



Serengeti Cheetah Project

December 2012

All Grown Up!

As many of you will know, one of our most successful cheetah mothers on the Serengeti Cheetah Project is a female called Eleanor. Eleanor is only about seven years old and yet has already managed to raise an incredible eleven cubs to independence! Her last litter to become independent was of two male and two female cubs. Unfortunately the female cubs have not yet been seen since leaving Eleanor but the two boys have been popping up all over the place. The two have recently been named, Muddy and Waters, continuing the Jazz and Blues singers naming theme that Eleanor's cubs have (her first litter was named Aretha, Etta, Nina, Howling and Wolf; her second was Satchmo and Armstrong). Muddy and Waters have turned two handsome young males and are ranging widely over Serengeti plains. They were last seen near Semetu Kopjes, about 50km away from Ndutu where they grew up. The pair were happily chilling out on top of a termite mound when they suddenly spotted a small herd of wildebeest and zebras walking towards them. Zebras are much too big, even for a fully grown male cheetah to take down and even wildebeest are a bit of a stretch, but there were some wildebeest calves in the herd and it was these that seemed to grab the attention of Muddy and Waters. Everything seemed to be going in the cheetahs' favour; the wildebeest and zebra were acting very skittishly – it seemed as though something in the long grass a few hundred meters away had spooked them and as a result they were running directly towards the two boys! In fact, they were so worried about what might be behind them they didn't even see Muddy and Waters running towards them! As the wildebeest and the zebras got closer the boys dropped down into the grass

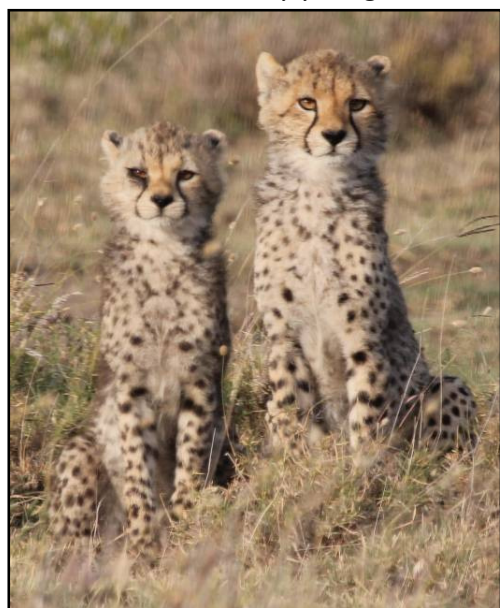




out of sight, still without being seen by their prey. Soon the lead wildebeest had drawn level with them and suddenly stopped and stared intently right where they were hiding as if it had just had a glimpse of them. The boys stayed very still until the wildebeest's attention was diverted by something else and it started walking on again, followed by her young calf. It was at this point that Muddy and Waters made their move; they leapt out of the grass and gave chase. All of the wildebeest scattered as soon as they rose from their hiding place in the grass and started to run for their lives. The cheetahs ran after the calf that had been stood just a few meters away from them but, despite its young age, it was fast and it ran, literally for its life. The cheetahs kept following for quite a long time but even though they had looked so interested just seconds before it seemed that their hearts weren't really in it. They gave the calf a real scare but they didn't bother getting up to anything like top speed at any point during the chase. After a little while they slowed down and did the usual cheetah thing, of looking after the prey that had just escaped as if to say "hey guys, where are you going? We were only playing?!" The wildebeest, unsurprisingly, kept on running for a long time afterwards until they were along way from the boys – they obviously didn't want to risk being chased again! Muddy and Waters soon turned around and sauntered back to the same termite mound they had been on originally, sat themselves down and stayed there happily watching the world go by!

JS170FC and cubs

There is, as ever, more news in the world of cheetah cubs! This time I want to tell you about JS170FC and her latest litter. JS170FC is one of the shyest of the cheetahs we see regularly in our study area. We're not sure why she is so shy as she was the cub of a female called Meryl, who was very well habituated but it seems that she has just never liked having cars around very much. As a result you have to be very careful how you approach her, and if you are careful and patient enough she will let you get quite close to her without any problems. This is lucky because it is only through this slow and steady approach that we have been able to start getting a handle on the status of her current litter, which is probably the most complicated that the Cheetah Project has ever come across! When Sarah Durant, the Project Coordinator for the Cheetah Project was out visiting in March she found JS170FC with one very young cub. On the Cheetah Project, each cheetah sighting we have gets an individual code,



in this case the sighting was number 3813, and whenever a new cheetah is seen it is given a name code based on this number, making this cub's code 3813C – i.e. a Cub that was first seen on sighting 3813; so far so simple - that is until Sarah saw JS170FC again a couple of days later with three cubs! This is very unusual as normally cubs from the same litter will stay together, if some are going to stay in the den then they all will, likewise if some are going to follow their mother then they all will. So these new cubs would become 3815C1 and 3815C2, as they were first seen at a different time to their sibling. The family wasn't seen again for a few weeks by which time JS170FC had unfortunately lost one of her cubs and was now down to two, which meant we had to spend quite a long time squinting at photos of the tiny cubs trying to see enough spots to work out which was which. We eventually worked out that it was 3813C who had disappeared and 3815FC and 3815MC (who had their names updated to reflect their sexes) who had survived. But, that is not where the story ends by any means because I saw the family again a month or

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two later, by which time the number of cubs was back up to three! JS170FC had adopted another cub! This young female is probably about a month younger than JS170FC's own cubs and at first wasn't looking the healthiest. She had quite scruffy looking fur and looked as though she had some kind of eye infection but I'm pleased to say that after a few weeks of TLC and plenty of food she was starting to look dramatically better and now is a very pretty young cheetah. This still remains probably the most unusual litter that Cheetah Project has ever seen!



Emily's cubs



To continue the cub based news I want to introduce you to Emily's latest litter of cubs. Emily is a cheetah who is often seen in and around the Ndutu area. She was the cub of a female known as Loopy Lou and is now about eight years old. This is her third litter of cubs, her previous two litters were both of two cubs and each had one male and one female. This litter, however, is on a much grander scale comprising as it does of no less than five cubs! When I was at Ndutu much earlier this year I had seen Emily a few times and I could see that she was lactating, suggesting that she had cubs hidden away in a den somewhere. It's always interesting to see

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when females are lactating but you learn very quickly not to get your hopes up for seeing cubs as about 70% of litters die before they even leave the den. It was with some excitement though that I heard reports of a female being seen with five cubs in the area that I thought Emily had been denning. It seemed an age before I got hold of any photos of the female with the litter and could finally confirm that it was her! Then followed an incredibly frustrating few months during which I kept hearing about how the family had been seen the week, or even the day, before I went down to the area but never actually seeing them myself. It always seems to be the way with cheetahs, that whenever there is one that you really want to see, they are the ones that you can never seem to find! Finally on one of my trips to the area I was told that the family had been seen that morning in the long gulley, by that time it was dark and so much too late to go out looking for them but the next morning I went out determined to find them, not least because the people who had seen them had said that Emily was injured – a very worrying development when she had six mouths to feed. Unfortunately for me, when I went out the next day, Emily seemed even more determined to stay hidden than I was to find her, and so followed a frustrating day of driving and searching. Eventually I had to give up for the day, and, as by this time the group could have been almost anywhere, I decided to concentrate on surveying a different area the morning after. However, that afternoon I couldn't resist having just one more drive along the long gulley, just in case, and I was richly rewarded when, what did I see but six cheetahs chilling out on one of the banks! Very usefully Emily was lying in a way that I could have a look at the wound she had sustained, and I was glad to see that it didn't look at all serious, although it wasn't small it wasn't deep, and when she got up and started walking she wasn't limping at all. Even better, she confirmed that it wasn't causing her any problems when a dikdik caught her attention; it was wandering through the long bushy grass nearby and, after a short but fast chase, Emily grabbed a hold of it, at which point the cubs all ran over as fast as they could – after all a dikdik isn't much more than a snack for one cheetah, let alone six so they all wanted to make sure they got some!



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Boys will be Boys



As it has been a while, I thought I should update you on the news about the territorial males in the study area. Recently the territories have been quite stable, with the resident males all holding their territories for quite a long time, however things have started to move around a little bit more of late. Down at Ndotu it is still the Coffee Boys, Espresso, Latte and Mocha who are ruling the roost. They are still holding the prime territory around the big marsh and two trees, and they don't look like they are going anywhere any time soon! In the area near twin hills we used to have the Tea Boys – Tetley and Twinings but it has been a while since they were last seen and there have been reports of three new young males moving into the area. We haven't managed to get any photos of these new males but it is possible that they could be Rolls, Royce and Morgan; these three grew up in the area around Ndotu and had been seen scent-marking near Kusini, but it could be they have moved over to twin hills instead, equally it could be three entirely new males who have moved in - we'll just have to watch and wait and hope to get some more information soon!

Further north, there has also been some moving around. It looks as though Maurus and Jerome, the two males who have held the simba kopjes territory during the dry season and then moved to gol kopjes during wet season for the past several years seem to have disappeared. Maurus was seen on a few occasions last year without Jerome and since then has not been seen for quite a long time, meaning that they might have died. The two had reached the ripe old age (at least by male cheetah standards) of 9 years old so they had a good run while it lasted! So far there hasn't been any sign of anyone taking over the simba kopjes territory but Crumble seems to be determined to take over the gol kopjes area. He has held the area for a few months now, but as this has mostly been during dry season, when this is not a very hotly contested area, this may not mean too much, it will be over the next few months that he is really put to the test!



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Pecan

And finally I'm afraid I have some very sad news to end with. I wrote last issue about Pecan, who was, at that time our oldest living cheetah in our study area. Unfortunately since writing that piece Pecan has died. It is very unusual for us to actually come across a dead cheetah – the scavengers in the Serengeti are very efficient so there is not much left of a carcass very soon after an animal has died. This gave us the opportunity to work out why and how Pecan died, and sadly it seems that she was attacked and killed by lions. She was fourteen years old when she died, which is about double the average life span of a female cheetah, making her one of the oldest cheetahs ever recorded by Cheetah Project.

