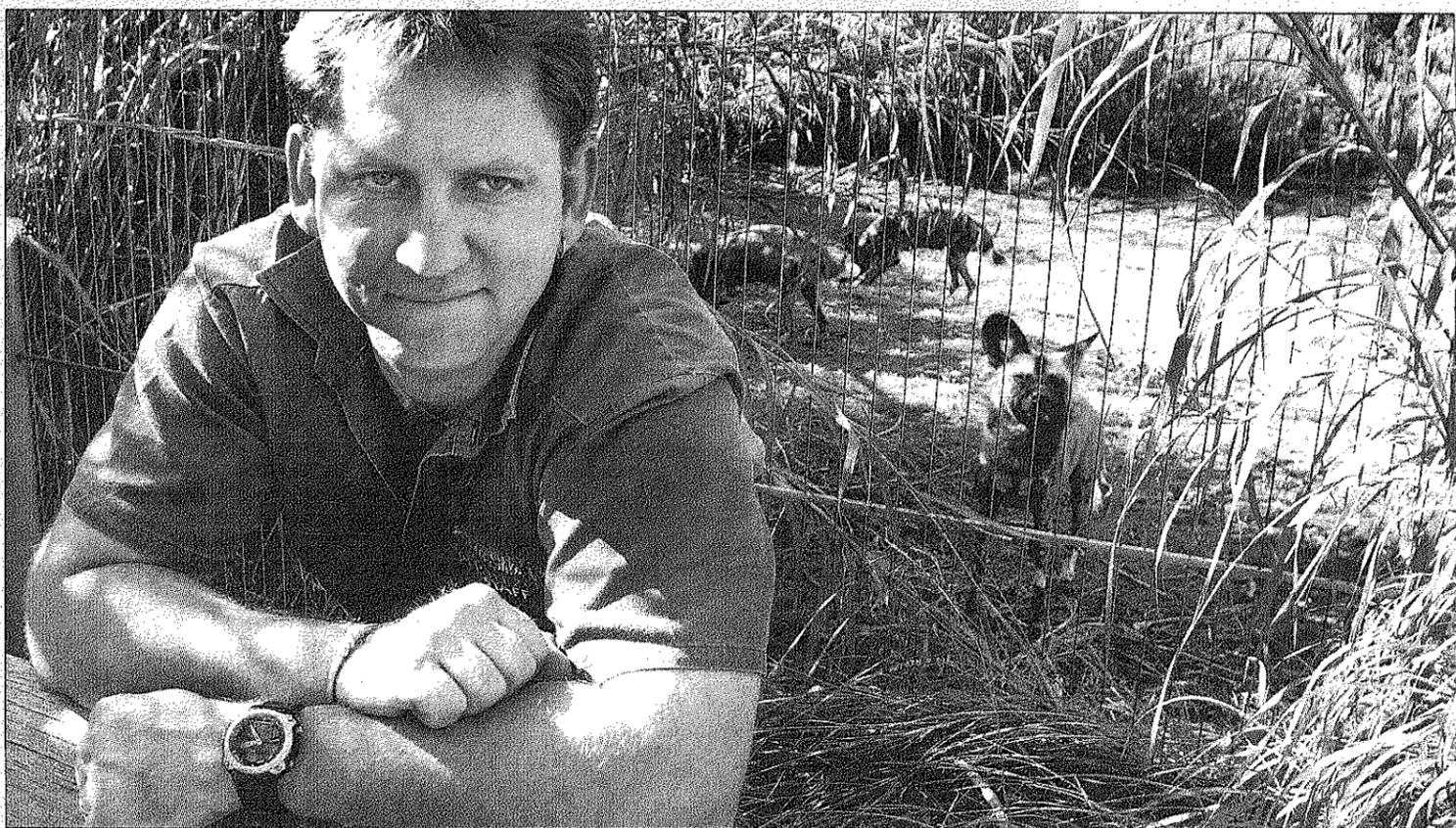
Its hunting technique may initially appear gruesome, too. One of the most successful land predators in the world, the painted dog is fast and highly strategic. When close to its prey, one grabs the muzzle, one the hindquarters and the rest move in to disembowel their victim.

Despite being efficient hunters with strong family units, the future of the painted dog remains in doubt. Mr Lemon rates their chance of becoming extinct within the next decade at greater than 50 per cent.

They've existed for about 12 million years and once totalled around 300,000 in 39 countries across the African continent, but now their numbers have dwindled to an estimated 2500. Humans are mostly to blame. Road accidents, snaring and being shot by farmers are all regular events. Often the dogs are not a target, merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

One of Mr Lemon's tasks is to rescue dogs that have been caught in snares; over the past four years his team has removed 10,000. He says it can be a heart-wrenching experience.

He recalls a time in 2002 when his team came across a severely

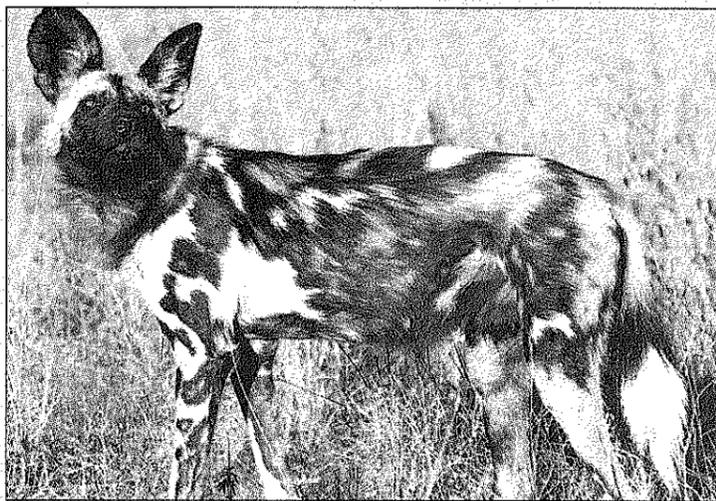


Gone to the dogs: John Lemon is an acting curator at Perth Zoo, which has nine African painted dogs. Picture: Greg Burke

Saviour of the painted dog



Caring: The African painted dog looks after the weak and injured.



Deadly: Their hunting technique makes them extremely successful predators.

dehydrated and emaciated dog trapped in two snares. "To survive two snares shows the resilience of these animals. Both were still wrapped around its throat, attempting to garrotte the life out of its body. One snare had been in place so long that the skin had grown over it. The second had cut through its trachea, leaving a hole the size of a 10¢ piece. Within all the minced flesh lay a small city of worms and maggots."

Efforts to transport the injured dog were hampered when his LandRover died, so John got help the hard way. He walked 30km through the Zimbabwean bush at night, teeming with wildlife, to the nearest farm lodge.

The owner lent one of his unused

pet lion yards for the dog's rehabilitation. "Four months later, after daily care, he was released to a local pack," Mr Lemon said. "Watching him run off with the others was a sight that would bring a tear to the eye of the toughest souls."

Another important aspect of the group's work is relocating packs of painted dogs to areas where they can exist in relative safety.

In March, Mr Lemon took four dogs to a controlled area where they could learn to hunt for themselves — a place, ironically, called Starvation Island.

The dogs had become so attached to their carers they swam after the team as they departed. The group urgently got the dogs back to dry land — the water they were paddling in

had an abundance of crocodiles.

In May, Mr Lemon transported 16 animals from South Africa to the rehabilitation centre in Zimbabwe. It required months of planning and the team spent four days making the trek, at one stage driving for 32 hours at a stretch. They were received warmly in Zimbabwe, met by that country's minister of environment.

But the job of protecting the dogs is more often a case of hard slog with little recognition. He reels off some of his alarming experiences in catching dogs. "You've got to run over and place a hessian bag around it and inject it all in one, and in the dark, without getting bitten. It's hair-raising stuff."

On one occasion he suffered teeth tearing straight through his knuckle.

He has had hyenas circling him for a feed while he slept, faced off a venomous black mamba snake which stood at two-thirds his height, stamped out a grass fire threatening to engulf his camp — and been victim of theft when baboons ran off with his pots and pans.

But it was a run-in with humans that had the biggest impact on him. That was the only time, he says, when he's questioned whether he had the nerve to continue his work in Africa.

"I met some characters who were part of the anti-white faction and got beaten up. I fought back but was battered from the experience."

Fundraising is a constant issue. "You do conservation work and people think that you're getting your jollies, that you shouldn't be paid for it," Mr Lemon said. "But conservation costs money. We're looking at around \$US250,000 (\$328,000) a year just in Zimbabwe."

Mr Lemon's wife, Angela, also a zoologist, is supportive of the project and has been over to Africa several times. But Mr Lemon admits it can be tough. "Every time I go away it's getting harder on my wife," he says. "She stayed at home and paid the mortgage while I was off trying to save a species from extinction."

"My dream is to have my own children on my lap in the front of the LandRover, seeing the stuff I see and doing the stuff I do. I could work a 9-to-5 job my whole life and never have done this or I can try with the rest of my team, to succeed. And we have. We've grown the number of dogs in Zimbabwe from 350 to 750."

Still, the painted dog is a long way from being taken off the critically endangered list and he believes raising awareness about its plight is the key to success.

"You only save what you love and you only love what you understand. I sometimes joke to myself that if we could only get, in the next Lion King-type film, a dog character, we'd be sold. If the dog became a household name, things would be different."

Maybe one day, through the efforts of John Lemon, they will. And the painted dog will be able to shake off its image problem and find a place in our affections — just like the cuddly panda and spectacular blue whale.