



The Coffee Boys are Back

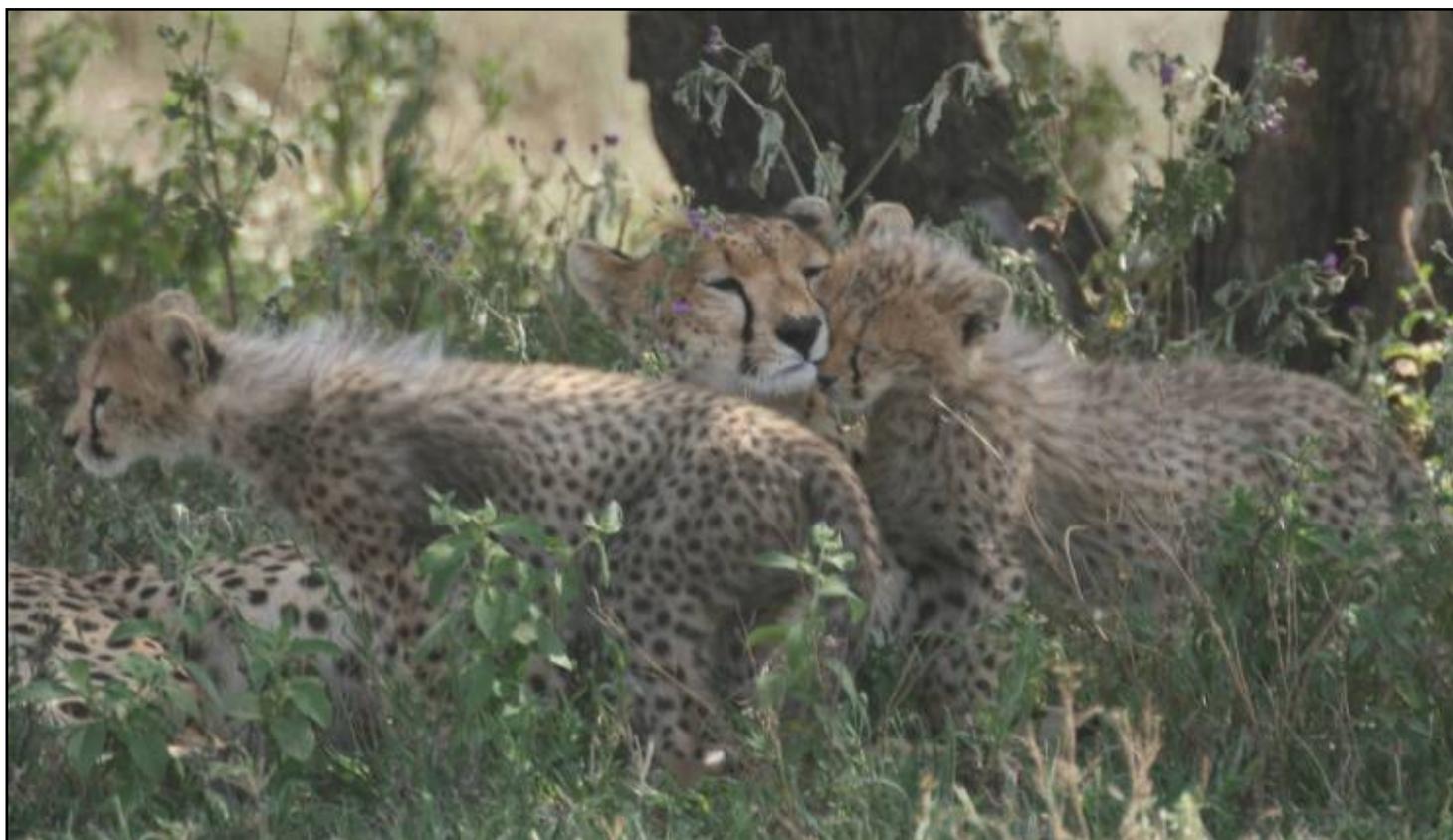
One of the highlights of moving between wet and dry season is seeing the return of some of our old favourites to our study area. For the past couple of years the Coffee Boys, Espresso, Latte and Mocha, have been disappearing from their territory at Ndotu and going off on a dry season sojourn; you can't really blame them – although there is always plenty of food in that area during wet season thanks to the migration coming in, the pickings can become very slim during the dry season when most of the herbivores have moved north again. They seem to cling on for as long as possible but eventually their appetites get the better of them and off they go. This wet season, due to the good rains we had in November and December, the boys reappeared quite early and were definitely making the most of the migration being in town. They were looking quite mangy when they first came back but after a few months of eating, frankly, a huge amount they are all starting to look like the handsome cheetahs we know and love. Unfortunately it's not all been good news however, it seems that Latte has sustained an injury to one of his front legs over the past few weeks and has developed a bad limp. We're obviously keeping an eye on him and hoping for the best – as it is a naturally occurring injury we cannot interfere and treat him for it; not least because doing so could actually make things worse as we would have to separate him from his brothers who are currently taking very good care of him. Between the three of them they are hunting and bringing down a wildebeest every couple of days and are spending the rest of their time looking very content with themselves and their ridiculously full bellies! Latte has even been seen taking part in hunts which gives us hope that he will make a full recovery given a bit of time.





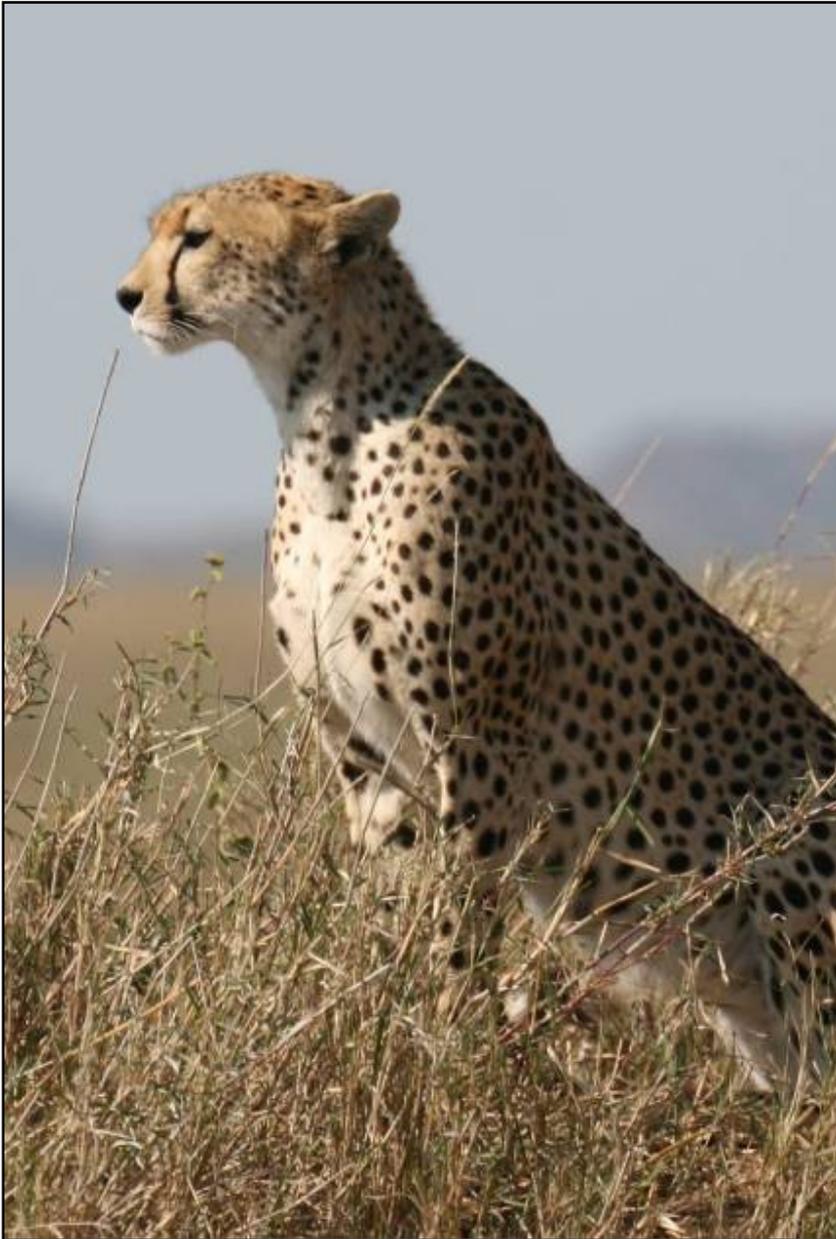
The Jazz Singers

Continuing on the Ndotu theme is my next update for you – Eleanor’s cubs! Eleanor rose to fame back in 2008 when she was raising her first litter of cubs; there were six cubs in this litter and she managed to get five of them to independence. As you can imagine seeing this family of six strolling across the plains was a very impressive sight and they were a great favourite with all the visitors to the Ndotu area. Since then Eleanor has continued to be a hugely successful mother; she has now raised a further two litters of cubs to independence, taking her total number of cubs to eleven, thereby absolutely securing her place in the Cheetah Project Hall of Fame! Eleanor’s cubs from her first litter were all named after famous Jazz and Blues singers – her female cubs were Aretha, Etta and Nina and the two males were Howling and Wolff. Unfortunately nothing has been seen or heard of Nina, Howling or Wolff for sometime now, so we’re not sure what has happened to them, hopefully they have just moved away from our study area into pastures new. However Aretha and Etta have both stuck around and so we know that Eleanor is now a grandmother! Aretha’s first litter comprised of three cubs who became independent of her quite recently and they were two males and one female. Etta took quite a lot longer than her sister to produce her first litter but, very excitingly, she now has four young cubs in tow! The youngsters are about three months old at the moment and so are full of beans! The family has been quite a draw for all the tour groups but luckily Etta has been able to keep the cubs out of danger and the family has been doing really well. Etta has been making the most of all the opportunities afforded to her by the migration being around and has been hunting extremely regularly, sometimes twice in the same day, meaning her little cubs’ bellies are rarely anything but big and round!





The Return of Taitinger



During the change over from wet to dry season we quite often have some exciting sightings, such as the one I had in December. I was driving from Naabi hill to Gol Kopjes when I saw a cheetah nearby. Naturally I went over and collected all the usual data and got all my ID photos too. I compared this individual to all the ID cards I had with me in the car but couldn't get her to match any of them – this wasn't too surprising as I only carry cards for cheetahs that are seen quite regularly so it's not that unusual for me to not be able to identify the cheetah straight away. At that point I didn't think too much about it as I continued on my morning's survey. I returned to Cheetah House that afternoon and started inputting all the day's data into our database. Luckily for me we have a matching programme that I can use to identify cheetahs such as the one I'd seen that morning – in the days before the programme was developed the researchers had to sit for hours going through hundreds of ID cards trying to find the right individual! As it is I just plugged in all the relevant information, set the programme off and ten minutes later it popped up with an answer – the cheetah I had seen was Taitinger! This was a real surprise, not only was she a cheetah I hadn't seen before (something that is becoming quite unusual after nearly two years of working on the Cheetah Project) but she hadn't been seen by anyone for more than two and a half years!

As you can guess from her name, Taitinger is part of the Champagne family. She was first seen as a older cub with her mother, Friexenet, and her three brothers, Piper, Heidsieck and Bollinger back in 2005; making her about eight years old now. As far as we know she has only had one litter of cubs; two males and a female known as Jack, Daniels and Sangria – however as she disappeared for such a long time during the prime of her life it is quite possible that she has had another litter that we don't know about! This tantalising glimpse of Taitinger was a few months ago now and she hasn't been seen again since then – hopefully she'll keep popping back though, just to let us know she's still around; with any luck it won't be another two and a half years until her next sighting!!!



Almond introduces us to her latest litter



The cheetahs in our study area tend to come from a few select lineages – this is because some females make better mothers than other females and good mothers tend to produce daughters who turn out to be good mothers themselves. One particularly successful lineage has been the Nut Family – so successful in fact that we have run out of nut themed names! Almond is the current shining star in the Nut Family, despite being only eight years old she has already raised several litters to independence. Her first litter was two males, known as Ties and Erris, her second was two females, Coconut and Butternut (not technically proper nut names but we’d run out!) and her most recent was another litter of two, this time a male and a female. This last litter only became independent in the last couple of months which is why they haven’t been named yet. This hasn’t stopped Almond however as within just a couple of months of my last sighting of her with her two full grown cubs, I saw her again, on her own but already lactating – suggesting she had cubs hidden away in a den somewhere! A couple of months later I saw her again lying in some long grass, I could see she was still lactating but I was a little worried as she seemed to still be on her own and by this time she should have had some cubs with her. I puzzled over this for a few minutes as I watched her trying to take advantage of the small amount of shade she could get by lying next to a big bushy bit of grass. Suddenly the grass started moving, even though all Almond

was doing was lying down and panting, and then a little yellow face appeared peering through the grass at me and my Landrover! I was obviously very excited – despite all the time I spend out on the plains surveying the cheetahs I don’t actually get to see very small cubs often at all. We all sat looking at each other until the cub decided that I was probably ok as Almond wasn’t bothered by me and so came clambering out of the bush, it bumbled around for a while, using Almond as a climbing frame when I noticed that it wasn’t alone, there were another two little yellow faces that had appeared where the first one had been!

At that point I realised that me and the young family were not alone – about 200 metres away there was another cheetah calling and chirping. I think Almond had heard him and was lying low, hoping not to be noticed. After a while the young male lay down in some long grass to try and get out of the boiling midday sun, Almond immediately took the opportunity to start trying to slink away without being seen. She carefully stood up and,

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whilst staying close to the ground with her head down, started walking in the opposite direction. She couldn't call the cubs without attracting attention so she went, assuming they'd follow. They sat and watched her for a little while, then realised they were meant to be following her and started trotting along in her wake, until for some unknown reason they all decided they didn't want to go that way and started walking towards the male cheetah! You could almost see the look of total exasperation on Almond's face when she realised that she had no choice but to follow them instead and hope for the best. The male soon saw her and immediately came running over to try and consort with Almond. Luckily for the cubs male cheetahs do not commit infanticide – due to the cheetah's unique social system, males cannot ever be sure whether or not a litter of cubs is his or not therefore it doesn't make sense for him to kill them as he cannot be sure if he is in fact killing his own offspring. Male cheetahs have no input in the raising of cubs and this young male seemed a little confused by the three tiny fluffy cubs! He kept trying to get Almond's attention (she was doing her best to ignore him) but the cubs kept getting in the way and he wasn't sure what to do with them, to the extent of hissing at the cubs and challenging them by slamming his front feet down on the ground. To begin with Almond wasn't too happy about this and kept making sure she was between him and the cubs, but after a while when she had realised he wasn't really posing any threat she just left him to it – the cubs meanwhile were just looking at him wondering what on earth he was doing!



After a while he recognised that he wasn't going to get anywhere with Almond and he let them all wander off. The little family then went off and found a kopjes to spend the rest of the afternoon lounging around on, with one of the cubs even accidentally going swimming in a puddle!

