



ME, CHEETAH

They run three times faster than Usain Bolt, would rather take their food off a spoon than from the ground, and are the only big cat that purrs. But despite their charms, cheetahs are facing extinction. Jessamy Calkin reports on plans to save the species

IT'S DAWN IN NAMIBIA and there is a strange noise outside my window – a gruff, persistent rumble, quite loud, with a whistley bit. It is the sound of a cheetah purring. Tiger Lily, in fact, who is slumped up against the wire fence in a large pen next to the guest house where I am staying. Lions roar, leopards make a sawing noise, but the cheetah is the only big cat that purrs.

They also bark, chirp and hiss. Tiger Lily is one of four siblings known as the Ambassadors – along with Peter, Senay and Khayjay – who arrived here at the Cheetah Conservation Fund as three-week-old cubs after their mother was shot on farmland, and she is now a magnificent 10-year-old. The other three lounge indolently in the shade of a small acacia bush, draped over each other like teenagers watching television.

There are now fewer than 7,500 cheetahs in the world – in the last century we have lost 90 per cent of our cheetah population. But Namibia still has the highest concentration (about 1,500 adults and adolescents). This is partly due to the sustained efforts of Dr Laurie Marker, who has devoted her life to their preservation, and who set up CCF 29 years ago, here at Otjiwarongo.

The problems the cheetah faces are the usual ones – lack of habitation, loss of prey, illegal wildlife trade and encroaching human populations. In Namibia, 90 per cent of cheetahs live outside protected areas. Here, if you own the land, you own the wildlife that lives on it (different to most African countries, where the government owns the game), and 40 per cent of the land is owned by farmers, who, in an effort to protect their livestock, will shoot or trap the cheetahs.

But their assumptions are often misguided – cheetahs are not as big a threat as is commonly perceived (proved by the analysis of cheetah 'scat', indicating what they've eaten) – and an important part of CCF's job is to get involved with farming communities and teach them good livestock management. CCF also breeds Anatolian shepherd dogs to protect herds from predators, which the farmers can buy for N\$1,500 (£80).

Cheetahs have been around for five million years and, as every schoolchild knows, they are

the fastest land mammal in the world. Less well-known is that the distinctive black tear marks on their faces reflect the sun's glare – useful for daytime hunting – and the white tips of their tails help their offspring to follow them in the bush.

They are culturally and historically significant – since Egyptian times, cheetahs have been used for hunting expeditions and kept as elegant pets because they are relatively easily tamed. Marchesa Luisa Casati, the legendary Italian heiress had a pair of them; while Josephine Baker used to perform with her pet cheetah, Chiquita.

Keeping cheetahs in residence is not the objective for CCF – wherever possible, they are released – but some (because of injury, old age, or the fact



Above CCF's Dr Laurie Marker with Dominic.
Opposite Dominic strikes a majestic pose

they were brought in as cubs and never learnt to hunt) will remain here for the rest of their lives. There are currently 38 residents, of all ages and varying origins, and they are quite definitely the attraction – because Namibia may have the highest density of cheetahs in the world, but in the ordinary course of events, you'll never see one.

So far, 1,000 cheetahs have been through CCF, and 600 of those have been returned to the wild. Often the cubs are rescued after their mother has been shot or trapped. Little C, for example, was found in the bush by a boy who took him home and kept him in a cupboard until his mother called CCF. The youngest resident at the moment is six-month-old Dominic, who still has that

fluffy adolescent look. He was 10 days old when he arrived and had to be bottle-fed. 'You could hold him in the palm of your hand,' says Lauren Pfeiffer, who studied zoology at Reading before joining CCF as an intern. Do they have different personalities? 'Without sounding like a crazy cat lady, yeah, totally different,' she says. 'Dom is sassy and going through a teenage stage; he likes to push boundaries.' Sometimes – say, if he bites – she has to impose a 'time out' and refuse interaction – 'they learn from that'. They all know their names and understand tone of voice.

Rohini – a handsome adult female – was hogtied in a government office until CCF came to pick her up (it has an emergency hotline for people to call for advice or to report a captured cheetah); while three sibling cheetahs – Harry, Ron and Hermione – were found by the side of the road after their mother had been run over.

At 9am every day, the cheetah run takes place, and today it is Harry, Ron and Hermione's turn. The main purpose of this is to exercise the resident cheetahs and keep them in top physical and mental condition. But it is also a great opportunity for visitors to watch them in action. At an oval track, a piece of rag is attached to a zip wire on the ground – similar to the lure used for greyhound training – which then whizzes round the course at varying speeds. The spectators watch from behind a waist-high fence and, as the rag jiggles and jumps, the cheetahs spring into action. It is a sight that feels familiar from hundreds of photographs and documentaries, yet in real life it is mind-blowing – a cheetah in mid-run, depicting stealth and grace, has a stride that can reach 20ft, and can cover 100 metres in 3.3 seconds – three times faster than Usain Bolt.

After all that effort, the reward is a small chunk of meat served on a huge wooden spoon. Cheetahs are fastidious and don't like eating off the ground. Even in the wild, they like to eat from inside the carcass. They would – and sometimes do – eat from enamel bowls, like cats.

After exercise, it is feeding time, and we climb into the back of open four-by-fours with hunks of donkey or horse meat (retired animals bought

locally; it is illegal to feed live game to captive cheetahs). The cheetahs are in spacious, fenced-off areas: siblings together, or according to friendship groups. They chase after the truck and when we throw out the meat they catch it in the air, like dogs. In the wild, cheetahs chase their food, which is what they're taught to do. A local farmer told me about a calf of his, snoozing under a tree, unaware of the danger it was in while a cheetah pawed at it to try and get it to move.

Marker lives in a flamboyant adobe house surrounded by flowers, trees and birds, with a vast desk festooned with books and papers, and walls covered in photographs. From her garden we can see Tiger Lily. 'Hello, baby girl,' she calls out – they are all her baby girls. She has a streak of silver hair and a passionate, direct way of speaking. She shares her home with Bruce Brewer, her partner of 20 years, general manager and chief financial officer of CCF, who is currently in Germany looking at equipment for the Bushblok project. (Bushblok is a thriving sideline – turning invasive thorn bushes into charcoal-type logs, thereby simultaneously clearing the land and providing fuel to be sold.)

Marker is often away travelling and giving talks herself – much of her job is about fundraising, and keeping the organisation going costs about \$3 million a year. But when she is here, she is totally hands-on. Right now, she is on the phone. 'The brown hyena's not a problem but I don't really want to hang on to a leopard,' she says, talking about an animal who has been caught and injured in a trap and is now awaiting transportation. 'But be careful, they'll eat the box – both of them eat boxes.'

CCF will help out with any animal if asked to, but it doesn't have the facilities to house anything except cheetahs. Cheetahs are the holy grail. 'Everything needs to come together in order to protect the cheetah in the future,' says Marker, as we sit in her garden with her two dogs marauding around our ankles. 'We don't want to keep them in a captive environment, but if we must, they should be kept in the proper way, with the right food and facilities, so that the public can see them and be educated about them.'

'People always ask about rewilding,' she goes on, 'because it sounds so sexy – but unless we



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make a place for animals to live in the wild, what is the point of putting them back there?

'The truth is we have no wild – we have people everywhere, and in Africa it's people and livestock, and the wildlife has got nowhere to go. So the only way for us all to live together is to work with people.'

Marker also manages the International Cheetah Studbook, a registry for captive animals, to monitor populations for breeding purposes. '[We] keep an eye on what's going on and involve zoos, so that the animals become greater ambassadors – because the public doesn't realise that we're actually now in our sixth world extinction.'

Marker was born in Detroit, and went to university in Oregon, where she saw her first cheetah at a wildlife park. 'I looked at it through the fence and it hissed and spat at me and I just thought, wow, that's attitude.' A qualified vet technician, she asked for a job at the park and was soon supervising the veterinary clinic. 'But people seemed to know so little about cheetahs, and my director said, why don't you learn about them?'

So she did. She soon became an authority. In 1977, she brought a cheetah cub raised in Oregon to Namibia on a research project to see if cheetahs can be taught to hunt. It was then that she saw cheetahs in trap cages, and heard about how farmers were killing them. And that's when the idea of CCF came about.

It is legal in Namibia to kill a cheetah on your land, if it is considered a danger to livestock. It just has to be reported. Hunting cheetahs for sport is also legal in Namibia; since 1992 CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) has issued 150 cheetah-hunting permits per year. 'Cheetahs are not very hardy animals, so a calibre for plains game, such as a 7mm, along with a good bullet, should do just fine,' advises Ozondjaha Hunting Safaris, which charges £10,000 for its 'cheetah-hunting package' on a website illustrated with photographs of unattractive middle-aged white men embracing dead cheetahs. Another site boasts seemingly without irony that, while there are very strict export regulations, 'Namibia still provides an excellent opportunity for sport hunting these beautiful cats.'

Marker understands the concept around sport hunting and considers it a necessary evil. 'I know it's a hot topic in the UK, but we have a very ethical hunting community in Namibia,



PET HATES

Cheetahs were once considered glamorous sidekicks, and are still coveted as pets in some parts of the world, which CCF campaigns against.

1. Josephine Baker with Chiquita, early 1930s.
2. Silent-movie star Phyllis Gordon in London, 1939.
3. Polish actor Pola Negri 1963 with her co-star in *The Moon-Spinners*



From far left Eli Walker and Marker on the cheetah run with the four orphaned Ambassadors; which includes these hand-raised siblings Peter and Khayjay.
Below Milking a goat to supply CCF's dairy

and they have been some of our best partners in predator conservation [over the farmers]. The really important thing, she insists, is educating the farmers, and making the hunting community aware of the problems facing the cheetah and its ongoing vulnerability.

The argument for sport hunting – well exercised in Africa – is that it means habitat is maintained and increases the perception of the cheetah's value to the farming community. 'The biggest problem is that cheetah are still being indiscriminately killed by farmers. The population can't afford to have both groups taking their lives.'

Are you really saying there isn't anything you can do about the 150 hunting permits, but there is a lot you can do about deterring the farmers?

'Yes, exactly.'

CCF bought this farm, Elandsvregde (Eland's Joy), in 1994, and now owns 100,000 acres of land here and employs 125 full-time staff (mostly local and 55 per cent female) – as well as hosting volunteers, interns and paying guests. It is the world's leading cheetah research and education centre. CCF is a non-profit organisation, and also runs a guest house, a camp, a small museum and café, and has its own herd of goats, a dairy (the Dancing Goat Creamery) and a full-time cheesemaker.

In the livestock area, Chopper, the goat man, is carrying a small goat to the vet for dehorning. The goats are about to go out with their herder, and Teo, their dog. Baby goats are everywhere, and among them a couple of brown and black lambs. They are out all day, dog on one side, herder on the other – one dog to every 250-300 goats.

Teo is a breeding female but also a guard dog. Over the years, CCF has placed 550 dogs with farms. Puppies go to the farmers at 10 weeks old, so they bond with their herd, and they will stay for life. If there is a predator nearby, they bark – it is rare for the predator to touch the dogs. A good herder knows his livestock, can identify medical problems, loves animals and knows where to find the best food for his goats. Dogs usually work until the age of 10 and then retire with their goats.



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Eli Walker is curator at CCF. A young, intense American, he came here as a student in 2011, and is now in charge of research data and managing the keepers. On his desk is a photograph of a magnificent battle-scarred cheetah, a male called Miers. Walker looks at it fondly. 'He's the coolest cat I've ever worked with,' he says. 'He was so chilled.'

After being blamed for killing livestock – though Walker thinks there was little evidence – Miers was trapped by a farmer. It's a fairly typical story: the farmer claimed to have kept him in a cage for two weeks before contacting CCF. 'But based on his condition and behaviour, it is likely they'd had him for much longer,' he says.

'People think, "Oh, it would be cool to have a cheetah," then realise it's a very bad idea,' says Walker. Miers was not in a good condition. 'You can see when a wild animal has given up – when they break and just don't care. Initially, a wild cheetah would be freaking out – probably hurting itself trying to get out of that cage.'

Miers was depressed. He was put in a spacious quarantine area – the Leopard Pen, where they monitor new arrivals. Here, the cheetahs have

virtually no contact with humans. Over the next few weeks, he started getting his character back. Under Walker's supervision, he was transferred to Erindi, a private game reserve. Miers has a tracking collar so they can monitor his progress.

When CCF gets a call about a trapped cheetah, the best scenario, Walker says, is 'to convince the person who captured it to let it go. We wouldn't recommend it if it's going to cause the same problems, but some people will just put up cages indiscriminately, and say, "We don't really want to kill it, will you come and get it?"' A community development manager will discuss things to see if they can help. If the person refuses to release the cheetah or it is injured, then CCF will take it.

Younger cubs are housed together to encourage them to form a coalition. If they are able to hunt, they may later be released together, too.

'I love figuring out the best process to release cats back into the wild,' says Walker. 'But it's a very small contribution to cheetah conservation overall. It's more about the work we do to *keep* cheetahs in the wild, like our guarding dog programme and the education programme and the outreach work we do with farmers – that's where the real difference is being made.'

Later, Marker takes us to meet Dominic. Before we go into his pen, she instructs us to leave our bags outside (he likes to attack bags). He prowls insouciantly around, rubbing up against Marker, who inspects his teeth. She is careful about being photographed – she doesn't want cheetahs to be perceived as pets in any way, but is adamant about their value as ambassadors. Marker's first ambassador was Chewbaaka, whom she acquired as a very sick cub 24 years ago. 'I struggled to keep him alive, but he survived and we were closely bonded. He'd meet schoolchildren and farmers when they came here, and was featured in documentaries – millions of people saw him walking with me in the bush. I was his cheetah mother. He taught Namibia what a cheetah was – why we should conserve his species. He was very, very special.'

He died in 2011, aged 16, and there is a memorial to him at CCF.

Cheetahs are crucial to the whole ecosystem. 'Our antelope stay fast because animals like the cheetah weed out the sick and the slow,' says Marker. 'It only eats what it needs, then the carcass feeds the jackal, the honey badger and the vultures – so the jackal doesn't need to go after the goats.' But it's a tough life for a cheetah. It may be fast, but once it has caught its prey, it's often chased off by larger, stronger predators – leopards or lions – before it has had a chance to eat.

There is evidence that the cheetah is the oldest of all the big cats. It would be catastrophic if they were to disappear. Where would Marker like to see CCF in 10 years' time?

'I would like to see total integration of wildlife management with livestock farming,' she says. 'I would like not to have a cheetah conservation fund at all – for there to be no need for it.'

Support the award-winning livestock guarding dog programme at cheetah.org.uk/donate