



Helicopter patrols serve to deter poachers

Words & Photos Renate Buchner

Cloudless skies, more than ten kilometres of visibility, low humidity, and a temperature of 25 degrees Celsius at Hoedspruit Airport in South Africa made the weather forecast look good for a door-off helicopter patrol flight over a reserve that is part of the Greater Kruger in South Africa's Limpopo province. The private reserves of Greater Kruger and Kruger National Park no longer share fences, so animals are free to roam. This ensures a balanced ecosystem between

wildlife and vegetation. Since my last meeting in 2022, Jana Meyer, Director of Hope for Wildlife Helicopter Services, has purchased her own Robinson R44 Raven II helicopter; almost two years later, I am participating in one of their patrol flights.

According to a report released in September 2023 by the State of the Rhino International Foundation, 448 rhinos were poached in 2022 and 231 in the first six months of 2023 in South Africa. This is a wake-up call.

"All patrol flights with the helicopter have to be privately funded; there is no support from the government," said Jana while she took a sample from the fuel sump drain on the helicopter. One of the main missions of patrol flights is to observe suspicious activity and monitor wild animals across a large area. The thunderous sounds of flapping blades from helicopters scare off poachers, reducing their attempts to kill animals. In addition to an in-depth briefing, Jana explained that we would pick up a ranger at one of the reserves and monitor rhinos for dehorning needs.

According to the Wildlife Justice Commission's

2022 report, rhino horns in Asia cost 60,000 US dollars each pound, which is more costly by weight than gold, diamonds, and cocaine. However, rhino horns have the same features as our fingernails, and rhinos are killed for them.

It took Jana just a few minutes to start the Lycoming engine at Hoedspruit Airport, enter the squawk into the transponder, and then take off. At about 120 knots, we flew straight to the ranger's pick-up point. *"The area you see with your eye must be patrolled, and beyond that is the Kruger National Park,"* Jana remarked. Today, the visibility was fantastic, but the area to patrol was intimidatingly large. Around Hoedspruit is the Klein Drakensberg mountain range to the west and a flat area on the east with a wide view of protected land.

A confined area surrounded by mixed woods, impenetrable thickets, and thorn bushes caught my eye. The ranger stood within and communicated with Jana, indicating he was ready for her to approach. Jana flew her helicopter around the site once to ensure it was acceptable to land. The wind seemed light from the south but still had some bumps. The steep approach was smooth, and near the ground, the rotor downwash threw a lot of dust up; the giraffes in the confined area ran, their spotted coat patterns standing out against the brown and dusty surroundings.

"I faced the ground directly"

We switched seats; I hopped rearward, and the ranger took the co-pilot seat, camera, and firearm in hand, just in case. Jana's max performance takeoff was as smooth as the steep approach. Jana has over 5000 flight hours under her belt, and she has experienced incidents: alternator failure, governor failure, and a tail rotor strike. *"That comes with the risk of low-level flight operations,"* she said. *"The R44 is cost-effective, small enough to land in confined spaces, has a piston engine that can handle regular starting cycles, and is less sensitive to dust than turbines,"* Jana explained when I asked why she chose the R44 for conservation work.

I faced the ground directly, with steep turns at just 200 feet AGL. The rhinos moved in a non-linear manner, turning left and then right. Jana used her tactical flying ability to position her helicopter beside the rhinos properly. The ranger inspected the three white rhinos' overall health and horn length. "They'll have to be dehorned soon," he said while photographing them.

The large, grey, gentle rhinoceros is in a race against time, and dehorning is costly. Porsche and Smith's study, published in 2015 by the European Union Action to Fight Environmental Crime, showed that poaching results in massive economic losses. It was calculated that a 1 percent reduction in the rhino population would incur a loss of up to over 1 billion US dollars annually in South Africa.

"Anti-poaching operations are too risky for volunteers. Ranger and anti-poaching units are the targets of poachers. It is too risky to accept volunteers for it," the ranger said when asked about enlisting volunteers to help fund their operations. According to the article "Killing of Rangers Protecting Rhinos Raises Fears for Conservation Efforts", published by The New York Times, 565 African rangers have perished in the line of duty since 2011, with 52 percent targeted by the syndicate and assassinated. The number of 2022 rangers reached a record high of 92, with half of them murdered.

Jana flew to the next hotspot where rhino sightings are common. "There is one of our accommodation tents for our rangers doing the ground patrol," she said. It features a man-made thicket and a bush wall surrounding the tent, preventing predators such as lions from entering.



"Two o'clock," the ranger said, pointing to three white rhinos and a calf searching for a place to hide in the thick foliage amid the sounds of approaching flapping rotor blades. Jana hovered the helicopter 100-150 feet above ground level so the ranger could get a better view of the rhinos. Jana is an experienced helicopter on-field operator, and low-level flights are done daily. The ranger's thumbs up indicates that the horn has not regrown much.

Dehorning takes about 15 to 20 minutes and is painless. The horn regrows like human fingernails, and the treatment must be done every 12-24 months to boost the rhino's chances of survival from poaching. Field rangers, veterinarians, researchers, helicopter pilots, authorities, and other experts collaborate to locate and tranquillise the rhinoceros. The dehorning project can cost \$1,000 (20,000 South African Rand) for each animal and requires sponsorship.

Patrol flights provide an overview of the animals and their surroundings and must be conducted more frequently to monitor them; this requires more financial support. Poaching causes severe economic loss and the extinction of a critical species. Rhinos, often known as "ecosystem engineers," play a crucial role in habitat maintenance, and their extinction will disrupt the equilibrium of other species that rely on the rhino. The economy has suffered a significant loss of revenue from taxes earned by wildlife tourism due to poaching. No wildlife means no tourists and no income or taxes. ■



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