

## DIARY MARCH / APRIL 2004

I have been with the cheetah cubs from the middle of February until the middle of March. Their ability to hunt for themselves has been developing well over the past weeks but life lessons are still rich, and often hazardous. It's not been easy, as one of their surrogate parents, to watch them stumbling into danger, but frankly, it's far better they learn the ropes whilst we are still nearby than once they are completely alone. At least we can come to their assistance from time to time.



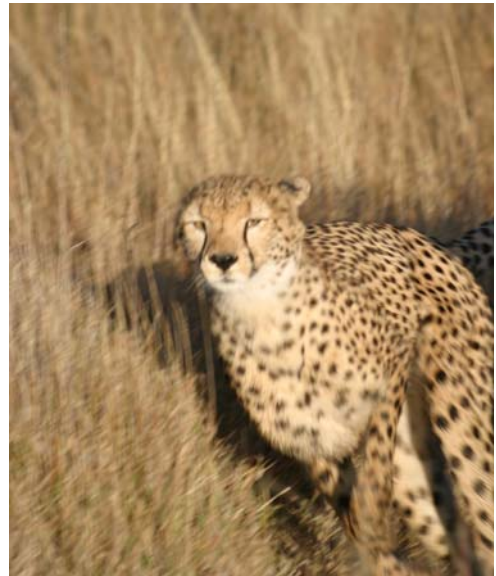
### ...walking into the lion's den...

A particularly hairy encounter occurred at the end of February. More and more now, the cubs are deciding to sleep away from the camp and out in the bush, several kilometres away. This is good, a very necessary part of growing up. But it's harrowing for me. If they are more than a few hundred metres away from the camp, I spend the night sleeping in my car a few metres away from them. (I stay in the car so that they don't feel over confident and assume that I am looking out for them!). Last week, after they had settled to doze on an old game trail, I began recording some of the night sounds of the grassland. There wasn't a breath of wind and a half moon cast soft silver shadows. Another half hour later and I noticed a very quiet crackling in the grass some 20 metres away. I shone my torch to find five sets of eyes looking my way. Predator eyes! A group of lions, two females and three cubs, had crept up on us and were quietly checking us out. The cheetah cubs had seen lions in the distance by day, and always behaved nervously. But they had never encountered them at night before. At 18 months old, the cheetahs are fast, faster I believed than a lion. But would they have the wit to notice the great cats stalking up on them? I couldn't be sure. Uncertain of the best plan of action, I decided to keep my torch on the lions, hoping the cheetahs would wake and take notice. They did, but rather than run, Sambu, the larger of the two, started to growl and creep towards the lioness with the three cubs, who by now was focussed and intent on dealing with this slender competition. Sambu was quite literally walking into the lion's den. Then explosion. The lioness charged at Sambu, he in turn took off into the darkness. Toki, his brother, disappeared in the other direction, pursued by the second lioness. Total, terrifying chaos. All I could do was try to check from time to time how the drama was playing out, whilst at the same time avoid putting Toki or Sambu at a disadvantage by shining the light on them. I have a burning memory of a lioness very hot on the heels of Sambu, who was running full stretch to escape her clutches.

After only a minute or so the immediate danger was over. I knew that Sambu had escaped, but had no idea of the whereabouts of Toki. I could see the lionesses, and decided to encourage them to move away from the area. This was a tricky decision. If I had been watching entirely wild cheetahs, I would have not played any part in the outcome of the encounter. It's one of my unwritten rules. But having already played an instrumental role in the survival of the Cheetah cubs over the past year and a half, I felt it was my duty to help. They had already survived the most deadly assault. Now I just wanted to give them a break, and to try to find Toki. After carefully driving the car between the lions and Sambu, the lionesses decided to move off. After five minutes or so, Sambu started to call for his brother. There was no answer. I followed his progress in the dark as he searched. After an agonising half hour, Toki appeared from the long grass on a nearby ridge, looking very, very nervous! The two spent the night huddled close together, taking it in turns to keep an eye out for trouble, whilst I, in turn, kept watch from the vehicle. The arrival of dawn was truly welcome.

A week or so later, the two chased a herd of Zebra, and passed within twenty metres of a female leopard crouching in the grass. Neither cheetah spotted the danger. The leopard however was extremely aware of these new kids on her block. She chose to slink off in search of impala rather than pursue the cubs, much to my relief.

Completely wild Cheetahs run this gauntlet on a daily basis. Indeed, Sambu and Toki's mother was killed by a lion rendering them orphans. I can only continue to hope that the cubs learn their trade and all of the pitfalls that come with it, without suffering the same consequence as their natural mum, and that we can help them get a good start in life.



Their hunting is certainly improving; they have little difficulty catching young impala fawns. But their stalking ability on more mature prey leaves a lot to be desired. They mess up about 90% of hunts through either incompetence, or impatience. Only trial and error will teach them how best to go about their trade.

I shall be back with them in early April, but now am on my way to the UK to present some sequences for an upcoming sequence in the summer: Briton Goes Wild.

My two weeks in the UK was extraordinarily varied. Presenting sequences which are to be shown in the summer as part of a series on British wildlife, I travelled to the Ythan estuary, near Aberdeen, to St. Andrews golf course, a cemetery which was home to two perfectly wild but incredibly tolerant roe deer and a Dorset woodland. In, that time we experienced the full range of British weather, from horizontal sleet on the northern estuary, to the most magnificent balmy spring day in the Dorset woodland, complete with newly arrived chiff-chaffs singing their heart out. Only a week before I was listening to migrating chiff-chaffs on the foothills of Mount Kenya. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to remind myself of my good fortune! I have to be honest, the plunge into the British climate did come as a bit of a shock for a day or two, and despite being in wonderful places, it always takes a little while to adjust to the short horizons of Britain compared to Kenya. But it is the variety that makes life so constantly fulfilling. Back in Kenya now, with the cheetahs. All going well, though constantly harrowing now that they are branching out alone more and more. I'll continue their update in the next instalment of this diary.