CHEETAHS

Ghosts of the Grasslands

Sunset catches a cheetah cub in Botswana’s Okavango Delta.

Though the world’s fastest land mammals, cheetahs can’t keep up as shrinking habitat and predators reduce their numbers in the wild.
Down for the count, an exhausted impala expires in a female cheetah's deadly stranglehold. Cheetahs' teeth are too small to use as daggers for large kill, but strong jaws lock around the throat of prey until the victim stops breathing.
Surprise attacks from the cover of tall grass are all in a day's play for 14-month-old cubs. Such behavior may teach young cheetahs the skills of survival in the wild—where in a few months they must fend for themselves.
IT WAS OPEN SEASON on babies in the Serengeti. Since mid-February the vast antelope herds had been raining down fawns on the rolling African plains. They were tender, glossy-eyed creatures on unsteady legs. Their mothers bedded them down under grassy tussocks and whistling thorn acacias, hoping they would go unnoticed until they were strong enough to run with the herd. All a cheetah had to do was meander around like a child on an Easter egg hunt, nosing under the vegetation till it found a treat.

A seven-year-old named Talisker and her four cubs had just finished off a young Thomson’s gazelle. Two of the cheetah cubs sat and rasped their long tongues up one another’s cheeks, preening with pleasure. When they walked, biologist Sarah Durant studied their bellies through her binoculars. The cubs ranked a 9 and Talisker an 8 on the Serengeti Cheetah Research Project’s belly-fullness scale of 1 to 14, with 14 defined as “swallowed a basketball” and 8 being about hungry enough to start hunting again. In the distance a column of sunlight broke through the slate-colored clouds. Talisker took up sentry duty atop a termite mound.

“There’s a wildebeest calf over there,” said Durant, as if hinting to Talisker. No one here roots for Bambi, except as flambe tartare. Talisker soon spotted the calf, a tawny creature about the size of a horse foal, which had made the fatal error of becoming separated from its herd. The cheetah closed on the calf from the left rear flank at a trot, not bothering to stalk or stalk.

When the wildebeest started to run, Talisker dug in behind. The two turned, the cheetah’s great doglike paws kicking up cots of dirt and grass. The distance between them narrowed. Still running, Talisker reached out and swatted the wildebeest across the haunches with her forepaw, driving it down in a tumult of dust. The wildebeest struggled to its feet and reared up to shake off the demon now locked on its windpipe. Talisker went up on her hind legs and hung on. The four cubs came bounding up from behind and shoved the wildebeest back down again. They stood on its
launches while Talisker adjusted her bite for the slow strangulation. The gnu's hoofs flailed in the air. The ears wobbled off, looking vacantly away from the kill. "Waiting for mom to prep the food," Durand said.

We waited too, and I reflected that I had come to a strange pass in my career as a natural history writer. My predilection was familiar enough, but I was not accustomed to such pretty killers. My inclination has always been to write about the less popular animals on earth, but taking on cheetahs was a bit like a crime reporter being asked to profile a Sports Illustrated batting star model. I was appalled, and also indescribably attracted.

A cheetah, ambulating across a field is among the most beautiful animals on earth, long legged and alien, shoulders rolling, ribs as a Jaguar model on the run. Then the cheetah breaks into its 60-mile-an-hour sprint, and it's as if Naomi Campbell has transformed instantly into Jackie Joyner-Kersee. The spine axes up and down with each large stride; the wide nostrils flare, the head sweeps back and forth so the cheetah's big, copper-colored eyes on its prey, and the tail stretches out to counterbalance the cheetah's weight on sharp turns. It becomes a blur of golden fur and dark spots, all speed and deadly finesse.

So why appalled? It had to do with human attitudes. Partly it was my own misguided notion that a creature as beautiful as the cheetah, the poster child of the animal kingdom, should need no help from me. And partly it was because cheetahs are cats, and they elicit the sort of cat-lover sentimentality that makes me cringe. One day a conservationist who ought to have known better pointed out the dichotomous black lines running down from the inside corners of the cheetah's eyes and described the cheetah to me as "the cat that cries." Something about cheetahs makes us patronize them. Maybe it's because they're the only big cats that do not normally attack humans or because they're the only ones that cannot roar.
Cats in Crisis

A semicircle mouth doubles as a watchtower for two brothers—a "coalition"—that scout for predators and prey in their territory. Chacals once thrived in Africa and Asia. But feline predation haunts their young, and farms and ranches have reduced their habitat, leading to indiscriminate killing by ranchers protecting livestock. Today, some 12,000 chacals live in 30 countries, helped by conservationists—and a growing number of ranchers.

The Semangkuti Anti-poaching Unit on the Semangkuti Chacal Research Project has come to know more than 1,000 individual chacals, using their distinctive spot patterns as identifiers. They have also constructed genealogies, stretching back to Tulaker's case to her great-grandmother. Duranti, who now heads the project, is a tall, handsome Englishman from the Zoological Society of London, 36 years old, strong-chinned and soft-spoken. As we soared at the wildest apex, Duranti recalled meeting Tulaker as a cub and later as "a hopeless adolescent." The chacals' deadly presence does not come easily. Duranti said, Cubs spend about 18 months with their mothers learning how to survive, and it may take them another year or two to become good hunters. They often start out chasing wildly inappropriate prey, including buffalo. Tulaker, said Duranti, would hunt right in front of a buffalo and then be surprised when it took away her kill. But she also learned from her mistakes. "Tulaker's a pretty switched-on chacal. She's quite vigilant, and she moves away if she sees a new one or a hyena. She hides her kill where she can. She's a good hunter." She's also a successful mother, having already reared two litters to independence. Most females, said Duranti, rear fewer than two unaned clients to independence in an average lifetime of seven years. Tulaker was now sitting off some side, leaving her cubs to sort out the wildcub. One of them touched it gingerly with a forepaw. Another stared down at it, then at its mother, then back at the carcass, like a kid contemplating
FEMALES RAISED IN VICE fill the bellies of cubs while
their mothers scan for trouble. Starting as the weak
neighbours, cheetahs eat fast before lions, hyenas,
and even a flock of vultures force them away.
his first lobster dinner and hoping for help.
"Wildbeest have thick skin, compared with gazelles," Durant said. Cheetahs also have small, delicate mouths. Their big eyes are set forward, the better to focus on prey, and the foreshortened face leaves little room for the mouth. One cub practiced a clumsy thrust bite on the carcass. Another gnawed at the thin, webbed flesh where the hind leg joins the belly.

The heat shimmered sideways across the open plain. The clouds became cottony and low overhead. When the sun came up (from the kill now), their mouths were blood red. Infants joined them, and the wildbeest's indigestion settled with golden fur and spots and black ears and sharp elbows. Sometimes two cheetahs fed opposite each other, with the tops of their heads pressed together like bookends. Sometimes they ate cheek to cheek and growled at one another over tidbits. After an hour the cubs had swallowed round belly, and their faces looked like kohaku ornaments, covered with blood all the way back to the ears. They took turns eating now.

"She's about a 12," Durant said, eying Tsalokho's belly. Still room for topping off. "It might hurt, but she'll do it." Cheetahs normally get a kill only every one to three days and sometimes lose their dinner to lions and hyenas. So getting makes sense. Three hours later the cheetahs were still occasionally picking at their food, but mostly lying around, their bellies now spotted white billocks rising from their indigestion. Vultures had begun to edge closer, like waiters who want a banquet to be over so they can clean up and go home.

As I lay Durant and I were talking about why cheetahs are so scarce, and I asked him, "Do you ever get to here alone?"
"Surely everyone does," she joked. "They are the thugs and bullies of the Serengeti. Of everywhere, really."

Cheetahs are not sturdy enough to defend themselves from either lions or hyenas, so they have become expert at being elsewhere employed. If their rivals hunt main, by night, cheetahs hunt by day. If their rivals kill thick bodies of wildebeest, cheetahs concentrate on gazelles and hunt where the prey is less dense and there are fewer eyes to notice them streaming through the grass. The cheetah's famously swift chase lasts on average only ten seconds, and bravery is a good thing. It means the barrier of a chase is less likely to attract attention. After bringing down her prey, a cheetah will typically lie still for several minutes to recover her breath.
and also to check that no one is watching.

For a cheetah the real danger is not losing a kill but losing her cubs. Ninety-five percent of cheetah cubs die before reaching independence. Hyenas kill them out of hunger, lions apparently out of bad habit. Durant theorizes that killing cheetah cubs is simply an extension of the male lion’s urge to kill the cubs of any unknown lioness so he can get her pregnant with his own cubs. Lionesses kill cheetah young, too, to protect their territory. Female cheetahs deal with the threat by constantly moving, preferably before their rivals even know they’re around. They occur as a phantom species, slipping into temporary vacuums between prides of lions and packs of hyenas.

Over the course of a year a female in the Serengeti will typically wander an area of some 320 square miles, larger than New York City. Several females may overlap in their wanderings, but, even so, cubs tend to be thin on the ground. Durant believes that there are no more than 250 cheetahs spread out across the Serengeti ecosystem, versus 2,800 lions and 5,000 spotted hyenas. The entire cheetah population of sub-Saharan Africa may have been small even in the best of times.

If females wander the whole city, males usually stick to a few choice saloons on the Upper East Side. Because they have no cubs to worry about, they can maintain and defend small territories, averaging about 28 square miles. Two or three males, usually brothers, may hold a territory jointly. One day Durant and I watched such a coalition, two males both pushing 12 on the belle-blushing scale, prowl through the bushes, stopping now and then to gaze at antelope and wildebeests. “I often think they watch prey the way we watch television,” said Durant. “Because it’s comforting and mindless.”

The cheetahs headed for the tallest tree in the neighborhood, an umbrella acacia, and squirted urine on the trunk, at roughly cheetah nose height—a message that according to one researcher tells small males, “I catch

Days before birth, four cheetah fetuses (opposite) died after a believed farmer shot their mother. In Namibia 96 percent of wild cheetahs roam private farmland, but conservationists like Laurie Marker, tagging a captured cheetah with farmer Ralf Ritter, hope ranchers will call them for help rather than kill these predators.

“I want my children to grow up where cheetahs run free,” Ritter says.
TRAPPED FOR EIGHT DAYS, a cheetah caught near injured calves waits to be picked up by conservationists. During its captivity, it was fed and watered, then treated for minor injuries before being tagged and released.
Tag-team Pursuit of Prey

Capable of speeds of up to 65 miles an hour, a male cheetah catches up with a lechwe in the wetlands of Botswana and attempts to sway it down with its paw (top). Desperate and struggling, the animal manages to reach a water hole, but there the cheetah's brother joins in to wrestle the lechwe down for good. Lacking the strength of larger cats, cheetahs are masters of maneuvers. In this case, they hold the winded antelope under water until it drowns—a form of cheetah kill rarely, if ever, before recorded.
Paternity is one of the great unknowns of cheetah biology, not just for researchers but for the cheetahs themselves. A female’s home range may contain three or four male territories, and she may mate with any of the resident males, as well as with feral males that pass through. Durant has seen cheetahs mating just once. It involved a coalition of three males named Daniel, Dav, and Lewis, after the actor, and a female named Florence. All of them disappeared into the bush. After a few seconds Durant saw what she called “stacked cheetahs.” Daniel, Dav, and Lewis mounted one atop the other, with Florence “looking rather squashed” on the bottom. But confusion can be a good thing. Unlike lions, male cheetahs have never been known to kill cubs, perhaps because they have no way of knowing whether the cubs are their own offspring.

The question of who father the cubs is of special interest because cheetahs are a genetic mystery. In the 1980s, researchers discovered that all cheetahs are genetically similar—so much so that skin grafts from one cheetah to another produce no immune reaction. The finding caused geneticists to rethink the cheetah’s evolutionary history. Roughly 20,000 years ago cheetahs ranged around the world. At different times there were two species in North America. But cheetah populations apparently suffered a drastic decline about 10,000 years ago, and all cheetahs now living appear to be descended from a relative handful of survivors. No one really knows what this signifies for the future of the species. Some biologists suggest that, having survived the population bottlenecks and recovered, cheetahs in the wild suffer no ill effects from their genetic homogeneity.
Others believe that they may be unusually vulnerable to any small change in their environment, particularly disease. Either way, the cheetah is a conundrum. The largest animal on land, an apparent model of evolutionary fitness, is also as inbred as the average lab mouse. "The more information you get, the more fascinating an animal becomes," Durant said one day. "It doesn't matter if it shows that an animal is more peaceful than we thought, as gorillas seem to be, or more aggressive, as with chimps. It's the information itself. Anything that makes people value an animal for what it is, rather than for our fantasy of what it is, the better it is for the animal." I had a small problem figuring out now to value the Lion King as a cub killer and a leopoldopatric. But cheetahs were beginning to grow on me.

I went to Namibia, on the southwestern coast of Africa, where people were advocating a different, distinctly utilitarian view of cheetahs. The world's largest wild cheetah population lives here and thrives largely because landowners have extinguished roots from the huge private ranches that dominate the countryside. Unfortunately the ranchers mostly regard cheetahs as vermin they're just not so easy to get rid of. Namibia has about 3,000 cheetahs down from perhaps 6,000 in the 1980s, and many ranchers argue that the best hope for saving the cheetah is to let wealthy foreign sports hunters take a small percentage of them each year. It's a measure of how tangled and difficult the question of cheetah conservation has become that even some environmentalists say the ranchers are right.

Traveling Namibia's excellent two lane blacktop highways, I frequently had the strange sensation that I'd just woken up in Wyoming. The highway rolled for hours through a flat landscape of parched grass and tangle gray scrub. Red rock ranged up in knobbled sandstone ridges and strange, fanciful promontories, here a pyramid, there a planetarium. The descendants of European colonists, mostly Germans and Afrikaners, make up only about 5 percent of the population in Namibia, which won its independence from South Africa in 1990, but they still dominate the rural landscape. Their long-rooted desert towns have rows of palm trees planted in the medians and little churches lifted intact out of the Bavarian countryside. Their long limousines cruise the desert into town, and ranches where antelope roam, along with cattle and cheetahs. Almost all the ranchers I visited wore flip-flops on the subject of predators, the way American ranchers talk about wolves. At his 19,000 acre ranch of the Waterberg Plateau, Thomas van Rensburg came out to greet me and immediately held up his left hand to ask if I'd brought him a new finger to replace one bitten off a few months before by a cheetah. He was wearing a surplus German Army overcoat and he had scraggy dark hair, a thick beard, a goateed chin. Inside we sat by the fire with an old cheetah-skin rug beneath our feet and a carcass hide covering the table. Van Rensburg began to voice the basic problem with cheetahs: "In short, they eat the same meat we do and often get their first."

As a cattle rancher, van Rensburg said, he used to lose 15 calves a year to predators. The problem only got worse when he allowed cattle and covered his ranch to trophy hunting. He stocked his ranch with black-backed impalas, springbok, and blesbok, and the cheetahs ate almost all of them—$20,000 (U.S.) worth in the past three years. "Oh!" he said, "my heart pumps blood." One day you feel that the cheetah also has a right to stay here. But you get angry, and the moment you see a cheetah you shoot it. I think you would feel the same." I asked him how many cheetahs he typically took off his land. "Oh, that's a lot," he said. "Last year I think I caught and shot 127."

The accident that cost van Rensburg an index finger happened when he released his grip on the neck of a cheetah he had trapped and it spun around, catching his finger in its side teeth and hanging on. "I could do nothing, I must sit and wait till he is finished," van Rensburg said. He killed the cheetah, but he meant to suggest that his antipathy toward the

Too closely related for comfort, cheetahs as a species are genetically almost identical. Some 18,000 years ago cheetah populations were decimated. A smattering of survivors gave rise to these living today—animals whose homogeneity may make them more vulnerable to disease.
When a female and her adolescent cubs wander into their territory, two brothers—dubbed the Steroid Boys—move in, aggressively challenging the mother (below). Fearing for her cubs' safety, she bats one of the males away (left) and shows the other (right). Female cheetahs live alone with their young and mate just before the cubs reach independence at between 16 and 22 months. This cheetah paid a painful price for successfully fending off the brothers: Cuts on her leg sent her limping into the night. But she is lucky to be alive.
species was merely practical, not pathological, not Alahah after his white whale. Of the finger, he said, "I thought that was my own stupid thing to do. But I blame the cheese. For the small game because I've lost a lot of money."

The ranchers talked with readily volunteered that their cheese problems were at least partly of their own making. "There's far more chertahs today than there were a hundred years ago," one rancher said. Back then, when the water ran during the dry season, the grazing birds went elsewhere, along with their predators. But the ranchers put cattle watering holes everywhere, inadvertently making it possible for game and chertahs alike to remain in the desert year-round. The ranchers also wiped out hawks and lizards, leaving chertahs and leopards to harry predators. In the 1880s Namibia's chertahs were thriving on a growing population of antelope, particularly kudu.

The kudu went best because of drought and disease, and the chertahs increasingly turned to livestock. Ranchers were allowed to kill chertahs without limitation, and the government estimated that they took as many as 600 a year. "They were required to report kills," a professional hunter named volker Grellman recalled. "But most did. They threw 'em over an earthen-bank and covered 'em up."

The killing has since slowed to about 190 chertahs a year, according to a Namibian wildlife official, though he added that the number may still be "underreported."

None of this sounded to me like an argument for trophy hunting. But that was one of the main strategies being discussed for chertah conservation, as a way to make chertahs valuable to the ranchers. The Namibian government and several hunters have applied to the U.S. Department of the Interior for permission to import up to 50 trophy chertahs a year. U.S. permission matters because American hunters are telling to pay big trophy fees for chertahs.

"The fate of the chertahs is in the hands of the ranchers," said Grellman. "It's a heritage look-alike with a broadband, a white beard, and blue eyes peering over black reading glasses. "You have to appeal to these goodfell and offer them something in return to compensate them for their losses. If ranchers could invite hunters onto their property, he said, and charge them a thousand-dollar trophy fee to kill a chertah, "with 5 percent going to a conservation fund and the rest split between the ranch and the hunter, some positive, then chertahs might become an asset instead of a nuisance. The parasomnious mind-set of ranchers strongly militates against foraging thousand-dollar animals into and out with holes. Trophy hunting has worked with other species. The grazing birds of wildlife are once again abundant, Grellman said, because ranchers protect them as a cash crop. Cattle now sell for about $300. But a leopards can be worth $900 just for its head, and as one incredulous old rancher put it, "you get to keep the meat."

The chertah, he said, must also "become part of the utilization process."

I went out to watch a tame chertah getting his exercise in a huge hay bale, with the long red bluff of the Waterberg "like a bear up in the background. The exercise here, a bright rag on a ground-level wire and pulley system, took off, and the chertah hit out in pursuit till he pinned down his forepaws. Then he lay panting helplessly on the ground. He allowed me to handle the tie-rod pads on his foreleg and the选子的, semi-retractable claws. I felt the curved decisive on his foreleg with which chertahs snap and trip their prey when they snap out at the end of the chase. The chertah's owner, an American conservationist named Laurie Marker, was explaining to a group of Namibian agriculture students that chertahs are relatively weak killers. They can't pierce a victim's neck with their teeth, as leopards do. The adaptations that help make them such fast, efficient hunters also make them vulnerable at the moment of success to more powerful cats, like the lion. The students regarded the animal warily. Marker treated the chertah like a pet, but to them it was still a predator, the enemy.
Bad in the 1980s, when Laurie Marker first heard how many cheetahs were being killed each year in Namibia, her impulse was to save the animals by catching them and putting them in parks or zoos. She made a career as a specialist in captive breeding of cheetahs in the United States. But Marker began to think that 200 could be part of the problem, as well as the solution. So in 1991 she moved to Namibia and founded the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) with the aim of saving cheetahs in the wild.

Marker, a 44-year-old with big, tinted eyeglasses and dark ringleted hair, had little experience with animals in the wild. She is a lover of dogs, pets, and house cats, all of which she addresses affectionately: "Aren't you the most beautiful girl? Yes you are." She talks about the same way to visitors to her cheetah education center on a farm outside the town of Otjiwarongo. Moreover, she does not speak German or Afrikaans, the languages of the ranchers. Not surprisingly, the ranchers give her the sort of warm welcome customarily reserved for Americans arriving in foreign countries to tell the locals how to behave. "In the beginning," Marker said, "I thought we were going to get shot."

But her arrival in Namibia, and the cheetah survey she began to conduct among the ranchers there, sent a message: The outside world, which otherwise scarcely knew the place existed, actually cared about Namibia's cheetahs. At their ranch on the other side of Otjiwarongo, Wayne and Lisa Hanssen soon formed a homegrown cheetah and leopard conservation group called Africat. Though the 40s and 50s both sides frequently clash, Africat and CCF take the same approach of gentle persuasion with hostile ranchers. "We never say 'Don't kill cats,'" Marker said. "Because the door just closes."

Wayne Hanssen, a 35-year-old with a red mustache, a bush hat, and a smoking knife at his belt, was his first reluctant convert to his father's, a traditional rancher who had been losing more than 20 calves a year to predators and shooting any cat he came across. "He said he'd stop shooting when we got the lions down to five calves a year," Hanssen recalled, sitting on the hood of his Land Rover. To reduce poaching losses, the Hanssens tried using game animals, building better fences, and poisoning the cats at night. "Now, after ten years, he can't explain why he shot those cats. We proved by intensive fencing methods that we could minimize the losses."

Most ranchers, Hanssen quickly added, aren't willing to make the effort. But the campaign of gentle persuasion appears to have
produced at least one significant change. Having trapped a cheetah, many ranchers are no longer so eager to kill it. Instead, they call AntiCat or CCF to collect the animal. AntiCat was originally paying up to $500 for cheetahs, but both groups now oppose payment.

O ut west I went with Lee Hansen to retrieve a trapped cheetah. Three generations of the von Oppen family and their farmworkers show up to the trap in a festive conclave. Jennifer Lee von Oppen, a nine-year-old, was planning to do a school report about cheetahs, and the last thing anybody wanted was to see the cheetah dead or to break up a cheetah family. Hansen had picked up one cheetah from the von Oppens some days earlier, and now we were sure that the cheetahs waited outside the trap. They fished us in, leaving their trapped brother to pace nervously in the cage. He got out when Hansen came near, and we spoke to him soothingly. “You got your mums at home.” Hansen armed a long aluminum blowpipe at the caged animal and quickly fixed a tranquilizer into his flanks. Then the children carried the unconscious 70-pound cub to a truck for a medical examination and the trip back to the Hansens’s ranch, where he would reunite with his mother. By the end of the week, the whole cheetah family was reunited in captivity, and after a six-week quarantine Hansen released them into a game reserve as part of a large carnivore reintroduction program.

One problem with this warm scenario is that trapping can become a feel-good way to eliminate cheetahs in the wild. In South Africa most of the cheetahs have already vanished from private lands into zoos and game parks, which can be a reproductive dead end because of the cheetah’s complex mating behavior and the potential for inbreeding. Matt U. and European zoos now snap up animals and cooperate in other ways to improve reproduction by captive cheetahs. But South African zoos and

“i’m the only mother he’s known,” says Marko, with Chowaaska (left). Without the skills passed on by their real mothers, captive cubs will not survive if released into the wild. Most are sold to zoos for up to $6,000 U.S. Each, or (below), a rare king cheetah (worth $25,000) is the result of a recessive gene. Except for darker elongated spots, kings are genetically identical to other cheetahs.
A framed beneath a full moon, a cheetah prowls for impala and small game. Though these cats typically hunt during the day, they're clearly opportunists. "Cheetahs are very creative," says one researcher. "Nothing they do surprises me."
game parks have been slow to get involved, according to Laurence Martin, who manages the International Cheetah Sanctuary. Many of them treat captive-born cheetah cubs, which add for up to $8,000 apiece, as a lucrative business. "When they have animals that don't reproduce, they sell up farmers in Namibia and say, 'Please, will you catch some cubs?'" Marker said. "Most want females, and for every female caught, the farmer typically catches 8 or 15 males."

"The perception is that zoos are saving the cheetahs because they're taking problem animals that would be killed," said Nicole Schumann, a South African on the CCF staff. "But there aren't just taking problem animals. Sometimes they create problems by paying farmers to open their gates and catch cheetahs."

Despite the apparent success of captive-breeding programs at some zoos, no one is attempting to reintroduce captive cheetahs to the wild. There are relatively few wild places left in Africa or Asia big enough to accommodate cheetahs or willing to accept them. Thus both CCF and African emphasis protecting the existing population in Namibia and persuading ranchers to tolerate cheetahs in the wild. Despite their cuter orientation, both groups have come to support trophy hunting as one practical way to accomplish this. Hunting, said Marker, "won't make anybody rich, but it's an aspect of management."

I went to visit a young hunting guide named Johan Heim at his game ranch near Okahandja, where a pet cheetah named Maggie paced outside the kitchen door. As we walked, he told me about a trophy cheetah hunt that had recently been on a neighboring farm. The neighbor, he said, used to keep cheetahs as pets. Then Heim paid him the cheetah trophy fee, and the farmer's jubilant wife confessed that it was their first income of any kind in six months. "When we killed the cheetah," Heim recalled, "I said, 'Look, you're getting this money, keep those cheetahs for me. Please forget these damned traps. A lot of these farmers, they need to see it for themselves. They need a professional hunter who will shoot a cheetah on their property and give them some money."

Heim helped write Namibia's new cheetah hunting compact, which sets the terms for an ethical hunt. More than 250 professional hunters have signed the compact, and only trophies from compact signatories will be eligible for import into the United States. But biologist Sarah Durward doubts that the compact will protect cheetahs. It's too easy, she said, for cheetahs to wander from ranches that observe the compact to neighboring ranches that continue to trap and shoot.

Some hunters also object to the new rules. Wolfgang Gromofsky justified his hunting behavior who spent 14 days in the wild following the new rules would have only a 20 percent chance of even seeing a cheetah, much less getting a shot. "No landowner was likely to get more than one or two cheetah trophies for a week, and the fees would never equal what the rancher lost from having the cheetah there in the first place," he repeated these criticisms to Heim, who explained that hunters would spend these 14 days taking kudu and other common game and paying trophy fees on them, driven by the better prospect of a cheetah.

I said good-bye and headed from Heim's ranch to the nearest gas station, at an empty corner in the middle of the desert, where I happened to find the very farmer whose Heim had recently paid the cheetah trophy fee. He cared hairless, short-eyed man of about 30 in a leather jacket. When I asked him what he felt like doing a day's trophy hunting, he asked how he felt about him now that he'd earned his first cheetah trophy fee. "When I see them," he said, "I shoot them." Maybe it was just bluster, a rancher saying what his father and grandfather always said. Or maybe old animosities don't vanish in one transaction, or even in one generation. "I can't honestly say we've ever turned around a farmer so that he never shoots a cheetah again," Wayne Haarsen had told me. Then he added, "We've got a lot of farmers thinking twice."

As the end of my visit in Namibia, I went one morning to search for some radio-collared cheetahs with Laurence Martin. We took off from the dirt road outside the CCF farm, with radio-tracking antennas slamped onto both wide wings of a Cessna 206. The pilot's technique for pinpointing an animal's location was to fly figures eight in the vicinity of the radio collar signal, banking so
Not even a swarm of flies disturbs a cheetah's after-dinner catnap. Most delicate of the big cats, cheetahs choose to flee rather than fight when confronted with danger. "People are their biggest problem," says Laurie Marker. "Whether cheetahs thrive in the wild or are lost in our lifetime is ultimately up to us."

step and so low that the entire port window was filled with the thorny earth skidding past just beyond the wingtip and the starboard window was all empty, close like. Then the plane soared over, and we did sit on the other side. I got the feeling that the busy love grass and wag-in-the-niche, or with a bit bush, was going to reach out and hold the plane into the undergrowth. We leveled off just above the ground and passed past two cheetahs seated alongside a chaser. One of them looked at this winged apparition, and his eyes burned with a color like the embers of a banked fire. Then he turned away with majestic feline indifference—true, it was almost contempt.

I contemplated the trade-offs. Those eyes replaced with glossy bubbles. That head mounted on some trophy room wall, to be admired by egomaniacal patriarchs and to become decayed in time with cobwebs. The idea that such beautiful animals needed to become "part of the utilitarian process" stuck in my heart. And yet 50 or so cheetahs turned into townships each year might just make one or two ranchers think twice. And maybe this was a beginning. The plane flew on across the desert, and it seemed to me that nature seldom offers easy or reasonable trade-offs. She is content merely to teach us one hard lesson, over and over, and nowhere more vividly than in African all life comes from death. Below us wildebeests angrily tossed their manes, and springboks, balefully grazed. Somewhere in the thorny bush a cheetah ambled, cloudless thinking, as we must, about where it would find its next meal.

Look for "Cheetah Chase" on National Geographic EXPLORER this month.