

DIARY FEBRUARY / MARCH 2004

It has been a month of extraordinary highs and lows. We continue with our project of helping to rehabilitate two orphaned cheetah cubs, and they have put us through the gamut of emotions, from joy to extreme anxiety.

...Definitely time for long trousers...

It's hard to imagine how frail and tiny the cheetah cubs were when first they came into the care of Jane and Ian Craig of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy back in September. Now, at five months old they look set to take on the world. They have developed from malnourished fur balls into boisterous, cheeky brothers. Their character as individuals has blossomed too. Toki, the smaller of the two is by far the more cheeky. On daily walks it is he who has taken to trying to trip up his human guardians, and even the dew-claw of a five month old cheetah cub can leave a significant hole in an unwary shin! Definitely time for long trousers. It is also he who shows greatest interest when it comes to games of tag or wrestling bouts, often dominating his larger brother to the point of anguished squeals.



Sambu, by contrast, is more serious minded. Of the (very amateur) attempts the cubs have made at chasing prey, it is Sambu who seems to have the edge and a more focused attitude, and Toki tends to charge in regardless. Such chases have so far been directed at Warthog, the odd bird, lizards and hyrax, but none to date, have ended in success for the cubs. Just as well when the quarry has been adult warthog, given that these animals can easily rip into a full-grown lion or leopard with their tusks if they are cornered or enraged. Fortunately, the increased speed and agility of the cheetahs is such that we can now allow them to be more adventurous with their targets, though we still discourage them from close approaches to elephants, rhino or other predators. This is done by our using an approximation of a female cheetah's warning growl, and has so far worked perfectly, freezing the cubs in their tracks, and if continued, sending them sloping off into cover away from the threat. This technique has been particularly successful when encouraging the cubs to be wary of humans on foot (other than their guardians of course) an essential lesson if they are to live a wild existence in a year's time. Each month sees dramatic changes in the brothers, all of which we are documenting. We look forward to their continued development in strength and speed, and their gradual steps towards independence.

NEWSFLASH

On Thursday, 20th February, Toki did indeed chase a family of Warthog. On this occasion he managed to close the gap between himself and the young warthogs, and incited the rage of the mother. In a matter of seconds he was attacked and injured, before we were able to chase the mother off. His injuries were deep, but all fortunately missed his internal organs. By further good fortune, senior zoo vet Bengt O. Roken was staying on Lewa at the time, and was able to assist tremendously with first aid and surgery. To date, 24th February, Toki is recovering well. The wind has been knocked out of his sails, but perhaps this was the lesson he needed in order to exercise more caution out in the field. He's a lucky cat!

Simon King