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Grévy's Zebra now protected in Kenya by Samburu Warriors

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[Joanna Eede](#)



GREVY'S ZEBRA ROLLING IN DUST AT DAWN (EQUUS GREVYI), SAMBURU NATIONAL RESERVE, KENYA (PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WARWICK / [HTTP://WWW.JAMESWARWICK.CO.UK/](http://www.jameswarwick.co.uk/))

More closely related to an ass than a horse, the Grevy's zebra (*Equus grevyi*) is the world's largest living wild equid.

The Grevy's zebra has a stripe pattern as unique as a human fingerprint, and large round ears. Once used in Roman circuses, it was forgotten by the western world for a millennium, until it was named after a 19th century French President who had been given one by the Emperor of Abyssinia. Today, Grevy's zebras are Africa's most endangered large mammal and can now only be found in northern Kenya and southern and eastern Ethiopia.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the global population was estimated at approximately 15,000 animals; today, it is thought that no more than 2,500 roam across the arid grass and scrubland habitat of its Horn of Africa range. Numbers have plummeted by up to 87%, primarily due to poaching, loss of habitat and access to water and hot droughts.

But dedicated efforts by conservationists including the Grevys Zebra Trust (GZT) means that prospects are finally improving for the animal. Aware that, "*Conservation of the species cannot be viewed in isolation of local people,*" as Belinda Low, Executive Director of Grévy's Zebra Trust says, GZT recently launched an initiative with warriors from the indigenous Samburu and Rendille tribes. The 'Grévy's Zebra Warriors' (GZT) monitor Grevy's zebra, raise awareness, and provide protection to the species. They are trained in GPS

skills, datasheet recording and photography. *“Working with local pastoral communities is critical to the long-term survival of Grévy’s zebra,”* says Belinda. *“Their outreach to communities has created a large network of local support through which conservation messaging is disseminated and practical conservation action, including dry season water management, mud rescue efforts and supplementary feeding, is implemented.”*

Lekuiria Lperia, one of the Grévy’s Zebra Warriors who lives in Samburu, was recently interviewed by Joanna Eede.

When did you become a Samburu warrior?

I became a Moran (warrior) six years ago.

Can you explain the traditional role of a warrior in your Samburu community?

The role of a warrior in Samburu culture is largely a defender of the community. We have to defend the community against its enemies, which are usually other tribes. Morans also make sure that the community’s livestock has enough grass to graze on and water to drink.

The Samburu community really respects warriors. They make many of the decisions about things such as livestock, herding and migration.

Are Grévys zebra important in Samburu culture?

Yes! We use Grévy’s zebra to lead us to pastures. When someone is looking for pasture for livestock, the first thing they do is search for Grévy’s zebra spoor. Grévy’s zebra also lead us to water.

When did you start to develop an interest in conservation?

Being able to live with and alongside wildlife is very important, so five years I started protecting wildlife. I did this by talking to livestock herders and asking them not to disturb or kill animals.

How did you become involved with the Grévy's Zebra Trust (GZT)?

The GZT team came to our village and told us that they needed people to help protect Grévy's zebra. So I became a Grévy's Zebra Trust Warrior three years ago. And I am now earning with GZT, so my livelihood has improved.

Can you tell me what a typical day is like for you working for GZT?

I start the day by milking my livestock and having a cup of tea. I then go out on patrol. We know the areas where there are many different types of wildlife. I guide my herders to places where they are able to graze their livestock, and check on how they are grazing their animals. We also walk to waterholes, in order to refill the animals' water troughs.

At midday I return home to have something to eat, and then rest for a while.

When the livestock return to the village in the evening, I count them in. I then milk the cows for my parents and have supper.

I am a Moran, so I have to sing in the evenings. It is normal for all the Moran and Samburu girls to dance together. We dance throughout the night; people join us from many different areas, and we share news.

Dancing is a way of protecting livestock from predators, because the noise scares predators away. Dances normally take place during the green (wet) season, when all livestock are at home in the village. During the dry spells we don't tend to dance because Moran and livestock are not around; they leave the area to look for areas that are rich in pasture and water.

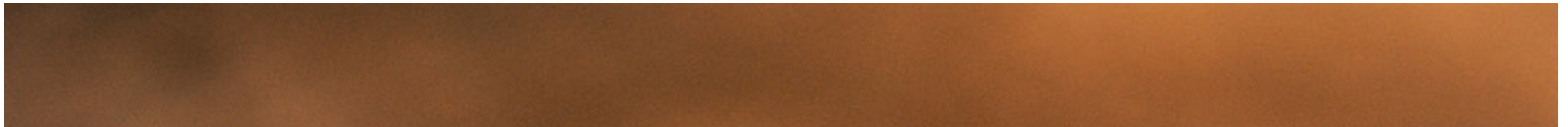
How do you raise awareness about Grévy's zebra within your community?

I try to bring together different social groups – such as the moran, elders and women – and inform them of the importance of protecting wildlife on our lands.

We also hold community meetings with warriors and herders, and visit schools. We explain to people that it is important to manage wildlife and livestock well, so they can live alongside each other.

The community knows that we work with Grévy's zebra, so they provide us with recent information, such as zebra sightings or discovery of spoor.

Recently they told us that a Grévy's zebra had given birth. We went to check on its health, and luckily found that both mother and baby were still alive.







How do you track and find Grévy's zebra in such a huge area?

A lugga (a dry river bed) is the only source of water for Grévy's zebra. So in the early morning I walk to the Kamatonyi Lugga to see if I can find any zebra spoor. I also know where zebra pastures are; I track their spoor until I locate where they are grazing.

When I find Grévy's zebra I walk slowly towards them. I identify the sex and age of the animal with the use of my binoculars.



SAMBURU WOMAN CONSERVATION SCOUT MONITORING GREVY'S ZEBRAS (EQUUS GREVYI), WEST GATE CONSERVANCY, SAMBURU, KENYA (PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WARWICK).

What measures do you take to protect them?

Our community does not traditionally kill and eat Grévy's zebra. So I just inform herders not to disturb them, and to let them graze in the same area as livestock.

Kamatonyi lugga is the only local source of water. At night, children used to use torches to scare Grévys Zebra away from the lugga. But since I have been employed by GZT, children haven't played around the water hole at night.

There was also a village near the lugga that was blocking the Grévys zebra's corridor to the water hole. So we moved the village, and opened up a route for Grévy's zebra to access water.

When the water level goes down we dig sand from the lugga in order to make shallow wells, so that Grévys zebra can then reach water.



GREVY'S ZEBRAS CROSSING UASO NYIRO RIVER (EQUUS GREVYI), SAMBURU NATIONAL RESERVE, KENYA (PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WARWICK).

What are the key threats to Grévy's zebra within the Laisamis region?

The main threat to Grévy's zebra is from drought.

When it is very dry, Grévy's zebra walk a long way to find water and graze, so they become difficult to find. However during the wet season, when pasture is available, I am able to locate them nearby.

What are your goals for the future?

We live in a big area, and at the moment there are only 2 Moran who work for GZT in the region. So we are unable to capture all the data and information about Grévy's zebra. Also, poachers operate in some of the areas in which I work, and sadly many elephants have been killed by poachers.

But in time my goal is to make sure that I am able to reach all the areas where Grévy's zebra graze, in order to protect them.

Grévy's zebra portrait (Equus grevyi), Samburu National Reserve, Kenya (Photograph by James Warwick).





MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including Portrait of England (Think Publishing, 2006) and We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.



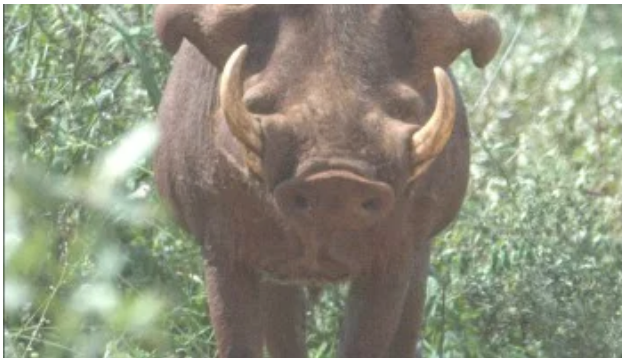
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