



Historical Records of Waterberg Wild Dogs

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African wild dogs were still to be found on the Waterberg plateau in the early part of the 20th Century, despite most of the game that used to populate the region having been shot out by then. The first to hunt game around the Waterberg were the adventurer-hunters of the 1840-1860 period; they did not come onto the plateau, but travelled around its western foothills, following the Crocodile and Limpopo rivers. They found the region teeming with game and documented their travels extensively in published works. They were followed in the 1870s by seasonal hunters from the Transvaal (mainly the Pretoria area), who would travel up to the Waterberg in winter to hunt for meat, hides and even ivory. Since virtually all these individuals were illiterate, few if any records were kept of their visits.

By the 1880s, farms in the region were being laid out (though not properly surveyed) and some were occupied throughout the year, though most were still only seasonally occupied by people from the Witwatersrand. These early settlers (most of whom did not read or write or keep diaries) also used guns for trade with local black headmen and chiefs, especially around the Ga-Seleka (Beauty) area and along the Mogalakwena river valley. This led to a rapid increase in the population of armed residents of, and visitors to the region, with the result that numbers of wild animals of all species dropped quickly. By the end of the South African War, very few game animals were left across the Waterberg plateau. Inevitably, surviving packs of wild dogs, deprived of their natural prey, either resorted to attacking domestic animals or else moved out of the region in search of sustenance.

This devastation of game species in the Waterberg and elsewhere in the northern Transvaal was well known in the old ZAR and the *Volksraad* attempted to arrest the indiscriminate killing of wild animals with several pieces of protective legislation – most of which were only nominally enforced and were opposed by representatives of the local community.

It is not surprising that the post-war settlers of the Waterberg came to think of the region as being un-populated by game species or by wild dog. Only with the transformation of the region from sub-economic pastoral farming to hunting, purely altruistic conservation, breeding, and eco-tourism activities from the 1980s did game numbers begin to increase – and with them, came the re-population of wild dog packs from the Limpopo bushveld. The presence and return of African wild dogs is a natural consequence of the re-population of the region – by commercial hunters, breeders and conservationists alike - with traditional wild dog prey; moreover, in higher concentrations than was ever previously the case.



Extracts from historical records of Waterberg residents:

1. **CR Prance** (1872-1955). Cyril Rooke Prance was a tenant on the farm Mamiaanshoek 279KQ in the western part of the Waterberg plateau (now part of the Marakele National Park) during the period 1908-1921. He later wrote several books of anecdotes based on his life there and his previous role as an officer in the South African Constabulary. The following are excerpts from the first of his books, which described the 13 years spent on Mamiaanshoek:

*“...camp is but the prelude to the ... building of a ... house on a farm yet to be wrought out of a mountain waste, till now the untroubled home only of buck and rock-rabbit, partridge and hawk, leopard, **wild dog** and jackal...”*

...Under the Blue Roof (1923), page 23.

*“Yet is the silence broken at whiles. A jackal gloating over the grisly remains of a **wild dog’s** meal wakes the baboons to angry protest against untimely reveillé...”*

... Under the Blue Roof (1923), page 25.

*“A raucous shadow of a sound swells in a moment to a chaotic tempest of noise as **a pack of wild dogs** sweeps down the vlei, questing close on the heels of a buck right past the waning [camp] fire. Donkeys, braying and clanging, go the nearest way to perdition over the rocks; cattle bellow, huddle and stampede as the bestial rout goes by, swerving at the fire, up the brae to the trackless wilds above the kloof.”*

... Under the Blue Roof (1923), page 38.

*“Still, the ten years [now 1918] have not been wholly unprofitable even on a dry commercial reckoning. Leopards and **wild dogs** have taken their toll of the herd, truly;...Yet an almost monotonous freedom from major ailments and plagues is no doubt the direct result of that remoteness from city noise...”*

...Under the Blue Roof (1923), page 88



2. **WHA Caine** (1859-1929). William Henry Atwood Caine was the manager of the New Belgium Estate on the northern Waterberg plateau from about 1894 until 1903. During the South African War, he obtained permission from the Boers to remain on the estate so as to look after his employer's property and cattle. Caine kept a diary throughout this period; the original document is in the custody of a descendant in the Cape, but copies are lodged with the National Archives in Pretoria and in the Manuscript Library of the University of Cape Town. The following is an extract from the diary:

*"28th [September 1900]. I reached Noord Brabant [HQ of New Belgium at that time] by 10a.m., the cart coming later. Found all well at Canvas Town [a settlement to the south probably on Wynkeldershoek or Giesendam 12KR, towards today's Dorset police station]... Work went on steadily until the 12th October when Smith [Caine's assistant] sent me word that **a pack of wild dogs** had put in an appearance, so on the next morning, 13th October, early, I rode over to Canvas Town sending all the horses and guns over, but I had been suffering a good deal from my head the last week and now today got an attack of lumbago which prevented me from joining the hunt, so the others went off, four of them, but never came across the wild dogs though they found the carcasses of two of my donkeys which they had killed. Smith told me that the night before, **a pack of 40 dogs** came right up to the kraals and Swarts, with a young fellow-hire, ran over with their guns, fired 5 shots and did not hit one. I think they must have been nervous as they state the dogs were all round them and not 30 paces off. However the dogs left and as I felt easier I went over this evening with Smith and Swarts to wait for them. However they never came and just as it was dark nearly dark I saw an antelope coming towards me which I shot dead."*

"18th [October]. Now comes news that fever is laying all low in the Waterberg laager and that fighting is going on at Warmbaths. So far no more of the wild dogs, but 3 dead donkeys have been found."

...Diary of WHA Caine, 2nd October 1899-2nd December 1901, pages 16-17.