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Abstract: In this, the second of two articles, David and Lida Burney describe their studies in the Masai lands which adjoin the Masai Mara Game Reserve in southern Kenya.



HUGO VAN LAWICK, FROM 'SAVAGE PARADISE', COLLINS.

*An alert family of Cheetah, watching potential prey.*

**In this, the second of two articles, David and Lida Burney describe their studies in the Masai lands which adjoin the Masai Mara Game Reserve in southern Kenya.**

In addition to studying the cheetah inside the Masai Mara Game Reserve (see last issue of SWARA) we have also made extensive studies of cheetah living outside the Reserve on the adjoining Masai lands. Here the Masai people graze their cattle, sheep and goats, but they are traditionally tolerant of wildlife; thus our study of this area, which is physically similar to that inside the Reserve, but is put to radically different human use, acts as a sort of experimental control of the work done inside the Reserve.

We have found that only 20% of our Reserve cheetah stay inside the boundaries virtually all the time. The vast majority move out into the Masai land where once again, the sight of a man on foot sends cheetah scurrying long before a car would. But there are still many wonderful spots in the Tribal Trust Lands that are almost on a par with the best areas of the Reserve in terms of

wildlife numbers and diversity. Occasionally, local herdsmen will graze their livestock there, but many a day passes before another human being will even walk through the same square mile.

We have spent many enjoyable days out in Masai land collecting data on the two families we know best. In both cases, three cubs are reaching maturity soon (although one of the families lost a fourth cub to a leopard when it was nine months old). The intriguing thing about both families is that they divide their time equally between the Reserve and adjacent Masai land. Our less extensive data on other families' movements suggests that most of them confirm to this pattern.

Thus, most cheetah families in the Mara are quite familiar with the petrol-powered tourist, but are equally facile at occupying the usually sizeable spaces between the livestock herds and Masai people who are out walking—and they certainly do walk, sometimes great distances and nearly always well-armed, with spears, bows and arrows, and occasionally shotguns.

We frequently see a sight that has heightened our respect for both the cheetah and the Masai. A man alone, very alert and quick-footed, appears on the horizon. Bedecked in flowing red shuka and with spear gleaming, he travels straight across the land. Hundreds of yards away, a cheetah mother notices and hastily retreats if there is any chance he will get within

# Cheetah and Man

PART TWO

David & Lida Burney





Masai Moran.

200 yards or so. The bright-eyed cubs watch with curiosity. Mama watches with the same cool concern that she watches lions. The man seldom even sees the *olkinyalasho*, but if he does he makes a wide detour, covering ground surprisingly fast for his species. Soon the tension passes, and one is left with the suspicion that man, as a species, is well known to the cheetah. Presumably man has been a surmountable difficulty for the cheetah for millions of years—since, as anthropologists tell us, they have both been on the East African plains that long. Throughout this period, man has occupied the area at low density. The coming decade is likely to see an unprecedented rise in that density, perhaps to the point where the cheetah has no place to run.

Sometimes we worry a little when cowbells or shouts herald approaching livestock and herdsmen who are sometimes armed with shotguns. Never yet, in our experience, have even the hungriest cheetah shown the least interest in domestic stock. The cubs will always stare with total absorption, but the distances maintained, at Mama's insistence, are again, about 200 yards!

One morning we were observing a family with three cubs that were then not quite a year old. Since shortly after dawn, Bob Campbell, a professional cameraman, working for Survival Anglia, had been waiting to film some action. From the time these cubs were fluffy-mantled toddlers he has period-

ically recorded their antics for British television audiences. He is one of several professional movie-makers we have observed for many hours with the cheetahs, since this is yet another of the many potential sources of human disturbance that Mara cheetah occasionally encounter. Unlike some professionals, Bob is extremely patient and unobtrusive in his filming.

Suddenly, at mid-morning, Bob was up filming as the cheetah became very attentive. Half a mile away a gigantic herd of sheep and goats was slowly wandering towards the cheetah between two groups of men. As they got closer, the uneasy cheetah milled about and continued to watch. At their closest the herd passed behind our car about 250 yards from the curious cats. While Mama stood tensely and the cubs lay down out of sight, we estimated the herd size at over 500 and continued to monitor the cheetah as the livestock filed past. (For goat-fanciers like ourselves such a sight is akin to the splendour of a herd of wild herbivores, although the spectre of over-grazing looms over even these well-watered grasslands).

Mama and the cubs put a few more yards between themselves and the disturbance as two Masai at the rear of the now receding herd walked over to our car and greeted us with friendly smiles and a husky "Soba!" We greeted them in Masai and one of them broke into full conversation in the strange-

sounding tongue, switching to Swahili when he received only a rudimentary response. He stated with certainty that there were 1,005 sheep and goats in the herd including the small kids. When asked if he had seen a cheetah lately (not a leopard, now, but a cheetah, I kept stressing, because the two are often lumped together by indigenous people), he replied that he had not and did not want to, because they can be very fierce.

On further questioning, he expressed the usually-held opinion that they were less fierce than a leopard, and never bothered the livestock as might leopard, lion, and hyena on occasion. We bade farewell as they moved off in the dust-cloud of the herd. They never asked us what we were doing—they almost never do—and we did not give the cheetah away by looking frequently towards them.

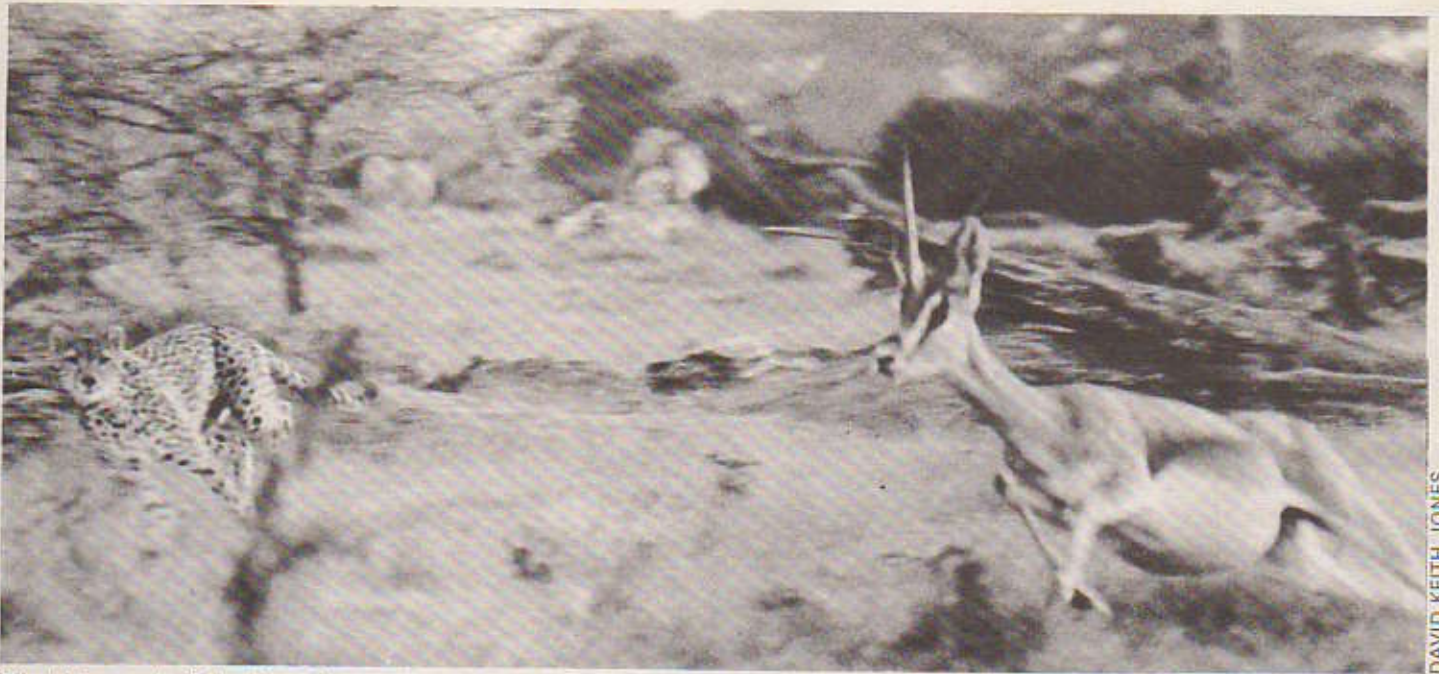
One by one Mama and the cubs climbed a slanted tree and watched the herd, now grazing nearly half a mile away. The family remained in the vicinity all day, and several cattle herds passed in the distance. Throughout the hot mid-day period they lay in the shade, occasionally sitting up and looking around when the sound of cowbells and human voices drifted by on the wind.

In the late afternoon, Mama dashed across a stretch of short-grass plain and took an elegantly horned impala by the throat, without holding it down, and the cubs scrambled onto its back and pulled it down with the eager ineptitude of learners. Most of it was consumed in the next hour, but the skin and bones went to a lone hyena that advanced in front of a growing phalanx of vultures. With only momentary token resistance, the cheetah walked away with bellies sagging.

## THE OTHER CARNIVORES

It may be that neither man afoot nor man motorized is as serious a concern for the cheetah as are some of the other large carnivores. Lions and groups of hyenas often take a cheetah kill before it has been of much benefit to the cheetah. At dusk, the kill can easily be appropriated by even a single hyena, and occasionally a leopard happens by and the cheetah kill finishes up in the forks of a tree, where the leopard may feed upon it for several nights.

Baboons, groups of vultures, and even clever jackals sometimes get considerable benefit from the cheetah's legendary ability as a hunter. Despite



DAVID KEITH JONES

*Cheetah in pursuit of Grant's gazelle.*

their hunting success, cheetah are seemingly quite timid for such a large and toothsome animal. It must be remembered, though, that the cheetah is in fact lightly built for speed—140 lbs. is about maximum weight.

Healthy adult cheetah are far too swift and attentive to ordinarily be in much danger from lions and other fearsome beasts (although an adult male was killed by lions near Keekorok a few years ago, and at least one has been killed, hung in a tree, and consumed by a leopard in the Serengeti).

Young cubs are however extremely vulnerable. In December, a pride of lions happened upon five two-weeks-old cheetah cubs in a shallow depression near Musiara Swamp. The mother cheetah watched helplessly from a distance while the lions killed three cubs which were later eaten by hyenas. Many tourist vehicles were present, and someone drove the lions off before the other two could be killed. Although the mother cheetah bedded down with the two survivors that night about 400 yards away, by morning a mother lioness with her two big cubs was on the exact spot; some blood was on the ground around them, and the cheetah cubs were never seen again.

Soon this female cheetah will be bearing another litter, but her chance of success is hardly a sure thing. Unlike most of the females we have studied, she insists on locating her litters in the vicinity of tourist facilities, making herself and the vulnerable cubs a virtually "stationary exhibit" for several weeks. Of the four litters she is known to have borne, one group of three was raised to maturity and they are still in the Mara (and are amongst the tamest cheetah around); another group of three was eaten by hyenas, and a group of six drowned at a young age when their lair in a dry stream bed flooded suddenly in a storm.

All of our other well-known families were borne and raised to four months of age or more, out in Masai land. In the Keekorok area, there are also three less known families—two litters with one cub and one with two—that presumably spend most of their time in the Reserve.

It may be that Masai-land's less frequented pockets provide the best nursery for young cheetah. Lions are scarce outside the Reserve, consisting primarily of lone individuals and small

nomadic groups. Presumably lions do not co-exist with Masai as well as they do with tourists! In the areas where most of our families of cheetah spent their early months, little game viewing takes place, and a cheetah may go for days or even weeks without being chased by vehicles. On the negative side, though, there is the risk of an encounter with Masai dogs, something we have seen several times, and this could have serious consequences for small cubs.



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## WHICH WILL IT BE?

Cheetah in the Mara are thus faced with two major kinds of human disturbance depending on whether they are inside the Reserve or out.

Watching the tourists watch the cheetahs, we have noticed some simple patterns in the vehicles' comings and goings that bear directly on the question of disturbance.

First, although most vehicles stay only a few minutes, as several investigators have cited, a small but significant percentage of visitors stay 30 minutes or more, usually in the hope of seeing a kill. While these long-term visitors may sit quietly at a distance, they still may draw the attention of vehicles passing by, that might otherwise have missed the cheetah. We are often compelled to hide our car in bushes or drive away when approached by a vehicle if we are the only people present. Cheetah are hard to find, but once someone has located them, others are more likely to. We must, therefore, occasionally take an "unfriendly" approach in order to avoid attracting an abnormal number of visitors to the cheetah and thereby affecting our data.

There is a second characteristic of the cheetah-finding game which greatly increases the individual driver's chances of turning up a cheetah for his clients. Whereas cheetah move frequently and hide extremely well, they are one of the most sought-after animals on this game-driving circuit, so drivers exchange information about the sightings. This tip-off puts cars in the right general area. If a car is sitting near the cheetah when potential cheetah-watchers pass in other cars, the latter are almost certain to "find the cheetah", whereas even the best drivers and scouts are no more than about 70% effective when searching for the right area with no help from a vehicle on the scene.

On days when a lot of cars cruise the right area and most vehicles stay with the cheetah until the next arrives a great many cars will thereby see the cheetah that probably would miss it otherwise.

From the cheetah's viewpoint, the result is the continuous presence of tourists for many hours. Each vehicle in turn clatters up and halts next to the vehicle already there and people exclaim in various European languages. Miraculous technological toys click and whirr while the group in the vehicle before them moves on to find some other animal. Soon a third vehicle



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LIDA PIGOTT BURNETT

*Bowled over in its attempt to escape this young Impala has only moments to live.*

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arrives and number two pulls around for another angle and then leaves. Such a cycle may be repeated in roughly similar fashion for four hours or more, although occasionally as many as ten vehicles may arrive almost simultaneously as the word gets around. Almost invariably at least one vehicle will tarry long after the others leave, until someone else arrives and the "relay effect" carries on.

Nevertheless, the cheetah have their own game to play. This is one we call the "Pin-ball Principle". Instead of resignedly tolerating all vehicle approaches and sticking to a small area, or even one spot all day, as lions often do, these high-strung creatures move a good deal in the course of an ordinary day. They rebound this way and that in an erratic course that takes them around a bad driver here, straight away from a group of lions there, and perhaps in yet another direction to investigate a snorting impala. Even if the cheetah have a relatively quiet day, evening may find them several miles from the low grassy mound that was last night's sleeping place.

Between 12:30 and 3:45 nearly all tourists are in for lunch at their respective bookings, and the cheetah are quite free to move unobserved at this time. Sitting far away under the shade of a big tree, we have watched many kills in the blazing heat of mid-day.

Clearly the cheetah's life-style has many complications. Besides the human beings (of various forms) and the large carnivores encountered, is the nagging necessity to eat at least every two or three days. Add to this a seemingly restless spirit that prompts them to move even when nothing is wrong and one has an animal whose movements are indeed suggestive of the busy steel sphere in the pin-ball machines of amusement parks and cafes.

Evolution has clearly shaped the swift, alert cheetah for a fairly hectic life and generally they move through the dangers and disturbances of the day with casual finesse. Some days things go very well and they remain virtually invisible all day—resting, scanning for danger and game, playing, stretching, yawning, and even occasionally lying flat to the earth and closing their eyes.

"So what's the verdict?" people are always asking us. "Will the cheetah survive or not?" Naturally, we are cautious in answering, since we have not yet finished analysing our data and one year is hardly enough time to evaluate such an important question anyway. We are sure of one thing, though. If the cheetah fails to survive as a wild species, it will not be because they didn't try. Far from being the fragile, over-specialised evolutionary freak they are sometimes portrayed as being, cheetah in the Mara are extremely versatile in their choice of

habitat and flexible in response to the demands of the human influences in the environment. Clearly, some individuals have become domesticated enough to handle virtually whatever the tourist wishes to dish out. Yet others remain aloof and seem to prefer to take their chances outside the Reserve, where their future has even fewer guarantees. The cheetah eating by the airstrip and the phantom on the escarpment have one thing in common though: their fate is completely interwoven with that of man, who has the power and, let us hope, the wisdom to preserve both the cheetah and himself.



DAVID KEITH JONES

*This cheetah lost its breakfast because tourist vehicles came too close whilst it was lying in wait for prey.*

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