



OUT IN THE BUSH THE SECOND TIME AROUND, A LOUD PURRING ALERTED HER TO THE CREATURE'S PRESENCE.

Frame thy fearful symmetry



By Jesse Blackadder



A big cat photographer's second worst nightmare was coming true for Jan Latta as she waited at Nairobi Airport's baggage carousel. Although she had one camera body and one lens in her hand luggage, a back injury had led her to pack the rest of her weighty photography and video kit in her checked bag. Which failed to appear.

It's a long way from Sydney to Africa, and it had been a significant investment of time, money and effort for Latta to reach Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve. On this, her ninth journey to Africa, she was planning to photograph zebras for her latest children's book about endangered wildlife, building on some two decades of photographing Africa's wild creatures - including her favourites, the big cats.

Arriving without most of her equipment was a disaster. "I spent

three hot days in the winter clothes I was wearing before the airline finally told me it would fly my bag to Nabiosho camp in the Maasai Mara," said Latta. "When the case eventually turned up at my tent, days later, I was so relieved." But when she unlocked her case, she discovered every item of electrical equipment had been stolen. The camp manager lent her a charger for one part of the trip, but she had to cancel her second camp, and give up on plans to video zebras.

The missing equipment was distressing, but Latta decided to put it behind her. "When you're close to wild animals and wanting to capture their behaviour, you simply can't hold on to negative emotions. I woke up the next morning and willed myself to be positive."

The effort worked, and Latta was able to shoot enough images of zebras for her book. And it turned out the

most memorable part of her trip had more to do with a big cat photographer's true worst nightmare - being eaten by her subject.

In the midst of a wild storm, Latta was sheltering in a closed section of the camp's dining tent with the camp manager. "We heard a loud bang," she said. "We looked at each other, and he unzipped the section so we could see what it was. A wildebeest tore through the centre of the tent, hotly pursued by a lion, a few feet away from us. The lion caught the wildebeest and killed it just outside the Maasai staff quarters. Getting back to my sleeping tent that night was pretty scary! I could see sets of glowing eyes all around the camp - lions everywhere."

Scary meetings with large creatures are par for the course in the trade and Latta has plenty of hair-raising tales to tell - including being charged

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by a bull elephant in musth (a cycle of elevated testosterone), creeping close enough to a rhinoceros to touch his horn, sleeping in tents with lions panting on the other side of the canvas, and being invited to walk with a pride of lions (with the instruction to avoid, at all costs, letting them get behind her). But it was meeting a cheetah that touched her most deeply.

Walking in the bush with friend and wildlife photography mentor Karl Ammann in the pre-digital era, Latta had halted to change film. When she looked up, a wild cheetah was coming straight towards her. "I had no idea what to do," Latta said. "I looked at Karl and he gestured for me to kneel down. I did so, realising that I was right at jaw level. Then the cheetah lay down in the grass next to me." Latta later found out that the cheetah had been brought in as an orphan and raised by humans before being released back into the wild. The moment of close proximity may have been enough for most people, but the next time she visited, Latta was keen to try and find the cheetah again.

Out in the bush the second time around, a loud purring alerted her to the creature's presence. "The cheetah came out of the bush, right up to me, and allowed me to touch it. A second cheetah followed and came in close too." As the first cheetah tucked its head under Latta's chin, Ammann framed and captured the moment on film. The resulting image, showing Latta holding the cheetah's head with both hands as it rested against her, became emblematic of her love affair with the big cats, and graces the cover of her book *Diary of a Wildlife Photographer*.

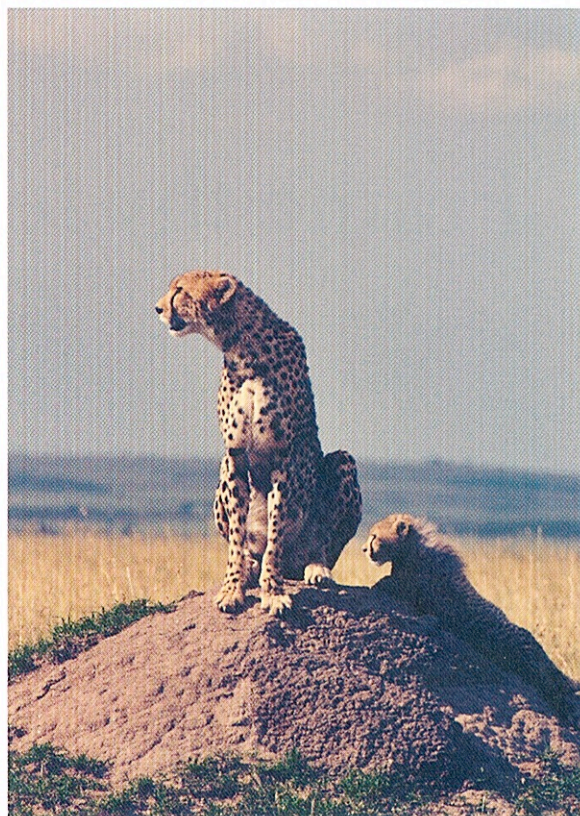


Photo: Jan Latta

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The fact that Ammann had taken the image was significant too. In her old life Latta had worked in high-level advertising in Australia, and had run a publishing company in Hong Kong. Her life was consumed by work until the mid-1990s when one of her magazines ran a photo essay of African wildlife images shot by Ammann. "I was mesmerised," said Latta. "I looked at those photos and knew I had to go to Africa. My excuse was to meet Karl and write some captions."

It was a meeting that changed her life. Inspired by Ammann and his partner's world in Kenya, Latta decided to become a wildlife photographer, and publish books for children that told stories of the world's charismatic endangered creatures. It was a move that drew on her skills in marketing and design, as well as her new passion for photographing wild animals.



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Photo: Jan Latta

Her first lesson - other than the mechanics of photography - was animal behaviour. “You can’t just go out there and take snaps - you have to research and understand animal behaviour and be prepared for what they might do,” she said. “You might have to wait days, weeks or even months for the shot you want, and then suddenly you’re in that adrenalin mix of excitement and danger when it’s all happening around you. Out in the field I’ve learnt about the habits and habitats of those animals - how to understand dung and tracks and broken branches. I spend lots of time researching, observing, talking to my guides.”

Patience is essential too. It took Latta 15 years and numerous trips to gather enough photographs to publish one of her books, *Lennie The Leopard*. “Leopards are very difficult to see in the wild,” she said. “Each time I went to Africa, I’d always ask if there were leopards around. Over the years I got a few photos, but not enough to tell

a story. In the end I went to a tented camp in Sri Lanka and was able to shoot enough leopard photos. That was a very expensive book to produce!”

Latta has been in the game now for some 23 years and has no plans to retire soon - big cats have changed her life and have provided some of her most memorable moments. “On my last trip to Africa I was following a mother lioness and her two cubs early one morning. The mother raised her head from drinking in a puddle and started walking towards me. Her incredible eyes were fixed on me intently. I stared right back at her as she walked up to the jeep.

“After she walked away, my guide said ‘You didn’t take a photograph’, and I said ‘No’. He understood. To have that one-to-one eye contact with a lioness walking towards me was so special. There was no need to frame a photograph. That was my moment.”