

The Big Cats of East Africa: Unrivaled Charisma in the Wild



The most charismatic of all the animals that roam the savannas of East Africa are the big cats. Safari enthusiasts exercise great patience and go to great lengths to ensure a sighting. To behold the beauty and splendor of the big cats in the wild is a prospect that warms the heart of every nature lover.

Among a number of the ancient civilizations - the Romans, Sumerians, and Egyptians- the big cats were held in fascination and in higher esteem than any other wild animals. Some were indeed taken as gods, and many are the kings who have set images of the big cats on their royal emblems.

The big cats have in the past been more widely dispersed in the world than they are today. In our time, the redoubts of the big cats are in Africa and small pockets of Asia. The cat family is known by scientists as felidae and refers to an assortment of animals grouped as small and big cats. The small cats are less well known and appreciated. In East Africa small cats include wild cats, sand and serval cats. The small cats are very widespread in almost all habitats in East Africa. But they keep their heads down and elicit little conflict with man- the ultimate enemy of all wild animals.

The big cats you find outside Africa include tiger, jaguar, leopard, cougar and Iberian lynx. The big cats are the most committed carnivores in the entire animal kingdom. They are mostly nocturnal and rather secretive in nature. In common with primates, they read a lot from facial expression and love to play. The big cats capture and kill their prey. To witness a lion on a hunt is truly fascinating- if for a moment you take your mind from the fate of the prey. For all the fame of the big cats of East Africa, there are just three of them: lion, leopard and cheetah.

The lion, so called the king of the jungle, is the largest carnivore in East Africa. The adult lion stretches between 1.4m to 2.2 m - excluding the tail. The male can attain a weight of up to 225kg, while the hefty female reaches 168kg. The lion is noted for its exceptional strength and has been known to bring down the much larger buffalo, which has about 4 times its weight. For this reason, kings have understandably sought to be associated lions. But they hesitate to be associated with its reputation for sloth- for the lion shamelessly spends up to 20 hours daily resting.

Lions are social animals and of the big cats, they are the only ones to live and hunt in family groups. The group or pride usually consists of a number of related females and few unrelated males. Young females usually join their mother pride, but young males venture into the outside world to seek female company. Females in a pride practice communal cub rearing and hunting.

Lions are highly territorial. Males enforce territorial integrity, by means of their characteristic fierce roars, scent marking and periodic border patrols.

Lions of the same pride develop strong social bonds and practice head rubbing and social grooming. Females give birth after a gestation period of 3.5 months. After only 6 weeks, the cubs are induced into a lifelong habit of meat eating. Cubs play in imitation of adults and this helps in the development of such useful skills as stalking prey. Though born to kings, cubs need protection from hyenas and leopard. And also from non-pride male lions- for the reason that females will not mate until cubs are about 18 months old. The cubs therefore stand in the way of a mating encounter.

Fighting off males bent on infanticide appears to be one of the reasons why females live in prides. The moniker "king of the jungle" is misleading, for buffalo and hyenas sometimes kill lions. Elephants too have no fear of the king - they will charge at lions to encourage them to move on. But man remains the biggest threat to lions and he has hunted the lion to extinction in most of the world. The lion population in Africa is today estimated at only 23,000 and the survival status is listed as vulnerable in international conventions.

In most parks and game reserves of East Africa, however, the lion is impressively visible. Particularly in the grassy plains and dry forests where the large plains herbivores they prey on thrive. You will easily see the king in Ngorongoro and Serengeti in Tanzania and Amboseli, Nairobi, Lake Nakuru, and Maasai Mara in Kenya. In some other locations- such as Lake Manyara in Tanzania, Tsavo, in Kenya and Queen Elizabeth in Uganda, patience and skill is called for.

Early in the last century, lions received extremely bad press when they disrupted the building of the East African railway in the Tsavo area of Kenya by feeding on the workforce. The movie "The Man-eaters of Tsavo" has captured this macabre drama. It is in this atmosphere that Theodore Roosevelt, the American president who was a pioneer safari enthusiasts said of lions: "except when resting and in the breeding season, the whole career of a lion may be best summed up in the single word: rapine."

Lions when deprived of their usual prey occasionally attack domestic animals and even human beings. Lions that are infirm- such as the old and the sick can easily attack humans and you are advised to exercise caution and take your photos from the safety of a car. So if you are out camping, watch out! All said incidences of lions attacking humans are extremely rare. The image of the lion has recently been rehabilitated in the minds of many by the popular children cartoon drama "Lion King" whose hero is Simba- Swahili for lion.

The future of the lion in the savannas of East Africa is not assured. The main challenge is conflict with man, his ancient enemy. People living in areas bordering parks, sometimes inflict the ultimate punishment to lions when they are caught preying on livestock. In the Serengeti plains of Tanzania, the king has recently experienced attacks by a viral disease know as FIV -Feline Immunodeficiency Virus. FIV, just like HIV in humans, results in lowered immunity making the animals vulnerable to other diseases. Unlike HIV, however, the primary means of transmission of FIV is bite wounds and not sexual intimacy.

Of the big cats of East Africa, the most elegant is the leopard. The leopard is the most naturally adapted of the cats. It can survive in almost in any habitat offering sufficient food and cover. That is why, of the big cats, leopards thrive in the most diverse range of habitats; and of land mammals they enjoy the widest distribution in the tropics. In East Africa, they have been found in the most unlikely of places- from deserts, to mountaintops and even in cities. That not withstanding, scientists were surprised, when in 1990 three leopards were found living in a Kampala city train station.

The full grown adult stretches between 1 to 1.5 m and can reach a weight of 60 kg. Man (and especially woman) has always been jealous of the leopards beautiful coat. Those of East Africa have round spots unlike the square spots of the southern African species. Leopards are solitary animals and you hardly ever find them in groups. The sexes associate only long enough to mate! Females are ready to breed at about 2 years of age, when they produce up to 3 cubs after a gestation period of about 90 days.

The leopard therefore faces less danger than either the lion or the cheetah. Notwithstanding that they are very widely distributed in East Africa, you are unlikely to see them in large numbers. In addition, this most secretive of cats is nocturnal. The traveler who is determined to see them must be very calm and patient, for only the most persevering are rewarded. Even scientists have such trouble spotting them, with the consequence that they are not as well studied as the other cats.

The leopard is the strongest climber among the carnivores. And they spend mostly their days inactive, draped over tree branches. So, to see them, set your sights to the treetops. You are further advised to take your game drives very silently and watch out at rivers and water holes. The leopard is a stalking predator and lies ready to pounce at such places where prey would seek food and water. Some lucky people also come across leopards basking on the rocks early in the mornings.

The cheetah is the smallest of the big cats of East Africa. It can reach up to 1.4 m in length; males can weigh up to 55 kg and females 40kg. For the inexperienced, it is difficult to tell apart from a leopard. But you can distinguish it by the long teardrop-shaped lines on each side of the nose, from the corner of the eyes to the mouth. It also has protruding and streamlined neck and thin legs. This animal is specially adapted for speed and it is indeed the world's fastest mammal.

From a resting position, the cheetah can reach a speed of 80 km/h in less than 3 seconds. It can run a stable speed of 105km/h, compared to a man's 37km/h. But take heart, it is not a man-eater. The cheetah lacks the stamina to be more than a short distance runner. It is not a very social species and lives either singly or in small groups. Females are ready to procreate from about the age of 2 years and after a gestation period of about 90 days give birth to up to 6 cubs. Hunting by day only, this solitary hunter relies on its famed speed and keen eyesight. Its technique is to stalk stealthily and then take a short killer dash when prey is within 30 m.

The cheetah is mainly found in grasslands, woodland savannas and semi deserts. It survives best in vast ranges where prey is plenty. This cat has never enjoyed wide geographical distribution or high densities. And numbers have drastically fallen over the last few decades. Today not more than 12,000 remain worldwide, mostly in eastern and southern Africa. In East Africa, the only areas where you can easily spot cheetahs are Maasai Mara in Kenya and Serengeti in Tanzania. But the cat is also present, though in fewer numbers, in Tsavo in Kenya, Mkomazi in Tanzania and Queen Elizabeth in Uganda.

Scientists have classified the cheetah as an endangered species and think that it faces possible extinction. Only one species -jubatus remains today. The lack of genetic diversity, possibly caused by inbreeding, is yet another handicap in ensuring the long-term survival of this cat. In its daily life, the cheetah faces competition from other carnivores such as lions and hyenas. In some areas, Maasai Mara of Kenya for example, instances of lions killing cheetah cubs are very common; hyenas too eat them. The lion kills the cubs only to destroy and never eats them -an extremely disgraceful show for an animal that would be regarded as king.

Cheetahs are active only by day. In East Africa's game sanctuaries, tourists interrupt critical activities like feeding and suckling of the young. There are incidences of mothers abandoning their cubs under

the pressure of human curiosity. Considering the challenges facing the species, conservation options are yet limited by the fact that cheetahs do so poorly in captivity and almost never breed unless free. Spare a thought today for the cheetah, whose future is so uncertain. If you want to do more, talk to the Cheetah Conservation Fund (www.cheetah.org). And hope that such glorious days as when it was honored as a cat-goddess in ancient Egypt will yet come again.

AfricaPoint.com