

## ARK & TENT



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Home

Articles Index

Travel Articles

World Beat

Helping Hands

Pet Projects

Field Notes

Trips & Tours

Reader's Corner

Newsletter

About Us

### ANIMAL HEROES

#### *Patty Wagstaff's Love for Aviation Helps African Wildlife*

By Katey Pfeil

As you read this, there's a good chance a blond-haired, blue-eyed American woman is flying over the skies of Kenya. Using her aviation prowess to monitor illegal poaching in Africa while teaching local Kenyan pilots the "in's" and "out's" of aviation, hope rests on the idea that monitoring poaching activity from the air will help preserve Africa's wildlife.



Upon first glance, Patty Wagstaff probably isn't what you had in mind when you think of a three-time winning U.S. National Aerobatic champion, but then again Wagstaff isn't your everyday pilot. The charismatic 59-year old woman has more accolades to her name than most pilots could dream of, including both the coveted Betty Skelton award (1988-1994) and the Air Show Hall of Fame award (2006). She is also an inductee to the Women in Aviation International Hall of Fame (1997) as well as the International Aerobatic Hall of Fame (2005).

In 1994, her Goodrich-sponsored Extra 260 airplane was put on display next to Amelia Earhart's Lockheed Vega at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum. Simply put, Wagstaff is good at what she does - *really* good. Although her attractive persona and insatiable enthusiasm for flying are only exterior reasons to appreciate her efforts in Kenya, a deeper introduction reveals why Wagstaff is a true animal hero.

Born in St. Louis Missouri in 1951, Wagstaff was surrounded by planes from an early age. Her father was a pilot for a Japanese airline, which allowed her to travel the world and gain an appreciation for other cultures. Some of her earliest memories include sitting with her father at the controls of his airplanes. At ten years old when her father let her take the controls of his DC-6, her lifelong fascination with airplanes began.

Although many people know about Wagstaff's incredible aviation feats, not everyone knows she has spent the last several years in Africa during her winter off-season, training park wardens so they can fly air patrols to deter poaching. Under Wagstaff's

watchful eye, the accident rate of the patrol pilots has declined by more than 50%; in contrast, some accounts claim that elephant numbers have increased.

The Charles Lindbergh Foundation (CLF) has joined forces with Wagstaff, funding many of the project's costs as the work she's doing balances both technology and the environment. Because anti-poaching pilots "need to fly low, slow, and with precision," a perfect instructor can therefore be found in Patty Wagstaff.



But what exactly is it that Wagstaff does in Kenya? She teaches pilots who have little to moderate experience flying more advanced flying methods- including better safety procedures. By doing so, she's ensuring a homegrown crop of conservationists will have what it takes to protect their native wildlife.

The 2009 documentary titled *Over Africa* (produced by Miles O'Brien Productions and funded by the Lindbergh Foundation), chronicles Wagstaff's efforts in Kenya. In the film Wagstaff notes, "Poaching is getting worse. Aviation is becoming more important because poachers (have said) that aviation is the single biggest deterrent to them. So what these pilots are doing is really important."

Under the wing of her airplane each morning (before the in-air sessions begin), Wagstaff draws diagrams and outlines for the pilots in the red African soil. Her technique isn't fancy, but it is adequate in a country where aviation and technology are just beginning to take off.

Poachers target many endangered animals in Africa, especially elephants because their ivory tusks can fetch serious money on the black market (up to \$1,000 per kilo). Motivated by greed or pending starvation, poachers brutally kill hundreds of elephants each year, threatening the future of Africa's gentle giants. Although there are approximately 20,000 elephants in Kenya, conservationists are concerned about their numbers because poaching has become so rampant. Coupled with drought and habitat loss, researchers fear the result could be devastating.



Flying over vast spans of land (sometimes thousands of square miles), the pilots face danger such as crashes and violence from the ground. Several of the planes have been shot at by poachers.

Although cultural differences between Wagstaff and the Kenyan pilots do exist (including polite skepticism at the thought of being instructed by a

woman), Wagstaff humorously admits, "When it all comes down to it, we get up in the air and I can show them a few things. If they give me any problems, I'll just flip them upside down."

By imparting her knowledge and love of aviation onto others, Wagstaff demonstrates what successful wildlife presentation can look like. In the film, Wagstaff notes, "We have this amazing resource, this global resource, that you find in very few places in

the world, that's becoming more and more endangered. Elephants, the rhino and everything else we fly over every day here - it belongs to everybody.”

However, Wagstaff is quick not to take all of the credit for the program’s success. One of Wagstaff’s students is a Kenyan named George Mwangi. Thrilled to be a part of the program because it unites his love of flying with his love of nature and the animals that are part of his culture’s heritage, Mwangi relates the pride he has for being a good steward in *Over Africa* by saying, "When St. Peter comes and I eventually leave this world, I want I go to St. Peter and tell him I did my big job and took care of your animals - our animals.”



*For more information about Patty Wagstaff, or any of her upcoming air shows, visit: [www.pattywagstaff.com](http://www.pattywagstaff.com)*

*To learn more about what Wagstaff is doing in Kenya, and to learn more about the film *Over Africa*, visit [www.lindberghfoundation.org](http://www.lindberghfoundation.org)*

Photo credits: courtesy of Patty Wagstaff  
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Site Map