



Where *have all* *the* lions gone?

By Laurence Frank

“**L** Laurence, this is too dangerous.”
Translated into his native Turkana, Stephen was saying, “Laurence, you are the dumbest white man in all Christendom.”

“We’ll never get data on cub survival if we don’t count cubs. And this is the only way to do it.”

“But she charged us the last time we tried this.”

“Yeah, but they are very close this time – I know we can get a count.”

“But we are in the middle of two hundred buffalo.”

“Yeah, but they don’t seem to mind us, and I really want to count those cubs.”

Just then Female 11 burst out of a bush 30 yards in front of us, with the distinctive roar of a mama lion defending her brood. Simultaneously, her big uncollared companion (known to us as 11’s Friend) charged us from the right. At fifteen yards, scientific detachment gave way to gibbering terror and I fired a shot in front of 11, spraying gravel in her face. Both females evaporated in a gratifying instant, and we picked our way through the buffaloes back to the car, grinning at each other the way fools

do when they have once again survived their own stupidity. We each had counted three small cubs.

Besides having glorious good fun and annoying blameless animals, was there some point to this idiocy? We were doing our modest bit to prevent the disappearance of wild lions in Africa. Six years ago, I abandoned my beloved spotted hyenas and came to the thornbush of Kenya’s Laikipia District to initiate one of the first conservation studies of lions and other predators in the cruel, hard world of man.

Around the world, predators have disappeared because they kill man’s livestock. It took Western Europeans thousands of years to wipe out bears and wolves. In eastern North America, it took a few hundred years. Better guns, traps and poison cleared wolves and grizzlies from the American West in a few decades. Now it is Africa’s turn.

For years, conservationists have been rightly concerned about dwindling populations of elephants, rhinos and apes. But while no one was watching, the great predators have been disappearing even faster. Go to any national park in Africa and you will see lions and hear hyenas. But outside parks, the situation is

drastically different. Until recently, conservationists estimated 100 000-200 000 wild lions in Africa. A survey last year by the African Lion Working Group concluded that there is probably less than 23 000 left. There are perhaps 15 000 cheetahs, and possibly 5 000 wild dogs. We know nothing about hyena numbers, but they are dwindling, too. Only the adaptable and elusive leopard is holding its own.

Today, the majority of predators survive in national parks, most of which are too small to ensure long-term survival of viable populations, and too widely separated to prevent the genetic problems that arise when isolation causes close relatives to interbreed. Political instability can wipe out a protected area in weeks, as we have seen in the tragedy of today’s Zimbabwe.

Even within protected areas, most carnivores die at the hand of man: in parks, 50% of the lions are killed by humans. (In and around Yellowstone, the world’s first national park, an astounding 89% of grizzlies are killed by humans.) This occurs partly through poaching – many African carnivores die in snares set for edible game – but mostly because these animals



response to the twin threats of predators and human raiders, still constant concerns today.

During the day, livestock are closely tended by herders who bring the animals back to spend the night in thornbush bomas ('kraals' in southern Africa.) Wildlife, from dik-diks to elephants, is abundant on the ranches, where low stocking rates maintain healthy rangeland. Most importantly, ranchers in Laikipia have become ardent conservationists, committed to preserving the habitat and wildlife.

In all of Kenya, only on Laikipia ranches is wildlife increasing. Most of the communal areas, however, are badly overgrazed and wildlife is less common.

With enthusiastic help from Laikipia ranchers, we have captured over ninety lions; they are released wearing radio collars and short an ounce of blood, taken for disease studies. By tracking them from the air, we have learned that the average lion moves over five or six ranches, but almost never crosses onto the communal areas, where there is too little natural prey and too many people ready to poison stock raiders.

The use of cheap and readily available poison is on the increase in the tribal areas; a single poisoned carcass can kill a pride of lions, a clan of hyenas, and scores of jackals and vultures.

While aerial tracking gives us invaluable information on movements, it cannot tell us much about ecology. How many lions are associated with the collared individual? How often do females give birth, and how well do cubs survive? What happens to a pride when some are shot after killing one too many cattle? Does the death of a pride male mean that all his cubs will die in the jaws of the new male who replaces him?

With tame lions in a national park, we could just drive up and watch them. But after a century of experience with guns, non-park lions are extremely wary, staying deep in Laikipia's thick bush by day, and moving only at night. In order to answer these questions, we track them on foot, hoping to catch enough glimpses through the bush to gradually build the biological information we need to intelligently manage this population.

Glimpses are all we usually get, as the cover is so thick that often only a few yards separate lions from scientists when we become aware of each other, and they slip off into the bush.

The collars also help us learn what sort of lion is likely to become a serial killer. When we get a call from a ranch that cattle have been attacked, we check for collared animals in the vicinity, building up dossiers on bad characters.

It does appear that there are well-behaved lions and naughty ones: of those we originally captured on a livestock kill, 40% have been shot for subsequent misbehaviour. Of those captured under other circumstances only 14%

have been shot for killing cattle. Thus far, females seem to be the main culprits, especially old loners with no one to help them catch wild prey.

Should we remove such animals preventively as soon as they become a problem? Can we set objective criteria, removing an animal after it has killed say, three cattle in a month? Or five, in six months? How should criteria differ in the communal areas, where the loss of a cow is much more serious than on a ranch?

If a lion is to be condemned, should both ranchers and Masai first have to demonstrate that they are using the best livestock management methods to avoid attacks in the first place? Today, there is no policy, nor even a competent authority to make decisions.

All the biology in the world won't save lions if people continue to kill them at the current rate. And they will be killed as long as we do not protect livestock.

Elaborate and expensive measures are not realistic for Africa, so it is fortunate that, properly applied, ancient African livestock management methods are very effective.

Our research has shown that if bomas are properly constructed and well maintained, cattle cannot burst out in panic when lions prowl at night. If there are dogs and a night watchman at the boma, they can rouse the sleeping herdsman and chase off the lions before the cattle panic. If herds were tended by young men, instead of by children, most predators can be frightened off before they kill.

Yet bullets and poison are always cheaper and easier than even the most modest improvements to husbandry. Unless lions and other wildlife have value to African people, they will soon disappear outside of parks.

Each year in Laikipia, 30-40 stock-raiding lions are shot and left to rot. How much would these be worth to sportsmen?

Although there is currently no sport hunting in Kenya, we are working on a system to enlist sport hunters to remove problem lions. Income thus generated would be used to compensate cattle owners, help the Masai improve their husbandry, and pay for wider lion conservation efforts.

And what of Female 11's cubs? Today, one of them is known as Female 30, and she has her first litter. We will have to count them soon.

Dr Laurence Frank is based at the University of California, Berkeley. He studied the biology of spotted hyenas for over 20 years before turning to predator conservation. His work is supported in part by the Wildlife Conservation Society, the National Geographic Society, Busch Gardens, and other conservation organizations. For further information, he can be reached by email: lgfrank@uclink.berkeley.edu.

have huge home ranges, and are likely to cross park boundaries into lands inhabited by humans and their livestock.

Although biologists have studied African predators in parks since the 1960s, we know next to nothing about their behaviour and ecology where they must cope with high levels of human persecution.

Lions are highly social creatures, dependent upon their fellows to help hunt, and then defend their kills. What happens to their social system when 20-30% is shot each year? Nor do we know much about preventing their depredations on livestock. Are there ways of tending cattle and goats that would reduce the number taken by predators, yet still be affordable and acceptable to impoverished, conservative African herding tribes?

Laikipia is an ideal laboratory for this study. Lying astride the equator at the base of Mount Kenya, it is a microcosm of rural Africa. Near the mountain, subsistence farmers and market gardeners get enough rain to eke out a living.

Further north, commercial cattle ranches owned by descendants of the original British settlers, surround the lands of the Laikipiak Masai who subsist on their herds of goats and cattle. Both ranchers and tribesmen still use the ancient herding systems that evolved here in

The *first lions*

By *Gunyana*

Much has been written about lions since the first people were able to depict their daily lives on walls of caves, graduating to papyrus, paper and now floppy disks.

Leonine magnificence, nobility and regal demeanour have been extolled. There is the feeling of naked fear that pervades when one when one is on foot, faced with the cat in long grass or thick bush. The sound of the growl that means he has seen you, and the knowledge that he knows where you are while you are unable to see him, is something that infects the adrenal glands in a unique way. The scalp prickles, the hands moisten, and the clarity of your own awareness is like crystal. Passing years and experience can reduce the time lapse to return to a steady heartbeat, but even now that initial warning rumble still creates a special frisson, acknowledging that the hunter can also be the hunted.

My first lion hunt didn't really produce any of the above. As a young National Parks Ranger stationed at Chete Safari Area on the edge of Lake Kariba, I had been called in to the Warden's post in Binga, a settlement further up the lake. One Sunday morning the District Commissioner's Agricultural Officer, Mike Bunce, dropped in and mentioned that lion had killed some cattle at a village about 30 kms down the road to Chete. Up till then I had had very little to do with lion, apart from seeing

them in the game reserves. However I was a Parks ranger and my job included dealing with problem animals, so rounding up a Game Scout I headed down to see what I could do. At the village we saw where the lion had got into the stockade of poles some 10 feet (3m) high and killed three of the beasts inside. What immediately impressed me, green as I was, was that the lion had then lifted a half-grown cow and taken it out of the stockade to eat at its leisure about 25 yards (22m) away. The

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strength of an animal that can lift its own body weight over a ten foot obstacle is a sobering thought, when you get on his tracks with your 375 Jefferey clutched in your youthful hands! Tracking the male was difficult as he went down to a nearby stream to drink before continuing. With the thick grass and fallen leaf cover on the ground, everyone, including the slaughtered cows' owner, was hard at it to keep

on the track.

It was now afternoon, hot and steamy in the thick riverine vegetation. Heads bent and communicating only with gestures and shakes or nods, we tracked the lion at snail's pace, to where he had crossed the sandy riverbed. We noticed his right front foot was off-set, indicating an injury. Crouched under a canopy of tangled Jesse bush, we were trying to find a sign of the lion's passing, when the local man pointed ahead of us. Looking intently in the direction indicated, I searched the area, and seeing nothing, shook my head. The stabbing forefinger got more emphatic, and looking again I dropped my gaze to within about 8 – 10 yards (8m) of where we stood. Lying flat on his side, fast asleep with his back to us, was the cattle killer. It took a few seconds to figure out exactly how he was positioned, and a 375 between his shoulder blades brought things to a conclusion without a twitch or growl. Needless to say there was backslapping all round and the rest of the village arrived to administer a few blows with sticks to the killer of the cows. After loading the carcass, I headed back to Binga and a cup of tea, when Mike Bunce drove up and said, "Aren't you going to do anything about that lion?"

"Sure," I said, "we're skinning him now." The look on his face was my reward for my first lion.

This left me with an entirely unwarranted

confidence in my ability to deal with lions, but youth knows no bounds. My next encounter with cattle-killing lions was an entirely different affair.

The farming areas in the highveld extend up the edge of the Zambezi Valley where the tsetse fly had been eradicated or kept in check at least. From time to time, however, the denizens of the valley move up the river courses, following the dwindling water supplies and the resultant concentration of game. When they arrive at the top of the stream courses, there is food in abundance. Fat, devoid of horns, and bewildering in their stupidity, the cattle present a veritable smorgasbord to a pride of lions.

Such a pride moved into the Doma farming area north of Sinoia (Chinhoyi) town. A male, two lioness and four half-grown cubs can consume a lot of beef and they proceeded to do just that. I was called in after colleagues had accounted for the lioness and four cubs. This left the male, who, having grown accustomed to the easy pickings, stayed on despite the loss of his companions. He had, however, got smart, and I pursued him for two full weeks. I tied young sheep up in cages and sat in uncomfortable trees for nights on end. I tracked him from sun up to sundown.

Parting the reeds on the Rikuti River with my rifle barrel we came up on him several times, but all there was was a warm patch where he had lain. I resorted to poison with capsules of strychnine and atropine; he sicked them up and carried on except now he would not come back to a kill. I tried trap guns, a single barrel Greener set off by a trip wire, without success, and eventually went to my head office in Sinoia to collect a set of Canadian Bear Traps as a last resort. While I was there I learnt of the death of my friend and mentor Len Harvey, killed by a lion at Wankie.

It was late when I arrived back at the farm, and Hugh and I left to set a line of trap guns along an old road where we had seen the lion spoor several times. I had three guns to do, and we were setting the third in the headlights of the Landrover when a gun went off. Damn, I thought a wild pig. Then we heard a coughing grunt. Back down the track in the headlights we found a large, almost maneless lion, lying in the road, a pattern of AAA shot neatly behind his shoulder. All together, the pride had killed nearly 35 head of cattle over a period of 5 weeks. We arrived back at the farmhouse where it took us a while to convince Hugh's wife that we were late for supper because we had the killer lion in the truck. It tipped the big scale at 475 lbs.

I moved to Wankie National Park from the Zambezi Valley area and it wasn't long before I had to go out on another problem-lion hunt. Near the railway village of Dett, lions had moved in from the National Park and proceeded to terrorize the local villagers by killing their goats.

Senior Ranger Willie Koen and I, accompanied by Japan, one of the finest trackers I have ever worked with, went to investigate. We saw where the lion, two males, had managed to extricate a goat from a stoutly-constructed stockade and eaten the beast. With Japan on the tracks we headed off at a smart pace. A while later Japan eased off, and waved a hand telling us to slow down. We halted and looked at him enquiringly. Then I heard it. From about 30 yards away in the grass and scrub came that sound - a growl laced with evil.

Try as we might we couldn't make out a single hair of the lion, and all the time the challenge went on. Japan moved in between Willie and I, and we edged apart to try and catch a glimpse of it. Then, abruptly, silence. We waited and then moved towards the spot, every sense heightened and at red alert.

We followed the tracks for another hour, when I spotted the one lion about forty yards (36m) distant, about to cross the fence line back into the park. The 375 Jeffery came up, and click - a misfire! Willie could see the lion but had a difficult shot with his 458. It caught the lion back beyond his ribs, and in a confusing whirl, the lion charged. I barely had time to work the

To this day I can hear the growl the rustle of grass and see the tawny apparition break through a small bush. All seemed to take place in slow motion but Ken hadn't even managed to get the safety catch off his 458 when it was all over.

bolt and fire, with Willie dropping the animal five yards (3.6m) from our little group. In the confusion, Japan who had carried my 450 Double, was frantically patting the ground around his feet for the cartridges while keeping his eye on the now recumbent lion.

We took the body back to Main camp and it was placed in the cooler room until a National Museums team could collect it for mounting. It still forms part of the display in the Museum in Bulawayo.

The next time I was subject to the infamous growling salute was as Warden in the Matetsi Safari Area. During the guerilla war everyone moved around armed, and this led too much illegal shooting for meat or for fun or bravado. I had been in residence barely a week when I received a radio message that a road maintenance foreman had been attacked by a lion close to the headquarters. None the wiser but expecting a problem, I took my double 577 loaded with soft points, and accompanied by Den Mason, a ranger on station, went to investigate. Finding tracks from the previous day we tried to decipher what had happened, as we had no witness to the event. Coming across

an area in the short grass that had been flattened, we could see that there were dried patches of blood and short lion hairs sticking to the congealed blood. We decided to do 4-5 a 360 sweep to try and locate tracks exiting the general area. I walked in front with Ken paces behind. Because it was fairly open, with patches of short grass and scrub mixed with clumps of young palm trees, there did not appear to be any danger. I had just walked up to an area of short grass when I heard the growl.

Time slows so that milliseconds seem forever. I backed up two paces and when the lion burst from cover twenty feet away (6m), I shot it once in the shoulder. To this day I can hear the growl, the rustle of grass, and see the tawny apparition break through a small bush.

When I left National Parks in 1980 I went into the only field I felt qualified in, Professional Hunting. This occupation has the added hazard in that you have the responsibility towards a client while hunting dangerous game, as happened in a hunt I did with an American client in the Westwood area near Victoria Falls. We were hunting lion, and were fortunate to come across fresh tracks of two big males. We followed them and found a Kudu bull only just killed - the tracks indicated that the lion had seen or heard us, and decamped.

We proceeded to build a hasty blind nearby with leafy branches. Once this was done we retired for lunch, certain that the lion would be back for theirs later in the day.

Leaving the vehicle a mile or more away, two hours later we walked up the track and then cautiously entered our blind on all fours, as silently as we could. Peering through the cover, I swore as I realised that the Kudu had disappeared. Away from the blind we could see where a broad trail had been left as the lion dragged the Kudu further up the hill. We slowly followed the drag mark until almost on top of the ridge. There lay two large maned lions in the shade of a Teak tree. Peering through binoculars I could see that they were two magnificent specimens. A whispered consultation took place, with the client wanting to know which was the biggest and best. I was certain that the two were evenly matched, as is often the case when male lion pair up, but to avoid argument I said, "The one on the right." Now the client was an excellent shot so when the shot went off and the right-hand male jumped to its feet, I was a little concerned. Not as concerned as the second lion who was decamping at marvellous speed but right at us.

The client then fired at this lion which carried on until my 577 broke its neck close to where we stood. Not visibly impressed with the situation I asked the client to explain whereupon he replied "I wanted to see for myself so I shot above them into the tree so that they would stand up".