

# Caring for orphans in Swaziland's Big Game Parks

The sun was scorching, the dry earth felt hard-packed beneath my boots, and the grasses were unusually low. It wasn't hard to spot the effects of the drought as I surveyed my surroundings in Big Game Parks (BGP), Swaziland.

Josephine Gibson | Partnerships Manager



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**L**ow rainfall across Southern Africa has had dire consequences on BGP, putting pressure on the land and severely depleting food and water sources for rhinos and other wildlife. Mick Reilly, BGP's Head of Conservation and Security, and his team have had to manage an ecosystem under strain from the drought; taking decisions such as translocating rhinos to areas with more browse, and providing supplementary feed for the rhinos.

It's not just the drought that is putting the rhinos in BGP at risk; there is also the constant threat of poachers. Like Kruger National Park, Swaziland shares a border with Mozambique, where many of the rhino poaching gangs originate. Rangers carry out regular anti-poaching patrols for rhinos and other wildlife. I was shocked to see tall towers of wire snares, left by poachers to trap wildlife, which rangers have found on routine patrols over the years.

Another troubling consequence of the poaching crisis and drought are the rhino calves left orphaned after their mothers die from poaching attacks or who are too weak from the drought to raise a calf. With no chance of survival in the wild, Mick and the team have stepped in to care for two rhino calves until they are strong enough to be released back into the parks.

Looking after rhino calves is a full-time job. A team works around the clock to feed them every few hours and ensure their security. During my stay, I helped on the 9 pm, midnight, 3 am and 6 am feeds; when Mick emailed beforehand to ask if I would mind doing some "baby-sitting", I hadn't quite guessed what he meant! The level of dedication I witnessed by Mick, his family and team was outstanding. This couldn't be further from a 9 to 5 job.

During my stay, I was lucky enough to meet some of the dedicated rangers who risk their lives to protect Swaziland's black and white rhinos and see first-hand the difference that donations by Save the Rhino's corporate partner *Sporting Rifle* and its readers have made in helping the rangers' anti-poaching and monitoring activities.

Mick Reilly adds, "The rangers who go out every day and night, come rain or sunshine and risk life and limb to protect Africa's rhinos are often a forgotten force in the daily hum-drum and hype created around rhino conservation. These men take the brunt of the escalating conflict and remain the true heroes in the fight of life and death. The readers of *Sporting Rifle* should therefore rest assured that

the support provided to these men is highly appreciated by Swaziland's rangers as well as the management of BGP".

I also visited remote ranger outposts used as bases for patrols, some of which were upgraded thanks to *Sporting Rifle's* donations. Due to the threat of night-time incursions into BGP, one camp was constructed to house the sleeping quarters on the roof. By elevating themselves at night, rangers are more easily able to hear any disturbances from intruders or gunshots and survey the land. Some camps also have solar panels to provide renewable energy for lighting and radios.

With strong conservation efforts, BGP has thankfully not suffered any poaching losses since a rhino was killed in 2014. Dedicated efforts by rangers and other agencies, coupled with political support of King Mswati III and strong legislation to prosecute poachers has provided a tough stance against poaching in the country. During the last 22 years, only three rhinos have been poached in Swaziland, a stark contrast to the 1,175 rhinos illegally poached in neighbouring South Africa last year. The dedicated team at BGP are working hard, but continue to need our support to provide high levels of protection and management of rhinos in areas affected by the drought.

### Grants

Since November 2015, *Sporting Rifle* and its readers have raised £10,657 for Big Game Parks' rhino conservation work.

Top to bottom:  
The new ranger outpost; Snares found by rangers; A rescued rhino calf; Rhino calves suffer from the poaching crisis and drought, with their mothers unable to care for them

