



A Promise Made Beneath a Thorn Tree



A wine for connoisseurs and for conservation: could it even be possible? Painted Wolf Wines for Conservation has boldly gone and shown that the proof of the pudding, so to speak, is in the drinking. **Lorraine Kearney** spoke to co-founder Emma Borg about the groundbreaking winemaking team.

They are never there when you're looking. African wild dogs. They're elusive, everywhere and nowhere, across the sub-continent. Except on television, when you're watching a David Attenborough documentary. So, I went where the film crew went – 2025's Kingdom was filmed in South Luangwa National Park – and watched a pack of dogs snoozing unperturbed in the black river mud, under a brooding purple sky, until the thunder drove us back to camp.

The next day, they had disappeared. Melted into the

vastness of Zambia's remote bush. A few weeks later, in Lower Zambezi National Park, I was transfixed when our late afternoon bumble crossed paths with a big pack. We sat until it got dark, watching as they played and gambolled, the adults as joyful as the puppies.

Lions may lounge obligingly beside roads and elephants announce themselves with the subtlety of a marching band, but painted wolves seem to exist in a parallel safari universe. They're there suddenly, a flash of black, gold and white, a blur of motion,

Their greatest strength – their extraordinary social bonds – is also their greatest vulnerability.

a pack on the move. And then gone again.

For Emma Borg, co-founder of Painted Wolf Wines for Conservation that fleeting predator combined with a promise made in the shade of a thorn tree in Botswana to shape an entire business. Emma is not a wine entrepreneur who became interested in conservation. She's a bush person who happened to find a partner and wine as the vehicle to fulfil a promise she made decades earlier.

It must be said there are easier ways to start a wine company, but nonetheless, that's how Painted Wolf Wines began.

Origin Story

Long before she'd even thought about wine and labels and restaurant wine lists and safari lodge tables, Emma was a young traveller who found herself

accidentally falling in love with the African bush. "I got to Africa eventually," she says – her first round-the-world ticket had skipped the continent entirely. "I travelled for six weeks or so, having my first bush experience in Kruger, which was amazing."

So amazing that it changed everything. One unexpected opportunity led to another until soon afterwards, relying on her background in hospitality management, she was managing a remote safari camp in Botswana, learning the rhythms of the bush from old school veterans.

"They were the conservationists who didn't call themselves conservationists, because they just got on with it," she says.

And then she met Jeremy Borg, a South African-born winemaker who was raised in Malawi and Zimbabwe, and who had

been working in California's wine industry. The pair married beneath a thorn tree and made a pact.

"One day we'd give back to conservation," Emma recalls, "having absolutely no cooking clue how we were going to, because we had no money."

For The Love of The Dogs

This year, Painted Wolf Wines for Conservation is celebrating two decades in business, during which time it has raised more than R4-million for conservation projects while helping to turn one of Africa's least understood predators into one of its most beloved. The company donates a percentage of the sale of each bottle of its wines to conservation initiatives and has built an entire brand around a species many people once dismissed as little more than vermin.





LORRAINE KEARNEY is a writer, editor, lover of safaris and sometime wine-drinker who has written headlines and survived deadlines, fallen out of game vehicles and off motorbikes, and seized every moment, with only minor scarring. She covers everything from conservation to cuisine, often at the same time. When not wrangling words, she's probably misplacing her glasses and/or lounging in the sun.

The species in question is *Lycaon pictus*, which translates directly from Latin as "painted wolf". It is more commonly known as the African wild dog, although many conservationists now prefer painted wolf or painted dog. The name reflects the animal's extraordinary coat, a patchwork of black, gold, white and russet markings unique to every individual, like a fingerprint.

Back when Painted Wolf Wines launched in 2007, the species wasn't a public relations darling.

"We chose the African wild dog because they were so endangered, and so many people were confused about what they were. Are they hyenas? Are they this? Are they wolves?" says Emma.

Today, painted wolves are among Africa's most sought-after safari sightings. Attenborough documentaries have helped to introduce them to a global audience, while photographers and safari guides rave about their intelligence, social behaviour and astonishing hunting skills.

Emma likes to think Painted Wolf Wines has played a small role in that shift.

"I think we have," she says. "We've spoken to thousands of people over the years all over the world."

Extraordinary Hunters

The painted wolf certainly deserves the attention.

These animals are among the most successful hunters on the continent, with some studies recording hunting success rates at 80%, far higher than lions at 10%. They live in remarkably close-knit packs and display levels of co-operation that would make many human families look dysfunctional. Pack members care for injured animals, regurgitate food for pups and even allow youngsters to eat first after a kill.

Kingdom brought us the story of Flint, oldest son of the pack's matriarch, Storm. He was injured in a poacher's snare and lost one of his legs. Although he couldn't hunt, Flint was cared for by his pack, which shared their kills with him. In turn, he became an acute observer of danger and took on a crucial protective role over the pups.

Then there is what for me is perhaps the greatest wildlife fact ever discovered. Probably

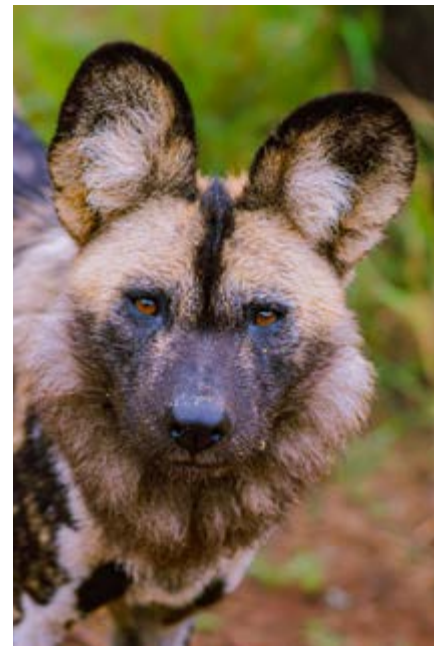
my favourite fact ever, actually: the pack is a democratic society in which individuals vote by sneezing.

Researchers studying painted wolves in Botswana discovered that packs use sneezes as part of a collective decision-making process before setting off on a hunt. In "Sneeze to leave: African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*) use variable quorum thresholds facilitated by sneezes in collective decisions" (2017) Walker et al found that the more sneezes, the more likely the pack is to move.

Yet for all their charisma, painted wolves remain endangered. There are fewer than 7,000 across Africa, with only about 1,400 mature breeding adults. Habitat fragmentation, conflict with farmers, road accidents, snares and diseases carried by domestic dogs are the main threats.

That vulnerability is partly a consequence of what makes them so special.

"They're so social," says Emma. "They pick up a domestic dog disease and then because they nuzzle so closely, a whole pack gets wiped out."



Years ago, she would go to tourism trade shows with a

suitcase full of wine and a determination to introduce the brand to tourism operators. "I started with actually going to the travel shows, way back 16, 17 years ago, with my little wheelie suitcase," she laughs, "wandering around, showing my bottles, seeing if anyone might want to taste. And I went up to the Africa Travel and Tourism Association stand, because I saw

they had a lot of East African exhibitors and I wanted to get our wines into East Africa. "So I said: 'Well, I've got some wines in my suitcase, would you mind if I pour them for your exhibitors at the end of the day?'"

The conservation story resonated immediately.

These days, Painted Wolf appears on wine lists from Kenya to Zambia to Cape Town, a fitting outcome for a company whose roots lie not in the vineyards but in the bush. You could say Painted Wolf Wines is a winery that supports conservation, but really, it's a conservation story that happens to make wine.

The wine itself is excellent, of course. Jeremy Borg's Chenins,

Pinotages and Rhône-style wines have earned plenty of accolades over the years. Yet what people remember most is often the animal on the label and the conversation it starts.

"By drinking our wines, you're also giving back," says Emma. "People get busy in their lives and it's not always possible to work out how you go about doing that. But it's very simple in our case. Enjoy wine and you're contributing."

Not bad for a promise made beneath a thorn tree.

Or, for that matter, for a species that settles important matters with a sneeze.

Conservation Values

Over the years, Painted Wolf Wines for Conservation has supported organisations including the Endangered Wildlife Trust, Tusk Trust and, more recently, the Painted Wolf Foundation. Unusually, conservation isn't simply a marketing exercise attached to a bottle of wine; it sits at the heart of the business. The same philosophy extends into the vineyards.

Painted Wolf doesn't own vineyards but works with growers who share its values, sourcing fruit from organically certified or sustainably farmed vineyards and championing initiatives such as South Africa's Old Vine Project. "It's just about working with people who get it," Emma says. "Who know they must work in the best manner possible."

That commitment to purpose has also helped the brand find a home in the safari industry.

If you've spent time in lodges and camps across Southern Africa or East Africa, chances are you've encountered a bottle of Painted Wolf. Emma certainly made sure of it.



A SINGULAR WINE

Painted Wolf Wines for Conservation has donated more than R4-million to African wild dog conservation since 2008, donating about 4% of the sale of every bottle to conservation projects. The winemakers work with the Endangered Wildlife Trust and the Painted Wolf Foundation, and has previously worked with Tusk.

They specialise in Chenin Blanc and Pinotage, and source their grapes from small, sustainably farmed vineyards – "All our growers are either organic or practice sustainable viticulture," they point out. There are three collections: The Den, The Pack and *Lycaon Pictus*, the flagship collection. Over the past 20 years, Jeremy Borg has made wine in 15 different locations. In April, the Paarl company announced it was partnering with Jordan Wines, in Stellenbosch.

"It's not an amalgamation of Jordan and Painted Wolf," Emma Borg explains. "Painted Wolf will stay on its own two feet and will continue with our kind of legacy for the future, but with the wonderful resources that Jordan has. And in turn, they get our 20 years of Wines for Conservation, for which we have a trademark now."

Painted Wolf Wines sources grapes from Kasteelsig (Estate) vineyards in Malmesbury, Silkbush Mountain Vineyards in Bredekloof Wine Valley, and Welgegund Wines in Wellington, among others. They are champions of the Chenin Blanc Old Vine Project, and Emma says: "look out for our newly released label 'Lightning' Chenin blanc, my absolute favourite wine".



www.paintedwolfwines.com