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Abstract: Article about Laurie Marker: Although she had worked with animals most of her life, when Laurie Marker landed a job at Winston Wildlife Safari as keeper of the goat yard, she never thought she might turn into a mother cheetah. But that is what happened.

Mother cheetah

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By Sally Walker

ALTHOUGH she had worked with animals most of her life, when Laurie Marker landed a job at Winston Wildlife Safari as keeper of the goat yard, she never thought she might turn into a mother cheetah. But that is what happened.

It all began after Laurie was promoted out of the goat yard and into the animal health clinic at the Safari Park. Among her duties was to tame two feisty mother-reared cheetah cubs to human beings before they were shipped to another zoo. This is routinely done at zoos to minimise the stress involved in transport. The cheetahs' unique behavioural characteristics attracted Laurie

and she began to read everything she could about them and to study their psychology. The Winston Wildlife Safari was a major cheetah breeding centre and Laurie had a six-acre breeding area in which to observe the near natural behaviour of the cats.

Although cheetahs are technically cats, with a separate category in the great roaring cat category just for them, their non-retractile claws, square head shape, long legs and non-aggressive behaviour are uncommonly dog-like. Cheetahs are the fastest land mammal—they can short sprint up to 85 km per hour with the help of their long long legs and lean body. The cheetah's prey are small ungulates such as antelopes.

Cheetahs are extinct in India, in trouble in Africa and in bigger trouble in Iran. There is talk of

rehabilitating captive animals of all kinds back to the wild to replace the dwindling numbers but it has not been done to everyone's satisfaction with big cats. The main problem is food for big carnivores—that means catching and killing something for dinner rather than leisurely nibbling grass and leaves all day as so many other animals do. Captive animals do not learn to catch their own food.

When captive carnivores are released into the wild then, they may find it difficult to obtain food. Thus, some wildlifers say, they may become man-eaters, turning to the easiest prey to catch and also having lost their fear of man in captivity.

Laurie was interested in learning whether a captive cheetah could be taught to hunt by a

human being. Moreover, she was curious whether it would then become aggressive. As Laurie observed and worked around more cheetahs she became more and more

A chance to find out came when a team from ABC television visited the park to make a film of rehabilitating birds of prey. They thought it would make a most dramatic conservation story to film the raising of a captive cheetah and its training. Because of her interest and her skill with animals, Laurie Marker was marked for this lovely project.

Laurie's dog, one of those bright, gentle and sensitive labradours, provided quite a big in the way of companionship and discipline. Because of the dog's contribution, the cheetah grew up to be completely housebroken and could be kept

with Laurie in motel rooms on her many tours in the years to come.

The film crew accompanies Laurie and Khyam to Africa where Laurie painstakingly taught the cat to stalk, chase and bring down prey. Laurie even had to teach her pet how to catch the throat of the animal and hang on until it stopped struggling. The cheetah's natural instincts made her a fast learner and soon she was chasing and catching her own dinner. The film was a great success—as dramatic and moving as everyone thought it would be.

Laurie was interested in whether Khyam would turn unmanageable after learning to hunt. This did not happen. Khyam turned out to be a most versatile animal, able to really bring down animals and open them up for eating but still docile and friendly.