

Power rangers

They're bold, changing the game and paving the way for women to stand alongside men at the forefront of conservation – meet the inspirational female rangers who give their all to protect wildlife from extinction



To date, World Female Ranger Week founder, Holly Budge has identified over 4,500 female rangers in 18 African countries, and over 5,500 female rangers around the world. Here, one of the Akashinga Rangers is shown on patrol in Zimbabwe

PHOTO: BRENT STIRTON

holly Budge, founder of World Female Ranger Week (WFRW), is no stranger to difficult challenges. Not only has the British adventurer summited Everest, but she is the first woman to skydive the world's tallest mountain. Voted the 'most innovative woman in non-profit' in 2021, Budge founded her NGO, How Many Elephants, in 2013 and has raised over £400,000 for charitable causes. She has been supporting female rangers in Africa for almost a decade, earning the rare privilege of patrolling the frontline with all-female and mixed ranger teams.

"I've seen first-hand how these bold women are impacting lives by protecting wildlife, uplifting communities and empowering other women," says Budge. "WFRW highlights the significant gender imbalance in environmental conservation. We'll continue collating gender-specific data about female rangers globally, enabling us to identify their needs, find tangible solutions and help build effective policies to contribute towards positive outcomes; for female rangers and conservation as a whole."

The Covid pandemic crippled tourism and funding for conservation projects globally. The lack of tourists visiting national parks led to many rangers losing their jobs or having significant salary cuts. The knock-on effect was huge. For example, one ranger in Africa may support up to 16 family members. Additionally, reduced vigilance in tourist hotspots has left wildlife even more vulnerable to poaching.

The often-challenging work of rangers is paramount right now. Day and night, female rangers patrol wilderness areas, monitoring wildlife, seizing snares, working with communities and in some cases, arresting poachers, all to save iconic species from extinction. They are away from their families for long periods, sometimes facing workplace security issues and battling social stigma. Many of these inspirational women have overcome adversity, poverty and marginalisation. Becoming a ranger has empowered them, turned them into breadwinners and property owners, and has allowed them access to higher education and much-needed healthcare.

As champions of wildlife conservation, role models, educators and beacons of hope, female rangers are not only transforming attitudes towards the role of women around the world, they are also showing the capabilities and success of females in traditionally male roles.

However, less than 11% of the global wildlife ranger workforce is female. With women being natural communicators and protectors, focussed on investing their income in their families, greater gender equality in the workforce can only enhance community conservation efforts and relationships.



ANDREW JOHNSON/PURNIMA

Purnima Devi Barman and some of the women she has inspired in her work to protect the endangered greater adjutant stork



Wildlife warriors

Holly Budge launched the **World Female Ranger Award** in 2021 in conjunction with her pioneering initiative, World Female Ranger Week (held annually in June). The awards give international recognition to a female wildlife ranger who has shown exemplary service and commitment to conservation. We salute 2022's winner, Purnima Devi Barman – founder of the Hargila Army in India – and profile some of the outstanding African female rangers highlighted by the campaign

IMAGE: HOW MANY ELEPHANTS

PURNIMA DEVI BARMAN | INDIA

The greater adjutant stork used to be called many things: ugly, filthy, a disease-carrying pest, a bad omen. But conservationist and biologist Purnima Devi Barman has not only changed local people's perceptions of the much-maligned bird, but her Hargila Army (named after the local name for the bird) has helped transform the species into a cultural icon in Assam, India.

Purnima has built the Hargila Army into a team of over 10,000 women, working to protect the critically endangered stork. "Today many women join because it is a matter of prestige to be a part of the Hargila Army," she says.

By keeping a strict vigil on their nests (and

even constructing artificial nesting platforms), they are helping to tackle threats such as habitat loss, poaching and poisoning. Purnima believes she has fostered a pride in the rare stork by associating positive festivities with the bird.

"I'm humbled, honoured, and excited to receive the World Female Ranger Award 2022," she says. "Bringing women to the forefront in conservation movements can create miracles as our Hargila Army has done. I hope we can work together towards more gender equity along with environmental sustainability. There are many challenges still and we are determined to face them and win through." ➡



Clinging to survival: greater adjutant storks pick over waste at a refuse site

ANDREW JOHNSON/PURNIMA

On patrol: The Black Mambas is a 36-strong, all-female ranger unit operating in the Greater Kruger area of South Africa



JULIA GUNTHER

GENDER EQUITY IN THE CONSERVATION ARENA IS SUCH AN IMPORTANT AND PREVALENT TOPIC. THERE IS RANGER WEEK PLAYS A KEY ROLE IN RAISING AWARENESS OF THE WORK OF FEMALE RANGERS AND WOMEN

DR GLADYS KALEMA-ZIKUSOKA, AMBASSADOR FOR WORLD FEMALE RANGER WEEK

STILL MUCH WORK TO DO, BUT WORLD FEMALE IN CONVERSATION IN THE BROADER PICTURE



RIVONIKWANSI

TSAKANE NXUMALO | SOUTH AFRICA

Nxumalo is a ranger in the all-female Black Mambas Anti-Poaching Unit in South Africa and a role model in her community. In the course of duty, the rangers face danger from poachers and wild animals. “At first, people were sceptical that we, women, could do this traditionally male job and be good at it,” says Nxumalo. “Now we have their full support.”

HOLLY BUDGE

SARAH NEMIGISHA | UGANDA

A Ranger Guide in Kibale National Park in Uganda, Nemigisha takes tourists on nature walks to teach them about chimpanzees. She monitors the wildlife and the forest, and works closely with local communities. The population of chimpanzees is increasing because the rangers have worked hard to educate the communities about the benefits of conserving the forest and this has greatly reduced poaching. “I enjoy being a ranger but there are definitely challenges,” says Nemigisha. “Sometimes there is harassment, denial of opportunities and promotions, no uniform dresses for pregnant rangers, deployment in hard-to-reach areas and a lack of gender balance. My message to fellow female rangers is to keep aiming high so that we can encourage younger women to join us and not to be scared to pursue this line of work.” ➡





task force

To shine a light on the impact female rangers are making, the Akashinga Rangers in Zimbabwe ran a total of **208 operations** in the areas they protect. As a result, they were able to contribute to a total of **351 arrests**, confiscate **11 illegal weapons** from poachers, **destroy 341km of illegal monofilament fishing net** found along the Zambezi Valley and **impound 99 boats**.

Akashinga Rangers,
Zimbabwe

BRENT STRICKON



AMISH CHAGAN

CAREN YEGON CHEPTOO | KENYA

The first recipient of the World Female Ranger Award in 2021, Cheptoo is a Maasai woman working as a female wildlife ranger for the Mara Elephant Project. She was noted as a “top 1%” recruit and now leads the Sheldrick Trust Mau De-Snaring Unit in Kenya’s Mau Forest, combating illegal logging and bushmeat poaching. Since June 2020, Cheptoo’s team have arrested over 90 suspects for unlawful habitat destruction, destroyed some 17 kilns, confiscated over 56 bags of charcoal and more than 4,311 illegal posts, trees or timbers. They’ve also arrested eight suspects for bushmeat poaching, removed 182 snares and seized 39kg of bushmeat.



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CAROLINE OLORY

The first female Conservator of Parks for the National Parks Service in Nigeria, Olory and her team have improved park protection and conservation in Cross River and Old Oyo national parks. She has increased the involvement of women in decision-making in communities surrounding the parks and has strengthened relationships with state governments and NGOs. Olory is a role model to girls in the surrounding communities and schools, piquing their interest in conservation. Often referred to as the ‘Iron Lady of Wildlife Conservation’, she delivers lectures on the role of women in wildlife conservation to university students in Nigeria.

THE NEXT
WORLD FEMALE
RANGER WEEK/AWARDS
WILL TAKE PLACE ON
23-30 JUNE 2023

Find out more at
worldfemalerangerweek.org

JANET SAKALA | ZAMBIA

Sakala is a ranger and dog handler in the K9 Unit for Conservation South Luangwa. Sadly, when Janet was 15 years old, she lost both her parents and was no longer able to go to school. Becoming a ranger has enabled her to become the breadwinner and support her relatives. “One of the biggest challenges I face as a female ranger is that my ideas are not always heard,” she says. “Communities here in Zambia often consider men to be superior to women and can easily discount the views and ideas of women. We know we are sharing this experience, and whilst we have not overcome this challenge, we know we can if we stay strong.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF K9 UNIT FOR CONSERVATION

UK registered charity How Many Elephants is a design-led awareness campaign that showcases the annual poaching rate of 35,000 elephants in Africa in a visual exhibition to inspire and educate a global audience about the devastating impacts of the ivory trade. How Many Elephants collaborates with and supports female rangers on the front line in Africa. Find out more at howmanyelephants.org