

Hlambanyathi Game Reserve  
P.O. Box 19  
Mkuze  
3965

#### Report 7: Cheetah female obtained from NCMP

The female has used five denning sites in the first month of the cubs' infancy, moving them on average every six to seven days. These den sites were relatively close to one another ranging from 30 to 60 meters. We have had about 160 mm of rain during November so the grass has become lush and thick towards the end of the month, making sightings of the cubs more difficult. The cubs are not yet relaxed in any human presence and usually hide for the first five minutes of an encounter. If you sit still and quiet they will usually come out and start playing with their mother or one another.

5 November: It rained about 40 mm during the night and we still had some light drizzle coming down the following morning. The female remained with her four cubs throughout the night and I found her at the first denning site with the cubs suckling. The last time she has eaten was on 1 November so I fed her pieces of a warthog carcass. The meat was cut up as suggested by Deon with no pieces of bone or sinew attached. This would ensure that little smell is left over after she has fed which would leave no trace for any scavengers/predators in the area. We fed her a total of between 3 and 4 kilo's (estimated weight). I left after taking a couple of photographs.

6 November: We had about another 20 mm of rain through the night. She was still at the first denning site and I only had a look to see whether everything was still OK. I left after less than a minute.

7 November: When I arrived at the den site in the early morning it was still bitterly cold. The cubs were lying in a heap on top of one another, right next to the female. I brought along another 4 kg's of meat to feed her. In stead of eating the meat at the denning site (as she did on the 5<sup>th</sup>) she took the largest piece of meat from the bucket and walked away with it, leaving me alone with the cubs. She lay down after about 120 meters where she started consuming the meat. I followed with the bucket and stayed with her whilst she finished everything. After 10 minutes or so she moved back to the cubs and lay down behind them. They started suckling immediately. It seems that she spilled two small pieces of meat on the 5<sup>th</sup> and this had a very strong smell about it. She probably did not want a recurrence of this happening which is why she took the meat away from the den and finished it there. I threw away the two old pieces of meat which at this time had a consistency similar to jelly.

8 November: She was at the den site and did not seem happy to see me at all. I left after determining that the cubs were still alive.

9 November: Arriving at the first denning site I found out she was not there anymore and neither were the cubs. Whilst walking back to the vehicle I decided to go past the area where I saw her on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November. She has relocated the cubs to this site, a movement of only 40 meters or so. I believe that this den site is a better one than the first, seeing that there is more hiding places underneath this pushed over *Acacia*. This movement has taken place six days after giving birth. It seems as if one of the cubs' eyes are starting to open. The other three were fast asleep so their eyes were closed in any case.

10 November: All the cubs' eyes were open which would give a time of 7 days after birth. The eyes are a deep blue colour at this stage, and they did not seem to be able to see very well and to discern me as an intruder or threat of some sort. The female was not with them and I found her later on next to the fence line where she has caught a young impala ram.

14 November: She has relocated to another den site about 60 meters to the north. This movement also happened after six days in the den. She was extremely relaxed and allowed me to come within about 2 meters from her and the cubs. I took a couple of photographs and left. Later that day I fed her some pieces of meat we had and she did the same thing as on the 7<sup>th</sup> by taking the largest piece of meat and walking a 100 odd meters or so and eating away from the denning site.

17 November: I found her at den site 3 suckling her cubs and looking extremely well fed. On the way back I saw some vultures landing and on inspection found a reedbuck female presumably caught by the cheetah. There were 4 vulture species at the carcass and they had almost finished everything by the time I arrived there.

20 November: The cubs were at the third den site and we found the female quite a distance from the den where she had caught a baby impala. These were becoming quite plentiful at this stage.

21 November: I found the cubs at the third denning site, with the female lying in some shade about 30 meters from them. This was the first time that the cubs realized that I am something different than a cheetah and they reacted by hissing and spitting when they saw me. After a while they calmed down but refused to do anything but stare at me with large eyes. Their eyes are starting to become more amber in colour and are a bluish green at this stage.

22 November: The female and cubs were busy relocating to the fourth denning site. I found her with all four cubs underneath an Acacia tortilis tree, about halfway between den sites three and four. When I arrived later that day she was at the fourth denning site, about 40 meters from den site 3. This movement has taken place after eight days in den site 3.

25 November: She was at the den site with her cubs and were suckling them. It was a very hot day and I did not stay for too long.

27 November: We found the female while she was hunting in the rain and witnessed an unsuccessful chase after a young lone impala male. We followed her for about an hour as she walked around looking for prey and decided to leave her and come back later. The cubs were not at the den. We found her again at about 16:00 that afternoon and it seems as if she had caught something small (probably another baby impala) and was on her way back to the new denning site. We followed her back as she walked straight to the new den site, called her cubs, flopped down and allowed them to suckle. This is the first time that I drove closer in a vehicle and when they saw me they ran off. The female called them closer and as long as we (and the vehicle) were silent they ignored us completely.

29 November: The female was not at den site 5 but her cubs were. I drove closer in the vehicle and they ducked for cover immediately. We only had sporadic sightings of little faces peeking at us through the thick grass and disappearing again. The female has caught another baby impala and was back at the den at about 17:00. The cubs are 26 days old at this stage. They are starting to become really

adventurous, climbing over mom and basically anything else they can find which could present some sort of a challenge.

2 December: The female was out hunting again but the cubs were at den site 5. They dived for cover again as we drove past. Two of the cubs are definitely larger than the other two and this could be an indication of sex, although this will have to be confirmed at a later stage.

5 December: I found the female hunting in the same area as where she was on 27 November. This area seems to have an abundance of impala with young. I found her in the middle of the day where she was lying in some shade, panting heavily probably due to an unsuccessful chase. When she got up and moved to the direction of some impala I saw earlier I left her. I found her again at 14:30 with a baby impala she has killed and eaten. Everything except for the leg bones and skin was absent and presumed eaten, this includes the vertebrae, skull and intestines. I have seen this particular female bite open a nyala fawn's skull and eat the brain but not the entire skull. A thorough search in the area revealed nothing; however, I doubt that she would have eaten the intestines. The cubs have been at the fifth den site for eight days now and another movement is probably due.