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GEOGRAPHIC
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SURVIVOR

THE CAPE LEOPARD



Image © Cape Leopard Trust

**THE STORY OF A LEOPARD
POPULATION THAT BEATS
THE ODDS**

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by

Simon Espley & The Cape Leopard Trust

Friday, 20 July 2018



The Cape leopard is the stuff of legends. This seldom seen, highly elusive apex predator survives in some of the most inhospitable habitat possible – the rugged, low nutritional fynbos biome of the Cape Fold Mountain ranges.

Despite the habitat limitations, this region did historically host many wildlife species such as black rhino, Cape mountain zebra, bontebok, Cape buffalo, hippopotamus, elephant, spotted hyena, brown hyena and wild dog – all of which now only occur in some fenced private and national game reserves in the Cape. The Cape lion, quagga and bluebuck also occurred in the area, but are now extinct.

The arrival of permanent European settlers signalled the death knell for these species in the wild, and 365 years later, the pressure has escalated. And yet the Cape leopard is hanging in there. And they do so with other hardy survivors such as African wildcat, chacma baboon, caracal (rooikat), Cape clawless otter, Cape fox, large-spotted genet, striped polecat, honey badger and several antelope species.

So, what is the Cape leopard's secret? How does the Cape's apex predator escape local extinction? In a nutshell, Cape leopards continue to survive because they are adaptive to change, opportunistic about food sources and because of the vastness of their home ranges.



A fantastic view from the Maltese Cross parking area in the Cederberg © L. Müller

LET'S LOOK AT A FEW INTERESTING CAPE LEOPARD FACTS

1. The Cape leopard (*Panthera pardus pardus*) is the same species as the savanna/bushveld leopard, despite the differences noted below. The southern African leopard population is comprised of a number of geographically isolated groups, with slight genetic differences caused by distance isolation. These differences are not enough to classify each group as a separate sub-species;

2. Cape leopards are about half the mass of savanna leopards. On average males weigh in at around 35kg (savanna leopard 60-70kg), whereas females weigh around 20kg (savanna leopard 35-40kg);



Left: *Front paw of a female leopard* © J.Hayward; **Right:** *A leopard spoor (track/pug mark) left in the sand on Klipbokkop Mountain Reserve in the Boland. Leopard tracks in the Cape mountains measure between 6.5cm and 8.5cm from the front of the*

longest toe to the back of the main pad. The tracks of females are smaller than those of males, and a leopard's front feet are bigger and rounder than its hind feet © J. Haywood

3. Home ranges are far larger than those of savanna leopards. While male leopards in the Kruger National Park have a home range of 25 to 50km², the range of a male Cape leopard is between 200 and 1,000km²;

4. Contrary to popular belief, Cape leopards do not commonly target livestock, unless food is scarce and there is an easy opportunity;



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5. Females give birth to two to three cubs in a litter, but conditions are very harsh in the Cape mountains and there is a high mortality rate in the first six months of a cub's life;

6. Leopards in Africa are classified as 'Vulnerable', but Cape leopards are more threatened than other leopards because of urbanisation and limited suitable habitat;

7. Although one should obviously always be very cautious when encountering any predator, Cape leopards are generally extremely wary of people and will readily retreat – except when threatened or cornered. A Cape leopard sighting is normally only very brief – the leopard will appear as if from nowhere, stand still for a few seconds,

and then disappear into the fynbos once more. There are no reports of unprovoked attacks on people in the Western Cape. However, if one were to corner a Cape leopard, or threaten a female's cubs, they could be extremely dangerous;

8. There is no definitive total for leopard numbers in the Western Cape, however data from recent studies in three distinct mountain areas suggest the number to be fewer than 1,000;

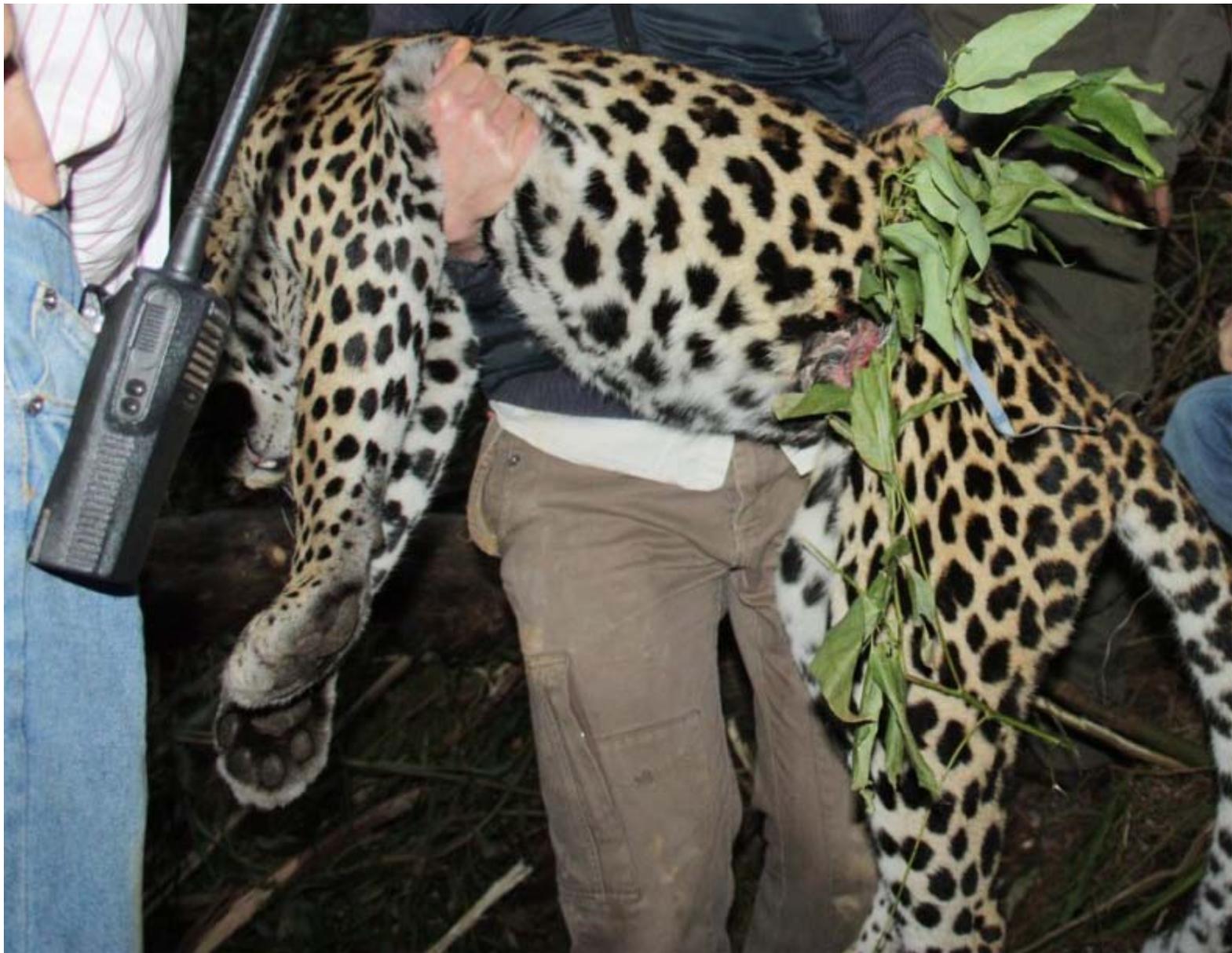
9. Leopards are opportunistic and adaptive hunters. Cape leopards mainly target rock rabbits (dassies), klipspringers, Cape grysbok and porcupines. Baboons do not form a major part of their diet.



Scott (BM12), a dominant male leopard in the Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve, stalking a porcupine. Porcupine forms a substantial part of leopard diet in the Boland © Rooi Els Conservancy

MAIN THREATS

- Human-wildlife conflict:
 - Illegal hunting with snares for bush meat – which depletes the prey base and also kills leopards which get caught in the snares despite not being the intended targets;
 - Direct persecution by farmers in retaliation for livestock losses (guilty or not);
 - Indiscriminate use of poisons and pesticides;
- Habitat loss and fragmentation;
- Roads and traffic;
- Too frequent and large scale veld fires, which damage ecosystem health;
- Natural threats, particularly to cubs, include black eagles, snakes, disease, malnutrition and territorial killings by other leopards.



Clockwise from left: 1) *A leopard caught around the abdomen by an illegal wire snare in the Boland* © J. Sikich; 2) *An example of an illegal wire snare set to catch grysbok, duiker and porcupine* © J. Sikich; 3) *Cape leopard road kill* © P. Steens



HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT

Human-wildlife conflict is a complex issue and there is no simple single solution. Instead, there are various ways that can be used in combination – depending on the circumstances. The Cape Leopard Trust believes in a holistic livestock management strategy, instead of trying to manage predators.

In essence this means taking livestock off the predator's menu. These methods include well-trained livestock guardian dogs, traditional herding, and keeping livestock in adequately fenced, predator-proof kraals at night.



A territorial adult male called Apollo in the Bainskloof mountains ©
Cape Leopard Trust

Farmers are often put in very difficult situations when it comes to livestock depredation by leopards. Education is key, and they need to understand how and why they need to protect their livestock rather than reverting to simply killing all predators using unselective and inhumane methods. Killing predators does not solve the problems in the long term, because new individuals will move in to take over the vacant territory. All predators fulfil a vital function in our ecosystem – without them, adverse knock-on effects are likely to be experienced.

In rare instances, one specific individual leopard may be classified as a 'problem animal' and dealt with as such by the authorities. The Cape Leopard Trust always tries to work with landowners and CapeNature to find viable long-term solutions that are effective and

relevant to each particular farm.

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WHY ARE CAPE LEOPARDS IMPORTANT?

These beautiful, enigmatic creatures epitomise wilderness, and that is reason enough for many people. For those that require more substantive reasoning, Cape leopards are the top (apex) predator in the Cape, which means that they are a vital cog in maintaining ecosystems and other species.



This is a big adult male known as CM42. He roams a large area in the Cederberg close to Krakadouw © Cape Leopard Trust

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

The Cape Leopard Trust is a non-profit, public benefit organisation, funded primarily by corporate funders, trust funds and private donors.

- Donate: <http://capeleopard.org.za/donate>;
- Sponsor a camera trap: <http://shop.capeleopard.org.za/product/sponsor-a-camera-trap>;
- Sponsor a school camp or eco-club for disadvantaged children;
- South Africans only: Sign up for a MySchool MyVillage MyPlanet card and choose the Cape Leopard Trust as your beneficiary. The card is completely free and participating stores will donate a

percentage of your spend to the charity of your choice
<http://www.myschool.co.za>;

- Spread awareness of the Cape Leopard Trust and the need to protect leopard habitat and prey in order to ensure their long-term survival;
- Follow the Cape Leopard Trust on their website, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for regular updates;
- While enjoying time out in nature, be on the lookout for illegal wire snares. Cut and disarm these snares and report them to the Cape Leopard Trust. Also report any other suspicious activity like other traps and feral dogs;
- Drive slowly and carefully through mountainous areas to avoid hitting wild animals – including leopards and their prey;
- Farmers: Adopt holistic livestock husbandry practices to avoid conflict with leopards;
- Property owners: Refrain from hunting/killing ‘agricultural or garden pests’ like porcupine, grysbok, duiker and dassie – these are leopards’ main prey.



The adult female is known as CF29 and the sub-adult is known as CU1.
This photo was taken in the Cederberg near Dwarskloof © Cape Leopard
Trust

THE CAPE LEOPARD TRUST



The Cape Leopard Trust was initiated in 2004 in the Cederberg to study the ecology of the Cape leopard. Dr Quinton Martins began his studies by hiking these mountains and searching for signs of leopards. Literature on the subject was almost non-existent, and yet they were being killed in large numbers. Quinton teamed up with farmer Johan van der Westhuizen as co-founder, supported by Dr Andrew Baxter – and so the Cape Leopard Trust was born. After a successful fundraising event, Leopard's Leap Family Vineyards and Rand Merchant Bank Fund pledged their support, and momentum began building. Over the years, activities expanded to include projects in the Boland, Little Karoo, Namaqualand, and the Table Mountain National Park.



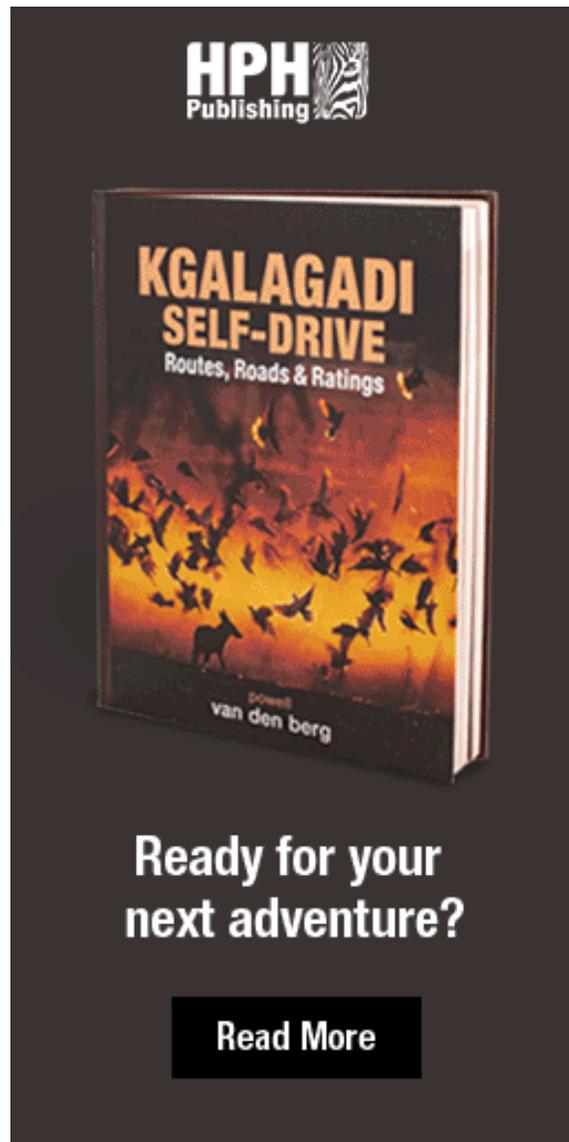
Clockwise from left: 1) *The Boland researchers servicing a camera trap* © S&A. Toon; 2) *Tracking a collared leopard in the Kogelberg* © A. Wilkinson; 3) *A camera trap in the Jonkershoek mountains* © J. Hayward

The Trust also supports predator projects in partnership with the Dept. of Conservation Ecology at the University of Stellenbosch as well as the Animal Demography Unit (ADU) at the University of Cape Town. The Cape Leopard Trust Education and Outreach Programme (est. 2009) is a vital component of their work and operates mainly in the Cederberg Wilderness Area, the Boland Mountains and the Cape

Peninsula.



Left: A leopard with a GPS collar fitted, ready to be released. Every leopard's spot pattern is unique and can be used to individually identify different cats © J. Sikich; **Right:** The Cape Leopard Trust research team taking measurements to fit a GPS tracking collar to a sedated leopard © P. van der Spuy



The Trust uses research as a tool for conservation, finding solutions to human-wildlife conflict and inspiring interest in the environment through an interactive and dynamic environmental education programme. Since its inception, it has become an authority on predator conservation in the Cape, and one of the leading authorities in SA.

The long-term vision is to ensure the long-term survival of leopard populations by promoting peaceful coexistence and the protection of landscapes, empowered by scientific research, positive community partnerships, education and advocacy. 

GETTING THERE

Airlink offers a direct flight to Cape Town in the Western Cape as well as multi-destination flight options across southern Africa and a convenient *Lodge Link* program, direct to popular lodges in the greater Kruger National Park and beyond.

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ABOUT SIMON ESPLEY



Simon Espley is an African of the digital tribe, a chartered accountant and CEO of Africa Geographic. His travels in Africa are in search of wilderness, real people with interesting stories and elusive birds. He lives in Cape Town with his wife Lizz and two Jack Russells, and when not travelling or working he will be on his mountain bike somewhere out there. His motto is 'Live for now, have fun, be good, tread lightly and respect others. And embrace change.'

CELEBRATING AFRICA'S WILD BABIES



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Celebrating Africa's Wild Babies

They are clumsy, incredibly cute, and curious about everything. Their ears and feet are too big for their bodies and their large, inquisitive eyes seem to suck you right in. They have protective, doting parents that keep an eye on them 24/7 and will protect

them no matter the cost. These are the incredibly adorable wild babies of Africa – guaranteed to put a smile on your face, whether it is while out on safari, or from the comfort of your home looking at photographs.

We are celebrating those delightful and captivating youngsters in this gallery, *Celebrating Africa's Wild Babies*, which comprises of a selection of stunning photos, along with some interesting facts and thoughts from the photographers themselves. And they're not just any photos, they're some of the special photos submitted during our **Photographer of the Year** 2017 and 2018 competitions.



A four-day-old white lion cub is carried by its mother in Ngala Private Game Reserve, South Africa © Daryl Dell (Instagram/daryldellsafaris) (Photographer of the Year 2018 Entrant)

White lions are technically leucistic, and not a separate species or subspecies. Leucism is where an animal does produce melanin (unlike albinos which produce no melanin), but the condition prevents melanin from being deposited in the fur, resulting in patches of white colouring in the fur.



"Innocence" in Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe © Dee Roelofs (Photographer of the Year 2017 Entrant)

If you are ever stuck with identifying the species of an elephant, take a look at their ears. When an African elephant's ears are stretched out, like this little guy here, you will see that they are shaped like the African continent. Meanwhile, Asian elephants have smaller ears, which are more rounded on top and flat along the bottom. An elephant's ears act as a cooling mechanism to help keep the elephant from overheating.



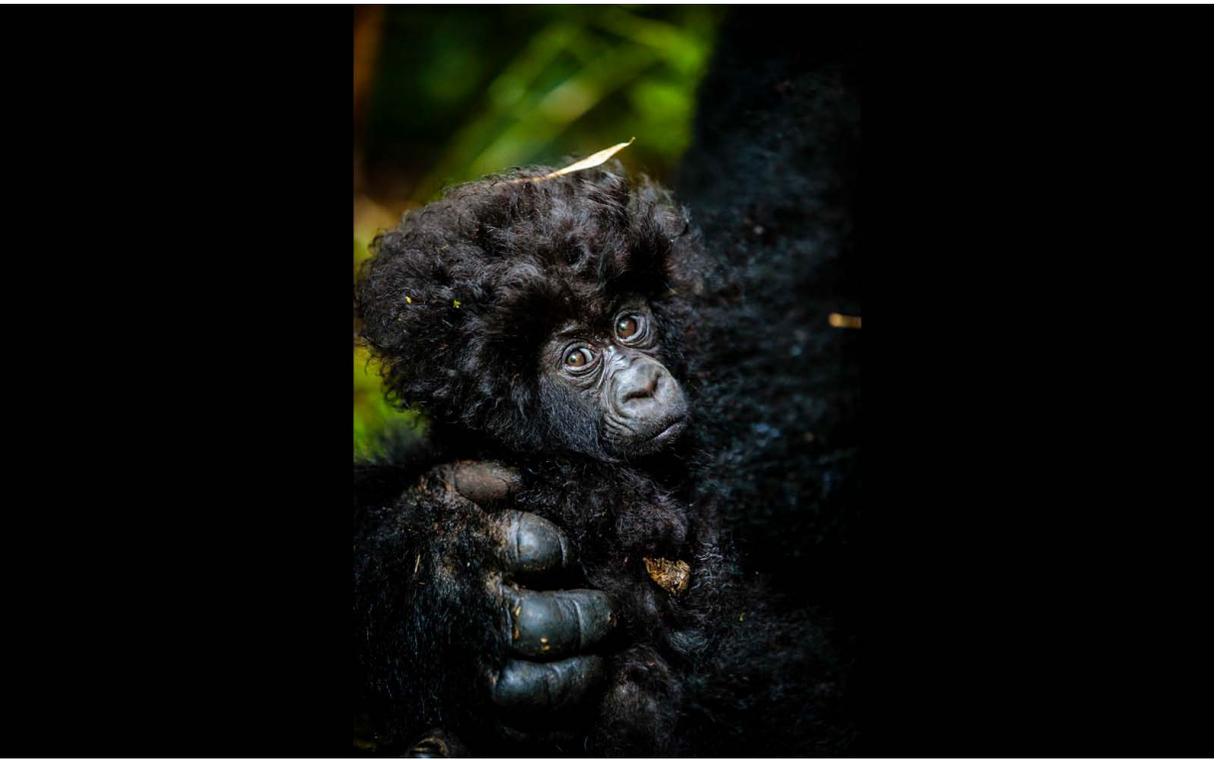
A baby gelada in the Semien Mountains, Ethiopia © Paolo Maccarone (this primate is an Old World monkey within its own genus and is alternatively referred to as bleeding-heart monkey or gelada baboon) (Photographer of the Year 2018 Entrant)

"After a long, foggy day on the Semien Mountains, I finally saw a troop of geladas. My attention was immediately attracted by a baby gelada, safe and protected in the centre of the group." ~ Paolo Maccarone



"Too full to move!" in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, South Africa/Botswana © Johan J. Botha
(Photographer of the Year 2017 Top 101)

"Photography at a kill can be very rewarding because of all the action and interaction. This was again the case at a lion kill of quite a big lion family of nine which included some cubs. All had enough to eat when all of a sudden this totally overfed lion cub just fell over on its back... looking at me!" ~ Johan J. Botha



A mountain gorilla infant in Virunga National Park, DR Congo © Bobby-Jo Vial (Photographer of the Year 2018 Semi-finalist)

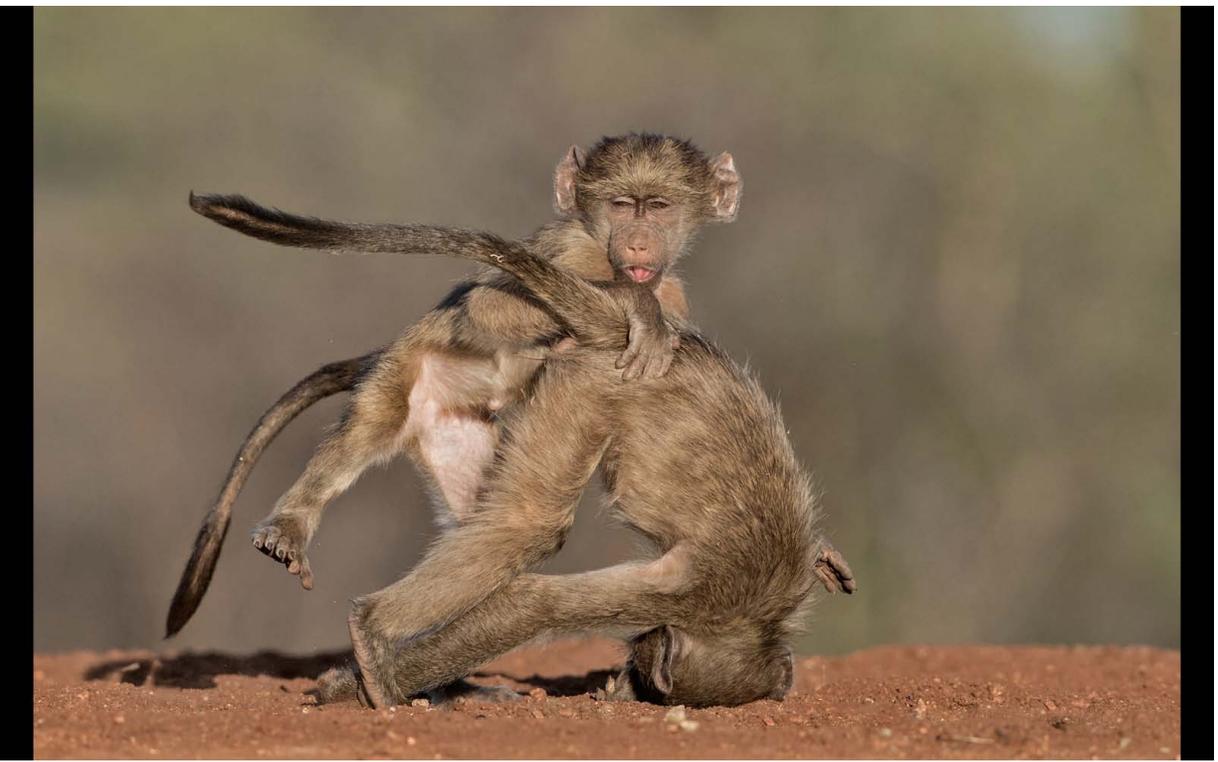
When born, a mountain gorilla baby weighs only 3-4 pounds (1.4 to 1.8 kg), and just has enough strength to cling onto its mother's fur. From the age of about four months, they ride their mother's back and continue doing so through the first two or three years of their lives. As it can become quite cold in their mountainous habitat, mountain gorilla fur is much thicker and longer than the lowland subspecies who have short, fine hair.



"Awwww Mom do I have to?" in Timbavati Game Reserve, South Africa © Andrew Schoeman
(Photographer of the Year 2017 Top 101)

"A hyena mom had just arrived back from her night's activities and was calling for her baby to come out the den. A small black bundle came wobbling out and the mother and pup enthusiastically greeted each other. After a few minutes the mother decided it was time for the youngster to go back into the den, but he baby had

other ideas and it continually came back out to be with its mom. After about five minutes of this the mother firmly picked up her pup and put it back down the entrance hole of the den, the pup looked in our direction with a sad face that clearly said, 'Awww Mom, do I have to?'. ~ Andrea Schoeman



Baboon youngsters play in Karongwe Private Game Reserve, South Africa © Johan J. Botha
(Photographer of the Year 2018 Top 101)

Baboons are very sociable creatures and are often found grooming, feeding and playing together within a troop. They are also very vocal and have numerous hand and arm gestures that help with communication – this also includes very expressive faces!



"Don't go!" – a cub grabs its mother's tail as she begins to move off in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya © Teresa Nel (Photographer of the Year 2018 Entrant)

"On a trip to the Maasai Mara we came across this mother cheetah with two young cubs. The mother rested a bit with her cubs who just lay against the termite mound and did not interact with each other. After a while the mother wanted to start moving again, presumably to look for food. As she got up the one cub grabbed her tail as if to say 'don't go!'." ~ Teresa Nel



"Caught the cat by the tail" – a lion cub in Serengeti National Park, Tanzania © Yaron Schmid
(Photographer of the Year 2018 Entrant)

Lion cubs play with anything that arouses their interest, including their mother's tail. Most of the time their play imitates behaviours they will use as adults, such as stalking and fighting. This is an important part of their development as playing will help the cubs learn these skills as well as help to form strong social bonds within the pride.



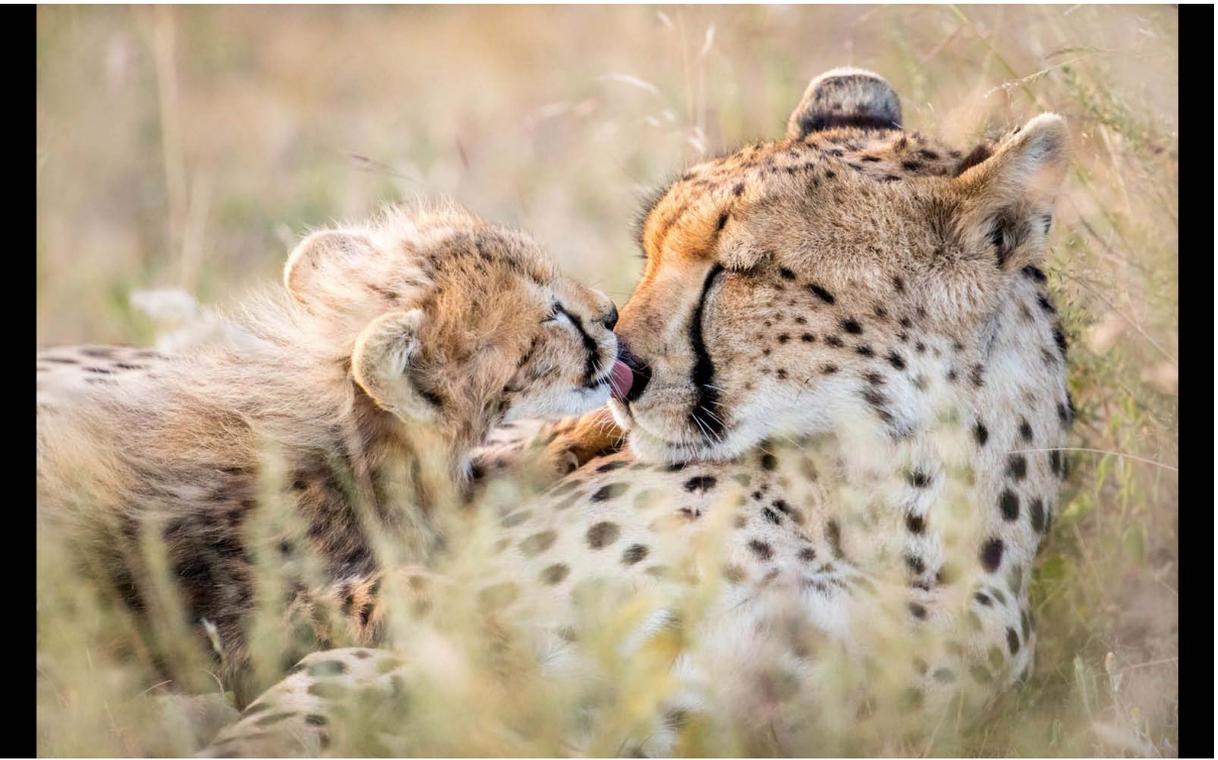
"Wish, dream, hope" in Sabi Sand Game Reserve, South Africa © Ross Couper (Photographer of the Year 2017 Entrant)

Newborn elephants stay very close to their mothers as they are unsteady on their feet and require support. They rely on touch, smell and hearing as their eyesight is poor for the first few days.



"As light as a feather" in Kruger National Park, South Africa © Senka Gavrilovic (Photographer of the Year 2017 Finalist)

"One early morning I spent a few hours at a hyena den sight in Kruger National Park being entertained by inquisitive cubs exploring the surrounding. One of the cubs discovered loose feathers on the ground, of which some ended up gently sticking on its nose after a sniff. The playful scene in front of me produced this soft and innocent moment that I was able to capture with my camera." ~ Senka Gavrilovic



"Cub love" in Serengeti National Park, Tanzania © Sarah Zito (Photographer of the Year 2018 Entrant)

"We had watched this valiant mother cheetah drag her springbok kill across the valley to a safer place while all of her three cubs played around, jumping on the kill, racing each other, and generally making nuisances of themselves! Once she got the kill to some cover they fed and she was finally able to have some rest. Then, one by one, all the cubs came up to her, expressing the deep

affection and bonds between them with touching sweetness – like this cub licking her nose. It was truly something special to witness." ~ Sarah Zito



A wild dog pup in Zimanga Private Game Reserve, South Africa © Prelena Soma Owen
(Photographer of the Year 2018 Entrant)

African wild dog pups are cared for by the entire pack. Once they are old enough to eat solid food they are given priority at a kill (even over the dominant pair) and are allowed to eat first.



"Innocence" in Sabi Sand Game Reserve, South Africa © Andrea Galli (Photographer of the Year 2017 Semi-finalist)

"It was one of those days in the bush – and this can happen in Sabi Sand – with no sightings all day long. Before the usual stop for a sunset drink we came across this baby rhino and his mother. He was having fun chasing an oxpecker and running around like crazy, but suddenly froze when he saw us and tried to hide, looking for protection from his mother." ~ Andrea Galli