

Counter-poaching Helicopter Pilot Jana Meyer

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Setback, strategy, and the comeback
Photographs: Lola Reid Allin and various Helicopter Life



The iconic photograph taken by South African award-winning photographer Joe Dreyer during Rhino de-horning missions in Gravelotte 2020 shows Jana Meyer stepping towards her Robinson R44 helicopter as a Rhino a few meters away watches her intently. In this scene, Jana's ability to protect endangered species, combined with the Robinson R44 helicopter she prefers to use to combat poaching, positions her as an asset to conservation efforts.

In beginning of October 2022, Jana published shattering news: she was forced to fold her wings due to circumstances out of her control.

Time starts ticking.

Poachers don't sleep and every day helicopters are

critical for this counter-poaching work. The Kruger National Park alone has a size of 2,000,000 hectares (20,000 km²), which is comparable to the size of Israel. Jana operates within the Greater Kruger National, a 344,000 hectares area to the west of the Kruger National Park, including all adjacent private game reserves. The Kruger National Park and the Greater Kruger National are not separated by fences, which allows wildlife to roam freely between them. While helicopter companies can provide these specific services, even when combined into one mission, there are still too few of them for this kind of operation area.

On December 3, 2022, Canadian award-winning photographer Lola Reid Allin and I visited Jana Meyer for

an interview in her Hangar 45 at her company Hope for Wildlife Helicopter Service, based at Hoedspruit Civil Airfield in South Africa; Hoedspruit is famous for its remarkably beautiful scenery and wide variety of wildlife that one can encounter. Jana's welcome was humble and heartwarming, but her eyes showed strength, courage, and the determination to fight. She is an asset in counter-poaching operation with her Robinson R44 helicopter, which she strongly believes in. Hangar 45, a dedicated facility of Hope for Wildlife Helicopter Service, was established in April/May this year, and has everything necessary for taking up the fight against poachers, including a call room for Jana. However, right now it lacks one vital asset tool: the Robinson R44 helicopter.

"The owner of the helicopter was hopeful that he would be able to follow through with the promised rebuild, but at the last minute informed us that due to unfortunate circumstances he would not be able to. Ideally we should have been notified of this predicament months in advance"; Jana explained.

She was forced to fold her wings in October this year, because the owner hadn't performed the required overhaul on the Robinson R44 Helicopter Piston Engine, a 2200-Hour Maintenance and Inspection. When I asked if others could step in, Jana explained that it wasn't so easy. "This combination of conservation studies, my field experience and my skills as a pilot is rare," Jana said. "You build a relationship with the clients and then estab-



Above: Rhino with the horn cut to protect it from the poachers

lish yourself in the area. It took years, and years, to get to the spot and actually earn my way.”

Losing the helicopter as an asset tool in counter-poaching operations has had a drastic impact on the whole process and makes it much more difficult to intervene on time or to catch the poachers. Not everyone who has a commercial helicopter rating and or even an additional rating can fly on wildlife rescue missions and counter-poaching operations.

Jana gives an example of the skills need in counter-poaching operations:

Using NVG (Night Vision Goggle) Jana spotted a African buffalo, also referred to as Cape Buffalo - which is rated as one of South Africa's top five most dangerous animals - just meters from the counter-poaching ground

team'. The African buffalo turned toward the ground team and was likely to charge. Jana acted quickly and, knowing how the animal would behave, flew the helicopter in a direction that caused the African buffalo to move away from the ground team.

"The skills required go beyond flying," Jana added to my question if a helicopter pilot without knowledge of wildlife operation could perform these operation, "the key is to know what is happening on the ground, and while still airborne learning how the ground team will be thinking and reacting."

One of the keys factors in changing the public's attitude towards conservation and wildlife protection measures is awareness, awareness, and more awareness. Jana understands this and takes passengers of scenic flights

Tracking techniques and skills will be taught to any rangers not already versed in the art



over the area.

"With scenic flights," she explained, "my goal is to engage the passengers and make them aware of conservation issues."

Anyone who is interested can get involved by sponsoring one of our helicopter wildlife operations, shown on Jana's company website - Hope for Wildlife Helicopter Services.

This strategy of raising public awareness, and offering passengers an incredible conservation journey and 'once in a life time' opportunity.

Jana's passion, knowledge, and the fact that she is a graduate from Nature Conservation studies, coupled with her FGASA Trails Guide and ARH qualification, make her a multifaceted pilot, giving passengers a true understanding of nature and ground operations.

As well as counter-poaching flights and scenic flights, Jana undertakes wildlife relocation, charter flights, aerial

photography, wildlife rescue missions, and patrol flights.

Jana faced three issues in October: first, it was difficult to get a Robinson R44 helicopter to lease in South Africa; second, getting her own R44 helicopter would cost around R8.970.000, including the 15% VAT, which she didn't have at the time; third, there was no support from the government.

Jana's world fell on its head as she published the news in October 2022 that everything she considered enriching had collapsed, with the one exception of her strategy, which was driven by her continued good relationship and long-term trust with South African wildlife sanctuaries; lodges; NGOs like Rhino Connect.

Luckily she found a turning point: the Serondella Game lodge together with the MJA Wildlife Fund approached Jana and agreed to help her purchase a helicopter. She added her capital to the financial backing to purchase Robinson R44 helicopter. Remarkably, Jana

PHOTOGRAPH GERALD CHEWNE



managed to buy a helicopter in just 6 weeks. This is an incredible feat and an absolute inspiration showing that anything is possible. After my interview with Jana, she informed me that her Robinson R44 helicopter is on the way and will soon find its rightful place in Hangar 45 at Hoedspruit Civil Airfield, South Africa.

Operations such as counter-poaching, wildlife relocation and helicopter rescue operations are not supported by the state; all of these helicopter operations have to be funded, and that's a constant struggle. A good way to support companies like Hope for Wildlife Helicopter Service would provide funds or services to help them maintain their aircraft, or perhaps sponsor equipment

they need to run successfully. (see <https://hopefor-wildlife.africa/> for more information).

Sam Ferreira, the Scientific Officer with the IUCN SSC African Rhino Specialist Group clarified the urgency of the need for counter-poaching services in his 22. August 2022 press release. "The overall decline in poaching of rhinos is encouraging, yet this remains an acute threat to the survival of these iconic animals." He added.

"To support the growth of rhino numbers, it is essential to continue active population management and anti-poaching activities for all subspecies across different range states."



My thanks for this article to Renate Buchner the author, to Lola Reid Allin for her photography and most of all to Jana Meyer for her incredible work with the Hope for Wildlife Helicopter Services.

*For more information please see:
www.hopeforwildlife.africa*

Left hand page: Elephants and pangolins are also regular casualties of poaching

Above: Jana Meyer and her dog Imp