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Pangolins, rescued from poachers, are being given a second chance in SA game reserves

Nicole McCain

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Helena Atkinson

- **Conservationists are rehoming pangolins that have survived the illegal wildlife trade.**
- **These rescued animals are being given a second chance in game reserves.**
- **For many of the pangolins who have been kept by poachers for weeks, their chances of survival are only around 50%.**

After weeks of being kept in cramped spaces, deprived of food and water, many pangolins rescued from the illegal wildlife trade don't survive.

But those who survive are given a second chance at some of South Africa's private game reserves, including [Beyond Phinda Private Game Reserve](#) in KwaZulu-Natal.

Since 2019, Beyond Phinda Private Game Reserve has successfully reintroduced several pangolins onto its property, with a number of them having bred and produced a second generation of these endangered animals.

All the pangolins have been rescued from the illegal wildlife trade, with many of them found in Gauteng, where they do not naturally occur, explained Johannesburg Wildlife Vet's Dr Karin Lourens.

After the rescue, they are brought to the centre for rehabilitation.

She said:

They're in quite a state. They've often been carried across borders and have been left without water for anything from a week to four weeks. They've been kept in bags, drums, or even in the wheel wells of cars. When they come in, they're very compromised, very sick.

The work to save these pangolins can be difficult. It requires urgent intervention with fluids and tube feeding, as well as the treatment of any wounds.

If they've been in captivity only a week or two, the vets have an 80% chance of saving them.

For those who have been held by wildlife traders the longest, there is the risk of fluid starting to leak into their lungs. With these pangolins, the vets have only a 50% chance of saving their lives.

Those who do recover and move on to eating solid food will not eat in captivity. This means they must be taken outdoors and monitored to forage for ants and termites.

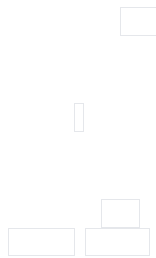
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The clinic has treated almost 200 pangolins in six years, said Lourens.

Helena Atkinson, co-chair for Southern Africa on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission (SSC) Pangolin Specialist Group Steering Committee, said that while the full extent of poaching in South Africa is not known, it poses a significant threat to the local Temminck's pangolin population.

"According to the IUCN classification of population status, they are vulnerable. There are estimates that we are only aware of and intervening in one of 10 poaching incidents, so the issue is likely much bigger," said Atkinson.

Atkinson said that statistics from a national database of all reported pangolin poaching incidents show 40 incidents this year alone, including both skins and live animals.



Meet the conservationists saving rare animals in Uganda

In a recent rescue, a pangolin was found in the boot of an e-hailing taxi. Lourens said three people had ordered the taxi from Sandton to Pretoria when the driver noticed the passengers' suitcase was moving. He purposefully stopped at a police roadblock and requested that officers search the suitcase.

They discovered a pregnant pangolin, who has since been named Bramley, said Lourens. Both the mother and pup are in good health, although Bramley had injuries to her two front claws.

Lourens says the medical bill for a pangolin can reach up to R2 000 a day. And that doesn't include the emotional investment from the staff fighting what can feel like impossible odds.



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"There's a lot of emotional effort from all of us. We put a lot of effort in. We try to pick a release site with people on the ground who can walk with them and bring them back in at night," she said.

"Pangolins are the most poached mammals. It feels that if we can't save the pangolins, what can we save?"

Once a pangolin has started gaining weight and has been cleared medically, the work begins to find a new home for it.

&Beyond Phinda Private Game Reserve is one of these sites, with a dedicated team working to ensure the pangolins settle into their new home.

Pangolins historically occurred on &Beyond Phinda Private Game Reserve, with no pangolin seen for more than 30 years after a sighting in 1986. The reserve's 30 000 hectares have become a refuge for these poached pangolins, especially as it is home to a range of vegetation types, said &Beyond South Africa conservation manager Dale Wepener.

Wepener explained:

No one really knows what vegetation pangolins like. Each pangolin has its own preferences for burrowing and food.

When a new pangolin arrives at the reserve, it is closely monitored to ensure it's eating and settling in well. This includes having a monitor accompany them on foraging walks and weigh-ins before and after feeding. Fortunately, all new residents are tagged on arrival, as they prefer dense bush areas, which can make tracking them challenging, especially as they prefer nocturnal feeding.

"A pangolin can lose as much as 500g in one night of not feeding. For a little animal that weighs between 10 and 12kg, it can very quickly lose more than 10% of its body weight," said Wepener.

Pangolins are fussy little creatures. Each individual has a preference for ants and termites, as well as burrowing. They don't like bad weather and would rather stay in their burrows in torpor than venture out.

Pangolins are also extremely territorial and will adjust their routines to avoid each other.

PICS | Man arrested for alleged possession of pangolins, dead rock pythons and monkeys

Yet the small community of pangolins is settling in well, with Beyond Phinda Private Game Reserve having several pups born in the reserve.

Atkinson said that the illegal pangolin trade is highly organised and operates across multiple countries, making it difficult for individual countries to combat it effectively individually.

"International collaboration and coordination are vital to disrupt these networks. South African conservation and law enforcement agencies often face resource limitations, including insufficient personnel, equipment, and funding.



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"These constraints hinder their ability to combat pangolin poaching and trafficking effectively. Some incidents of corruption within law enforcement agencies also pose an obstacle to anti-poaching efforts.

"Focusing on dealing with corruption is essential for curbing the illegal pangolin trade and the broader illegal wildlife trade," she said.

Atkinson said that based on the current status of the population, "everything should be done to curb [poaching] and deal with the individual animals that can be rescued and put back into the wild".

"The thing with pangolins is that every individual counts. We do need to, however, focus on the prevention of poaching as well and also the protection of habitats. Raising awareness is crucial," said Atkinson.