

OBITUARIES

Ian Lemaiyan—KWS bush pilot passionate about rhino conservation

Born: 19 April 1990

Died: 11 February 2021

Tribute by Paula Kahumbu

Wildlife Direct, PO Box 24467, 00502, Nairobi, Kenya
email: paula@wildlifedirect.org



Everyone who met Ian was left moved by his passion. Those of us who knew him well would describe him as knowledgeable, positive, compassionate, forgiving, generous, and adventurous. Altogether an impressive person who was undeniably going places with his life.

He was also a dreamer—in his “about” section on Facebook he wrote “I believe in dreams coming true, in one way or the other, if you put enough strength, faith and smart work together, there is nothing one cannot achieve”.

I got to know Ian really well during the 2014 Global March for Elephants and Rhinos in Nairobi, as we walked together for several hours. I learned that he was no longer a volunteer at the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) but had moved to Lewa Conservancy to start a job with the rhino team, and he loved rhinos more than anyone else I’d ever met. It was not until his first visit to the Nairobi National Park following his training at the KWS Training Institute, that he saw his first rhino. At KWS he assisted with notching rhinos and veterinarian work. He was intrigued by this giant animal and dedicated his life to saving them. I visited Lewa several times over the next few years, as a guest and as a board member, and every time I’d seek Ian out and spend time with him to hear about his work and support him in his aspirations. He always took me to meet the rhinos, especially the orphaned calves to give me a close up experience. He got along with the rangers, scientists and donors alike, Ian had a rare sense of self confidence, yet he was still hugely humble.

From the first day I met Ian, I knew that he wanted to be a pilot. He loved doing the field work by motorbike but spoke dreamily about saving rhinos from the skies. It might have seemed like a pipe dream for a boy raised by his grandparents in the dusty town of Kiserian on the outskirts of Nairobi. He didn’t have much money, so he took his lessons secretly. He would take a bus to Nairobi every weekend to do just one hour of the course at a time. It was all he could afford. It took time, but in 2018 he finished the course and qualified as a pilot.

Newly qualified I filmed Ian for an episode

of *Wildlife Warriors*. He was a very good communicator, easy going, natural in front of the lens, quick to smile and at the same time, courageous enough to show his emotions. During the shoot I asked him if he had ever witnessed a dead rhino. His eyes immediately welled with tears, and he fell silent, turning from the camera, then spoke through the tears about a painful experience of witnessing the death of a five-year old rhino at Lewa. The whole crew were wiping their eyes as we shot that scene. During the shoot, I learned that he was building a house for his new wife and new-born baby Louis, who at the time were on their way back to Kenya. During the shoot he spoke about why he was so dedicated: he said it would be too sad if his son didn't grow up to see elephants and rhinos.

Ian's episode of *Wildlife Warriors* made him so proud because after the screening many people called him to inquire about volunteering—an offer he made on air. In July 2019 he wrote excitedly to me about a new job he had landed with the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) as assistant Security Administrator—a strange title he said, but he looked forward to the challenge. Soon after that he was offered his dream job at KWS which he took up. KWS had recently bought new aircraft and were recruiting new pilots. Best of all, his close friend Mike Nicholson was in charge. He was so happy at KWS where he had his own plane, 5Y KWL. Since then there have been numerous features across the media, where he regularly spoke about conservation issues.

He loved life and called it a “crazy wild unplanned adventure”. At the time of his death, Meru National Park was his duty station, but the air was his playground. He generously shared his experiences, about the places he visited, and revelled in the diversity of the job of a bush pilot. He enjoyed it so much that he didn't refer to it as work. He said, “I love flying, I love rhinos, and possibly more than I love life”. He had a beautiful wife Stephanie, a healthy son and his love for them shone through in the Facebook posts he shared every day.

In 2020 Ian lost a close friend during a training flight at KWS. I spoke to him at the time, he was gutted. I asked him to be careful and he assured me that he always was. Less than a year later, on 11 February 2021, Ian took off for the last time.

Tragically his plane crashed shortly after take-off from the Nanyuki airstrip, with fellow passenger, and a warden of Meru National Park. Ian was beloved by so many of us, words cannot convey the sense of loss of such a great person, friend, and conservationist.

Ian will be remembered by so many for infecting all of us with his love of life. He never said a bad word about anyone, was hugely forgiving and an incredible ambassador for rhinos. His wife Stephanie has set up a scholarship in his name and I invite everyone to support it, to honor his legacy, by creating opportunities for others like him. To learn more about the scholarship fund, click on the link in the bio, or visit <https://gofund.me/df552f17>. If you're based in Kenya, you can donate directly via till number 5780089.

May Captain Ian Lemaiyan continue protecting our rhinos through all of us. Rest In Peace my friend.