



GREG RASMUSSEN

The conservationist who crashed in the Kalahari (Zimbabwe, 2003)

Greg Rasmussen is a conservation biologist and an expert on a particular species of wild dog. Known as 'painted dogs' – their distinctly patterned coats look like ink spots on blotting paper – they are one of Africa's top predators but in recent years have become increasingly endangered. Around 150 of them live in the Hwange National Park, a vast wilderness where Rasmussen has spent more than twenty-five years studying their behaviour.

The dogs are closely related to wolves and jackals, and packs of them have lived in this part of southern Africa for at least three million years. They have a reputation for being better hunters than even leopards and lions, and once they spot their prey it rarely manages to escape. They work as a team and this helps them catch antelopes and other animals much bigger than them.

The dogs' territory is enormous and covers nearly six thousand square miles, much of it so hot and dry that entire lakes disappear each summer. This means scientists like Rasmussen have to travel huge distances to observe them, often in tiny aircraft called microlights. Many of the animals in Hwange have been fitted with radio collars, which makes them easier to locate using equipment carried in the microlights to pick up their signals.

One day in 2003 Rasmussen booked a pilot, as he needed to observe the dogs moving through the park. For some reason the pilot failed to show up, but this didn't trouble Rasmussen too much. He was more than capable of flying himself, and after completing the usual checks on the aircraft he took off shortly after dawn.

Before long he picked up the first signal from a radio collar attached to a rhino. Noting the animal's position he pulled back on the controls and increased the power to climb to a higher altitude.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, he was hit by a sharp burst of air turbulence. One wing dipped downwards and the tail of the aircraft shot up.

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If an animal is 'endangered' it means they are rare or scarce.
True or False?

Looking at the paragraph starting "the dogs are closely related to wolves and jackals....".

How do we know that painted dogs are a top predator?

Find and copy another word for 'watch'.

The next thing Rasmussen knew was that he was looking straight at the ground, which was getting closer and closer. In seconds the plane was in an uncontrollable spin. He could see rocks and trees looming ever larger, and then he heard a loud, sickening thump as it ploughed into the ground.

Rasmussen briefly lost consciousness, either from a blow to the head or the shock of the impact

Rasmussen briefly lost consciousness, either from a blow to the head or the shock of the impact. When he came round he was aware of blood and petrol running down his face. He couldn't feel his legs but he could wiggle his toes. He knew this meant he hadn't broken his spine and that he wasn't paralysed.

Like a 'Mayday' call, an SOS is a type of emergency message. True or False?

Modern aircraft are always fitted with radios and he was able to send an SOS. However, the impact had knocked the radio out of tune, and unable to retune it properly he had no idea whether anyone would hear his message. Instead of a friendly response telling him help was on the way, all he could hear was the ticking of the engine as it cooled down. That and the ominous sound of highly flammable fuel leaking out of the damaged plane.

In the paragraph beginning "modern aircraft are always fitted....", which word tells us Greg could be in danger?

Unable to move either of his legs, which Rasmussen correctly guessed were both broken, he knew he had to get out as quickly as possible – if the fuel caught fire he would be burned to death. Fortunately, his arms were uninjured and he was able to pull himself out of the cockpit and heave his body across the scorched ground to a safer position.

Lying around seventy miles from the nearest road, Rasmussen didn't need to be a wildlife expert to know that even if he moved away from the wreckage he was still far from safe. Until now he had never liked to refer to his beloved painted dogs as 'wild', for fear of reinforcing their reputation as nasty and brutal creatures. But as he lay in the broken shade of a thornbush he knew this reputation was well deserved. After all, these animals can survive without waterholes because drinking the blood of their prey provides them with all the nourishment they need. Rasmussen also knew that he faced other dangers besides the painted dogs. Hwange was also home to lions, leopards, cheetahs and hyenas, any one of which would attack a solitary, injured individual. Already several vultures were circling overhead.

How do these animals survive without water?

The threat from the vultures would become even more serious after dark, but for now the biggest danger to his survival was dehydration. The park forms part of the Kalahari Basin, a region centred in an immense desert that takes its name from the local word *kgala*, meaning 'great thirst'. Here temperatures soar above 40°C and rainfall can be as little as two inches a year.

For now the biggest danger to his survival was dehydration

List 2 facts that make this biome, the Kalahari desert, difficult to survive in?

- 1.
- 2.

By now Rasmussen was hot and incredibly thirsty. Moving was out of the question, but even if he'd been able to search for something to drink the nearest waterhole might be miles away. It was awful to think that earlier that morning he'd pulled into a filling station, but because it was out of fuel he hadn't stopped to buy any water. Figuring he could get some on the way home, it hadn't occurred to him that he might be trapped out in the desert.

He was also in immense pain, especially from his legs and feet, which were bleeding profusely. He was desperate to get his boots off as quickly as possible to relieve the pressure and reduce the risk of infection, but he couldn't bend his legs to reach them. Undoing his laces took him more than an hour, loosening each one with a thin stick and slowly pulling it through

the holes. Using a larger stick he was then able to push off one boot and then the other, but this took at least another hour.

It was now midday and in the burning heat of the desert his lips were cracking badly and the dryness in his mouth was almost unbearable. With the sun at its highest the thornbush offered almost no protection at all. Rasmussen realised that his best hope of survival (assuming someone had heard his SOS) would be to wait out of the glare beneath the remains of the plane and hope that the fuel had all evaporated. As he hauled himself back across the ground he could hear his bones cracking. It was so agonising he began to suspect that he'd fractured his pelvis as well as his legs.

Undoing his laces took him more than an hour, loosening each one with a thin stick



Is this a painted dog in the picture?

Can you list 4 more predators named in the text?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

What are the shadows on the ground in this picture?