



SERENGETI CHEETAH PROJECT NEWSLETTER APRIL 2010



The challenges of working in the rain

As you might recall from our last news letter, the rains had come to the short grass plains at the beginning of this year! January was a very wet month which brought all sorts of challenges to going out into the field and finding cheetahs. During the first two weeks of January, Anne Hillborn, who was the project manager for the Serengeti cheetah project from 2004-2007 was still visiting us. Her company was invaluable for lots of reasons. Not only was she great fun to have around, taking her out into the



field meant an extra pair of eyes to help look for cheetahs, but it also meant an extra pair of hands in case we got stuck!! On the 10th of January, a day before she was due to fly back

home, we were roaming around the Makao plains in the Ndutu area. It had rained the night before but we were confident that we knew the area well enough to know which places to avoid and which places to scan in search of the spotted cats. We had missed out on a party the night before in Seronera and were so busy gossiping about what might have happened and what might not have happened until all of a sudden I realized that we weren't moving anymore. Anne who saw the look on my face also only



noticed this after it was too late. We started off being very optimistic thinking 'no worries, we'll just pop the land rover into low range and diff-lock and we'll be out of here in no time'. Low range engaged, diff-lock set it. We didn't move an inch! We were well and truly bogged down. We had a good look around and realized we were surrounded on all sides by water birds, which is never a good sign. Thankfully we're trained to be very well equipped. We had a shovel, sand ladders, high lift jack, spare tires, and boards of wood. We started out confident. It should be mentioned that Anne was even better organized than I was; she rocked up that morning wearing welly boots! I laughed at her for it, but said that if we got stuck she could say 'I told you so'! She definitely lived up to that moment. At the same time I was having a moment of vainness. I had just gotten new shoes for Christmas and didn't want to get them muddy so I decided that all the work that we had cut out for us, I was going to do wearing just socks! Not a very good move as there were mean little thorny bushes scattered all over the place... but that wasn't enough to make me change my mind and get my shoes all muddy... (what am I like??) So the hard work began, we had to jack up all four tires and put sand ladders or wood boards underneath them all. Jacking up a car in a boggy swamp is not easy! Not only is there no solid ground for the jack to based on, there is only so much strength in two girls of 65 kg. But this didn't stop us, after an hour of



hard work the car was jacked up and ready to go. I revved the engine a bit and went for it...we moved all but four meters. Great! Start again!

Second attempt at getting out

The second time round we made a plan, we would leave the car in low range, and we mapped out the path that we thought would give us most chance of getting out. Anne stood behind the car to give it an extra push, and off we went! Again we moved all but 6 disappointing meters and were back to square one. The third attempt at jacking every tire up it was clear that this was going to be our last try. The energy was getting sucked out of us, we were hungry and the idea of calling for help was sounding more and more appealing. The third try I asked Anne to try the driving part and I would try pushing. But once again, we got no where. It was time to call for help! We called Ndotu Safari Lodge, and help was on their way. While waiting we sat on the bonnet and indulged ourselves on the left over crackers we had, and a pot of Nutella. One should never go into the field without a pot of Nutella, it is a true life



savor! What was great was that although we had spent three hours trying to dig ourselves out, we were frustrated, hungry and tired but we were still able to laugh about it all. After about an hour help arrived. We warned the guys not to get too close as we were afraid that they too would get stuck. Eventually with the help of more sand ladders, wooden blocks, and manpower it took a further two hours until we were able to freely drive across the plains again. What a relief!! We went back to the lodge smiling big smiles and looking forward to lunch and a hot shower! No spotted cats for us that day but we got some good exercise which is a very rare happening when one lives in the Serengeti!

The rains continued heavily through January, but died down again in February. However it looks like it might be back for the month of March. On the night of the 3rd of March we had 90ml of rain all within a few hours! I didn't go out the next day as now that I was on my own again getting stuck would not have been half as much fun!

Cheetah Name Giving Ceremony

As I mentioned in the last news letter there was a Cheetah Chick reunion over the Christmas holidays. After New Year's, three of us got together to think of what names to give what cheetahs. As cub mortality is so high, cheetahs only get a name after they have reached independence. However they are not just randomly given a name. A lot of thought goes into the whole process. The first thing that has to be considered is if the to-be-named-cheetah was born into a certain lineage. Current lineages include the Nut family, the Cheese Family, the Wine family and the Dessert Family. The second thing we have to think about is what names have been used and what possible names are still available. For example Almond, who is the daughter of Peanut, granddaughter of Pistachio, and great granddaughter of Hazelnut, had two female cubs that needed a name. As you can see the Nut lineage is a very successful one and thus lots of Nut names have been used already. Although not technically a nut, we settled on calling her cubs Butternut and Coconut.

Further cubs that needed to be named were Tiramisu's cubs, Squeaks cubs, Eleanors cubs, and Muscats cubs. Let's start with Eleanor. Eleanor was a legend and so her cubs needed legendary names. Eleanor was not born into a lineage and so we didn't have to stick to a certain theme. At one point I thought it would be a nice idea to name them after areas around Ndotu as this is where she was most frequently spotted. We could have named them Masek & Ndotu (after the lakes), Makao (after the Makao plains where she was often seen), Kusini (in the southern Serengeti where they were often sighted between dry season and wet season), and Simiu (which is located between Ndotu and Kusini). However it was pointed out to me that this could cause quite some confusion when talking to people. You could end up saying things like 'I saw Kusini at Ndotu'. That doesn't sound right, so that idea was binned. Eventually we settled on naming them after famous jazz singers. The female cubs are now known as Aretha, Nina, and Etta, and their brothers are known to the project as Howling & Wolff.



Squeaks cubs that have been mentioned in previous news letters are also not born into a lineage. They were very high profile cubs, seen by lots of passers by and at one point even challenged a lioness which kept me on my toes for a good hour. Squeak had one male cub and three female cubs who now all have high profile names. The male cub is now known to us as James Bond, and his three sisters are named after the bond girls: Honey Ryder, Xenia Onatopp, and Octopussy. Cheeky names for Cheeky Cheetahs.

Muscat and Tiramisu's cubs were both born into lineages and so they had to be named accordingly. Tiramisu is one of my favorite cheetahs as she always seems to pop up when times are desperate. She is also one of the only cheetahs that I am able to recognize on site as she has a large scar on her right side.

Her mother Cocoa, like Eleanor, is somewhat of a legend as she raised 6 cubs to independence. Out of all her siblings (Ben, Jerry, Haagendaz, Éclair & Profiterole) Tiramisu is the only one that is still seen on a regular basis. The cubs that had to be named are of her second litter, a male cub and a female cub who are now known to us as Crumble & Strudle! Muscat who is the female cub of Amarula also managed to raise one male and one female cub to independence. They have now been named Grenache & Sauternes!



(Tiramisu, her scar can clearly be seen)

Love is in the air!!

When on the cheetah project we have a monthly quota to find 20 different cheetah sightings. Finding a consort pair is like going to a sale. You find one and get one free, it's fantastic. On average I think I find a consort pair about once every two months, however in March I was lucky enough to see 5 different pairs in 8 days!! Love is definitely in the air on the short grass plains!

It all started on the 6th of March, I was driving around Naabi hill when close to the main road I had spotted a cheetah. As I approached it, another one popped up making it clear that there was two of them. I first assumed that they would be two males and I wondered if it was Maurus and Jerome. Maurus and Jerome are named after two of the scientific staff at the Tanzania Wildlife research Institute (TAWIRI) and were often seen scent marking around Naabi and Gol Kopjes in the wet season. I hadn't seen them in a while and was happy to see that they were still around. However after a couple of minutes I realized that one of them was female, which ruled out Maurus and Jerome. Was it a mum with cub? I didn't think so... they both looked about the same age...and then it hit me, this might just be my lucky day! A consort pair! It was Lady Godiva (who was previously seen with Maurus and Jerome) and a male that goes by the number LS288M2. He is not often seen and thus nameless for the moment.



The very next day I didn't just see one consort pair but two! I was in Gol Kopjes this time I did come across Maurus and Jerome. They were with Butternut, the young female cheetah we had just named, so hopefully this is the start of a continuation of the Nut family! Later that day I was driving around Barafu kopjes, when across the gorge I spotted a cheetah! Although I was chuffed I was quite cautious as cheetahs in this area can be quite shy. I approached it very carefully, and when I came up the ridge I saw that a mother with two cubs was on the move. I stopped to give them some space and before I knew it I saw a big male cheetah, whom I hadn't noticed yet, start trotting behind them. As the male was clearly not the same size as the cubs I knew that he wasn't part of this family and thus an extra sighting. I had to figure out if this mother was running from me or from her admirer. I approached them very slowly again and she let me get close enough to get some good ID shots. She wasn't as happy with the male known to us as AH970. He was aware that his presence was not welcome and so he kept a bit of distance from the mother of two but again every time she tried to move away, he followed. The mother with two cubs is a relatively new female to the project. She was first seen in January 2010 around Gol Kopjes. As she was never seen before we have no idea where she came from or who she is related to. She was quite shy in January but as she has been seen twice since she is already starting to get habituated.

The fourth consort pair was a lucky one. On the 9th of March I was driving along the five hill track when I bumped into Rose. Rose is the female cub of Nathalie. Cheetah Nathalie is named after Nathalie who analyses all the demography data from the Serengeti cheetah population at ZSL, and cheetah Rose is named after Rose who is in charge of coordinating the carnivore conservation action plan for Tanzania. Rose was being followed by an admirer, a shy male whom I am convinced I had seen before but never got close enough to get an ID shot. However, because he was so occupied with making a good impression on Rose I was able to get good ID shots of both of his sides. It was still a bit of a challenge as he insisted on walking in long grass as often as possible, hiding from my camera lens, however when Rose moved out into the open he had to prioritize and following Rose was more important than hiding from me. He is now entered in our data base as LS735M and if we catch a glimpse of him again we'll know where we've seen him before, all thanks to Rose!



Rose (the brave one) and her admirer (hiding behind the termite mound)



The last consort of the month was seen on the 14th of March. I had heard rumors of a consort pair around the Two Trees area of Ndutu. There was no doubt in my mind that the Koffie boys: Espresso, Latte and Mocha were involved. These strapping boys are still holding a territory around the Two Trees area and are currently the most commonly spotted cheetahs of Ndutu. I tried looking for them on the first days and only found Latte. He was feeding on a wildebeest calf and calling for his brothers at the same time. In the case of Latte when it comes to food or women, clearly he chose the first option 😊. The next day however I saw all three boys with Etta, one of Eleanor's female cubs! As far as we know she hasn't had cubs yet and so it's possible that we'll be introduced to her cubs in a couple of months! Fingers crossed it all goes well and that she follows in her mothers steps!

One of my rarest sightings!

Finally I would like to share one of my most rarest sightings with you. Although it's not a cheetah sighting it will be one of my most memorable moments during my time on the Cheetah Project.



On the fifth of February I arrived at Ndutu Safari Lodge just in time for lunch. Lunch time at Ndutu is always a treat and so I am normally never late for meal times! However on this day I was met at the gate with some very exciting news: Wild dogs at Lake Masek!!! Really? You sure? Yes yes it was a confirmed sighting. For my first annual holiday I decided to stay in Tanzania and tour the southern circuit in the hope of finding wild dogs. The road trip took me through Ruaha, Selous, and Mikumi to mention just a few of the places we visited, but never did I have the privilege to see this great carnivore, and now I was being told that they were just around the corner.

I could hardly believe it! Being very excited I forgot all about the idea of lunch and set off to see if I could find the rumored pack of 6, 7, 8 dogs... By this time I had gotten different reports of how many dogs were actually there but it didn't bother me, the fact was they had been seen! Lake Masek was only a short 10 minute drive away and I set off as soon as I had gathered my binoculars, camera and gps. On the way there I came across lots of cars, all full of drivers and tourists smiling big big smiles, it was a good sign. The 10 minutes it takes to get there seemed to take forever and I was keeping my fingers crossed that they hadn't moved off. The vegetation around the lake can be pretty dense and so I was worried that I would miss them, either because they had moved off, or settled in the thick shrubs. Passing another car, the driver gave me the thumbs up, a good sign that they were still around. Passing yet another car, the driver informed me that it was only 800 meters away! Coming around the next corner... there they were!!! I couldn't believe my luck! It was fantastic! Shortly after I had arrived they



started moving, I took as many pictures as I could in fear that they would soon be gone, but instead they walked towards the lake shore, out in the open where they all laid down. Being the social creatures that they are, they were often seen lying all on top of each other, making it hard to see which leg belonged to who, or how many dogs were lying on the one pile. The pack of seven, (six females, one male) could not have been better located. Sun bathing on the lake shore was ideal for two reasons. First of all they were out in the open, as opposed to being in dense vegetation making it easy for everyone to enjoy them and take some great pictures. Secondly the shore of Lake Masek has a reputation for having swallowed up many many cars, getting very stuck at an attempt to get too close to the waters edge. This meant that no car could get close enough to be a botheration, and the dogs were left in peace.

The news of the dogs spread like wild fire and people from all over the area came to enjoy them. That night at the lodge, they were the topic of conversation. It had been over 20 years since wild dogs had been seen in this area, and everyone realized what a privilege it was to be able to spend the afternoon with them. Not only was it big news for everyone in the Ndotu area but a couple of weeks later a friend of mine in Holland had heard about it on Facebook!!!



A couple of days after the dogs had been sighted everyone was out on a frenzy to try and find them again, but no such luck. Not to worry, we know they're around, and hopefully they'll pay us a visit in the near future. Fingers crossed!

