

## DOG DAYS ON ISABELA

*by*

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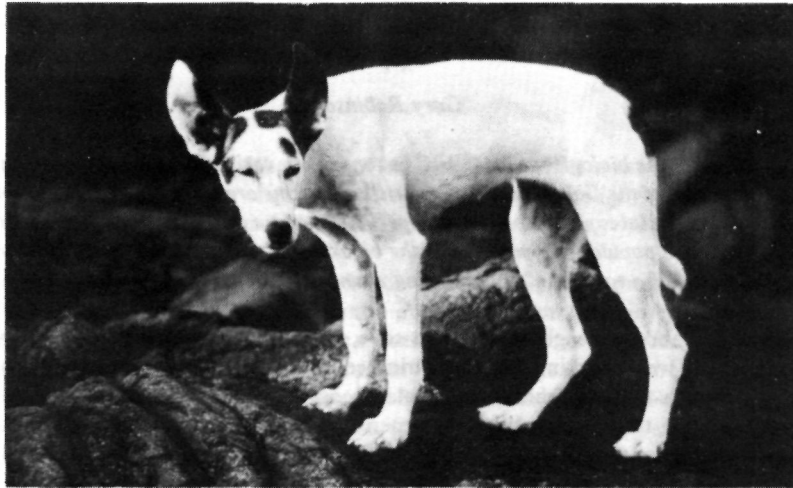
The midnight calm over our campsite was shattered as loud barking and growling erupted only a few feet from our tent door. A half hour later the angry animal was still persisting with its enraged racket, so we climbed out of our sleeping bags somewhat apprehensively and, shining our flashlight into the dog's eyes, ran toward it, yelling as loudly as possible, and causing our nearby camp-mates to believe we were being eaten alive. Nevertheless, to our relief the dog fled without another sound across the lava fields under the full moon! A few years earlier, on our first encounter with these feral dogs that have roamed the rugged volcanoes of southern Isabela Island for many generations, our meeting was not so uneventful. On that occasion a pack of eight of these long-legged, long-snouted, hefty beasts had attacked our party of four. We had taken refuge on a steep lava outcropping as the dogs encircled us. Teeth bared, they began to move in on all sides, until at last they retreated under a shower of stones.

But tonight we had barely regained our tent when not one, but six dogs appeared and again besieged our camp with wild barking. Soon another pack chimed in down the coast. Eventually they broke out into chilling howls and we were comforted to know that, in case of real problems, the Park wardens in the next tent had a rifle. The strange concert continued for several hours. What had gone wrong? We had been here almost three weeks on the first trip of the feral dog eradication campaign and, just as we thought we were beginning to achieve significant results in reducing the dog population, they were turning out in record numbers.

There were six of us involved in this new project launched in 1981 by the Galapagos National Park and the Darwin Station with funding from the Frankfurt Zoological Society. Every day we and the four Park wardens hiked several miles along the coast, laying poisoned baits at regular intervals. By placing the baits hidden under dark ledges in the lava we would allow the dogs to find them with their keen sense of smell, while the native animals, who seek their food primarily by sight, would be in no danger of locating them. Even as we worked we could observe the devastating activities of the dogs. It appeared that the adult dogs devoured one medium-to-large marine iguana every day, and more when eating small ones. Considering that there were at least 100 dogs in the vicinity of Caleta Webb, our first work site, this translated into staggering numbers of hapless reptiles consumed each year. We were amazed that there were any left at all. Despite this large scale depredation, on several occasions we were able to watch as dogs approached the marine iguanas closely without the latter showing the slightest fear, obviously not comprehending the dogs' deadly intentions. Having evolved in an environment totally devoid of large carnivores, the iguanas were clearly unable to cope with these introduced predators. The shoreline of Caleta Webb was littered with iguana carcasses, although the dogs frequently consumed their entire prey, bones and all, leaving no sign of their feast. While in coastal areas marine iguanas constitute the dogs' primary food source, we also encountered the twisted remains of hundreds of masked and blue-footed boobies, pelicans, penguins, flightless cormorants, sea lions, and fur seals. And we knew that only a few miles away the dogs were responsible for destroying almost all the giant tortoise eggs and young.

Working conditions were not very pleasant at Caleta Webb, as the dogs thrive in one of the most rugged environments of Galapagos. Not a tree grows in the entire area, and heat waves rise mercilessly from the sunbaked lava fields. Our only refuge was a small awning over our kitchen area, and our tiny two-man tents. When we were not being broiled by the sun, the torrential rains of the warm season flooded our camp. Fresh water cannot be found here so our supplies, brought in dozens of large plastic containers, had to be used carefully, lest we run out before the end of the trip.

The day we landed at Caleta Webb a tremendous swell was running so all our gear had to be hauled ashore through six-foot breakers. This made for hilarious scenes such as people completely covered with black beach sand madly chasing water containers and bunches of bananas as they washed up and down the tiny



Juvenile Wild Dog on Isabela *Photo by Tui Moore*

beach. But the Park wardens are well-adapted to life in the field. Daily they would catch fresh grouper off the steep, rocky shore and cook delicious meals from our limited stores.

After some refining of our techniques, the project soon caught momentum. In only three months over 100 dogs were killed, including almost all of those which lived along the western coast of Isabela. There the marine iguanas can bask once more in the sun without becoming a dog's next meal. The project is scheduled to take two years to complete. Many problems will certainly arise. The tremendous area to be covered on the volcanoes Cerro Azul and Sierra Negra are sure to put the Park wardens to the test, yet they feel confident of success. Thought must also be given to the future of the large feral cattle population on Cerro Azul. With the elimination of the dogs, their only predator, it is likely that the cattle population will begin to increase. However, when the dogs are gone, just as has already been the case with the goats removed from several islands, we will be one step closer to seeing the Galapagos wild and pristine, much as they were for thousands of years before man introduced these alien species.



Remains of a Galapagos Fur Seal eaten by dogs *Photo by Tui Moore*