



Serengeti Cheetah Project – April 2014

Prepared Exclusively for Africa Dream Safaris

It has been a while since there was news of the Serengeti Cheetah Project, and several things have changed. Helen O'Neill has gone on to start a PhD project studying cheetahs and wild dogs in Kenya. At the moment we have two people on the project, I am Anne Hilborn, a PhD student at Virginia Tech, studying cheetah hunting behaviour. I worked as the research assistant on the project from 2004-2007 and am very happy to be back. Dennis Minja has joined us as the new research assistant, he used to work on lions in Tarangire National park, and we are hoping he is soon converted to loving cheetahs instead.

Being gone from the Serengeti for so long means that most of the current cheetahs are new to me, though I usually know if not their mothers, then their grandmothers. It has been interesting to see whose lineage has continued, and gratifying to discover that some of the cheetahs I knew are still alive, like Vitalis and Almond.



Dennis scans for cheetahs

Cheetah Hotspots

Cheetahs are very mobile and move around a lot in order to follow the gazelle migration. This means it can be a challenge to find them, and the area where there are lots of them (cheetah hotspots) change from month to month.

February and March of this year it was Ndutu in the South Serengeti. There were cheetahs everywhere. It was both delightful and frustrating to hear reports of tourists seeing twenty eight cheetahs in four days. Delightful because it was great to know there were so many cheetahs around, but frustrating because I was definitely not seeing twenty eight in four days, no matter how hard I tried. I did see quite a few though, including two mothers with small cubs.



High Season at Ndutu in the South Serengeti

Ndutu in the southern reaches of the Serengeti is a wonderful place. It boasts two lakes, two marshes, woodlands, plains, and spectacular views of the Ngorongoro highlands. If the rains are right during the wet season, it also boasts half a million wildebeest giving birth. This year the rains were right and many, many times the wildebeest congregated at and around Ndutu, making it a bonanza for both tourists and cheetah researchers. The marshes at Ndutu are a popular place for mother cheetahs to den with their cubs, and two mothers in particular were often seen there during February and March.

Money Penny was born in 2011 to Xenia Onatopp, and spent her early life around Seronera in the Central Serengeti. However once she reached independence she moved down to the Ndutu area and has been seen fairly regularly ever since. She attempted to raise a litter in 2013 and failed, but was seen in early February of this year with 3 small cubs. She now only has 2 but has safely guided them through the perils of the Ndutu high season which included scads of lions at Big Marsh, and an unprecedented number of tourist cars. The first time I saw her and her cubs, they were nursing and then started scampering all over MoneyPenny, chewing on her face and pouncing on her tail. Cheetah mothers have to be very forbearing.





Motherhood is tough. Shameka is about 4 years old and is on her second attempt to raise a litter to independence. She is rather shy and for most of February and March she was often seen at Ndutu with 5 little cubs. Having so many tiny cute cubs meant she was very popular with the tourists and often had cars with her all day. As she isn't totally comfortable around cars, this meant she spent a lot of time being agitated, especially when they came close.

We lost track of her for a couple of weeks and then in mid April I saw her in Hidden Valley, this time with only 2 cubs. She had lost 3 cubs and one of the remaining cubs was limping badly and had a problem with its eyes. When I saw her she was extremely skinny and trying to hunt, despite there not being much prey around. However she brought down a Grant's gazelle and the family gorged on it for hours, getting nice and fat.



A hungry Shemka looks for food



Moving the gazelle



The cub with a weepy eye

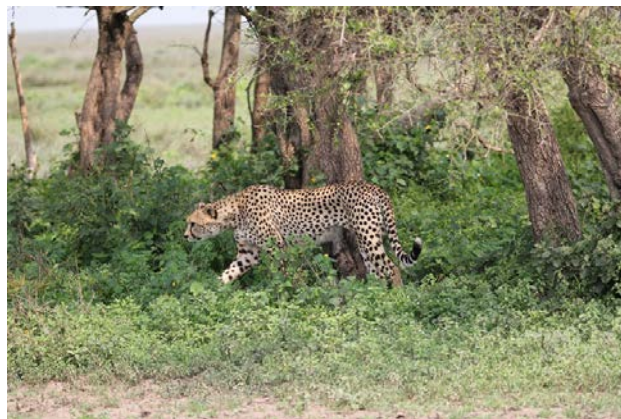
Ndutu males

There is a surprising lack of territorial males at Ndutu. Usually coalitions of two or three males hold the area around Three trees. Usian and Bolt had the territory in 2013, and The Coffee Boys (Espresso, Mocha, and Latte) from 2008-2012, but no one seems to be there at the moment.

Despite the number of cheetahs that were at Ndutu in the wet season, none of them seemed like potential heirs to the territory. Emily's two male cubs are now independent, and spent some time around Big Marsh, but I never saw Aubrey or Maturin scent mark and now they have moved out of the area. Farris spent some time south of Three Trees, and sniffed some trees with dedication, but did not see him scent mark at all.



Aubrey and Maturin at the Small Marsh



Farris sniffs trees south of Three Trees

In contrast we have two very handsome sets of brothers who are territorial up at Seronera and out east at Barafu. Both pairs of males just turned up in our study area, we don't know who their mothers might be. Bradley and Cooper have been spending time out by Loliondo Kopjes at the east edge of Seronera. There have been a lot of gazelles there throughout the wet season, and the wildebeest herds have come through several times, providing plenty of food. I even saw them trying to mate with Strudel even though she still had her big male cub with her.



Bradley and Cooper relax under a tree

Richard and Armitage roam between Soit Le Montonyi, Zebra kopjes, and Barafu kopjes. They have been taking full advantage of the lost wildebeest calves that get left behind in the confusion of the migration. One day they took down one calf and ate until they were bursting. Although mother cheetahs are very wary around other carnivores, a lone hyena was no match for two adult male cheetahs and it stayed 30 m away until they finished eating, and then took the remains. However the hyena was unable to enjoy eating for long, because a male lion came up and stole the kill from him.



Richard and Armitage chow down on a wildebeest calf



A hyena gets the remains



Until a lion stole it from him

The next day Richard and Armitage were still very fat, and set off to scent mark their territory. However they couldn't resist when another lost wildebeest calf came bounding over the horizon...





They took a long time to eat that kill and left extremely full....



I hope you enjoyed the cheetah report April 2014. I will back in touch with our next report during the dry season.

Hope to see you in the Serengeti!

Anne