



SERENGETI LION PROJECT - SEPTEMBER 2012 REPORT

The Transect Pride has been very busy since last time I wrote. In the dry season when the migratory prey like wildebeest and zebra are far away this large woodland pride has to catch other animals. Buffaloes are around all year but being a huge bundle of muscle with horns this is a dangerous challenge to take on. One day another researcher here told me he saw the Transect lions take down a buffalo only a few kilometers from our home. The buffalo fought viciously and managed to launch a lioness high into the air before being brought down and eaten. About a week later I got a report from another researcher that a buffalo had been brought down by the same lions just a kilometer away, just behind the local store. I went there but the carcass was already stripped of meat and there were only a few vultures and a jackal around.

In the morning after they brought down a buffalo in the dry creek just about 150 meters away from our house. We could see and hear the lions from our porch. They stayed there the whole day finishing their meal. There are 23 big lions in this pride but 2 buffaloes in two days is still a lot of food. About one week after that I woke up at 1 am by a repeated groan. I thought I knew what it was and snuck out to the car. I only had to drive about 50 meters to our neighbor's house where I found the Transect lions covering a buffalo, still kicking. But the battle was almost over and soon the lions started eating. There was a constant growling from lions trying to get their share. The moon was almost full and bright enough for me to see clearly without a light.



The Transect lions feasting on a buffalo next to the house.



After about an hour the three resident males, The Lohay Trio, came charging in. One of them came running along the car, literally brushing it as it passed just centimeters under my camera lens poking out of the window. The arrival of the males stirred up a chaos with lions scattering in panic. But soon enough they were all back to the carcass again feeding, the sound level of the growling even higher. By dawn only the skeleton remained of the buffalo. In only two weeks time these lions killed and ate at least four buffaloes. They sure haven't suffered from the lack of prey in the dry season that other prides might.

Next time I write I'm probably going to have more big news from this pride. Lately the adult females have been very secretive, hiding in dens scrub and among the rocks. The last few tries I've only located the signal of the collar but not been able to actually see any lion. This can only mean one thing. They are having new cubs. I'm looking forward to seeing the new pride members but at the same time dreading the work it's going to need. It's going to take weeks of trying to sex the cubs and get the identifying whisker spots on both sides of the muzzle all while the cubs are running around and mixing in tall grass. The new cubs probably also means that the adults won't let the now two year old youngsters stay around. So they'll have to manage on their own now.

Some of the lions in the Maasai Kopje Pride have been seen more together lately. These are Jezebel, Kennedy, Mato Keo and Blixten. Cordelle haven't been seen since October last year and is probably dead. She was like many other lions in this pride very old and it wasn't unexpected. The two cubs of Mato Keo though are still alive and healthy and recently Kennedy was seen mating with Ou, one of the Loahy Trio males that they share with the Transect Pride. So more members to this pride seem to be on their way.



One of the cheeky cubs in the Cub Valley Pride.



Another pride that is seen more together again is the members of the Cub Valley Pride. The reason for this is no doubt because they're having a baby boom. Valkyrie, Vanilla, Dawn, Twilight, CV91 and CV95 are altogether having 13 cubs. While Dawn and Twilight stay on their own and are rarely seen the rest can often be seen around the Sametu Kopjes and marsh. Last visit out there they were just finishing off a buffalo kill. The four resident males, the Killers, had already stuffed themselves when I arrived and lay panting in the shade with huge bellies. They almost looked like they would produce litters too.

The Naabi Pride has survived yet another dry season out in the harsh conditions around the Naabi Hill, all three cubs still alive. They have been venturing far out on the shadeless plains around the hill in search of scarce prey. Porky though, the grandpa of grandpas, have been seen less and less with this pride. I wonder if age is catching up with him and he finds it difficult to tag along with the rest. Every time I see him I rejoice for the fact that he has lived yet another day.

In the beginning of July the Simba East Pride vanished completely. Despite big effort and a lot of time was spent on finding them inside and out of our study area we could not pick up one beep from their radio collar. We had no clue to where they could be. Two months later, they reappeared in the centre of our study area, as if nothing had happened. It was Skvimp and Sarah with their four cubs. Sonia and her two cubs are still missing. We do think they are still around though. But not having a collar she is much more difficult to find on a regular basis. Probably she has chosen to raise her cubs alone since the cubs of Skvimp and Sarah are much bigger and would have a huge advantage in the fight for food.



The Simba East pride re-found.



When lions disappear like this only to reappear again later makes me wonder where they've been. At these times I wish we could afford collars with GPS. With those it wouldn't matter if the lions walked up all the way to Kenya, we'd still know where they were.

Since this pride is back though, they have been hanging around in an area where they never used to be. Instead of roaming around Gol Kopjes or in the nearby Cub Valley, now they have settled on the plains free of trees northeast of the Cub Valley where the sun is merciless. I hope future research will give clues to their disappearing and change of territory.

Last time I wrote I reported that there were six new little members in the Mukoma Gypsies Pride. Now the number of cubs has grown to ten only one of them is a female. She'll have to compete for milk and food with nine brothers. If she survives she might grow up to be a very tough female.



The Mukoma Hills and their new cubs quenching their thirst in a ditch by the road.

Lately this pride have been moving slightly north along the Seronera River and often venturing out on the Mukoma Plains, something they rarely did before. This got them to cross roads with the Transect Pride recently and ended in a big battle. It was a battle that we only saw the aftermath of. One of the young Transect males had open wounds on his back and one of the Mukoma Gypsies cubs couldn't be seen. Considering that both of these prides are very big, 18 and 23 lions, the casualties could have been much worse.



The Mukoma Hill Pride females are still hanging around with the two new males Nisse and Sotis. As a result of that the sub-adults in this pride have been driven off to a life on their own. No male would accept young non-reproductive lions in the pride they're about to take over. At least the sub-adults were big enough to run away. Smaller cubs would have been killed. Soon we might be able to get acquainted with new cubs in this pride too.



Nyota and Melody from the Mukoma Hill Pride drinking together with Sotis.

The Mukoma Mischiefs continue to move around a lot and being difficult to track. Lately they have spent a lot of time down in the Sopa Valley and one time they were spotted on top of a ridge near the Sopa Lodge. This is quite far outside our normal study area. But they are all still alive and in good condition.

So these last three months have kept us busy looking for lions running around outside their normal territories and a lot of new cubs have been born for us to give new IDs. In the near future we're hoping for rains and that the wildebeest migration will arrive. As of writing they are not far away. We're expecting a lot of new cubs to be born too, especially in the Transect Pride.