

CUBS ON THE RUN

APRIL 29, 2006
HERALD-SUN "WEEKEND" INSERT

After a spectacular day of animal spotting in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve we began the drive back to our camp. We had watched a lion devour a freshly killed zebra, stood across the riverbank from a family of hippos and followed a herd of elephants in their search for a mud-bath. Beyond all expectations the best was yet to come.

Had my hat not flown out the window we would never have seen the cheetahs. At the very location we stopped to rescue my cap a mother cheetah and her five cubs were hiding in the line of thick grass a few metres back from the road. The final minutes of daylight were upon us and at first we only saw the mother as she walked through the golden stalks. It wasn't until the cheetah was right alongside our van that we realised she was not alone. Several minutes pass without a word spoken, just the clicking and whirl of our cameras.

Tall grass is even taller for a pint sized cheetah cubs, just three months old. Cubs this young have an extra fluffy mane running down the neck which reminds me of children dressed as grown-ups. One by one they emerged from the veil of camouflage and headed silently towards us. Not only did they look identical to each other but they moved in harmony as well – the curve of their tails as they slink down low, the haunch of their shoulders and that cat-like bouncing stride were all exactly synchronised. They gathered next to our van and halted; they appeared to comprehend their mothers wish and stayed put on the spot without wandering so much as a foot in any direction.

Cheetahs in the Masai Mara are very tolerant of cars and cameras. The mother of a litter is usually more annoyed by the incessant playfulness of her cubs than the eaves-dropping of a telephoto lens; safari vehicles are not considered an intrusion, provided they do not crowd or block the cheetah cubs. The first rule when close in with wildlife is to talk very softly and very little. I feel more comfortable watching a cheetah than to have a cheetah watching me.

Our attention was diverted to the other side of the road. The mother cheetah stood hiding behind the ditch, poised and ready, locked in contemplation of her target. We were locked in observation of the cheetah, eagerly anticipating the strike. The cubs made no sound and remained hidden from view near our vehicle.

Suddenly there was movement. In the space of just four seconds the adult cheetah launched herself into the chase, ignoring several zebra and impala in her path, and brought down a juvenile topi. As soon as the cheetah had made her kill the herd ceased running. Less than 50 metres away they simply stood and watched for a moment, before slowly wandering off.

A fully grown topi would have been a difficult catch for the cheetah, demanding several minutes of intense exertion to suffocate, but the juvenile was quickly killed with a lethal bite. This was a relatively easy strike but not all hunting trips are so successful. A longer pursuit can drain the cheetah of her strength and she may lose vital minutes recovering from exhaustion before she can eat. Cheetahs are easily separated from their prey by hyenas or lions and even a persistent pack of vultures can send a cheetah running. Cheetahs in the Masai Mara eat less than 50% of what they catch.

Our successful cheetah mother wasted little time in calling the cubs over to enjoy their share of the spoils. She released a high pitched cry, which could be heard by her young from more than 100metres away, and guided them to her location; each cub returned the call with vigour and together they ran into the grass and vanished.

The sad statistic for these cubs is that their survival rate beyond the first year is just 1 in 10. Hyenas, lions and leopards are the biggest threat because a cheetah mother will not defend her cubs from attack. Cheetah mums will often leave the park in advance of giving birth, migrating to areas where competing predators are less likely to venture. It is estimated by the Cheetah Conservation Fund that 90% of cheetah that survive in Kenya today are living outside the protected reserves.

Travellers to Kenya's Masai Mara wanting to experience first hand the sight of a cheetah in the wild will need a touch of luck. By November each year a great number of lions and hyenas have headed south with the migrating wildebeest and the Masai Mara becomes a safer place for young cheetah families. Any organised safari within the park will be aware of where the cheetahs were last spotted and will make every effort to locate them. The Masai Mara is also home to a few resident cheetahs that rarely migrate out of the park; they are the focus of research and observation by the Kenya Wildlife Service and the Cheetah Conservation Fund.

If you would like to find out more about the preservation and protection of the endangered cheetah then visit www.cheetah.org; or head to Kenya and see for yourself what makes the Masai Mara one of the world's truly great wildlife reserves.



Cub scouts

A safari truck of tourists is the least of a cheetah mum's worries. Words and pictures Ewen Bell

• **Many times**
Cheetah cubs hide in the long grass.
• **Shelter's prime**
A cheetah-mum keeps a lookout for her cubs' food nearby.
• **Like always today**
If you find yourself this close to a lion, use a telephoto.
• **Safari**
Shelter's prime: a cheetah-mum keeps a lookout for her cubs' food nearby.



It was a spectacular day of animal spotting in the Masai Mara Reserve. We had watched a lion devour a freshly killed zebra, stood across the riverbank from a family of hippos and followed a herd of elephants in their search for a mud-bath. Beyond all expectations the best was yet to come. But had my hat not flown out the window we would never have seen the cheetahs. At the very location we stopped to rescue my cap, a mother cheetah and her five cubs were hiding in the line of thick grass a few metres from the road. The final minutes of daylight were upon us and at first we only saw the mother as she walked through the golden stalks. It wasn't until the cheetah was right alongside our van that we realised she was not alone. Several minutes pass without a word spoken, just the clicking and whirl of our cameras. Tall grass is even taller for a pint-sized cheetah cubs, just three months old. Cubs this young have an extra fluffy mane running down the neck, which reminds me of children dressed as grown-ups. One by one they emerged from the veil of camouflage and headed silently towards us. Not only did they look identical to each other but they moved in harmony as well – the curve of their tails as they slink down low, the haunch of their shoulders and that cat-like bouncing stride were all exactly synchronised. They gathered next to our van and halted; they appeared to comprehend their mother's wish and stayed put on the spot without wandering so much as a foot in any direction. Cheetahs in the Masai Mara are very tolerant of cars and cameras. The mother of a litter is usually more annoyed by the incessant playfulness of her cubs than the eaves-dropping of a telephoto lens; safari vehicles are not considered an intrusion, provided they do not crowd or block the cheetah cubs. The first rule when close in with wildlife is to talk very softly and very little. I feel more comfortable watching a cheetah than to have a cheetah watching me. Our attention was diverted to the other side of the road. The mother cheetah stood hiding behind the ditch, poised and ready, locked in contemplation of her target. We were locked in observation of the cheetah, eagerly anticipating the strike. The cubs made no sound and remained hidden from view near our vehicle. Suddenly there was movement. In the space of just four seconds the adult cheetah launched herself into the chase, ignoring several zebra and impala in her path, and brought down a juvenile topi. As soon as the cheetah had made her kill the herd ceased running. Less than 50 metres away they simply stood and watched for a moment, before slowly wandering off. A fully grown topi would have been a difficult catch for the cheetah, demanding several minutes of intense exertion to suffocate, but the juvenile was quickly killed with a lethal bite. This was a relatively easy strike but not all hunting trips are so successful. A longer pursuit can drain the cheetah of her strength and she may lose vital minutes recovering from exhaustion before she can eat. Cheetahs are easily separated from their prey by hyenas or lions and even a persistent pack of vultures can send a cheetah running. Cheetahs in the Masai Mara eat less than 50% of what they catch. Our successful cheetah mother wasted little time in calling the cubs over to enjoy their share of the spoils. She released a high-pitched cry, heard by her young more than 100m away, to guide them to her location.

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Each cub returned the call with vigour and together they ran into the grass and vanished. Unfortunately for cheetahs, they are just as often the hunted as the hunters. Only one in 10 cubs makes it beyond its first year. Hyenas, lions and leopards are the biggest threats. A cheetah mother will not defend her cubs from attack. Cheetah mums will often leave the park before giving birth, migrating to areas where competing predators are less likely to venture. Travellers to Masai Mara who want to experience first-hand the sight of a cheetah in the wild will need some luck. By November each year, many lions and hyenas have moved south with the migrating wildebeest and the Masai Mara becomes a safer place for young cheetah families. The Masai Mara is also home to a few resident cheetahs that rarely migrate out of the park; they are the focus of research and observation by the Kenya Wildlife Service and the Cheetah Conservation Fund. Ewen Bell travelled to Kenya courtesy of GSP Adventures. More information: www.cheetah.org