

Jackman B. 2001. Africa - Lions, leopards and cheetahs. BBC Wildlife Magazine Travel Supplement:2-4.

Keywords: 1Afr/1NA/1TZ/Acinonyx jubatus/cheetah/leopard/lion/observation/Panthera leo/
Panthera pardus/protected area/tourism

Abstract: A travel guide to the best places to see the biggest cats in Africa. For the cheetah the following protected areas are proposed: the Serengeti National Park (Tanzania), Ngorongoro Crater (Tanzania), Okonjima and Etosha National Park (Namibia). Basic instructions of how and when to find these big predators are also given.

BBC Wildlife Magazine Travel Supplement

February 2001

LIONS

LEOPARD

CHEETAH

TIGERS

JAGUARS

Cat-watching

A guide to the best places to see the biggest cats on Earth

£10703 - £10723





Africa

Lions, leopards and cheetahs Brian Jackman

£107.13

Lioness stalking prey on the Masai Mara, where there are more than 20 resident prides.

For 30 years I have followed the big cats of Africa, and their magic never fades. They are such mysterious creatures, and in their comings and goings they are like spirits from another world that I am sometimes privileged to enter.

Cheetahs are easy to find because they hunt in daylight. Leopards are much harder. Renowned for being shy and elusive, they are, to me, the most beautiful of cats, the icing on the cake. But it is lions which make my heart beat faster. Even at rest, their presence conveys a tingling sense of imminent drama, as if violence is never far away.

It was the lions of the Masai Mara that first caught my imagination. That was in the early 1970s, when Jonathan Scott, who was then working as a safari guide, introduced me to the pride we called 'The Marsh Lions'. Dominated by three magnificent males – Scar, Brando and Mkubwa – they were a powerful pride, and for five years, I shared their lives. At first I found it hard to tell one lion from another, but in time they became as familiar as old friends. Never in our wildest dreams did Jonathan or I ever imagine that the descendants of the pride we knew back then would one day become the stars of *Big Cat Diary*.

WHERE TO SEE THEM

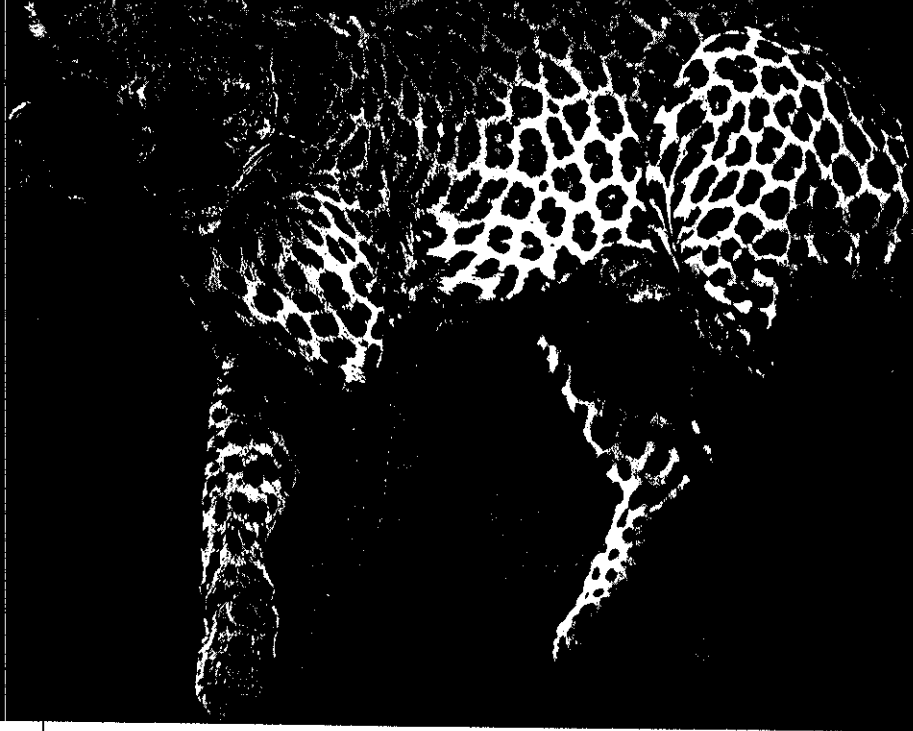
1. Masai Mara National Reserve, Kenya If you're hoping to see all three big cats in action, the Mara is unsurpassed. So is its setting on the Maasai plains at the foot of the Siria Escarpment – 1,530 km² of rolling grasslands veined with seasonal watercourses. Through it all flows the Mara River, with its hippo pools and monster crocs – a formidable barrier for the migrating wildebeest and zebras when they pour in from the Serengeti. July to October is the time to find the herds massed in the Mara, but lions (more than 20 resident prides) are the main attraction. Among the best places to stay are Governor's Camp (at the core of the Marsh Lions' territory); Little Governor's; Kichwa Tembo (deluxe camping in the Western Triangle); and Mara Intrepids (in the unspoiled heart of the reserve).

2. Samburu National Reserve, Kenya This small but spectacular reserve gives visitors a dramatic taste of northern Kenya and its unique dry-country animals: oryx, gerenuk, reticulated giraffe and rare Grevy's zebra. All three big cats can be found here, as well as elephant, buffalo and hippo. At the heart of the reserve, flowing through doum palm groves and thick riverine forest, is the Ewaso Nyiro, without whose waters the game could not survive in this arid region. The best place to stay is Larsens, a luxury tented camp overlooking the river.

3. Serengeti National Park, Tanzania. A national park the size of the Netherlands, renowned for its numerous prides of black-maned lions and huge herds of plains game. The abundance of game – particularly during the Serengeti migration, involving more than a million wildebeest and 200,000 zebras – makes this a cat-watcher's paradise. The short-grass plains are classic cheetah

country, especially around the Gol Kopjes or wherever the Thomson's gazelle herds happen to be. The Seronera Valley is one of Africa's leopard hotspots, and lions are everywhere. But timing is crucial. In the dry season, all life moves north, leaving the southern plains disappointingly bare and empty. For the best cat-watching, be like the wildebeest and follow the rains. Nduvu Lodge, simple and friendly with excellent home cooking, offers the only permanent accommodation in the south of the park, where the wildebeest mass for the calving season (January to March). The Western Corridor (best between May and July) has two luxury tented camps, Kirawira and Grumeti River. To explore the magical Moru Kopjes and Seronera Valley (May to August), choose the Serengeti Sopa Lodge. In the north, in the wild and pristine country near the Kenyan border, Klein's Camp and Migration Camp are about as remote as you can get.

4. Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania A unique lost world complete with its own forests, flamingo lakes, resident herds of plains game, rare black rhinos and some of Africa's biggest tuskers. Leopards are seen regularly around the crater rim, cheetahs come and go, while the famous Ngorongoro lions are always present – though not in such numbers since the El Niño rains of 1998, when floods drove half the prides from their territories. But the survivors and their cubs still make this one of the most rewarding places for observing lion behaviour. Most visitors stay at one of the three lodges on the crater rim, descending to the crater floor on all-day game drives. All 75 rooms at the Ngorongoro Serena Lodge have crater views. Ngorongoro Sopa is the only lodge on the eastern rim, with its own access route to the crater floor. Ngorongoro Crater is a fantasy lodge for the seriously rich (private suites with butler service, 4-poster beds and log fires in the



Leopards often sleep during the day, and it is always worth looking for them in trees such as figs or acacias.



Cheetah on the lookout in the Okavango. If you want to see a cheetah hunting, the best time is either the beginning or end of the day.

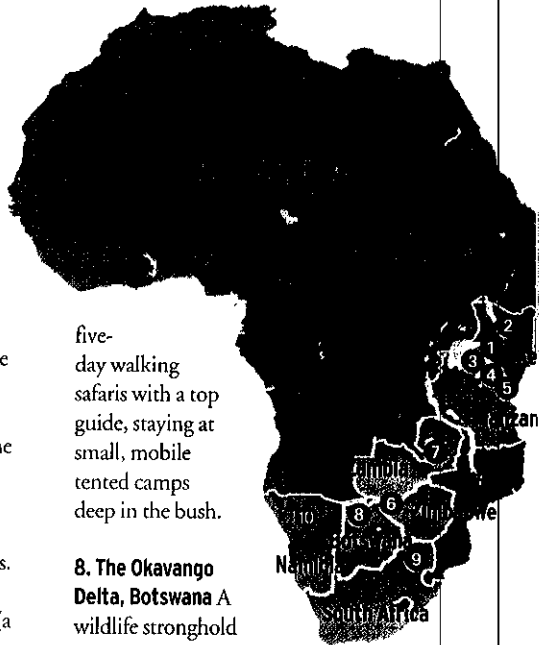
bedroom). Gibb's Farm, on the edge of the Ngorongoro Highlands forest, offers home cooking and great birding.

5. Tarangire National Park, Tanzania So easy to reach but strangely neglected. Many visitors hurry on by, heading for Lake Manyara and the Serengeti. Maybe they have heard about the Tarangire tsetse flies. But what they are missing is Tanzania's fourth-largest park and a landscape dominated by elephants and baobab trees. Leopards can pop up anywhere in this rugged, broken country, cheetahs occur on the northern savannah and Tarangire lions tend to be wilder than some of their more habituated counterparts in, say, Ngorongoro or the Mara. Tarangire Sopa is a new-ish luxury lodge with 75 suites. Tarangire Safari Lodge is actually a permanent tented camp with a fabulous setting

overlooking the Tarangire River. Oliver's Camp, at the edge of the park, is run by Paul Oliver, a bush-savvy English expat, and sleeps just 12 guests under canvas in a private wilderness concession the size of the Isle of Wight.

6. Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe This wild and beautiful park richly deserves its World Heritage Site status. It lies in the Lower Zambezi Valley and is still worth visiting in spite of Zimbabwe's current troubles. Beneath the trees, the vegetation is sparse – an ideal habitat for walking safaris. And this is the point of including Mana Pools. No guarantees, of course, but if you fancy the idea of tracking lions on foot with an armed guide, Mana Pools is hard to beat. And Zimbabwe's safari guides – experts like Ivan Carter and the veteran John Stevens – are probably the best in the business. Rukomechi (10 reed-and-thatch chalets), Chikwenya (10 tents on raised decks) and Vundu (a small bushcamp with just six tents) all offer walks, game drives and canoeing on the Zambezi.

7. South Luangwa National Park, Zambia The Luangwa Valley is one of the great wildlife strongholds of Southern Africa. Through it all winds the Luangwa River, with its riverine woodlands and grassy dambos – old oxbow lagoons frequented by hippos and elephants. Typical animals of this pristine parkland are kudu, puku and Thornicroft's giraffe – a subspecies not found elsewhere. Lions, too, are commonly seen. But for safari visitors, the leopard is Luangwa's top cat, with night drives providing the best sightings. There are too many lodges to list them all, but among the best are Nsefu, Tena Tena and Nkwai, all run by Robin Pope, a protégé of Norman Carr, acknowledged as one of Zambia's most experienced safari guides. All three are comfortable bushcamps which also offer

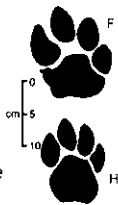


five-day walking safaris with a top guide, staying at small, mobile tented camps deep in the bush.

8. The Okavango Delta, Botswana A wildlife stronghold rivalled only by the Serengeti, though the watery world of the delta is very different from East Africa. Lying in the northern Kalahari, this is Africa's biggest oasis – wooded islands, floodplains and papyrus swamps braided by a maze of channels. One third is protected by the Moremi Game Reserve. The rest consists of vast wilderness concession areas which are leased to private safari camp operators. To explore the delta, you can set out on day and night game drives or glide silently along in a mokoro (dugout canoe). For the more adventurous, there are private safaris with expert guides such as Map Ives and Mike Myers, walking safaris, horseback safaris and even elephant-back safaris. Bird life is spectacular. Mammals include huge breeding herds of elephants, swamp-dwelling sitatunga, red lechwe and spotted-necked otters. Large lion prides roam the drier areas. Leopard and cheetah sightings are

LION

Lions are the only truly social cats, increasing their strength by living in prides. A typical pride might have half a dozen lionesses – all closely related – and two or three mature males, who may well be brothers or litter-mates but are not related to the females. Most females remain all their lives in the same pride, but young males are expelled after two or three years, to become nomads until they are strong enough to win a pride of their own. Pride territories range in size from 20 km² to 400 km², depending on food and competition. Lions lay claim to their territories by scent-marking, scraping and roaring – a sound which can be heard 8 km away. They spend most of their time resting, emerging to hunt at dawn, dusk or night. Favourite prey includes zebra and wildebeest, but by hunting together, lions are able to kill much larger animals, such as buffalo. Lions are abundant on plains and savannahs, wherever suitable prey exists, but their conservation status is, nevertheless, regarded as being vulnerable.



consistently high, and the delta is probably the top spot in Africa for wild dogs. Go between July and September, but pack warm clothes for cold dawn game drives.

There are dozens of camps to choose from, but favourites for the big cats are those in the drier areas. Most famous is Mombo, newly rebuilt

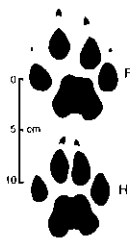
but hugely expensive. Among the rest, Khwai River Lodge, Camp Moremi, Little Vumbura and Chitabe stand out, and Abu's Camp, uniquely, offers five-day elephant-back safaris.

9. Sabi Sand Private Game Reserve, South Africa For big cats, nowhere else in South Africa can touch this reserve on the western edge of Kruger. Though much smaller than its neighbour, game-viewing and accommodation in the Sabi Sands are far superior. Here, in open vehicles, accompanied by rangers and trackers, you are virtually guaranteed close-ups of lions, leopards and cheetahs, and possibly even wild dogs. The reserve itself is actually a mosaic of privately run safari concession areas, each with its own lodges or tented camps. But the lowveld habitat is so dense that you are seldom aware of your neighbours. Many of the lodges are luxurious, and there's not much to choose from in this respect between, say, Singita and Richard Branson's Uluksaba or, for that matter, between Mala Mala and Londolozi, except that Londolozi offers such incredible leopard-viewing that it ought to offer a cash-back guarantee if you don't see at least one. Also good value are the Sabi Sabi lodges, where you can sign up for a three-day ranger-training course.

10. Okonjima, Namibia Namibia is home to more than 20 per cent of the world's cheetahs. The trouble is that most of them are to be found on private ranchlands. So where to see them? Okonjima, deep in the bush, is a comfortable privately owned guest ranch, which also runs the Africat programme, which is dedicated to preserving Namibia's threatened cats: mostly cheetahs, but also leopard, lion and caracal. The cheetahs you'll see on their farm are tame, but you'll also learn a great deal about cheetah conservation and have a good chance of seeing wild leopards from a hide. If you want to see cheetahs in the wild, you could combine a stay at Okonjima with a visit to Erossha National Park, which is also good for lions.

CHEETAH

The fastest land animal on Earth. With its long limbs and greyhound frame, it is the true predator of the open plains, having evolved stride by stride with the fleet-footed gazelles, which are its favourite prey. In one sense the cheetah's entire existence is a race for life in which strength has been sacrificed for speed. As a result, when confronted by more powerful competitors – lions, leopards, hyenas – it can hide or flee but cannot fight. They are widespread, but always scarce.



BUSH-WISE CAT-WATCHING

Searching for the big cats is half the fun of being on safari. They are such masters of camouflage, able to blend in so perfectly with their surroundings that they are almost invisible unless the flick of an ear or the twitch of a tail reveals their presence.

Begin your game drive as early as possible while the cats are still active. Use your ears as well as your eyes. Lions often roar at first light, and so try to pinpoint the direction from which you last heard them before setting out. In the bush, stop and listen from time to time. The warning snort of a startled impala, the bark of a bushbuck, the frenzied "wah-hoo" of baboons and the agitated calls of francolins are often clear evidence of predators on the prowl. So, too, is the body language of prey species. A group of zebras, antelopes or giraffes standing with heads up, ears cocked, all staring intently in the same direction is usually a dead giveaway. The presence of vultures, on the other hand, is not always a reliable indicator of predators nearby, or even a kill.

In open country, stop and sweep the surrounding savannah with binoculars. Cats have a tell-tale way of walking which enables you to pick them out even a mile away. But cats also love shelter; so, in open areas such as the Serengeti Plains, check every kopje and lonely shade tree. Often you'll spot cheetahs that turn out to be tree stumps, lion-shaped rocks and hanging branches like leopards' tails; but don't give up. Sooner or later you'll find the real thing.

In South Africa, where the bush is thicker, the most common way to find cats is to look for fresh tracks. Many lodges employ expert trackers who perch on a jump-seat over the bonnet and are highly skilled at reading spoor. Big cat tracks are easy to recognise. Look for the four toes and 'triple-ripple' at the back of the heel.

Leopards love rocks and watercourses that provide lots of cover. Look for them – and their kills – in the branches of fig trees, sausage trees and acacias. If you surprise a leopard and it runs for cover, keep looking where you last saw it. Often, its insatiable curiosity will give you a second glimpse as it emerges from hiding to check on your whereabouts. Leopards are also fond of sunning themselves in the early morning.

Lions are fond of lying up not far from water. And whenever you spot one lion, look for others. The rest of the pride could be around. When the weather is cooler, all cats tend to remain active for longer, but being opportunists, they will hunt at any time. The first and last hours of daylight are the best times to watch cheetahs in action.

In East Africa, safari drivers often exchange information about the whereabouts of big cats, and so a knowledge of Swahili comes in handy. Nowadays, however, a lot of drivers talk in code. Lion (*simba*) is either *kichwa kubwa* or *masharobo* (big head or the bearded one). Leopard (*chui*) is referred to as *madoadoa juu* (literally: "spots up" – ie, in a tree) and cheetah (*dhuma*) as *madoadoa chini* ("spots down" – on the ground).

LEOPARD

Shy, elusive; solitary; nocturnal. No wonder this is the cat that everyone wants to see. Often, all you know of a leopard's presence is its gruff, wood-sawing cough in the night. Like all predators, it is an opportunist, but leopards are also hugely adaptable, at home in all kinds of habitats from thick forest to semi-desert. Nairobi even has urban leopards! An ability to climb trees and store their kills aloft gives leopards an edge over more powerful competitors such as lions and hyena clans. Impala and warthog are regular victims, but leopards will also eat hares, guinea fowls – even beetles. They are found right across sub-Saharan Africa and are not threatened at present, except in North Africa, where they are critically endangered.



FURTHER INFORMATION

WEBSITES

African National Parks www.newafrica.com/nationalparks/ This site has extensive information on all the national parks previously described.
African Wildlife Foundation www.awf.org/
Africat www.africat.org/
American Zoo and Aquarium Association www.aza.org/programs/ssp/ Species survival plans for the cheetah and lion.
Big Cats Online dialspace.dial.pipex.com/aqarman/bco/ver4.htm
Big Cat Research www.bigcats.com/
The Cat Survival Trust hometown.aol.com/cattrust/index.htm
The Cheetah Conservation Fund www.cheetah.org/
IUCN Cat Specialist Group lynx.uio.no/catfolk/
The Lion Research Centre www.lionresearch.org/
 The lions of the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater.

Los Angeles Natural History Museum
www.nhm.org/cats/

CONTACTS

Born Free Foundation 3, Grove House, Foundry Lane, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 5PL; ☎ 01403 240 170; e-mail: wildlife@bornfree.org.uk. Has a Big Cat Campaign at www.bornfree.org.uk/bcat10.htm

READING

The Big Cats and Their Fossil Relatives, by Mauricio Anton and Alan Turner (Columbia University Press, £10, ISBN 0231102291).
The Big Cat Diary, by Brian Jackman and Jonathan Scott (BBC Books, £14.99, ISBN 0563387521).
The Leopards of Londolozi, by Lex Hes (New Holland, £49.99, ISBN 0947430229).
Prides: The Lions of Moremi, by Chris Harvey and Pieter Kat (New Holland, £19.99, ISBN 1868127788).
The Safari Companion, by Richard D Estes (Chelsea Green Publishers, £20.95, ISBN 1890132446).