

How GWC's Robin Moore Caught a Rare Hirola Family on Film

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The Critically Endangered Hirola is a skittish, evasive animal and hard to photograph. (Photo by Robin Moore/Global Wildlife Conservation)

As a wildlife photographer, Dr. Robin Moore measures time in sunrises and sunsets. Those are the golden hours when soft, filtered light can bring out the gleam in an animals' eye and the subtle striations of its fur. That, of course, is assuming the subject steps into the light.

On an October 2019 trip to Kenya, Moore had just five short tropical sunrises and sunsets – about two hours total – to find and photograph the Hirola, a Critically Endangered antelope. There are less than 500 Hirola left, all of them in Kenya's southeastern corner. Once 16,000 strong before a devastating rinderpest outbreak in the 1980s, the Hirola is the only surviving member of

its genus. Its loss would be the first extinction of a genus on the African continent since the evolution of modern man.



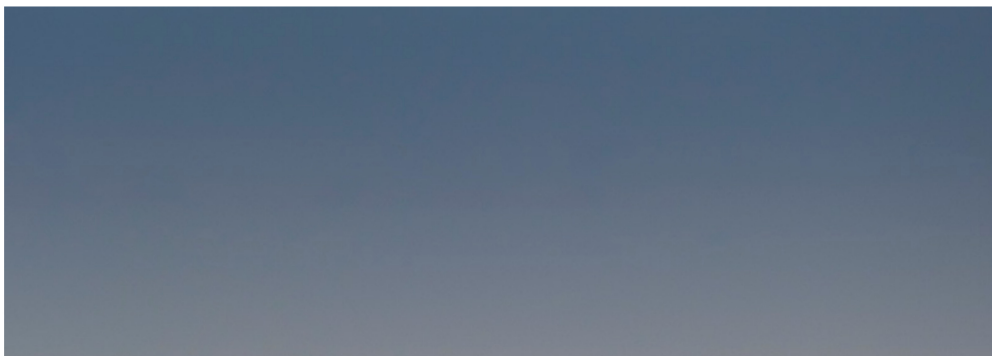
A ranger from Tsavo Trust helps look for Hirola during the few hours of soft light. (Photo by Robin Moore/Global Wildlife Conservation)

As GWC's senior director of communications and a professional photographer, Moore was on assignment to capture Hirola images that would aid our partners at Tsavo Trust and Northern Rangelands Trust with their conservation campaigns. Following the Kenya Wildlife Service's National Hirola Recovery and Action Plan, these organizations plan to build a new, fenced Hirola sanctuary in the Tsavo East National Park and to double the size of an existing fenced sanctuary within the Ishaqbini Community Conservancy. GWC is helping our partners raise the funds needed for the project.

Photos are powerful tools for fundraising, as they help people make an emotional connection with animals, but there were few quality close-ups of the notoriously evasive Hirola.

Finding the master of hide and seek

"Today the main threats to the Hirola are predation and poaching," Moore says. "Those who've survived have survived for a reason – they are very wary, and good at making themselves scarce. They are probably the most skittish animal I've ever photographed."





There are fewer than 500 Hirola left, all of them in Kenya's southeastern corner. (Photo by Robin Moore/Global Wildlife Conservation)

Adding to the photographic challenge, just 70 Hirola live in the 13,000-acre Tsavo East National Park where Moore was shooting. They tend to travel in small groups of about five animals, blending into the landscape of red dirt and dry brush.

So how did Moore manage to capture not just any shot, but an intimate portrait of a mom and baby? Lots of preparation and teamwork, years of experience and a little luck.

Working together to get the shot

Moore got some advance scouting help from Dr. Barney Long, GWC's senior director of species conservation. Long traveled to Tsavo East in August 2019 to learn more about Tsavo Trust's sanctuary building plans, as well as the studies a GWC-supported monitoring team is conducting to better understand why lions have made Hirola a prey target. As he toured the park, Moore took note of the lighting, the landscape's coloring, and any eyesores (like electricity pylons) to avoid in the background – all information that would help him plan his shoot.

When Moore arrived at Tsavo East in October for his three-day shoot, the monitoring team provided invaluable intelligence. Moore has been to Kenya dozens of times on shoots for National Geographic, GWC and other organizations. In fact, he was in Nairobi teaching a photography class for National Geographic the week before. But the Tsavo team knows every nook of the park and are incredible Hirola spotters.





Rangers from Tsavo Trust have a keen eye for Hirola and other species that can be tricky to spot. (Photo by Robin

Moore/Global Wildlife Conservation)

"I don't know how they would do it, but they would see a Hirola about a mile away in the distance," Moore says. "I'd say, 'How do you know that's a Hirola?' because there's a very similar looking animal, Cokes Hartebeest. But they just knew, and we'd drive toward it."

The first day of shooting threatened to put a damper on the project – literally – as rain poured down. During dry times, animals congregate around water sources. When it rains they scatter and become harder to find.

After the clouds parted they got into the Hirola-spotting groove. Moore likes to use a shorter camera lens and get closer to animals, so the team had to find the right balance. They wanted to get close enough to capture details like the Hirola's distinct under-eye scent glands (the inspiration for its nickname, "the four-eyed antelope"), but not too close that they'd scare them away.

After getting a lot of "butt shots" of Hirola running away, Moore noticed a pattern. Often the Hirola would start to run and then stop and look around before sprinting away, almost like an indecisive squirrel crossing the road. So when the group encountered a mother and her calf, Moore was ready. The pair started walking away, and when they paused to look back for a couple of seconds, Moore made eye contact and got his winning portrait.

Fundraising to save a special species

"When I first saw the Hirola in the wild, I was shocked by how stunningly beautiful they were," Long says. "They're this gorgeous shade of chestnut brown and striking in this understated way. Robin really captured that quality, and images speak a thousand words. Once people understand the Hirola's beauty, hopefully they'll feel compelled to support them."

Of course, the Hirola is more than a pretty face and a shiny coat. It's a uniquely resilient species. Unlike more well-known animals that can be found across Africa, the Hirola has stayed put and adapted to southeastern Kenya's harsh, arid climate.





The money shot: A Hirola mother and her calf. (Photo by Robin Moore/Global Wildlife Conservation)

"The Hirola is kind of a specialist, where other animals are generalists," Long says. "I use a sports analogy to describe it. Billions of people watch football (soccer), and it's on all the time. But every four years during the Olympics, we find ourselves discovering and cheering for these cool, niche sports like the luge or curling. We need to champion our specialists!"

The Hirola's deep local roots have endeared it to the community. The Ishaqbini fenced sanctuary is located entirely within a 100% community-managed conservancy, complete with a warden and an anti-poaching group. The push for doubling the sanctuary's size came from the community. And Tsavo East is in a government-run national park.

"We have the stakeholder and government support to save the hirola," Long says. "Now we just need the funds. We can't lose a whole genus because of money."

HIROLA | KENYA



About the Author

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Erica Hess is a strategic content writer specializing in sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Erica enjoys telling stories about people finding new ways to protect our planet's vital resources. Her work has helped raise awareness of issues ranging from overfishing to electronics recycling. Learn more at plumemarketing.com.

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