



Pictures by the author

Imagine an African Safari without Lions....

Unthinkable?

This is exactly what the experts predict unless something can be done about the diminishing number of lions in the wild.

According to noted *National Geographic* explorer Dereck Joubert there were close to a half a million lions in Africa only fifty years ago. Today there are between 16,000 and 23,000. Yet, unlike the far more abundant elephants, lions have no protection under international wildlife accords.

Last month my wife Ruth and I spent time at Duba Plains in Botswana's Okavango Delta where Dereck and his wife Beverly filmed their widely acclaimed documentary, *Relentless Enemies*—chronicling the ongoing bloody battle between the buffalo and lions trapped on the island. The Jouberts were in the United States trying to create a public awareness for the plight of Africa's lions but we had the services of expert guide Kebalebile James Pisetu a.k.a. James 007, who had been by their side during the filming. Accommodations were in a very comfortable luxury tented camp established by Wilderness Safaris.

On our way to Duba Plains we stopped over at Chitabe where, apart lions and abundant other wildlife, the focus was on another endangered species—the African wild dog. (Ironically, lions account in part for the demise of these dogs). The highlight at Chitabe was the observation at close range of an impala kill by a pack of wild dogs. Their military precision and a swift





Wild dog kill at Chitabe—swift with precision

killing technique—disemboweling their prey within seconds—account for an 80 percent success rate as opposed to the lion’s paltry 30 percent average. But then one wonders whether there is any pleasure in the eating as ten dogs between them devoured a fully grown impala in a matter of minutes.

At Chitabe lion talk was mostly about two black-maned males that suddenly appeared on the scene from “who-knows-where.” They were supposed to be confined to the Kalahari Game Reserve several hundred miles south—our final stop on this trip. These males stayed separate from the Chitabe prides and kept close to the airstrip as if waiting for a flight back home. Needless to say, I did not suggest that they accompany us on our onward journey to the Kalahari in a small Cessna via Duba Plains.

After witnessing a failed attempt by one of the local lion prides to bring down a wildebeest and encountering abundant numbers of zebra, antelope, elephants and giraffe as well as fascinating bird-life, we chanced upon a leopard in broad daylight. She was showing off her splendor in a tree. Even though leopards are the most prevalent of their kind after the domestic cat, these loners are very elusive, largely nocturnal and difficult to spot.

I went to Duba Plains with great anticipation, having been told by Kim Nixon of Wilderness Safaris that I can expect to see “a bit of activity” during our two day stay. James 007 or James Bond, as he introduced himself to me after I disentangled

my large frame from cramped copilot cockpit seat of the Cessna, was more cautious. “We’ll do our best,” he promised, “but one never knows.”

Soon we would find that James was indeed a super-spy who knew where to find even the unfindable. And Kim Nixon proved to be a tad conservative. With James’ help we witnessed an abundance of action in the short span of two days.

First stop during the afternoon ride was a mating lion couple. It is a frequent affair—short sessions followed by ample resting inbetween. During the hour and a half we spent with the couple they got together three times. (Just about right, according to Prof. Richard Estes of Harvard University. In his seminal *Behavior Guide to African Mammals* Estes notes that during female estrus lasting four days lions copulate on average twice per hour with each session lasting an average of 21 seconds. Estes estimates that lions copulate 3,000



Leopard at Chitabe



lechwe in a stranglehold while others sped forward to share the meal in the mud.

It did not take them long to tear apart this small antelope, each taking off with their share. “Enough to tie them over for a while,” James remarked. “Tomorrow we hope they are hungry enough to make a serious move on the buffalo.”

That evening, after a sumptuous dinner in the *boma* (open-air enclosure) of the camp I had a chance to browse through the coffee table book version of the Joubert

documentary. In the foreword to *Relentless Enemies* Dereck Joubert explains: “*Very few places will put you in the direct path of confronting your own life and death and mortality—in addition to the inner questions left too long unasked—as the wild places of Africa do... Perhaps when we watch the lions stalk in and bring a powerful buffalo down to its knees we see a little of the complexity of the system into which we were born and from which we have extracted ourselves...We can see beyond the action of the moment, that this is as close as it comes to the edge of life, and for some even exhilaratingly close, not because of the blood spilled but because so seldom is one placed exactly at such a meeting of past instincts and present intellect.*”

I was still pondering these words as we set out at the crack of dawn in pursuit of the lions pursuing the buffalo. We found four females close to the large herd of buffalo. Their clarion call of earth-trembling roars

times for every cub that survives more than one year). According to James cubs at Duba face an additional problem beyond the dangers from other predators such as hyenas, starvation and the like. The Tsaro pride got into the nasty habit of killing and eating their own.

While it is normal for a male lion to kill the young off-spring of another dominant male after he wins control of a pride, the killing of each other’s cubs by the females is unusual. Even more rare is their habit eating their own cubs after they have been killed by competing females.

“Let’s go see what the other lions are doing,” James observed as we proceeded through swampy grassland towards several females. Soon we were in hot pursuit of a lioness spurting towards a bewildered group of red lechwe. The Landrover was throwing up mud and grass as we slid and slide to keep up. The catch was quick and when we came to a stop the lioness already had a





It was late in the afternoon before the lions spotted a careless bull that drifted off. They positioned themselves in the thick grass on his path back to the herd. I sat ready with my camera, clouding up the viewfinder as I breathed heavily in anticipation of the long-awaited assault.

The minutes became a half hour.

Suddenly the buffalo started making a move back towards the herd. It sauntered closer, then stopped and sniffed in the air before resuming at a slightly faster pace. Suddenly the grass behind him moved as one lioness leaped towards him. The buffalo kicked his heels and ran.

This time the buffalo won. Another strike-out for the lions.

seemed to be of little concern to the buffalo who were still resting in the grass. "They won't attack until the buffalo start moving and one got separated from the rest. Too dangerous when they lie down with their horns pointing to the sky," James explained.

Grouping and regrouping females kept us guessing until late morning when the buffalo began to move. At one stage the mating male lion (or, the bridegroom, as we dubbed him) made a brief appearance before returning to the task.

"Sorry," James said. "That is the way it sometimes goes. They may still be a bit sluggish after their lechwe meal of yesterday."

"Not your fault," I replied. "If only they can take lessons from the wild dogs."





On our final morning at Duba we steered past the buffalo herd to visit with the rest of the Tsaro pride. We encountered a mother with three cubs and two other females, including the legendary Silver Eye—so named by the Jouberts for her blinded eye, most likely as a result of one of many buffalo encounters. Always in the forefront at the hunt and putting herself at risk, it was felt that she deserved a more illustrious name than simply being referred to as the Blind-Eyed female.

The mother was obviously quite concerned about the safety of her off-spring and at one stage erupted in anger as Silver Eye snapped at a cub that tried to play with her tail. James is hoping that these three cubs may be spared the fate of others whose mothers did not succeed in rescuing them from the predators within her own ranks.

The Tsaro pride needs to be preserved, he insists. At one time there were the Duba boys, then came Junior and after him...You cannot live with lions at Duba for fourteen years without feeling part of the family, I thought.

But then I have only been here for two days and I am already hooked.





Young black mane lions playing in the Kalahari Game Reserve and (left) full-grown specimen on the airstrip at Chitabe

At our final stop at Kalahari Plains Camp in the Kalahari Game Reserve (arguably the largest in Africa and the world) we encountered young males with the mere beginnings of a mane. There was no sign of the black-maned lions that were supposed to be the hallmark of this vast semi-desert. As I already had a good pictures of those two who showed up at the Chitabe airstrip, I could relax and enjoy these young ones playing in the grass that sprung up after the summer rains, and relaxing around the waterhole.

Apart from allowing me to enjoy the wonder of all God's creation from the tiniest of insects to the largest of them all, the omnipresent African elephant, this trip served to reinforce the importance of lions. Without them African safaris will never be the same. I have never been a subscriber to the fanciful idea that one has to encounter the Big Five before a safari is complete. "They" decided that lions, leopards, elephants, buffalo and rhinos posed the greatest danger to hunters. Operators commercialized this arbitrary grouping into a selling tool. Where, one might ask, is the hippo that kills more humans per year than any other creature? Not willfully, mind you, but simply because some poor damsels found themselves unknowingly blocking their way back to their waterhole after a night's grazing.

But I do believe that lions are key to a successful safari. Why else would I have the Lion King on my logo?



So what do we do to help arrest this alarming decline in the lion population of Africa? I leave this to experts such as Dereck and Beverly Joubert who, I have no doubt, have good ideas. You can visit the Jouberts at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/bigcats>. I also invite you to contact me when you are ready to be charmed by these big cats. It will be our pleasure to arrange this encounter as part of a trip of a lifetime. (www.theultimatesafari.com)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Les de Villiers'.

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