

Jackman B. 1992. Life on the edge. World Nature.

Keywords: 1Afr/Acinonyx jubatus/behavior/cheetah/hunting/occurrence

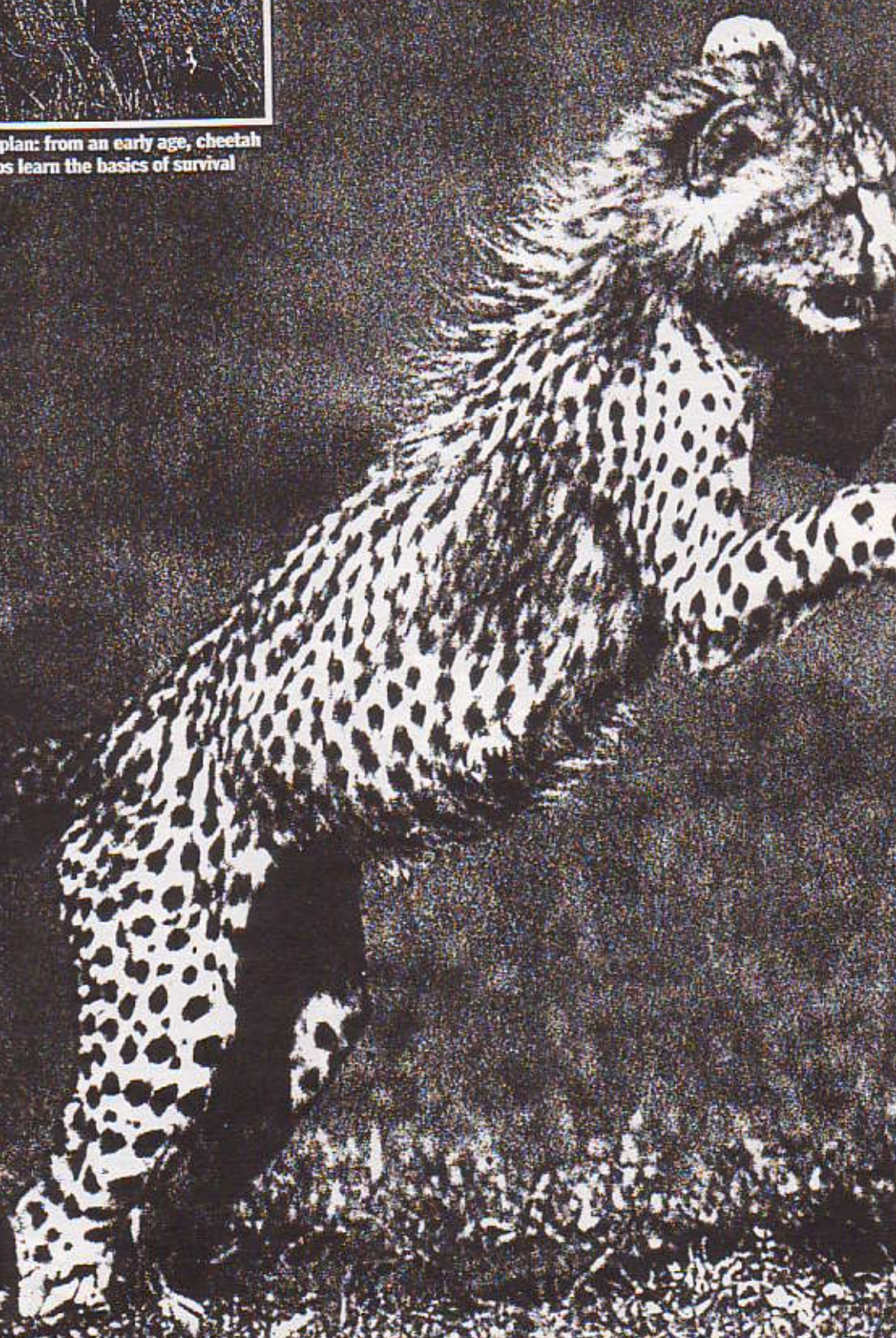
Abstract: Supreme hunter of the African savannah, the cheetah lives in the fast lane in every sense. Every day gets harder as it fights to survive in an increasingly hostile environment with greater competition from other carnivores and dwindling food resources. Once the cheetah roamed much of Africa and was common in Arabie, Iran and India. Now it's on the official endangered species list, existing only in pockets of Africa to the south and east of the Sahara desert.

World
Now
92



Game plan: from an early age, cheetah cubs learn the basics of survival

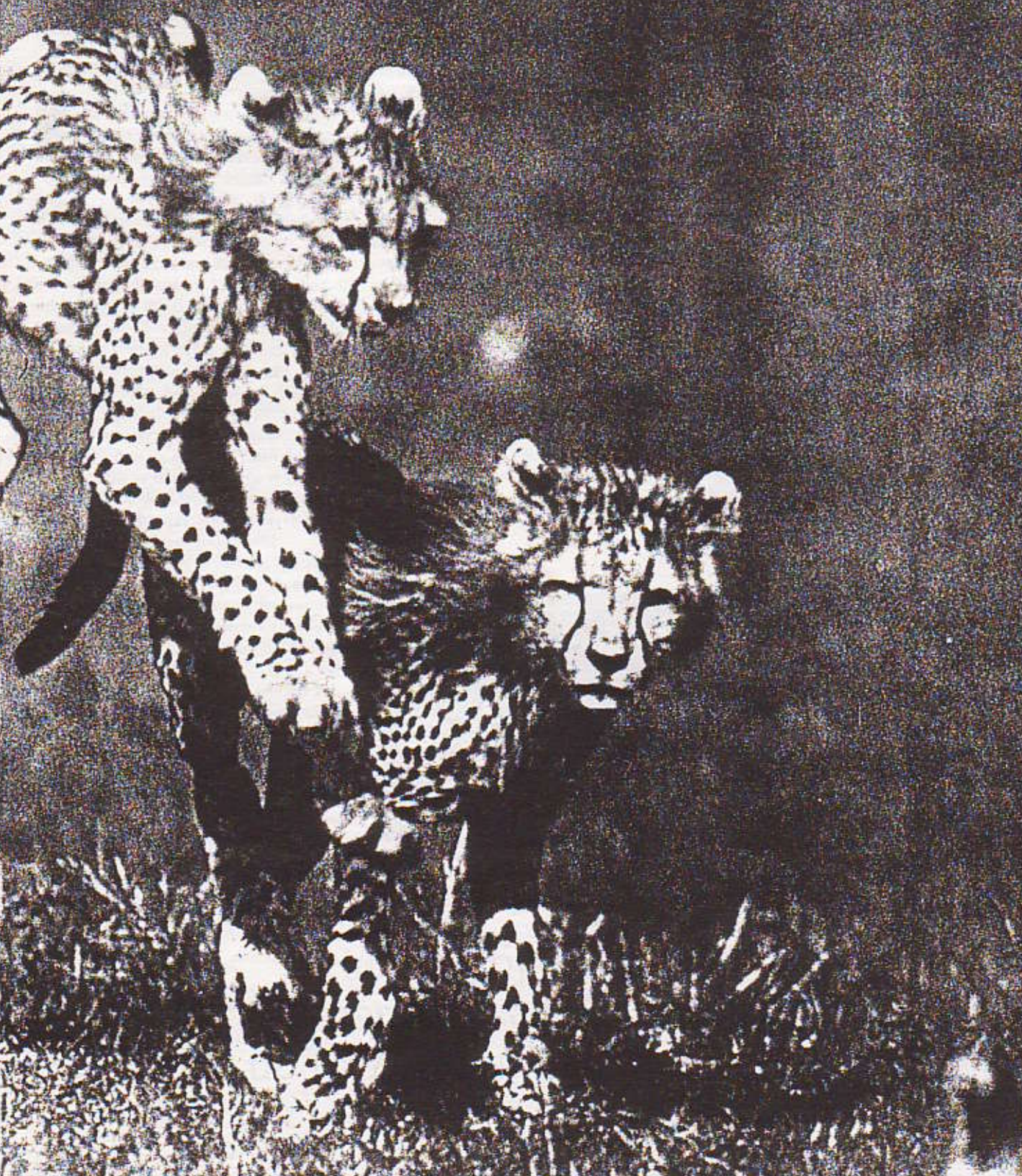
LIFE ON THE EDGE

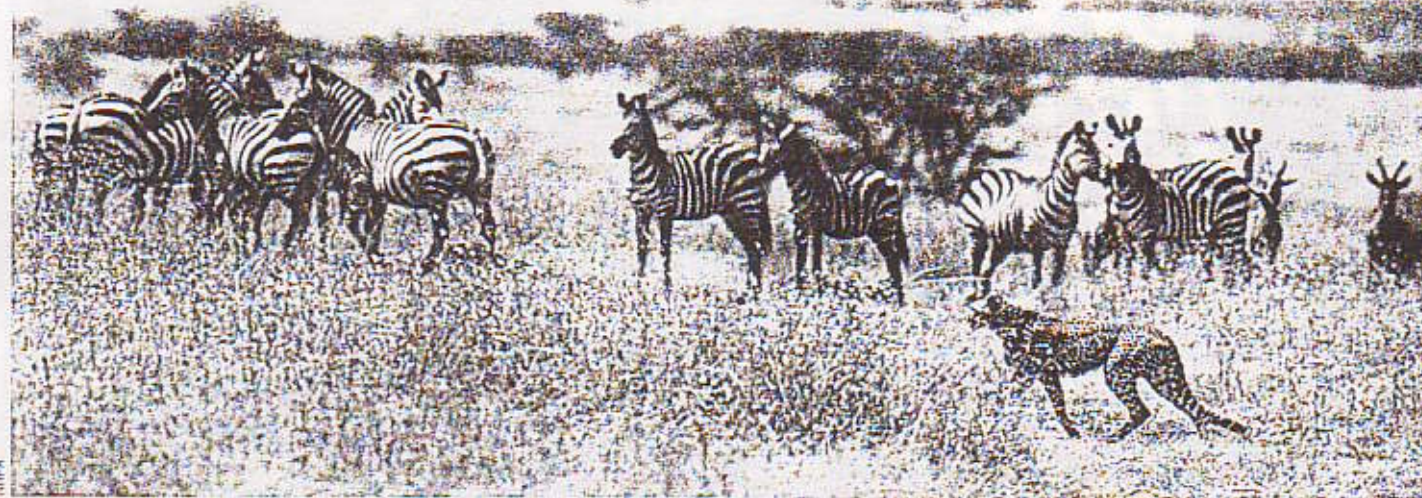


Supreme hunter of the African savannah, the cheetah lives in the fast lane in every sense. Every day gets harder as it fights to survive in an increasingly hostile environment with greater competition from other carnivores and dwindling food

resources. Once the cheetah roamed much of Africa, and was common in Arabia, Iran and India. Now it's on the official endangered species list, existing only in pockets of Africa to the south and east of the Sahara desert

WORLD *Nature*





BY BRIAN JACKMAN

Even from far off, watching you with smouldering orange eyes, the charismatic cheetah has a presence like no other predator. The black markings which run like tear-stains down either side of its muzzle give it an expression in repose of the deepest melancholy.

But a cat is a cat, and knows neither joy nor sadness. Instead it knows the heat of the plains at noon, the shade of thorn trees, the smell of the grass after rain, the squealing cries of zebra stallions and the eerie war-whoop of hyenas at dusk.

Above all, the hide-and-seek life of the cheetah is ruled by two basic instincts: fear and hunger. From the moment it can fend for itself, a cheetah must hunt to survive. But at the same time it must be constantly on the lookout for competitors – the lions, hyenas and other cheetahs which share its precarious world.

Of all the African predators, the cheetah with its small, dog-like head and sway-backed racing frame is the supreme hunter of the open savannah. In the grass oceans of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park there is no place to hide. Life hangs on the survival of the fastest, and the rakish physique of the loose-limbed cheetah is the culmination of an ancient and inseparable bond between hunter and hunted. It has evolved stride by stride with the gazelle, its favourite prey; the jinking, quicksilver pace of one matched by the other's devastating acceleration.

Once cheetahs were found all over

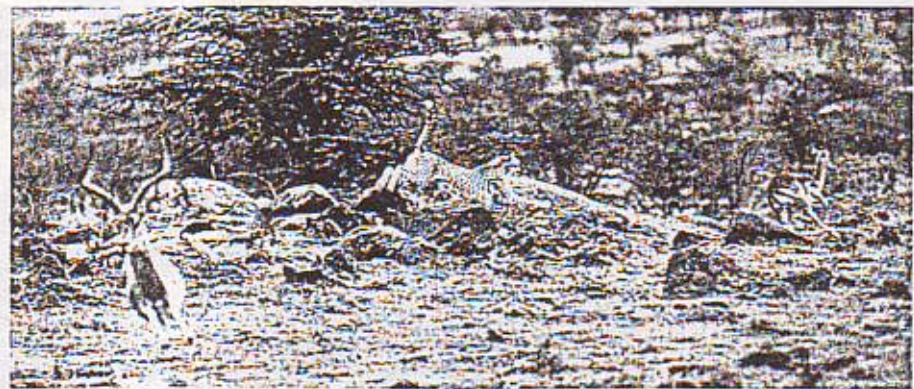
Africa except in the tropical forests and the inner regions of the Sahara. Their range extended to Arabia, Iran and India. Their name comes from the Hindi word for "spotted one". Man long ago discovered that cheetahs are easy to tame. In ancient Egypt they were used for hunting, and in India they were trained to hunt black-buck. Then their range began to contract as habitat destruction and widespread hunting reduced their numbers. By 1952 they were extinct in India. Even in sub-Saharan Africa, their last stronghold, they are now a highly endangered species, the few thousand left, mostly finding sanctuary in the national parks and game reserves of Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana, Namibia and the Transvaal.

Although male cheetahs often remain with their litter-mates, forming coalitions of two or three animals, females lead mostly solitary lives, taking pains to keep their distance from other cheetahs. Even

A captive-breeding programme in Texas is rearing cheetahs (below) to be introduced into the wild as an attempt to avert extinction



BIRUCE COLEMAN LTD



LEFT & RIGHT: DENIS HUOT / FRANK SPOONER PICTURES

Hunting by sight, it can chase at up to 70mph for short bursts

Highly efficient and realistic, this cheetah (above) ignores the large male impala and instead races after the Thomson's gazelle which it has most chance of bringing down

Ruled by two basic instincts: fear and hunger

The cheetah's amazing speed, below across the Masai Mara, allows the animal to run openly towards its victim

(Continued from page 32)

trees, rocks or termite mounds from which to search for its prey. If there is sufficient cover, it will stalk forward until close enough to attack. But on the short-grass plains of the Serengeti a cheetah will often walk or even run openly towards its intended victim.

When its prey begins to run, the cheetah breaks into a trot. The trot becomes a gallop. In seconds it has changed gear again and is running at top speed, using its long tail as a rudder as it follows the prey's desperate twists and turns. As soon as the cheetah is within range it trips its victim with a swipe of its paw. By the time the dust settles, the cheetah has its quarry by the throat - the classic bite all big cats use to suffocate their victims.

Death usually comes so quickly that the cheetah needs little strength to finish off its kill. The mother cheetah lies quietly in the grass, panting hard for several minutes after her exertions but still keeping her jaws clamped around her victim's neck. Only then does she struggle back to her cubs, dragging the kill with her, and avoiding the scavenging hyenas or lions.

Now the cubs rush forward. Excitedly they play around her before starting to

feed off the kill while the exhausted mother continues to rest. Fifteen minutes go by before she joins in the feast. Then she eats ravenously, bolting every mouthful while keeping a constant watch for danger. Soon the vultures will arrive, and hyenas, seeing them glide down to Earth, will come loping across the plains, fol-



lowed, perhaps, by hungry lions.

Hunting usually takes place in the cool of early morning or in the "golden hour" - the last hour before sunset. They will hunt at night but only with a full moon.

Cheetahs seldom kill animals exceeding their own top weight of around 140 lbs. A coalition of adult males may sometimes pull down a full-grown zebra or hartebeest. Wildebeest are also fair game, but gazelles are by far the most sought-after quarry of female cheetahs.

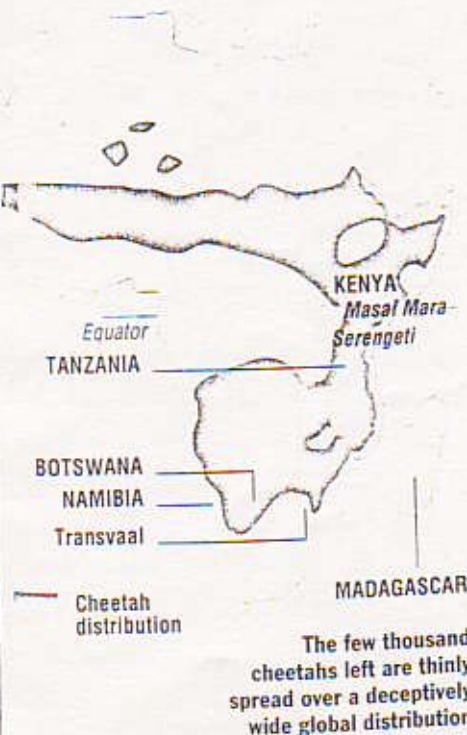
The Serengeti females in particular seem to prey almost exclusively on Thomson's gazelles, whose seasonal migrations they follow between the park's northern woodlands and the short-grass plains in the south. During the rains, male and female cheetahs are drawn to these lush open grasslands by the vast numbers of "Tommies".

At 15 months the cubs are as big as their mother, and increasingly they initiate the hunt, seeking out gazelle fawns with single-minded determination, and a 100-per cent success rates.

Some time in the next three months the young cheetahs will leave their mother to fend for themselves. At first they may remain together - the male cubs, perhaps, for the rest of their days, forming strong, tight-knit bands and leading healthier, less stressful lives than the nomadic females. The females, however, head out to make it on their own. ■

By Peter Green, former Wildlife Editor

of *The Sunday Times Magazine* and is the author of several books on African wildlife



Years of living dangerously

Life for cheetahs has always been tough. But in recent years it's been getting much harder - especially with their food sources getting scarcer, competition from other animals intensifying, and farmlands encroaching on their domains.

Some doomsday forecasters are predicting that there is less than a decade left before the only cheetahs you'll see will be in game reserves and zoos. At the beginning of the century the cheetah population was high, extending beyond their main range of Africa to the Middle East and India.

Experts vary on exactly how many are left; naturally low-profile, cheetahs are difficult to count. Some say their population is no more than a few thousand, although that is thought to be an extreme view. Author and scientist Norman Myers put forward a number of fewer than 5,000 in a recent book and

predicts they have ten years left, because of their small genetic base.

London Zoo's expert on big cats, collection manager Doug Richardson, is much more optimistic: "It's thought that there are 10-20,000 around sub-Saharan," he says. "Africa's their main home. It's possible that there are up to 50 in northern Iran and no more than 200-300 in West Africa. But in some ways, their numbers have stabilised, especially in East Africa where poaching has virtually stopped thanks to the demise of the fur trade.

"Genetically, I don't think they're in danger - as some think - even though because of their peculiar make-up, all cheetahs are virtually identical twins. The species has gone through a genetic bottleneck once, possibly twice, and come through it successfully. As long as they don't mate with closely related members there shouldn't be a problem."