



Serengeti Cheetah Project - June 2014

Prepared Exclusively for Africa Dream Safaris

May has been hard. The dry season has come fast and strong. The wildebeest came through Seronera in April, when it is more usual for them to move north in June. While gazelles are able to tolerate drier grasses and stay out longer on the short grass plains than the wildebeest, they too have started moving north and into the long grass plains.

Thomson's gazelle are always rather high strung, but they get even jumpier in the long grass. They do not stroll or linger through the tall grass, but bound and bounce through from patch to patch of relatively shorter grass. Considering how hard it is to see cheetahs in the tall grass, I don't blame them.



Nervous gazelle

Courtney in the long grass

Sunset colored by smoke

Cheetahs follow the gazelles, and they too are moving into the long grass where it is difficult to spot them. The national parks staff burns the grasslands at the end of the wet season, when it is dry enough to burn, but not so dry the fires burn hot and consume everything. The burning of the long grass makes our job much easier; both the cheetahs and the aardvark holes are more visible. The burning has just started in our study area, and I hope that soon there will be large open areas.

As the dry season settles in to its grind, more and more game come back to the areas around Seronera, dependent on the water in the river. Cheetahs as well come back and we are able to find them much closer to our research house. This means less driving per day which is a relief. But during the transitory period when they are leaving the short grass and moving north, it is harder to find them, and we have struggled in May to find our quota of 20 unique cheetahs or groups of cheetahs.

However we have found some. Courtney is an old female of about 11 years old. She was born in 2003 to a female named Angie, who was an extremely prolific mother who also tended to adopt abandoned cubs. Courtney has been a pretty good mother herself, and within a couple of days we saw three generations of cheetahs.

First we spent a couple of days following Courtney around Zebra kopjes, then we saw her daughter Laura down at Cub Valley a few days later. And then at Barafu we found three adolescents, two females and a male. The two females were Laura's newly independent daughters who were hanging out with an unrelated young male. That was the only time I have come across three independent generations of cheetahs in such a short time span.



Courtney

Laura

Laura's independent cubs

Cheetahs have a unique social system amongst cats. Instead of having territories like other species, female cheetahs instead roam widely following the gazelle migration. Males can be either solitary or in coalitions with other males, and either territorial or nomadic. Females are solitary except when they have cubs, which they keep with them for about 18 months.

After independence from their mother, siblings stay together for 6 months, then the sisters will strike out on their own while brothers will form lifelong coalitions. Adolescence is a socially flexible time. Males without brothers will sometimes find another and form a coalition.

Recently we have seen numerous examples of unrelated young cheetahs being together for a while. Not only did Laura's daughters join up with an unrelated male, but Strudel's newly independent male cub is hanging up with Campari, a slightly older female who had already left her brother Curacao. These will be only temporary social groups, and some young cheetahs never join up with others.

This sort of social flexibility keeps us on our toes, sometimes our assumptions about who we are seeing can be quite wrong. Thankfully the computer program we have to identify the cheetahs by their spots makes figuring out what is going on much easier.

There have been small cubs in abundance this year. As well as MoneyPenny and Shameka with their two cubs each, Asti has turned up in Cub valley with five small ones. The grass is quite long in that area and the first time I saw them I could barely see anything besides their waving tails. In fact I was worried that Asti had lost a couple because for long stretches of time I could only see one or two. However at the end of May I saw her again with all five. While in the long grass they aren't very visible, she took them across the valley where I could see them clearly. Although they are hard to sex at this age, I think there are three males and two females.

Raising cubs is a tiring business, they are constantly running around and causing trouble. These five seemed very keen on climbing up and falling out of a small thorn bush. Cheetahs are extremely clumsy climbers, their limbs aren't built for it and their claws are dull. However they do persist in doing it, especially when young. Doing it in thorn trees seems to be a painful business, and watching one of them face dive through the thorns, it occurred to me that perhaps that is how Shameka's cubs hurt their eyes (see last newsletter).

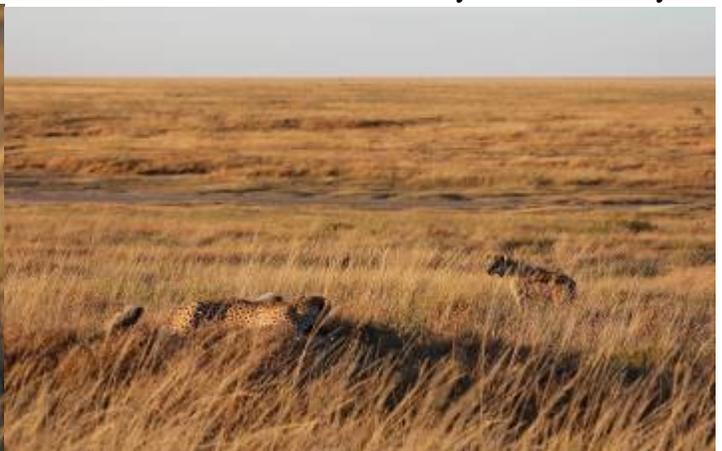


Asti's cubs tackle a thorn tree



Asti and her cubs

I saw Asti and her cubs on three separate mornings. I found them early on the third morning crouched on top of a termite mound. Two hyenas were nearby, and as they came near Asti hunkered down and eyed them closely.



Keeping an eye on the passing hyena



Many cheetah cubs are killed by lions and hyenas so mothers have to be careful when they are around. One passed them by without incident, but soon afterwards Asti sat up and shot off the termite mound while her cubs scattered in the other direction. She ran towards the second hyena, but to my surprise went clear by it, and hared off up the hill towards a third hyena. It was hard to see what happened in the long grass but she soon ran back down to the second hyena. Slowing down as she drew nearer, she raised her back into an aggressive posture.



The hyena ignores Asti's attempts at intimidation

However, there was no contact or vocalization, and the hyena ignored her pretty effectively. Asti then went back to her cubs and led them quickly across the valley to potential safety. Hopefully she will be able to keep them as safe in the future.

Here's hoping for more plentiful cheetahs next month.

