

## DIARY OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2004

We are approaching the final days in the Masai Mara for this year's series of Big Cat Week, and what a trip it has been. I cannot tell you the detail of what we've seen, just that the cats here have lived up to everything we might have expected of them. I have been concentrating on the lions again, and, as the most powerful of the big cats in Africa, they have provided us with some extraordinary drama and spectacle, from uncomfortably close encounters with a vast herd of buffalo that spell real danger for the younger members of the pride, to violent and bloody fights in the family. Lion-life is punctuated by violence of one kind or another, but that contrasts too with the tender care shown by the females and even the adult males, towards the cubs. Our star this year is a young cub we've named Sala; utterly charming and very vulnerable.

The weather has been fickle here in Kenya during September, with regular rain and the occasional massive storm. One such afternoon tempest flooded our camp and brought a tree down on top of one of the tents. Fortunately no-one was in it at the time. To be honest, I love the extremes of this climate - one minute roasting in the heat of midday, the next battling down the hatches against a tropical storm. It gives a real sense of perspective to our significance in this wild place.

Sorry for the break in the Dairy. I've been chokka-block with Big Cat Week and then on to Lewa in Northern Kenya catching up with Toki, the surviving cheetah brother.

*THANK YOU*, to those of you who have written such warming and flattering mail having watched the film about Toki and his late brother Sambu that was transmitted on BBC2 in October. Your reaction to the film has been quite overwhelming and very gratefully received. I only wish I could answer each if you individually, but I do truly appreciate your feedback regarding any of the work I do.

...saved by the radio collar which he still wears...

Toki was well when we left Lewa in mid October, and I followed his tracks which revealed that he was pursuing a female cheetah (he is obviously growing up) alarmingly, and perhaps because of his mature behaviour, he was attacked by three resident male cheetahs and almost died about a week after we returned to the UK. He was saved by Stephen, his caretaker, who witnessed the attack and ran in to scare off the adult males. Not being there to help him with his recovery has been really tough, but he is in good hands with Stephen, Jane and Ian Craig and Belinda Lowe, head of research on the reserve. His wounds are deep and significant, particularly around his back legs. His throat was badly bitten but the injuries here are not life threatening (he may have been saved by the radio collar which he still wears). For the time being, until he can walk and run again both to feed

himself and to avoid trouble, he is being kept in a large enclosure and Stephen is with him the whole time. We hope to be back with him in

## ...Planet Earth...

The reason I cannot be in Kenya now is that I am currently in Antarctica, quite an extreme change from East Africa, but a remarkably exciting one. I am filming for a new series called Planet Earth which is due to transmit some time towards the end of next year and 2006. I am in the most remote part of the South I have ever visited - 72° South. There is no true night as I write, and in a week or so the sun will not set as we approach the Antarctic summer. That said, temperatures don't rise above freezing and most of the time are 15° - 20° below. This is a world where little natural life can survive, but in a week or so we expect (hope) to see the



best part of 1 million birds arrive to breed on the mountains that stick above the ice. Here, there is probably the greatest concentration of breeding Antarctic Petrels in the world - 250,000 breeding pairs. Along with Snow Petrels and Skuas it promises to be an extraordinary spectacle. Now though we are waiting. Only a few South Polar Skuas are here, hanging around the polar stations, with the petrels still feeding out at sea over 400 miles away. They should arrive around the 20<sup>th</sup> November, still 2 weeks away, but the only way to reach this remote site was to accompany one of the Antarctic supply flights to Novolazerevskaya, a Russian base, and from there to fly in to Svarthamaren where the bird colony is situated. We had to fit in with their time table, and are enormously grateful they and the Norwegian Polar Institute, whose camp we will be using, could accommodate us.

Trips like this are the ultimate in adventure, jumping from one extraordinary mode of transport to the next. We took off from Cape Town in South Africa in an IL76, a huge Russian cargo jet with 20 wheels and the capacity to carry a phenomenal amount of gear. 6 hours later, we were landing in Novo airstrip - a vast area of clear ice! From the summer heat of Cape Town to -20° in a few hours!

## ...weathered in...

Since then we have been enjoying the hospitality of the Russian base at Novo, who are kindly accommodating us until we can fly on a smaller aircraft to the bird colony. And that's why I have a bit of time to write! At the moment we are 'weathered in' - gale force winds preventing the flight to the remote camp where we will spend the month. Soon though we shall

be even deeper into the continent and waiting for the birds. I'll try to keep you up to date, satellite e-mail allowing.

In the meantime, many thanks once again to all of you who kindly got in touch about the cheetah film and indeed all of the correspondence that has been incoming. Hopefully your questions have been addressed here and in the FAQ section. See you soon, warmest regards.

Simon