



Serengeti Cheetah Project

September 2012

Once again, it's been a busy time on the plains over the past few months. We are now well into dry season, with all the benefits and challenges that brings. One of the main benefits being that it makes driving around much easier as there is very little mud around to get the Landrover stuck in! However, spotting yellow cheetahs in the yellow grass, which in many places is taller than they are, is not always the easiest of pastimes!

Vitalis's Cubs and the Camera Trap



Recent visitors to Serengeti National Park may have noticed that there are currently a lot of camera traps around. Camera traps are small automatic cameras that are triggered by movement sensors so that whenever an animal walks past a picture is taken. They are a really useful way of finding out where certain species are within the park, particularly because they don't require a researcher to be there – which hugely reduces the chance of the presence of people affecting the way the animals are behaving. The traps themselves are small innocuous looking metal boxes which are attached to trees, where possible, or to metal poles that are driven into the ground. Cheetahs are generally very inquisitive animals and so whenever they come across a camera trap they are almost always unable to ignore it and usually end up spending several minutes trying to work out what it is. This is particularly true of the cubs, who often take things a little further – attempting to use the trap as a climbing frame and often having a bit of a chew, just to make absolutely sure that it isn't edible! During my last sighting of Vitalis with her two male cubs the family came across a camera trap. Vitalis herself had a quick sniff but quite quickly moved off to a nearby termite mound to have a look to see what was about. The cubs seemed to decide that this cursory investigation wasn't nearly thorough enough and proceeded to conduct a much more in-depth examination. The



two circled around and bashed it with their paws and then had a quick gnaw to try and work this strange metal box out. After a while they got bored and went to join their mum, but one of the cubs couldn't stay away for long and was soon back again. With the amount of time the cubs spent playing with it the camera must have triggered several times during their initial play but the two must have been making so much noise themselves that they didn't notice the soft clunking noise the trap makes when it takes a picture. This time, instead of walking directly towards the trap the cub had snuck around the back and he started playing around again. Because he was behind the camera, and therefore the sensor, it didn't trigger – until during one of his chewing sessions his nose must have just gone in front of the camera enough to set it off. A look of total shock came over him and he immediately leapt back in surprise! He stayed in the same place for a second or two, staring distrustfully at the trap before sauntering off to rejoin his mum and brother.

AH656FC1



There is currently quite a large family of cheetahs roaming the Serengeti plains. It belongs to the not-so-imaginatively-named AH656FC1. This is her third, and largest, litter of cubs which totals an impressive four young cheetahs! AH656FC1 herself was born in early 2006, making her only about six years old now. She was the cub of a female known to the project as Cupcake; originally she was one of a litter of four cubs but then Cupcake adopted a cub taking the total number in the litter to five! Her current litter of four cubs was first seen by the project when they were just a couple of months old in October last year, making them just over a year old now. AH656FC1's preferred

home range seems to only just overlap with the project's study area, meaning that we often go for a few months without seeing her. What has been really nice, however, is that we have seen her and the cubs a few times since the cubs left the den, and so have been able to follow their progress more closely than we would necessarily have expected. It has been great to see the cubs go from tiny bundles of fluff who are so small it's difficult to see them even in short grass, to playful 6 month old cubs, to nearly full grown young cheetahs! As the mortality rate for cheetah cubs is so high it is really unusual to see such a large litter making it this far which makes it all the more exciting when it does happen. My last sighting of the family was just a few days ago and they were all happily snoozing under a tree after having caught and eaten a Thomson's gazelle. They had dragged the carcass under the tree before they ate it and so were still lying next to the remains when I saw them. They had done a very thorough job of eating the gazelle – after all even a fully grown gazelle doesn't go far between five hungry cheetahs! However the cubs decided after a while that there must have been a little bit more meat left on the bones that they could gnaw off. They kept trying for about ten minutes, with what seemed to be very limited success, when suddenly all five cheetahs stood up and started staring fixedly into the distance, they then all brought their heads down into an aggressive posture and some of them started snarling. I turned around in my seat to see what they were looking at to see a hyena barreling down the hill towards them – it must have got the scent of the kill and decided to have it for itself! Although hyenas quite often steal kills from cheetahs, you would have thought that the sight of five large cheetahs snarling at it might have given it some pause for thought, but



apparently not! It kept on running towards the cheetahs who stood their ground until the hyena was only a few meters away from them when they lost their nerve and scattered – not that you can blame them, there isn't much point in trying to defend some unpalatable leftover skin and bones against an animal who could inflict serious injury on you! The family all got away from the hyena without any problems and were soon sauntering around and playing as if nothing had happened!



Growing Pains

As I reported in the last issue of our newsletter, Almond has a new litter of cubs – she was last seen with three tiny youngsters that were only a few weeks old at the time. Unfortunately the little family hasn't been seen over the past couple of months however Almond's last litter has put in an appearance. The pair became independent of Almond at the end of last year, probably around the time that she became pregnant with her current litter. The two old cubs haven't been named yet and so are only known as 3781FC (a female) and 3781MC (a male). The two were first seen after they split from Almond in the company of another young male, LS845MC. Things were getting a little heated between the three individuals, LS845MC seemed to be interested in trying to mate with 3781FC but due to his young age he wasn't quite sure what he was meant to be doing! 3781MC seemed to be torn between hanging out with his new friend and running away with his sister and was oscillating back and forth



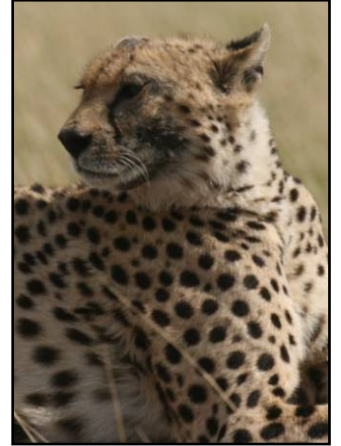
as to what he should be doing. 3781FC was also a bit confused about what was going on and was mostly just hiding in



the long grass hoping to be left alone!

The aged ladies of the plains

I thought that this would be a good opportunity to give another update on two of our oldest (and I'd like to think) most distinguished cheetahs currently living on the plains. I think I have written about both Tiramisu and Pecan in previous newsletters but for any new readers out there I will give a quick history of these two doyennes! Pecan is the oldest cheetah in our study area at the moment; she was born in May 1998 making her an impressive fourteen years old. She was the cub of a female known as Hazelnut and had three sisters who were called Cashew, Macadamia and Pistachio – and as you have probably guessed, they were all members of the Nut Family! Pecan is the only surviving member of her litter; however she is not the only member of the Nut Family still around – her great niece Almond is still alive and kicking and producing cubs to keep the family line going.



Tiramisu is almost as old as Pecan, being born in October 1998 she is around six months younger and so is just coming up to her fourteenth birthday. Tiramisu was also a member of a large litter of cubs, in fact one of the largest that cheetah project has ever seen in the nearly forty years of its existence. She was the cub of a female called Cocoa and she was one of six cubs in her litter! She had two sisters, Profiterole and Éclair, and three brothers, Ben, Jerry and Haagendaz. Again, she is the only surviving member of her litter but there are other cheetahs around who are continuing the Dessert Family line, including her own two cubs, Strudel and Crumble.

Although Pecan and Tiramisu have both reached ripe old ages by cheetah standards (don't forget that the average life span of a female is just seven years) they haven't quite broken the Cheetah Project record yet – that is still held by No Nose who reached the grand old age of 15! Here's hoping that the two of them keep going for a few more months and break No Nose's record!

August – A Month of Babies!

It's a question we often get asked here on Cheetah Project – do cheetahs have a breeding season? The answer is actually no, they don't – cheetahs breed opportunistically and as often as they can; however, there are times when it almost feels as though they do! This is what happened last month, when I came across no fewer than six litters totaling fifteen cubs that had not been seen by the project before! Of course, this is just coincidence that I happened to have come across the cubs all at roughly the same time as they varied in age from just two months old to about six months, but it was nonetheless very exciting to see. Two of the females who have just had litters are Sheridan and Tia Maria, the two youngest females from the Liqueur Family. It just so happened that these two introduced me to their litters for the first time within just a couple of days of each other. This means that the cubs' name codes are all very similar which has the potential to cause some confusion further down the line! Tia

Africa Dream

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Maria has two young cubs, one male and one female, who are about four or five months old. Tia Maria seems to be doing a good job at providing for them as the first time I saw them she brought down a Thomson's gazelle for them to feast on. Sheridan's cubs are a little bit younger than her sisters', being about three months old; she has three youngsters, two males and one female and seems to be doing just as good a job at providing for her family as her sister. The first time I saw the family she also caught a Thomson's gazelle, and then the second time the cubs all had nice fat little bellies as if they had all just left a kill.

