



Shelley Mitchley

Singita

PAMUSHANA LODGE

Malilangwe • Zimbabwe

WILDLIFE JOURNAL

From the first to the thirtieth of November
Two Thousand and Eleven

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.4°C (68.0°F)
Average maximum: 32.9°C (89.6°F)
Minimum recorded: 16.9°C (60.8°F)
Maximum recorded: 43.6°C (109.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 97.4 mm
For the year to date: 409.7 mm

The rain arrived in all its glory on the first of this month, and not a drop has gone to waste! It's like all the plants and trees have sprung an overnight surprise party of green on the rain's command. Creamy baobab flowers litter the entrance to the lodge, little chicks have hatched and many plains game have given birth to lambs, calves and foals, or are about to – as you'll read in a later story. But first I have been champing at the bit to share the news of the latest arrival of felines with you – and there is no sane person on this planet that can deny that these are the most adorable long-legged cheetah cubs!



Jenny Hishida

Fast and furriest

Why are young animals so cute? What makes us want to scoop them up in our arms and protect them forever? Their big watery eyes, wobbly first steps and rambunctious play... but that's an essay on evolution for another time...

The first sign of the little cheetah cubs (*Acinonyx jubatus*) was when Difficult, our tracker, spotted them on a scouting trip. The bush telegraph was abuzz with the news and it wasn't long before award-winning wildlife filmmaker Kim Wolhuter was on their tracks.



I spent an afternoon with the five cubs and their mother when they were about nine weeks old. We found them in a dry thorny area under a bush, and they were enthusiastically trying to tuck into an impala kill. Their little mouths were almost too small for the task at hand, but they persevered and eventually, with blood on their noses and swollen bellies, lay satisfied in the camouflage leaf litter. Notice how it is almost impossible to tell there are four cheetah cubs and an adult mother in this photograph:



We, and their mother, may find the cubs adorable, but there are many other predators who see any cheetah as competition for their territory and its prey. The spotted coat is what we term 'disruptive colouration' as it makes the outline of the cheetah difficult for another predator to discern. However, cheetah cubs have another trick up their sleeves, and one that has been the subject of debate for decades. It is a prominent mantle of fur on their backs that makes them look bigger and fiercer and similar to a honey badger (*Mellivora capensis*) which is a formidable fighter and one that all predators give a wide berth.

What was hugely intimidated by the five cheetah cubs and their mother was a squirrel that was marooned up a tree. The dead impala was at the tree's base, and there was no way down for the squirrel who had, no doubt, woken up from a long nap and wanted to go for a drink of water, but was being held captive by the six ferocious cats surrounding his tree. He raced up and down the upper reaches of the trunk and proceeded to paint the air blue with his vocal dissatisfaction and disgust of the scene!



Kim Wolhuter lives on the property and is wrapping up a documentary on a pack of wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*) that he has been filming for several years, and he has now set his sights on this new cheetah family for his next film. He was familiar with the mother cheetah before she had this litter of cubs, as when the wild dogs were beyond our property's boundaries he followed her and her previous offspring. Kim now spends every morning and evening with this cheetah family, and takes up their story:



"The previous litter was one female and three males, but this is exactly the opposite – one male and three female cubs which is great, because the more wild-living breeding females there are for this highly endangered species, the better. Unfortunately one of the initial five cubs went missing. I think it was killed by lions as I found lion tracks in the area I'd left them in the night before. I searched everywhere but couldn't find any sign of the missing cub.



The male cub is quite the guy! I've noticed that he is more adventurous than the others, but also demands the most affection from his mother. They will, at times, spend 24 hours feeding on a carcass, which I find unusual. The mother is killing almost daily, although last week she didn't kill for three days, and the little cubs looked starving! She then went hunting in the middle of the day, a day with a midday high of 44 C! Fortunately she was able to hunt and kill a duiker. Cheetahs really take strain in the heat. I timed the mother panting at 200 pants per minute and the cubs at 300 pants per minute. On a normal day the mother pants at about 20 pants per minute, so their efforts at keeping their body temperature constant are intense.



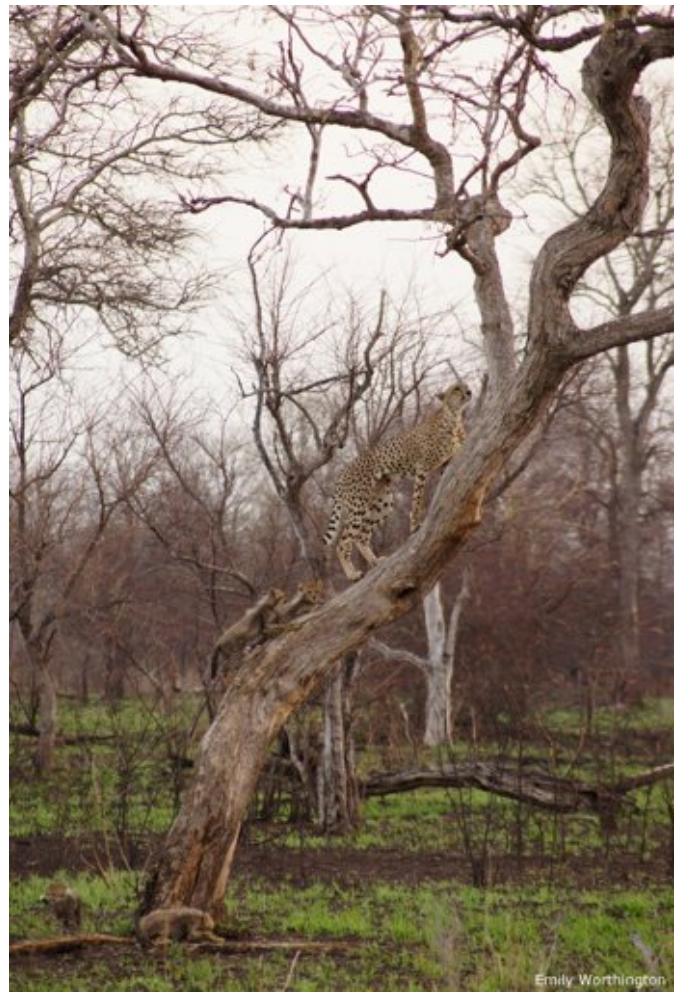
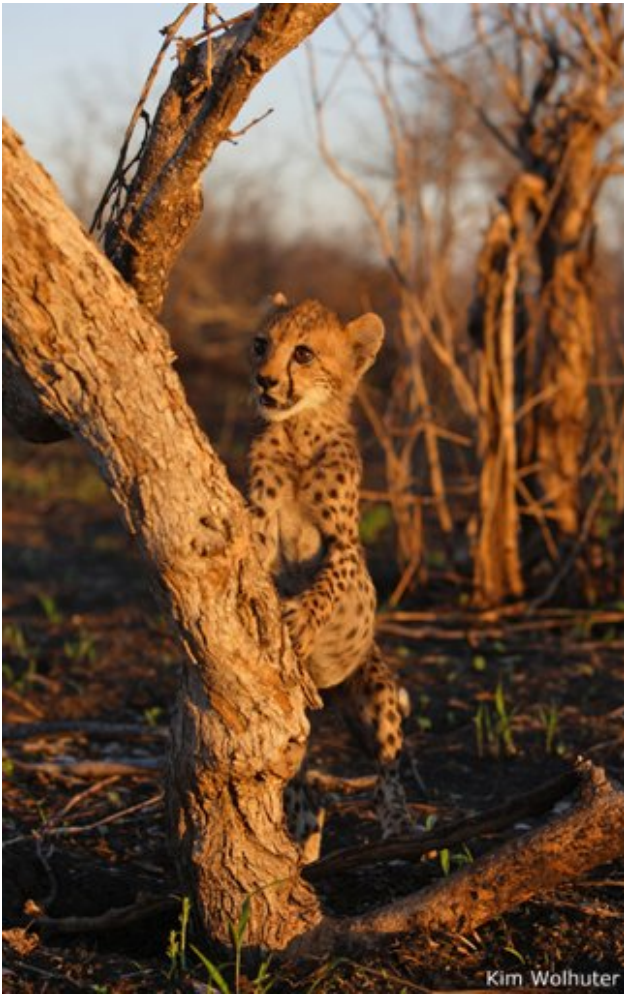
The now adult daughter from the previous litter showed up in the same area as the new family the other day but the mother wouldn't allow her anywhere near the cubs. Shortly after that the family did bump into another three sub-adult cheetahs – I'm not sure who they were or their sexes. They all seemed a little nervous, but I now estimate that we have at least 15 cheetahs on the property, which is phenomenal! I haven't seen any sign of the father or any other males around.



I plan to film them for the next 18 months, until they leave their mom and become independent. All going well I would like to produce a series about them.

Their daily adventures are so entertaining. Yesterday the cubs found a tortoise, but didn't know what to do with it. When it realised the cubs were no threat it popped its head out of its shell and carried on walking.

The cubs hissed at the frightening sight and leapt away in astonishment at the moving rock! They're now beginning to stalk birds which is so funny - especially guineafowl as the birds realise the cubs are no threat and just tease them. The cubs are very playful in the early mornings, and love climbing trees - preferably if mom leads the way..."



Hidden treasure



Lodge Manager, and resident squirrel expert, Shelley Mitchley found this hidden treasure inside its nest in a tree in the lodge garden. The young tree squirrel (*Paraxerus cepapi*) was following its mother on one of its first excursions out of the nest – and although it was shy and nervous it didn't have six cheetahs with which to contend!

We notice a peak in squirrel births now and for the next couple of months. Gestation is about 55 days and a litter of one to three emerge from the nest at 20 days.

Squirrel families sleep together in tree holes lined with grass and leaves. They groom and scent mark each other and recognise family members by their shared odour. Strangers are chased away from the group's nest hole and feeding areas.



Right of way

This was one of those drives when you talk about something and, it would seem, conjure it up. We left the lodge just as the sun was pulling itself up on the horizon, and as I turned on to the West Valley Road I told my guest to keep his eyes skinned for a black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) that has his territory in the area. Without missing a beat he said, "How about that one there!" Black rhino behaviour is to 'shoot first and ask questions later', so I immediately stopped and switched off the engine, planned my emergency exit and, with one hand hovering above the ignition, I zapped my camera's ISO up to 1 600 to try and get some shots in the dark dawn. He cautiously crossed the road right in front of the vehicle and only then did a half circle back and a stocky bounce-snort mock charge – but we were already a long way down the road!



The fast demise of a buffalo

This story details the death and ensuing feast of a buffalo over a 24-hour period:
Wednesday morning, 05h45: We leave the lodge in the cool temperatures of early morning and check a favourite waterhole, the Banyini Pan, for any thirsty visitors.



From a few hundred metres away we know we've struck gold! A pride of lions (*Panthera leo*) is lying at the water's edge and feeding on a dead buffalo (*Synceros caffer*).



It must have been a textbook hunt if ever there was one:
* Go to a waterhole where animals will drink.
* Wait for the cover of darkness.
* Allow the thirsty approaching animal/s (ideally a herd of buffalo) to drink.
* Spring an ambush attack on them, and single out a large female or young calf.
* Kill the animal, position its remains in the shade and enjoy fresh cool meat and water until you are satiated.



What the textbook didn't take into consideration was the photographer! Bright contrasting light off the water against the dark and blood-stained coat of a buffalo in shade... In these conditions it is best to zoom in on your subject and take an exposure reading of it (the AE button on a Nikon or * button on a Canon), and then zoom out to reframe your image.



The seven lions take turns at the feast, burying their heads in the opened stomach cavity and gorge themselves on the protein feast while deftly ignoring the carbohydrate contents of the grass-eating ruminant's four-chambered stomach.

The two lionesses feed first but a large young male that is almost the same size as the lionesses submissively approaches and feeds alongside his tolerant mother, after his aunt has retreated to the shade of a tree.



Wednesday afternoon, 16h30: A bit more of the buffalo has been eaten but it is obvious that the pride has spent most of the day relaxing and easing the strain of their bloated bellies!



The light now on the western side creates even more shadow on the buffalo, but gives a pleasing rim light to the feeding lion and a blue cast to the water. Distracting sticks seem determined to get in the way so shift your camera angle to avoid them.

A pair of black-backed jackal (*Canis mesomelas*) trot around the periphery of the scene, giving the lions a wide berth. The lions are clearly irritated by their presence, and the jackals' very obvious intentions of wanting to share in the spoils. Vultures descend from the sky in spirals and land in nearby tall dead trees. A red-billed hornbill (*Tockus erythrorhynchus*) causes less of a stir as it methodically pecks through dried dung in search of grass seeds, but also stays out of lion-claw's reach.

When predators make a big kill like this it offers a field guide a rare "guaranteed sighting." We'd found this scene this morning with much of the carcass still in tact, and could confidently drive our new guests that had arrived earlier in the afternoon straight to their very first scene of wildest Africa – seven golden lions feeding on the bloodied remains of another of Africa's Big Five. But how long does 600kg of prime beef last?



Thursday morning, 05h30: We check the scene at first light but there is no trace of the lions. There is little trace of the buffalo too – just its skeletal frame surrounded by vultures that are scrabbling over the slivers of meat that remain. Just like the rain that has fallen, not a scrap of this buffalo will go to waste. What the vultures can't claim a myriad of insects will, and ultimately the decomposed minerals of its bones will return to the earth.

“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.” *Albert Einstein*

A friend reminded me of the beautiful metaphor that lies in the roots of rock figs. A tiny seed lands in a rocky crevice and with imperceptible persistence and tenacity emerging roots pour themselves over the crevices and seep lines to make the most of the hidden water and minerals hidden within the rocks. Eventually the strength and size of a tree like this one (photographed at first light and again in the late afternoon) can crack solid boulders wide open. Nature always offers inspiration, and in Zimbabwe we need only look up to see one of the greatest of all.





A pregnant pause

The days before the first rains fall seem dry and barren, but they are anything but! The impala (*Aepyceros melampus*) ewes' bellies are swollen with promise and some of the plains game drop their young knowing that by the time they've weaned their offspring the new grass will be abundant and nutritious.

I had to laugh at the male impala in this photograph – the heavily pregnant females were all looking in one direction (we'd seen a leopard in the area earlier), but the male with the large horns (as well as a young ram with little spike horns) was eyeing me suspiciously as if I were going to challenge him for his harem that he had recently taken a renewed interest in! The stripy fluffy-tailed calf on the left is a newborn nyala (*Tragelaphus angasii*) and the two on the right are Lichtenstein's hartebeest (*Alcelaphus lichtensteinii*).



Dangerous game encounters - Part 1



I'm a huge advocate of bush walks – the times when you leave the chugging of a vehicle, its fumes and dust behind and go and explore the intimacies of the wild on foot. Your heart does the racing and your senses rev into the red of your body's tachometer!

If you come across any animals, especially "dangerous" ones, the ideal is to observe them without changing their natural behaviour, and for everyone to remain in a position of safety at all times.

Japhet and I were walking with three guests when we came across a very large elephant bull and his impressively tusked askari (a younger elephant bull that acts as a trusted aide to the dominant bull). We crouched down in the long grass and the mammoth lumbered past – an awe-inspiring sight from such close range and low angle. His askari sniffed us out though – and gave us a flap of the ears to ensure we remained rooted to the spot. We obliged.

He continued on his way without changing his course, and once they were a safe distance away we stood again and humbly placed our dainty-looking feet within the giant circular impressions that they had silently left behind.

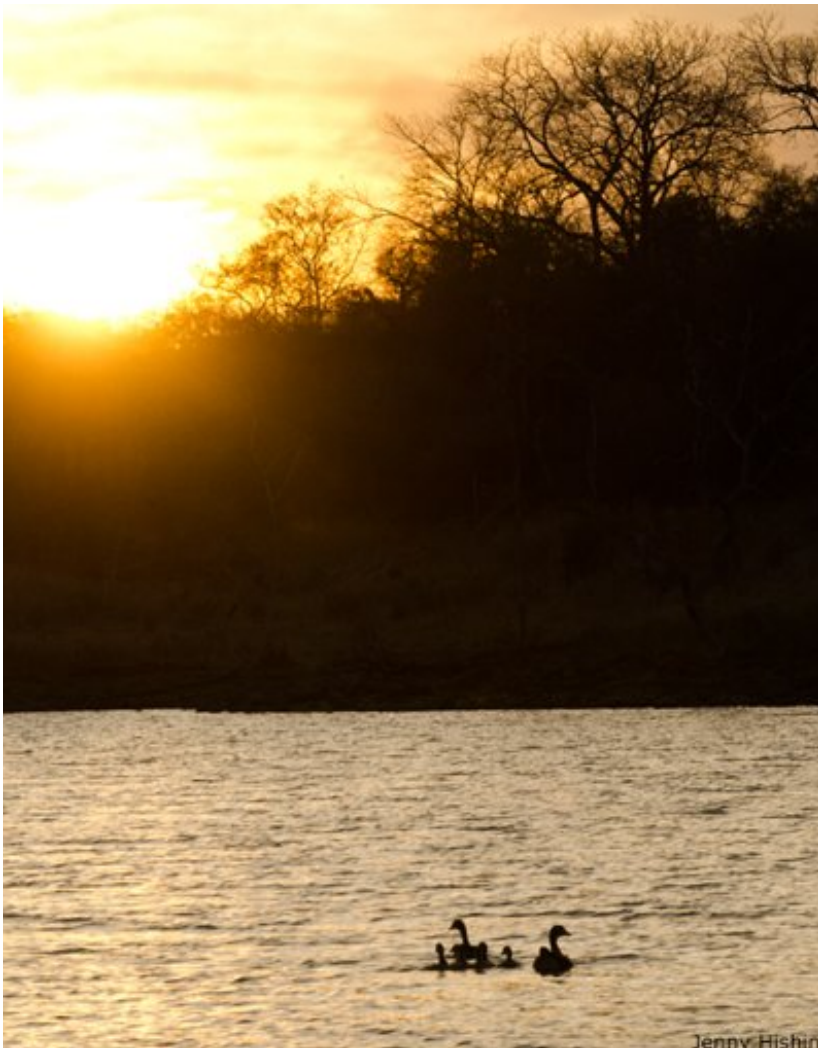
A Thousand Magical Flights

When we were dragonflies, we'd zip through wispy clouds
And like fallen angels with lacy wings we'd land upon tight lines of hope.
Water lilies with deep-rooted hearts would gaze upon our lightning speed
And a thousand eyes would never see us in the same way that we saw them.

When we were fireflies, we'd dance with an incandescent night
And like shooting stars we'd ignite and then surrender our flares to the rising sun.
Flame lilies with glorious crowns ablaze would herald our gentle glow
And a thousand words would never whisper of the darkness before dawn.

When we were butterflies, we'd float on heady wings of love
And like fireworks we'd adorn the world with bright bursts of blooming colour.
Crane lilies with long necks would stretch out as we tickled their dark blue tongues
And a thousand steps would never take us closer to living so wild and free.

Shelley Mitchley, Pamushana Lodge Manager



"I lived a daydream!
Thank you"

Sandra Warner, Chicago, USA

By Jenny Hishin
Singita Pamushana
Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve
Zimbabwe
Thirtieth of November 2011