



LEADING FROM THE FRONT

The number of female rangers protecting wildlife is growing, thanks to the pioneering women inspiring others. **Sue Watt** investigates

Pioneering spirit. Rangers in Ennedi Cultural and Natural Reserve in Chad

Inset right: Fatimé Hissebouna, ranger in Zakouma NP

HOLLY BUDGE ARRANGES SAFARIS WITH THE BLACK MAMBAS IN KRUGER, WHERE GUESTS OBSERVE THE WORK AND IMPACT OF FEMALE RANGERS. WWW.WORLDFEMALERANGERWEEK.ORG, WWW.HOWMANYELEPHANTS.ORG

AFRICAN PARKS

Africa's rangers are generally perceived as fearsome and fearless, fighting on the frontline of conservation. But few imagine them to be female. Among the 40,000-strong workforce in wild habitats across the continent, only 4500 are women.

Aiming to raise awareness, recognition and funding for these trailblazers, World Female Ranger Week (WFRW) takes place from June 23–30, spearheaded by NGO How Many Elephants. Its founder — adventurer and conservationist Holly Budge — wants to celebrate the dedication of those wearing the (usually smaller) boots on the ground.

Holly spent weeks at a time with all-female ranger teams, including the pioneering Black Mambas in South Africa's Greater Kruger and Akashinga in Phundundu Wildlife Park, Zimbabwe, inspiring her to launch WFRW in 2022.

"These bold women are protecting wildlife, uplifting communities and empowering other women," Holly tells me. "As champions of conservation, as role models and educators, female rangers are transforming attitudes towards women by succeeding in traditionally male roles. They're not only proving themselves on patrols, but also as natural communicators and protectors, easing tensions and strengthening relationships within local communities. The female ranger movement is building momentum across Africa."

Reflecting that, conservation organisation African Parks (AP), which manages 22 protected areas in 12 countries, has the largest ranger workforce of any NGO on the continent, employing 2247 rangers. Of these, 135 — about six per cent — are women, and their number is rising.

"We're seeing more women undergoing basic field ranger training, increasing the percentage of female rangers across our parks," HR director Mbulelo Ntusi explains. "Our policies embrace diversity, equity and inclusion. We have a zero

tolerance policy towards harassment of all forms, and we even guarantee anonymity of reporting. AP invests in training and continuous learning to build a solid pipeline of future leaders, with opportunities for female rangers to grow into senior roles across the organisation."

Mbulelo believes WFRW is a crucial initiative "to recognise and affirm the important role female rangers play in securing our parks and communities... under extremely challenging environments."

Chad, where AP manages three reserves, is a volatile country. Although women constitute 50 per cent of the population, they face ingrained discrimination and inequality. Despite this, 25-year-old Fatimé Hissebouna became an African Parks ranger in 2018.

Fatimé is one of two females among 80 rangers based in Zakouma National Park, which spans 3000sq km of wildlife-rich savannah, rivers and pans.

"My father, a forester, was my motivation," she explains. "I decided to follow in his footsteps to help protect our precious wildlife for future generations."

Adapting to her role wasn't easy. "As mother of one child and caretaker of three, I'm often away, leaving them with my parents. And living far from urban centres presents challenges, especially in terms of gender equality. We women fight for equality, supported by some men while others doubt our abilities. Nevertheless, we persist. Over time, men have learned to respect our strength and determination."

Now a Team Leader, her role brings its own rewards: "As a local woman, I'm a source of pride for my family and community. And I'm shaping the future for generations to come. Girls aspire to become like me, contributing to community investment. The involvement

of women in the forest guard is crucial: we play an important role in raising community awareness. Working at Zakouma is a dream come true for me and



BRENT STIRTON (2)

Juggling roles. Female rangers of the Akashinga team in Zimbabwe

my father."

Her advice to aspiring female rangers is pertinent: "They need to cultivate courage, discipline and patience," she says. "The rest will come naturally."

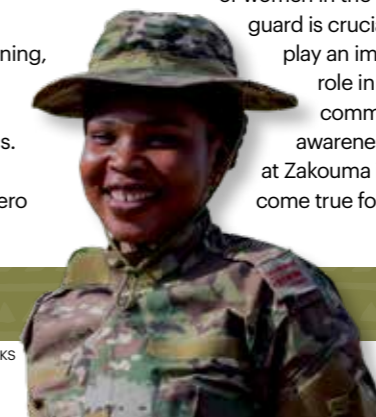
In north-eastern Chad, Halimé Adoum Loni is an AP ranger in the vast Ennedi Cultural and Natural Reserve, which covers 50,000sq km of Saharan desert. She is one of only two females among 40 rangers.

Growing up in the nearby town of Fada, 27-year-old Halimé was enchanted by Ennedi's natural beauty, its sandstone landscapes and ancient archaeological sites, deciding to become a ranger when she realised it was under threat.

"Many doubted me because of my gender. But I knew in my heart I could make a significant contribution to the conservation of our natural heritage. I worked tirelessly, overcoming prejudice and obstacles, and was finally recruited," she said.

"Assignments in the bush are a constant challenge. Sometimes I find myself facing dangerous situations. But whenever I see the fruits of our labour, whenever I participate in successful reintroductions of endangered species, I know it's worth it. This isn't just my job, it's my passion, and I'm proud to play a part in preserving our environment for future generations."

Halimé's greatest joy — similar to Fatimé's — comes from being a role model for girls in her community: "They have the power to achieve their dreams," she says, "no matter what obstacles they face."



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