

## DIARY JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2004

After a short break from the filming of Big Cat Diary (which transmitted in January 2004) it was off to South Africa, to work on a project for the BBC Natural World series. The film, produced by Marguerite Smits van Oyen, concerns the influence of the two very different oceans that border the shores of SA, with a particular slant towards the many sharks that inhabit



the waters. In June of last year we had the fortune to follow the Great White Sharks that hunt seals off the southern most tip of the country, but now our mission was to film nesting turtles, which are sometimes targeted by tiger sharks. The north east coast has good numbers of turtles nesting on the sandy beaches, but their arrival is affected by many variables, from the sea condition to the tide. In addition, all turtles are

disturbed by visible light, and in a lot of places they have become rare, confused by the artificial lights of coastal hotels and developments. In this wild corner of the world, the only lights were those of the stars and the moon, and not wanting to disturb this delicate atmosphere we worked only with infra red lights, invisible to both turtles and humans alike, but picked up by my IR camera. However, the beaches are miles long, and even with special permission to use a vehicle from time to time, we spent most of the time walking along the strand in complete darkness searching for one of these primitive but endearing creatures hauling its weight from the watery world to dry land. Walking on a tropical beach at night, under the light of the stars has a very romantic ring to it, but there were one or two elements that gave the task a challenging tone. Number one, the turtles are not exactly quick, but, on such a long beach, they could quite easily pop out of the ocean, do there business and be back in the water well before we reached them on foot. We often came across fresh tracks telling us that we had just missed our star's turn! Secondly, these tropical shores are often brushed by cyclones, and one had perched out to sea during our visit, ensuring that on many nights the wind blew salt water spray and light sand into every corner of the delicate IR equipment and indeed everywhere else it could reach! Throw in the occasional thunder, storm and the effort of carrying the fragile but heavy equipment up and down the loose sand and you'll begin to get the picture. Not easy! But we were lucky. We came across two loggerhead turtles soon after they emerged from the water and recorded the extraordinary effort these animals go to, to deposit their eggs on land. It's impossible not to be touched by their clumsy helpless forms scraping their way up the dune to find a suitable patch of sand to dig a nest hole. Once egg laying was under way, the turtles were so preoccupied that I was able to get to within a couple of metres without disturbing them, and record this increasingly rare behaviour in detail. It may sound peculiar, but it wasn't until the majority of filming was completed that I was able to truly

appreciate the magnificence of these creatures. Studying the viewfinder which presented a brightly lit turtle going about her business under the covert glare of infra red lights, and then peaking into the utter blackness of night that was all the unaided eye could see, was somehow distancing. But once certain that the best part of the sequence was secured I was able to take my eye away from the eyepiece for a little longer and allow it to adjust to the darkness. Not more than two metres away, the dark hulk of the turtle took form against the white sand, and I at last felt as though I was sharing the moment with this super-mum. Her puffing and wheezing breath added to the impression of supreme effort created by her almost mechanical movements as she covered her newly laid eggs with sand.

**..the second largest reptiles on the planet..**

To add to our luck on one night we also came across a leatherback turtle just as she started to dig her nest hole. Leatherbacks, after crocodiles, are the second largest reptiles on the planet. That sounds like a pub fact that means nothing, but when you crouch in the dark next to an animal that is as big



as your average single bed, and much, much heavier, it is truly impressive. The great bulk of this rare turtle, makes the effort of coming on to land all the more taxing, and it was a huge privilege to share the beach with this goliath, for the brief window that she entered our world of air.

**...wax their boards and catch a wave...**

After a few days spent checking out some small shoaling smooth-hound sharks in a wave swept river mouth further south, we travelled to the Garden Route coast. Here the subjects were far smaller, but no less compelling to watch. The sandy beaches here hold a secret. The flat sand, lapped by waves appears lifeless until some hapless animal is washed ashore. Often in the form of jellyfish, these stranded creatures are a cue to the plough shell or surfing snails to wax their boards and



catch a wave. Joking aside, it is an incredible sight, as, with the receding water washing minute particles of the hapless jellyfish across the sand, the ground erupts and from it lurch literally hundreds of snails. Those close to their target perform a vigorous breast-stroke in the wet sand to reach their meal, making them surely one of the fastest snails on earth. But those further down the beach wait for the next incoming wave, and as the water rushes past they lift their broad foot and perform a sort of inverted surf closer to their target. The biggest problem from the filming point of view was that the snails' targets on this occasion were bluebottles. Also known as Portuguese man-of-war, these small, jewel-like creatures (they look a bit like jellyfish but are in fact a form of colonial hydroid) pack quite a punch. The snails seemed immune to the stinging tentacles that draped along the sand, often following a single thread along until they reached the more substantial body of the creature. But I was not! Lying on my belly to get a snails-eye-view of the scene, a wave splashed into me and with it swept the fine blue stinging threads of the bluebottle. OUCH!! I was wearing a wet suit, but hands, wrists and feet were exposed, and all copped a dose of bluebottle's last stand. To be honest, the stinging wasn't too bad, but bad enough to encourage me to wear neoprene socks and gloves to avoid another dose. So there you have it, the picture of a neoprene clad man, lying on his belly on the beach, facing the lapping surf, and studying, apparently, nothing. More than once, a group of bewildered holidaymakers gathered around this curious beast, either intrigued, bemused or slightly nervous of the spectacle. All however seemed thrilled once the subjects of my attention revealed themselves with a passing wave.

**...natural dangers are ever present...**



From South Africa, it was on to Kenya, from where I now write. Since December 2002, I have been working on a project, also for the BBC Natural World series, following two orphaned cheetah cubs. Their lives and mine have been inextricably linked ever since. The whole story of how they came to be orphaned and their trials and tribulations to this date will be revealed in the film, but now, with the cubs a year and a half old we are reaching a critical period on their path to independence. Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, where the cheetahs live alongside great herds of elephant, black and white rhino, leopard, lion and a host of other creatures is ideal cheetah habitat. But like any part of Africa that offers the space and game necessary for a cheetah to thrive, the natural dangers are ever present. Having nurtured these cubs from tiny balls of fur, through their earliest clumsy attempts at hunting, to now, when they are venturing further and further a-field and are all but independent, it is very hard for me to remain dispassionate. Ian Craig, the Director of LWC and his wife Jane were and are instrumental in the cheetahs' success, and share my concern for the future of the cubs. With their continued support, and that of two rangers whose job it has been

to help educate and look after the cats, I have been working to carefully introduce Toki and Sambu as they are known, back to a world that they would otherwise have left forever at two weeks old. The cheetahs are now exposed only to a very few people, and though in the early days I was walking with them in the bush, I now remain in my vehicle, treating them as I would any wild cheetah. This is the beginning of a month of continued monitoring and filming to chart their progress and promises to be one of the most emotionally challenging for me. Already they have started to sleep away from the camp at night, and though equipped with radio collars for relocation in the morning, each night is fraught with risks. I don't think I'll be getting much sleep! Their hunting skills are improving, (this morning they killed a warthog, and yesterday an impala) but such is the habitat of long grass and dense bush, filming them now will grow ever more difficult. One of the greatest risks they face is the resident coalition of three adult male cheetahs. There is room on Lewa to accommodate more cheetahs, but as a species the males are generally intolerant of each other. Our boys must keep their wits about them if they are to avoid a mortal encounter. This of course is no more nor less than any wild cheetah would face, but it doesn't make it any easier to bear. The progress of the coming month and the months thereafter, when I shall be here in Lewa working with the cheetahs, and starting to contribute to a follow up of last years live programmes 'Wild in your Garden', will be charted in my next diary update.

Bye for now

Simon