

The Scientist

Volume 24 | Issue 10 | Page 21

By Chris Tachibana

Congo calling



Jackson scans a forest swamp on a recent expedition in the Republic of Congo.

Courtesy of Kate Jackson

This past spring, Kate Jackson gave a biology final in Walla Walla, Washington, and the next day, after strapping on her leg braces, she flew to the Republic of Congo. Jackson, a herpetologist, writer, and faculty member at Whitman College who studies the reptiles of Central Africa, was gearing up for her fifth expedition to the region. But this trip was different. It was her first since being diagnosed with transverse myelitis, a neurological condition that had her teaching from a wheelchair as late as a month before her trip.

Prior to this year's trip, Jackson was last in the Congo in June 2008. "In April 2009, I had trouble walking, and in two weeks, I couldn't walk at all," she says. "It took innumerable doctors, but they decided it was a virus I picked up in the Congo that had damaged my spinal cord." In Jackson's case,

Related Articles

the exact agent wasn't identified, but parainfectious transverse myelitis can develop with any viral infection, when inflammation and possibly an autoimmune response target the protective tissue called myelin that surrounds spinal cord nerves.

Jackson spent the next year recovering, including a semester on sabbatical leave in her home country of Canada that she had hoped to spend in Africa. Her doctors recommended a longer recuperation, but Central Africa called to Jackson.

[Dramatic Rise in Monkeypox](#)

[Slideshow: Monkeypox in the Congo](#)

[The Long Journey Home](#)

[Video: Meet Kate Jackson](#)

Her doctors recommended a longer recuperation, but Central Africa called to Jackson.

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) is conducting environmental surveys of potential mining and national park sites in Congo's Massif du Chaillu region, on the border with Gabon, and Jackson was a natural choice for the herpetology survey.

The WCS wanted her on site as early as possible in 2010, but she had to teach her

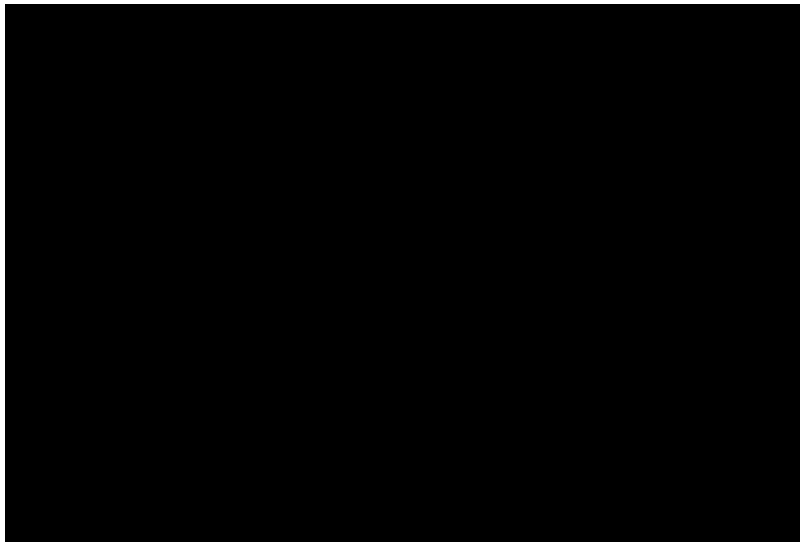
classes—and teach herself how to walk again. “In January, I saw my neurologist, and he wanted to me to move to a wheelchair-accessible apartment and live out my life in Walla Walla as a handicapped person,” says Jackson. “But the next day I had my first appointment with my physical therapist. I said my goal was to make an expedition to the Congo in May, and she said ‘okay, let’s get to work.’ ” At that point, Jackson could stand unsupported for less than 2 seconds.

Jackson can be quite nonchalant about the hardships and hazards she faces. Kevin de Queiroz is a research zoologist at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, where Jackson sends many of the preserved specimens and tissues she collects. "She takes more risks than a lot of other people," he says. "The field work she does in remote places is very important for the study of biodiversity and for conservation. I just wish she'd be a little more careful when she's doing it."



The skink, *Lygosoma fernandi*

Courtesy of Kate Jackson



[Kate Jackson SNAKES](#) from [Rose](#) on [Vimeo](#).

For the 2010 expedition, WCS wanted a rapid assessment of the reptiles and

amphibians in the survey areas and an evaluation of the impact that mining might have. Determined to make the trip, Jackson recovered enough to walk with leg braces, which made jungle trekking “possible but difficult, and I couldn’t pin a snake with my boot, which is something I used to do automatically.” Luckily, Jackson had several students from the Université Marien-Ngouabi in Brazzaville to help, including Ange-Ghislain Zassi-Boulou, who had been on two previous expeditions. “Ange was very upset when he heard I was on crutches because in the Congo, only beggars are on crutches,” Jackson says. But Ange and the rest of the team rallied and helped Jackson complete a report for the WCS with a species list that included a *Bothrolycus ater*, a harmless snake that is so rare that it had never before been photographed alive.

For now, Jackson is back teaching in Walla Walla and has two books in the works, including a sequel to *Mean and Lowly Things*, her 2008 book about the challenges and triumphs of her first Congolese field expeditions. And of course, she’ll go back to the Congo, for professional and personal reasons. “I went there to protect the amphibians and reptiles from the mining, but another reason was wanting to go back and get back on that horse. I had to show that the Congo hasn’t beaten Kate Jackson.”