



## **SERENGETI LION PROJECT – NOVEMBER 2013 REPORT** PREPARED EXCLUSIVELY FOR AFRICA DREAM SAFARIS

Hi all ADS readers,

Some of you may have heard from me earlier as I reported on your selected lion prides in Serengeti. After some years of silence I'm again sharing the lion reporting with my colleague Daniel. From me you won't hear about your favorite prides, instead I'll give you some tales from my work in neighboring Ngorongoro. Since late 2010 I'm fully engaged in lion research and conservation in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA). I continue the regular monitoring of the easily seen lions in the Crater and in the Ndutu/Masek area – this is the easy task. Much more challenging is learning about the elusive lions that reside in the Maasai inhabited parts of Ngorongoro. I work closely with the local communities, and have currently six local Maasai employed to assist gathering lion observation data, as well as data on predators' impact on the pastoralist Maasai population. Much could be told about the work here, but for this report I wanted to acquaint you with Puyol and his mates...

To learn more about how lions live in this human/livestock occupied landscape we have been permitted to attach GPS collars on up to six lions. In mid-February this year we set out to find, immobilize, and collar a couple of lions. I'd called in Daniel to help me, and "equipped" him with two sharp-eyed Maasai (Julius and Roimen) for easier lion spotting and local area knowledge. While I took the night shift calling for shy lions near the Eyasi rift, Daniel and team made daytime searches for the less shy lions in the Twin Hill region. Just after morning tea on the 14<sup>th</sup> Feb. Daniel calls to say they found 5 lions; 2 males and 3 females. Great news! Me, Ernest (the veterinarian) and my two Maasai assistants (Mudi and Koley) headed off immediately.

Once there I identified the three females as the 3 years old Hara, Helen and Athena from the Big Marsh pride. For whatever reason they had left their natal pride, including their two same-aged sisters. Presuming that these females would return "home", into the area of Ndutu where Maasai and livestock are not permitted, these females were no good candidates for a collar. The two males, however, were. They were the two gorgeous blond-maned nomadic males that we'd first seen and identified in May 2012. I gave Hamisi (driver guide at Ndutu lodge and local lion expert, a.k.a. Kaka Simba) the honorable task to name them. Being a football (soccer) fan, Hamisi named them Puyol and Ramos – defenders of the Barcelona football team - and we gained hopes they may become good lion pride defenders in the years to come. We estimate Puyol and Ramos to be born in 2008. It is likely they are brothers or cousins, but being just two they could also be two solitary, unrelated nomads that have hooked up for life. Their origin is unknown to us, although I'm hoping we can find it out by analyzing genetic samples from them.



Puyol immobilized and here weighed by Koley, Mudi, Ingela, Roimen and Julius. Puyol is some of the largest lion I've ever seen; his tail base as thick as my arm, and he weighs (if we can trust a non-perfect scale) around 235 kg. Mind you, perhaps 25% of that was his latest large meal.

Puyol and Ramos in embrace in a field of flowering Cordifolia, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013

I let Ernest choose whichever of the males to dart, and soon Puyol had the pink-tufted dart syringe in his butt. As usual it stirred some commotion among the lions. Helen found the intriguing syringe with pink tuft and pulled it from Puyol, chewing it to completely demolish the expensive equipment. Cats are cats... After shooing away the other lazy, well-fed lions, we had about an hour to work on Puyol; fitting GPS collar, measuring, sampling and weighing. As all that was done, and drugs had worn off, Puyol joined his mates again who were resting a few hundred meters away.



Puyol in the usual habitat within his range. The arrow in picture to the right points to where Puyol lies completely concealed in the vegetation.

From then on we have continued following Puyol's whereabouts through the regularly incoming messages (GPS-collar – Iridium satellite – base station – email – lion researcher). I have scheduled his collar to take hourly positions at night and one position at noon. Combining that information with field visits we are learning lots about lions' behavior; where they move and rest, and where and what they eat.

The area Puyol considers home fills with activity in the dry season, as Maasai and their livestock moves in to the Olduvai-Masek area that provides a rare permanent water supply. Most of this area is not the kind of African savannah we'd like to think of. This is a non-inviting place; mainly woodland of a "boring" kind of Acacia, interspersed with large clumps of waist-tall Cordifolia (whose seed particles gets into your eyes and makes you itch all over), and terribly dusty with fine volcanic dust. Wasn't it for Puyol's radio signals, or clusters of recent GPS positions I would never opt to enter here.



On 20<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2013 I tracked Puyol to the full Matiti pride. Here is Hara surrounded by their six cubs. Helen, Athena, Ramos and Puyol are just nearby.

### Incidence of late with Puyol & Co

On Nov 12<sup>th</sup> me and Roimen, one of our Maasai scouts, went to check out the lion scene in Ndutu/Masek area. I dropped off Roimen to work on foot; searching lion spoor and other signs, and talking to Maasai about any recent predator-livestock attacks. The following day I went radio tracking for Puyol, I pick up the signal and pursue it to some dense impenetrable thickets. I couldn't even see the tail-tip of a lion, but signals tell me Puyol was right there.

Later I meet up with Roimen who tells me about his spoor-tracking exercise this morning. He'd followed fresh spoor, stained with blood and leading into thickets - the same thickets I'd got Puyol's signals from. The following morning we search for Puyol again and find him still in the very same place. Not so good, as it further indicated that he was wounded. To find out how badly, and if there was anything that could/should be done we had get a visual of the lion. Not a chance while he hid in the thickets, so we tried to lure him out by playing up a recording of a bleating buffalo calf. Ramos popped his blond-maned head up and approached the sound, accompanied by his current "mistress" Marlene. Puyol, however, remained in the bushes. Even more worrisome; as he didn't come out for this attractive call indicated that he was quite injured. Had he been in a fight with other lions (perhaps even squabbling w Ramos over Marlene), or worse; been speared by Maasai??

Other duties occupied the next day, so me and Roimen returned on the 16<sup>th</sup>. We had coordinated with a veterinarian in case it was decided the lion needed treatment. The last GPS position that had come in from Puyol's collar was from the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup>, showing that he hadn't moved from the bush. Later positions were slow coming in, often an effect of poor satellite communication while in dense vegetation. As we reach Puyol's long resting place I get no radio tracking signal. There could be two reasons for this; either Puyol had left, or he was still in there but collar had failed or been chewed by hyenas. I leave Roimen to check out the spoor in the area while I go to check internet yet again for any collar updates. While the modern technique failed, traditional spoor tracking lead the way. As I return Roimen waives me in, and with him leading the way we follow spoor of Puyol as he'd moved off. After a couple of kilometers of Roimen running swiftly through the bush, following the very obvious lion prints on dusty ground, and me chugging behind clumsily in a noisy landrover, we reached a hillcrest and I gain radio signal. Shifting over to modern tracking, we weave our way



through the bush. Within a kilometer the booming radio signal tells us that Puyol is right near. "Pale!" whispers Roimen and points to a pair of well concealed paws inside a dense clump of Cordifolia. Because we still needed to know if and how badly injured Puyol was, I drove up irritatingly close. Puyol stood up and on a sore left front leg limped away to nearby bush – but was otherwise in good shape. Great – we no longer needed to worry about him!

Two weeks later I'm back to check on Puyol. Since last visit the GPS positions had shown that the limp male had regained normal movement patterns. Now back into Puyol's favourite, but un-inviting woodlands we track him down to widespread clumps of Cordifolia. Upon arriving we can hardly make out Puyol's blond mane in the yellow colored vegetation. Then Ramos even blonder frame pops up, then a female, and another, and finally also a little cub. A constellation I wasn't familiar with. Flicking through the lion ID cards I eventually found a match; the adult female was Nayomi and the 1.5 year old female was Nadine. The 3 months old male cub was seen for the first time and we named him Nanook. Before I had only seen and identified Nayomi and Nadine from photos provided by tourists. Seeing her in real was good, and great to know they were alive and well, and had even increased with a cub!



Puyol with the ca. 3 months old male that we named Nanook (The Master of bears in Inuvit mythology). For Nayomi and her group (can't really call it a pride as she seems to be a solitary female) we give them names starting with NA, as she was first seen and identified in the Naibardad area (also called Twin Hill).

It has been really interesting to see how Puyol & Co have managed to live here among all potential conflict with the Maasai and livestock. Lions are not vegetarians, and livestock is certainly part of the lions' menu. Retaliatory killings are a too common cause of death for lions in such landscapes. But Puyol and Ramos, and their two prides are living on well. Apart from being the resident males to the small group of Nayomi and offspring, they also continue as the males for the Matiti pride (which I named the Hara, Helen and Athena group). They reproduced successfully, and though I have only seen them on a couple of occasions during the dry season, they seem to get on really well. In fact, they are doing better compared with the neighboring lions in an area where Maasai and livestock are not permitted.



Rainy season is here, and I look forward to more and better sightings of the lions in this region. Many cubs to be identified. Their elusiveness tends to wear off as the Maasai and livestock moves on, leaving the area to only wildlife and tourists, and us researchers.

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7<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2013