BIG CAT LOVERS

Seeing a big cat in the wild is top of many people's bucket list on safari. But why? **William Gray** explains the abiding appeal of observing lion, leopard and cheetah in the wild and what makes them so captivating →

BRENDON GREMER

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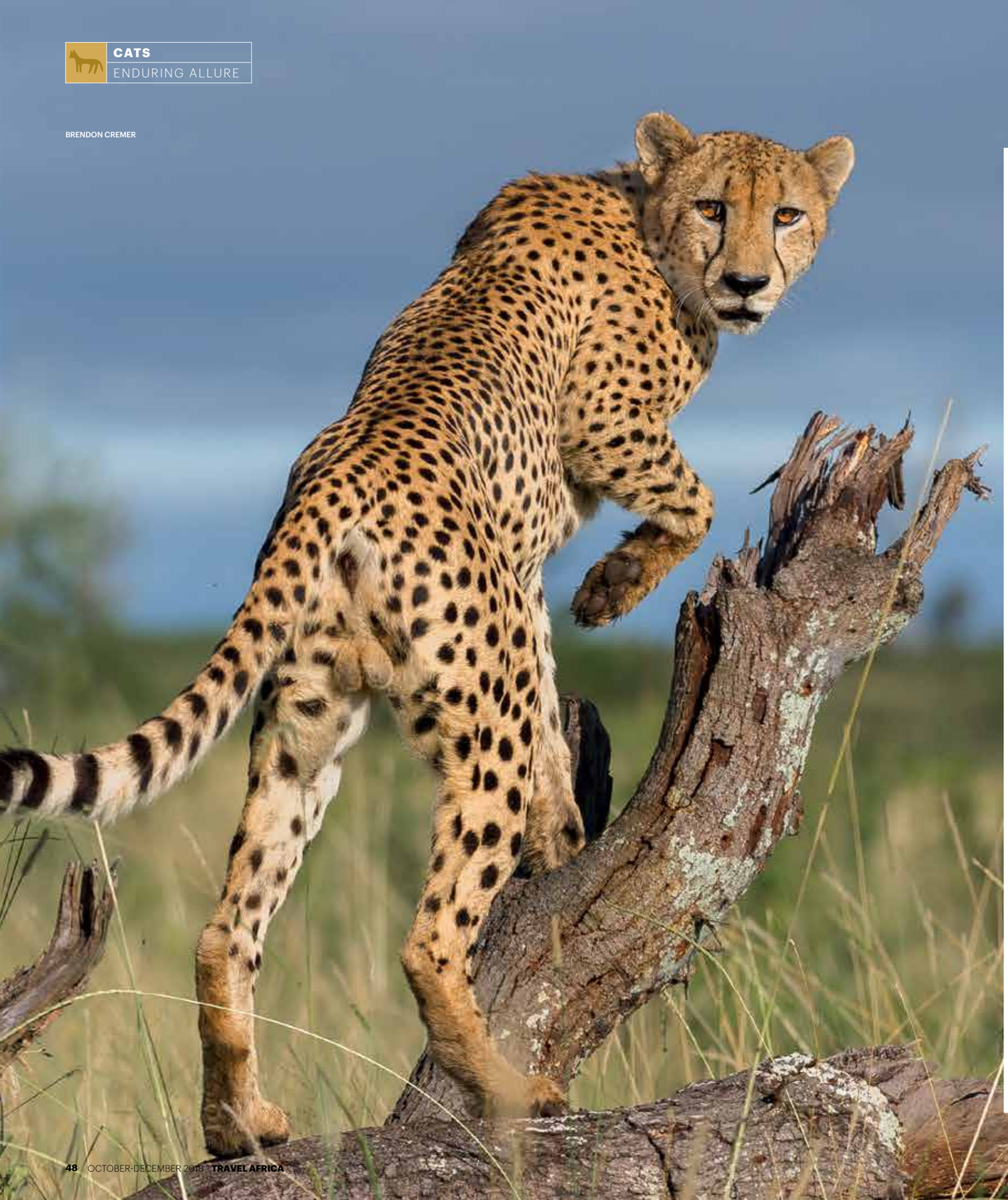


Early morning sunlight seeped through the bush, a molten tide that gilded the acacia trees and ignited the feathery grass heads. When it touched the lions, sprawled in a clearing, they responded lazily. A young male stood, stretched and flopped, while the rest of the pride rolled in the grass, pawing and nuzzling one another in a feline tangle of tawny limbs and black-tipped tails. They barely glanced in our direction. We were parked just a few metres away, yet the big cats seemed completely indifferent to our presence.

The adoring human, the nonchalant cat – an encounter that's been played out on just about every safari I've been on over the past 30 years. And yet the prospect of a big cat sighting still gets my spine tingling more than anything else. It's not that I'm particularly into cats. I'm more of a doggy person. Our pet labrador is part of the family – we're besotted with her – but I rarely yearn to see a jackal or a bat-eared fox. What, then, makes me, or anyone for that matter, a big cat lover?

I can trace the start of my love affair with Africa's big cats back to 1986, before I'd ever been on safari. My parents had given me a book, *Among Predators and Prey* by Dutch photographer and filmmaker Hugo van Lawick. The cover of my now battered, well-thumbed copy bears a remarkable image of a Thomson's gazelle somersaulting over a wild dog, mid-chase. But the book naturally falls open to another image showing a lioness breaking from cover, charging towards the camera, her gaze locked on the slowest of five gazelle fleeing before her. By today's technically high standards, it's nothing special – the focus isn't even razor sharp – but 30-odd years ago, that photograph not only screamed 'Africa!' at me, but also perfectly captured the energy and thrill of the hunt.

Is that why we're all so obsessed with seeing big cats on safari? A sense of anticipation? That split second when dozing pussy cat switches to keen-eyed killer? Never mind the impending doom of the gazelle or zebra... when the lions' ears prick alert, shoulder muscles bunch and tails start twitching, we're all on the edge of our seats, poised for drama, our money on the cats.

"We had an amazing safari – we saw lions make a kill!" Have you noticed how often you hear people judging the success of their safari by whether it featured big cats hunting? I don't believe it's the actual process of killing that holds us rapt. We're not all baying for blood. Several years ago, during a visit to Kenya's Tsavo East National Park, I witnessed lions hunting a waterbuck next to my tent. There was no pleasure in hearing the death throes of the antelope, the crunching of teeth on sinew and bone, or of seeing the cats, bloody-faced at dawn, pulling long coils of intestines from the corpse of their victim. That's what big cats do. Rather than a macabre fascination with the act of killing, we simply have a desire to witness these supreme predators in action – just as a motor enthusiast admires the most powerful, beautifully made racing cars at full throttle, but flinches if they crash.

We joined the cheetahs' vigil, watching them and their prey. They never got quite close enough to launch an attack, but it was a privilege just to spend time in their company

I once spent a memorable few days in the southern Serengeti. Our camp was pitched in a shady grove of acacia trees a short distance from the Ndutu Plains where, from January to March, wildebeest gather in huge numbers to give birth. One afternoon, we found a female cheetah with three almost fully-grown cubs lying up in asparagus scrub on the edge of the plains. Every time a herd of Thomson's gazelle or wildebeest wandered past, the cats were instantly alert – four spotted heads turning in unison to follow them. We joined the cheetahs' vigil, watching them and their prey from a respectful few hundred metres. Five hours passed. The cheetah never got quite close enough to launch an attack (and I would still love to see one at full pelt), but it was a privilege just to spend time in their company, watching them interact with one another.

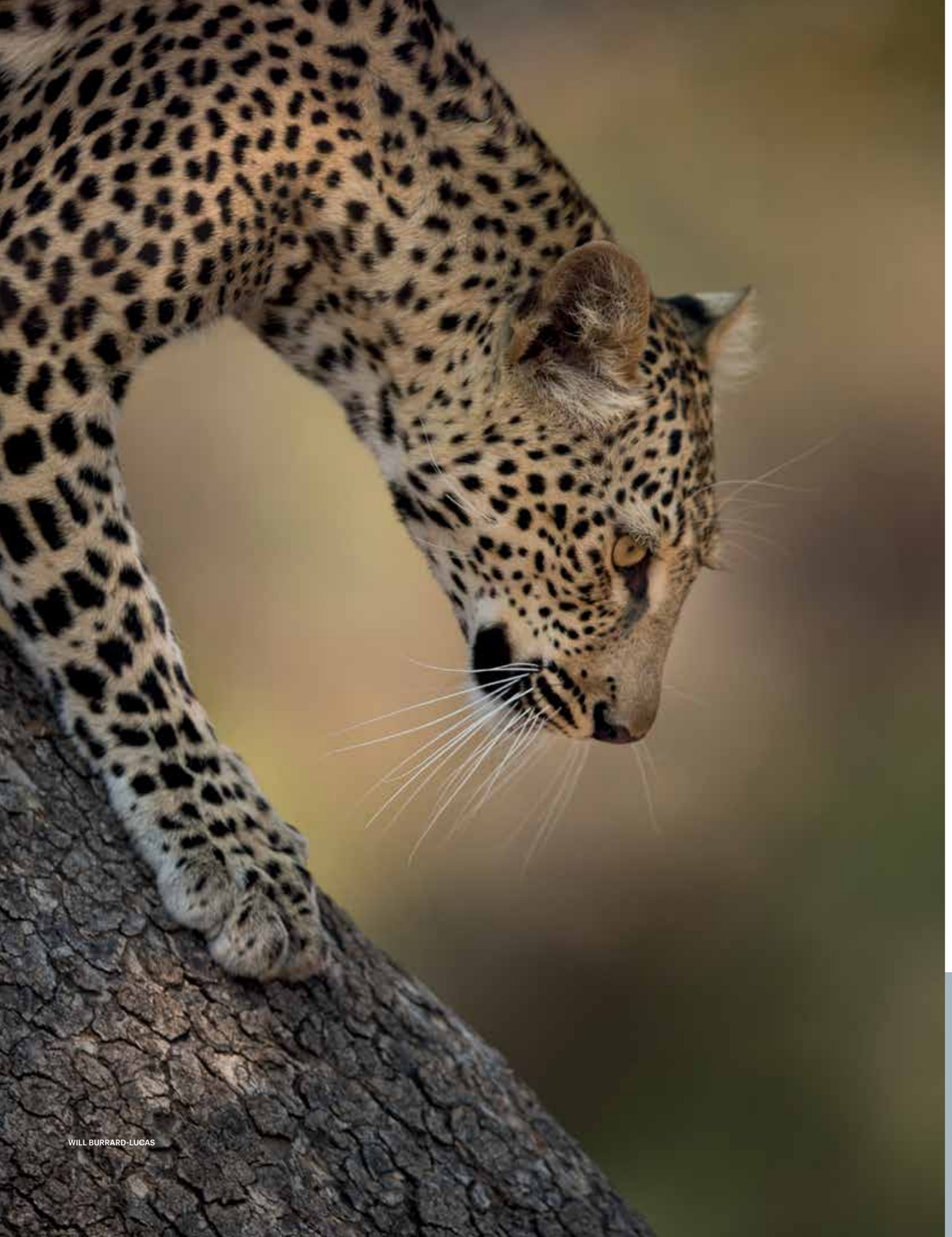
When you view big cats as more than just predators, you begin to appreciate a gentler, equally fascinating side to their behaviour. The day after seeing the cheetah, for example, we came across a lone lioness calling softly to her month-old cubs. They eventually scuttled into the open, three little golden fur-balls, to be greeted by their mother with the most tender display of grooming you could imagine from a 150kg killer capable of bringing down a buffalo. Watching cubs rough-and-tumble with the grown-ups in a pride is equally heart-melting – but there's also fascinating biology to be observed in the unique social behaviour of lions.

Unlike wild dogs, there is no dominant female preventing subordinates from breeding. The egalitarianism of lionesses often results in communal cub rearing (nursing, forming crèches etc.), and they will ferociously defend their offspring from males attempting to take over a pride. Nevertheless, infanticide is common in lions – it accounts for around a quarter of all cub deaths and is not only a 'genetic priority' for incoming males, but also resets the reproductive clocks of the lionesses.

It's very much a 'him and her' society with lions. Daughters are either recruited into their mother's pride or disperse to form a new pride with their sisters. Males, on the other hand, are expelled from their mother's pride after a few years, forming brotherhood coalitions that last for life. Pride males fight off rival coalitions, lionesses defend territories and hunt in well-coordinated teams – and all adult members of a pride will roar (a territorial display that can be heard from 5km away and is used by neighbouring prides to gauge the number and strength of potential rivals).

As with any social structure, however, there are always intriguing 'misfits'. In South Africa's Madikwe Game Reserve, I came across a group of just three lions where a partially disabled adult male seemed to be under the protection of his coalition 'brother' and was effectively kept alive thanks to the hunting prowess of a single lioness.

When you encounter lion, there's usually something going on, some backstory or nuance of behaviour. With leopard, however, you're just grateful for the encounter. I've glimpsed this →



WILL BURRARD-LUCAS

secretive, largely solitary big cat on fewer than a dozen occasions over the past three decades. Its elusiveness is, of course, a major part of its appeal.

On a visit to the Selous Game Reserve in southern Tanzania, I remember being slightly irked at how easily and quickly we found wild dogs on our first outing: a pack of 15, fast asleep and stomachs bloated, strewn across a grassy clearing. It was almost a relief that we couldn't find a leopard.

My guide knew all the tricks for tracking the fickle feline. We drove along the edge of dense woodland where he checked favoured resting trees – old jackalberries with black, twisted limbs. He stopped and listened for telltale alarm calls – impala sneezing, baboons barking – and he studied tracks on sandy riverbanks. My method was more random. I simply let my gaze flicker from tree to tree, tripping up on leopard-shaped stumps and branches that seemed, at first glance, to sprout ears.

Every now and then, I latched onto movement – impala skittering away, like autumn leaves picked up by a gust of wind; sparrow weavers squabbling through the thorn scrub. Despite the fact that we were searching for a largely nocturnal cat in a wilderness the size of the Netherlands, I never lost that sense of anticipation; the feeling that this might be the day. The reality was that if the big cat didn't want to be seen, there was very little you could do about it.

So just imagine the thrill, the wide-eyed wonder, when, on my most recent trip to Africa, we spent nearly an hour watching a young female leopard less than 5m away in broad daylight. She dozed, groomed, stretched, yawned, licked her paws and then curled her lip at a group of over-inquisitive francolin. But rarely did she take any notice of us. Nonchalant cat, adoring humans. We were totally smitten – not because she was displaying any particularly interesting behaviour or making any effort to hunt, but simply because she was big-spotted-cat-gorgeous.

Leopards have a kind of hypnotic beauty. Lions can hold you rapt with a deep-throated roar or smouldering gaze, cheetah can leave you breathless with their turn of speed or finely poised grace, but leopards can just be leopards. A brief glimpse of that long, luxuriant tail disappearing into dense bush will do for me.

Of course, I've heard plenty of stories from people who have seen leopard hunting, dragging their prey up trees with extraordinary strength and agility. But the enduring appeal of Africa's big cats is something far more deep-rooted and visceral. It's the electrifying realisation of finding yourself in an environment which still has space for large predators; the deep sense of respect that comes with setting out on a walking safari knowing that you're momentarily dislodged from the top of the food chain.

Considering our mutual bond with their domestic cousins, it's perhaps not surprising that we love wild cats. They first formed a relationship with people in mud settlements along the Nile 7000 years ago. Infested by rodents, grain stores proved a lucrative hunting ground for local African wildcats and it wasn't long before farmers recognised their value as guardians of a hard-won harvest. Cats were welcomed as an ally, and the seeds of domestication were sown. Ancient Egyptians worshipped their cats. Whole families shaved their eyebrows in mourning when a feline member of the household died. They mummified the cat and placed it in the temple of the cat goddess Bastet.

In Roman times, domestic cats continued to enjoy high status as pest controllers and house pets. Treatment of wild cats, however, reached an all-time low. In the wake of new cults glorifying animal sacrifice, hunting became a popular sport and the furthest reaches of the Roman empire were scoured for trophies. Big cats were also brought back alive to star in the gruesome games at public arenas. Lion and leopard were starved for days and then released into the ring to maul defenceless slaves before being slaughtered by gladiators. When Emperor Titus opened the Colosseum, 5000 animals were butchered in a single day. So great was the demand of the Roman arenas that lion were rapidly exterminated from the empire.

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Once stretching throughout southern Europe, Africa and Asia, the lion's kingdom continues to crumble. On a typical safari you would be unlucky not to see one – lion are still widespread and conspicuous – but their numbers have plummeted from around 200,000 in the 1980s to in the region of just 20,000 today. Cheetah are also having a hard time – their population has crashed to as little as 7000. Notoriously hard to survey, leopard numbers were thought to be relatively high compared to other big cats (around 700,000, but recent research suggests significant declines and a rapid shrinking of its habitat range. Trophy hunting, the fur and 'traditional medicine' trades, human-wildlife conflict, habitat loss and fragmentation... the threats facing big cats are widely known.

But there is hope for these magnificent creatures. Good news trickles in, like the recent reintroduction of lion to Liwonde National Park in Malawi. One thing is certain, though: we all desperately need to become big cat lovers – before it's too late.

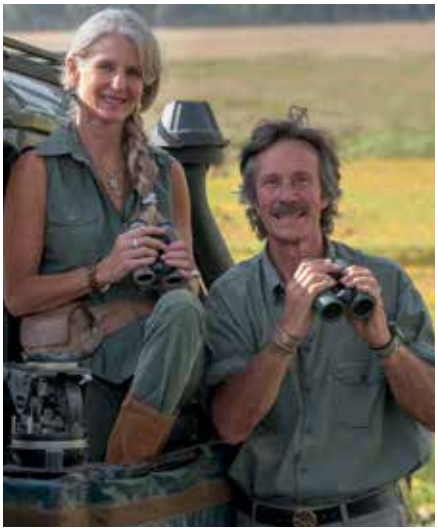
Cat tracks

To boost your chances of a big cat encounter, set off early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when these predators are more likely to be active. With the exception of cheetah, most are largely nocturnal hunters, spending the middle part of the day resting. Their superb camouflage can render them almost invisible, so look for other telltale clues, such as fresh tracks or signs of a kill (vultures, hyena or jackals nearby) or listen for alarm signals from nearby wildlife. ➜

MEET

Jonathan & Angie Scott

We asked the co-hosts and presenters of **Big Cat Diary** and the new series **Big Cat Tales** to tell us why they love felines



DAVID NEWTON

COMING SOON
Big Cat Tales, the stunning new television series by Jonathan and Angie Scott, premieres on *Animal Planet* this month

What motivates you to do what you do?
I was fortunate to always know my 'bliss' – my pathway to happiness. It was to live in the moment and explore wild places. The movie *Born Free* (1966) had me sitting in the cinema thinking: "That is what I want to do" – to live in the bush and watch big cats.

Q Africa's wildlife is so diverse. Why did you fall in love with big cats?
There is an aura to big cats that has always made them special. They're irresistible. They are so beautiful yet being predators there is always that tension, the sense that they can transform in an instant from a peaceful sleeping cat to a sublime hunter in pursuit of prey.

Q What is the most valuable lesson that you have learned from watching them?
We are inspired by spending so much time with nature. It helps to remind us of the gift of life – that death is a natural part of life; something none of us can avoid. Watching an old lion in the twilight of its years, still determined to cling to life until it draws its last breath, makes us value and respect our own lives.

Q What are your favourite big cats to observe?
For Angie, it is the social interactions within a lion pride that she finds so fascinating – identifying each pride member as an individual and following their life story from birth to death. For me, it has always been the leopard. They are just so enigmatic and mysterious, so clever at concealing themselves. They give nothing away and you have to spend years in their company to really understand their true nature. It took me six years to write my first book on leopard – that is how difficult it was in the 1970s to find, let alone photograph, a wild leopard. They estimate that perhaps 50,000 leopards were being slaughtered each year in Africa in the 1960s and '70s for the fur trade.

Q Can you comment on the status of Africa's big cats? How endangered are they?
Big cats are under pressure throughout the world due to loss of habitat, loss of natural prey, conflict with livestock holders – and in some cases, the trade in body parts and skins. Most big cats need large home ranges or territories to survive – they need significant portions of real estate – and so does man. All of the big cats have lost huge areas of their natural habitat to humans. A wave of humanity is literally sweeping our last wild places off the planet.

Q What is being done to protect them? And what more can be done?
Most people are aware that the planet is under threat, that big cats are diminishing across their range. But although they will tell you they are concerned, it is the politicians and policy makers who are hard to influence. Look at the battle to reverse climate change – the unwillingness of many countries to adopt more sustainable forms of energy. In many developed countries, our leaders want to access protected areas for mining or oil exploration. What hope is there for Africa where so many people live in poverty and countries have far fewer resources to create a decent standard of living for their residents – and to protect their wildlife heritage (something many developed countries failed to do and lost years ago)? What politician is going to put the rights of wild animals ahead of their nation? The international community is going to have to do far more to support conservation in countries that simply cannot afford to do it alone.

There is an aura to big cats. Angie loves the social nature of the lion, while my favourite is the solitary leopard. Big cats are irresistible

Q You are patrons and ambassadors for a number of conservation organisations, including the Cheetah Conservation Fund and the Mara Predator Project. Please tell us about your own role.
We love to keep current with scientists working in the field on big cat conservation. In the old days, a lot of research was primarily focused on animal behaviour, but today the priority is very much collecting data that can be used by park managers to help conserve wild places and their inhabitants. If we can protect the habitat, the animals will look after themselves. They just need space. Our role is to engage people's attention through our images and books, and through fundraising events. We are particularly keen on working with the next generation of conservationists. We have produced many children's books – both for Collins' award-winning Big Cat series and more recently for Cambridge University Press. We have two new books in their Cambridge Reading Adventures series: *Honey and Toto: The Story of a Cheetah Family* and *Tigers of Ranthambore*.

● **To read the full interview, visit travelafricamag.com.**

Secret seven

Briony Sturgis lists the small cats of Africa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1 Serval

With its name meaning 'deerlike wolf', the serval graces the open grasslands of southern Africa with the largest leg to body ratio of any small cat. Its limbs act like stilts, enabling a pounce of up to 3m when hunting prey.

2 African wildcat

Sometimes referred to as the 'tabby cat of the savannah', African wildcats are the ancestors of the pets of today. First domesticated about 10,000 years ago in the Middle East, they favour more hilly areas across Africa and around the Arabian Peninsula.

3 Caracal

Despite being the largest of the small cats and clearly identifiable by its long, black ear tufts, the nocturnal caracal is renowned for being difficult to spot. This hunter is capable of leaping up to 3m in the air, catching birds mid-flight across the savannah.

4 Sand cat

This compact predator possesses the highest bite force quotient of any cat species. Its reign of the desert landscape is facilitated by numerous adaptations, including a fur coat that provides insulation from extreme temperatures.

5 Jungle cat

First discovered in the Caucasus Mountains, the jungle cat is most commonly found throughout Asia and often listed under Eurasian Cats, but it also exists within Egypt, and was featured in ancient Egyptian art. Contrary to its name, the sandy-coloured feline is most associated with wetlands.

6 African golden cat

The continent's only tropical forest-dependent wild cat, the African golden cat is one of the least known felines, with its golden coat first captured on camera only in 2002. It features on the IUCN Red List, threatened by the increase in deforestation of the past 50 years.

7 Black-footed cat

Capable of gaining all necessary hydration from food, the black-footed cat lives in semi-arid regions within southern Africa and is the smallest wild cat on the continent. Being strictly nocturnal, they choose to shelter among abandoned termite mounds or burrows from the heat of the day.


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ROD WILLIAMS / NATUREPL.COM


7

RAJIV WELIKALA

GERRARD LACZ / FLPA

Where to find Africa's big cats

Safari goers should be able to see big cats in most protected national parks across southern and East Africa.

Tanzania boasts the highest numbers of lion in Africa. Head to the Serengeti for almost guaranteed sightings. Other areas, such as Ruaha National Park, the Ngorongoro Crater (high predator density) and the Selous Game Reserve, are also rewarding.

In **Kenya**, the Masai Mara is prime lion country with an estimated population of around 300.

Other hotspots include **South Africa**'s Kruger National Park, **Namibia**'s Etosha National Park, South Luangwa and Kafue National Parks in **Zambia**, and **Zimbabwe**'s Hwange, which runs a longstanding lion research programme.

Although widespread, leopard are largely nocturnal and often very elusive, so night drives offer the best chances of seeing them. Cheetah prefer wide-open wilderness areas like Tanzania's Serengeti and Ruaha, Kenya's Masai Mara, the Busanga Plains of Zambia's Kafue National Park and the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in South Africa and Botswana.