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## Conservation planes: Flying to save our wilderness

written by Sue Adams | May 26, 2020



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Who knew that wild dogs could make a cockpit smell so terrible? Or that three large male lions loaded into a Cessna would cause the plane tail to collapse? Or that a Bat Hawk could fly with a bullet hole in its wing, without the pilot noticing? But this is every-day stuff for the men and women pilots of conservation. Flying helicopters and planes to chase poachers or transport animals is rarely as dashing as it sounds.

“And it’s just a different kind of flying,” says Rob Timcke of Flying 4 Rhino and Conservation in Hoedspruit, Limpopo. Rob

and I are in the skies, and his head is craning as he peers intently at the ground, the wind through the open sides of the plane streaking through our hair.



in rhino poaching. Rob scans the bush constantly and, when he spots two waterbuck at a canter, he swoops down to take a closer look.



Later he explains to me that in this kind of work you need to have some knowledge of animal behaviour. The waterbuck were two males and were fighting. If they had been females he would question what had disturbed them – a carnivore or possibly a poacher.

An ex hunter and shark diver, Rob started the Flying 4 Rhino and Conservation Trust in 2013. “We can no longer sugar-coat what is happening in South Africa,” says Rob. “People need to see the gory details. Imagine what it’s like to come across a poached dead rhino and calf with their horns hacked off?” He reckons we are nowhere near to winning the rhino war and his job of surveillance flying is just buying time until a proper solution is found.

“Any time the rangers on the ground find anything like a cut fence, or signs of poachers, or at worst a dead animal, we scramble to get in the air as fast as possible. And if we have the funds, we just keep on flying so that poachers know we are watching.”

Flying 4 Rhino uses planes called Bat Hawks that can fly low and slow, are cheap to run and easy to fly. They’re proudly South African built by Terry Pappas and his father Andrew, who used to sell what was called a Bantam (from New Zealand) but have since started their own business making Bat Hawks. Terry has joined us on our flight and, as we bounce over the grass runway he points out, “We don’t have soft green grass like New Zealand and need a stronger plane more suited to hostile conditions.”



*The Flying 4 Rhino Bat Hawk has to be able to land on all kinds of airstrips. (Photo Flying 4 Rhino)*

The versatile Bat Hawks are now being snapped up by conservation people across Africa. “Botswana has bought 14 for its military and wildlife services, we have supplied reserves in Tanzania and Kenya as well as Mozambique, and interest is huge,” says Terry. They are classed as Light Sport Aircraft and look to my untrained eye like a bigger version of a microlight.

Rob says he can attest to their safety.

out when I landed." It's a sobering thought to hear Rob say, "I will keep flying as long as I can make a difference."

A Bat Hawk named Mofalodi belonging to North West Parks is in the hangar, and Terry tells me the story. "An orphan rhino was found next to her dead mother in Pilanesberg and they called it Mofalodi, meaning survivor. The park uses our Bat Hawks for patrols and anti-poaching and they named their newest Bat Hawk after the baby rhino."

But flying for conservation is so much broader than just anti-poaching. "Our Bat Hawks are used for fence patrols, fire monitoring, erosion and alien-vegetation monitoring, and aerial surveys," says Terry. "We can bulletproof the undercarriage and add on gun mountings but often that is not necessary. People do amazing work in farout places."

Father and son team, Mark and Pete Jackson, are two gentle giants who also fly in the name of conservation by fighting fires. "Life and limb come first. That's our motto," says Mark as we stand on the side of the Stellenbosch airfield surrounded by bright-yellow Working for Fire planes and helicopters, ready to fight a fire on Table Mountain.

"It's essential to work as a team," explains Mark. "We have spotter planes that tell us what is happening with the fire and where we can pick up water. They will also look for high-tension wires and tell us where to drop the ground crew. Without them we would be boxing in the dark."



The wind is gusting and I query how safe it is to fly in high winds and thick smoke. "That comes with the job," says Mark. He explains that they firefight at low levels and are at constant risk of hitting high-tension wires, trees and radio masts masked by thick smoke, and are picking up huge buckets of water.

"I have also been threatened with a shotgun," says Mark with a wry smile. One farmer got very possessive about the water in his dam and waved his gun at Mark's helicopter.

To keep the peace, Mark used a dam further away and the fire started burning the unhappy farmer's vineyards. After apologising profusely, he asked that Mark use his dam to extinguish the fire. "We have the right to pick up water anywhere," says Mark. "When people and their homes are threatened we do everything we can to protect them."

Mark and his team at Leading Edge Aviation move between the Western Cape and Mpumalanga, spending six months in each place during the respective fire seasons. Until now they have flown the Huey helicopter which is ex-military and widely used around the world. However, Mark recently brought in a Black Hawk helicopter that Pete Jackson and pilot Tosh Ross fly together.

"With this we are even more effective and can drop three tons of water on a fire at one time," Pete explains. "It flies fast (270km/h), is safer with two pilots and we can even transport a white rhino in a hammock if we need



*Ryan Beeton is one of the Bateleur volunteer pilots who give their time and expertise freely in aid of conservation.*

Then there are the Bateleurs, a non-profit NGO of dedicated volunteer pilots who want to help the environment and conservation by using their time, flying skills and aircraft free of charge. “I love flying and I love the bush and wildlife, so this is a really special way for me to combine all of that,” says pilot Ryan Beeton.

Ryan has just returned from a mission to move wild dogs to the Northern Cape to start a new pack, and another moving lions to two locations to introduce new genetic potential. “And this didn’t come without complications,” he says with a big smile.

He tells me about the vet, Rowan Leeming, who had to deal with wild dogs that were active and difficult to dart, as well as a couple of wild lions that were trying to attack the darted dogs through the boma fence. Pilots Ryan Beeton and Steve Beck had other issues like unseasonal rain in the Kalahari that made the runway slippery, storms around Hluhluwe in KwaZulu-Natal, and low cloud.

Apart from adverse weather, three particularly heavy lions caused the tail of the Cessna to drag on the ground. “We propped up the tail on a barrel while we loaded the animals and then had to use the entire runway before the plane took off,” says Ryan. He explains how they took out all the seats and lined the plane with plastic to protect it. “These animals can be messy and smelly.”

Not all Bateleur missions are as complex as this one. It can be a simple reconnaissance flight over mining sites to evaluate rehabilitation or to check for illegal dumping. Researchers often use the Bateleur services, and sometimes there is a rescue mission of an injured animal, like moving a sick pangolin in the Hoedspruit area.

Yes, it’s a risky business but, as Ryan says, “We do it because we love flying and we love wildlife. Simple as that.”

## Handy Contacts

Flying 4 Rhino and Conservation [flying4rhino.com](http://flying4rhino.com)

Their partner Wildhood Foundation works in Africa and Indonesia [www.wildhood.org](http://www.wildhood.org)

The Bateleurs – Flying for the Environment [www.bateleurs.co.za](http://www.bateleurs.co.za)

Bat Hawks [www.bathawk.co.za](http://www.bathawk.co.za)

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