

Black rhino rescue

In 2021, Chilunda, one of North Luangwa National Park's (NLNP) black rhinos, went walkabout. Not unusual in itself – that's what young male rhinos do – but by the end of the year he'd made his way 200 km south, deep into a remote part of the Luangwa Valley. To ensure Chilunda's safety, we deployed an expert rhino protection team to his location, whilst we planned a rescue operation to bring him back to North Luangwa as soon as possible.

Claire Lewis | Project Manager, North Luangwa Conservation Programme

1 With tough terrain, security risks and, of course, the enormous logistics of moving any large animal, the rescue mission was always going to be demanding. Thankfully, with support from some of our local and international partners, we were up to the challenge.

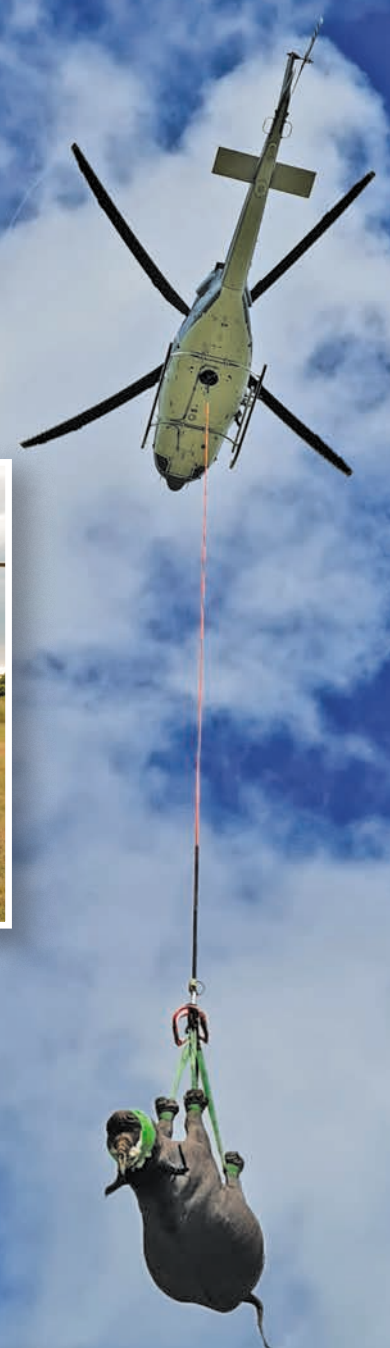
2 Months after Chilunda broke out, and once the heaviest of the rains had abated, the final preparations for his rescue were underway. With 24 hours to go, the team gathered to run through their final plans (right).



3 After finding him deep in the bush, Chilunda was immobilised, and then the vets got to work. They completed Chilunda's pre-flight checks before carefully securing his feet into sling ropes, ready to be airlifted.



4 Whilst it looks ungainly and bizarre, the 'slinging' method has proven benefits. Pioneered in Namibia and South Africa, it's one of the best ways to move a rhino: it reduces total travel time, decreases health risks, and reduces chest compression when compared to conventional crated road transport.



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5 With fuel logistics in place, we made two stops during the four-hour trip (top, left). These breaks allowed vets to check on Chilunda whilst the helicopters refuelled. Chilunda's vitals (heart rate, temperature and breathing) were all monitored, and he even got a bit of a leg massage to improve blood circulation.



6 Safely back inside North Luangwa National Park, Chilunda was carefully lowered for the third and final time (right). Once grounded, it was all-hands-on-deck to move him into the boma, where he could be closely monitored for a few weeks before being re-released back into the Park.



7 Paimolo Bwalya, Commander of the Rhino Monitoring Unit (below), enjoys a moment of peace (and thanks!) while new transmitters are implanted and the final vet checks completed, before Chilunda's sedative is reversed.



8 Despite the enormous journey, Chilunda settled into his new boma quickly, showing no ill effects. In fact, with so much tasty browse on offer, he walked straight into the second boma and began to eat!



We're all so proud and relieved to have Chilunda back safely.

A huge congratulations and thank you to the entire team for their dedication to keeping Chilunda safe throughout this record-breaking airlift.