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Abstract: Description of the development of the hunting behaviour of cheetah cubs in the Serengeti plains. Through play and imitation, cheetah cubs learn how to kill their own prey. At the age of 11 months, they regularly participated in stalking and chasing gazelles. They separated from the mother at the age of 13-20 months. Litter mates often stayed together for several months more. At the age of 23 months, all females were solitary, but the males stayed together for several years.

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HOW CHEETAH CUBS LEARN TO HUNT

by George W. Frame



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Through play and imitation,
cheetah cubs learn how to kill their own prey.

One sunny midmorning a cheetah family lay in the shade of a tree in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park. The mother and two seven-week-old cubs seemed hungry and restless. The cubs climbed the tree and played among the branches. When the cubs grew tired they clumsily backed down the tree and went to lie with their mother.

The cheetah did not stay with her cubs. She was hungry too, and saw a possible meal nearby. Two Thomson's Gazelles with a tiny fawn were walking only 200 yards away. The cheetah arose, trotted two-thirds the distance still unseen and then gave chase. The adult gazelles fled, but the cheetah was not after them; she was pursuing the fawn. She easily outran the tiny gazelle, and knocked it down with a swipe of her forepaw. Quickly the cheetah grabbed the prey by the throat and carried it away.

The two small cubs followed part way during the hunt, and then waited. After the chase they ran to join their mother, who was returning with the fawn. She carried the struggling prey by the throat to where her cubs were sitting under a bush. The cheetah needed to catch her breath and cool off from the chase, so she put down the live fawn which was no longer trying to get away. Mother cheetah, the two cubs, and the little gazelle all lay quietly together.

The seven-week-old cubs were too young to show much interest in the fawn, either as an object of play or as food. After several minutes the fawn jumped up and ran away, while the cubs only watched. The mother cheetah

caught the fawn again and suffocated it. She called her cubs with a *churr*, and they came and watched while she ate. After a few minutes the cubs began eating. They tore at the skin, tugging with their heads and pushing away with a forepaw. They tried to cut the meat with a scissor-like motion at the side of their jaw. Both cubs ate eagerly. They fought over the food, one cub uttering a sharp shriek and a staccato squeal.

The cheetahs ate for more than half an hour. No scavengers had found them yet. Finally the mother cheetah finished and walked a few steps away. She *churred* twice, and one cub stopped eating and went to her. The mother and cub licked each other's faces clean. The second cub started toward its mother, but then returned to the carcass, pulled on a leg bone, and continued eating. Again the mother *churred* three times, and the second cub stopped eating and hurried to her. She licked its face and body until its fur was clean.

Although these two seven-week-old cubs did not respond to the live fawn their mother brought to them, they joined in eating the meat once their mother had killed it. From the time that cheetah cubs first follow their mother at five to six weeks old, they eagerly eat meat. Cubs still continue suckling until they are about three months old, by which time they have lost their long silvery-blue mantle and retain only a small patch of dark hair behind the forelegs.

I often saw four-month-old cubs chasing Guinea Fowl and other birds.

mongooses, and small animals that are not the usual prey of cheetahs. At this age well-developed stalking, pouncing, and prey-subduing behaviour is apparent when the cubs play-chase each other. If the mother catches a hare or gazelle and rests before eating, the impatient cubs readily break open the prey's tough skin to get at the meat.

Cubs of five months old show more interest in chasing larger prey, such as gazelle fawns. I watched two cubs follow their mother while she stalked a fawn, but when the chase began the cubs waited behind. The mother caught the fawn and carried it alive back to her cubs. She put it down, but almost immediately the fawn jumped up and ran away. This time one cub chased it, while the mother cheetah sat and watched. The cub pursued the fawn more than 200 yards, with much circling, for about half a minute, but then gave up. When it was clear that the cub was not going to succeed, the mother cheetah again gave chase, caught the fawn a second time, and this time killed it. The cubs then padded, mouthed, and dragged the dead fawn around before eating.

Six- to seven-month-old cubs sometimes catch hares without their mother's help, although they still seem unable to hunt gazelles. Occasionally, however, they assist their mother in killing larger prey which she has caught. Once when a mother cheetah stalked toward a lone adult male Thomson's Gazelle, I watched her six cubs slowly stalk along about 40 yards behind. When she gave chase the cubs ran after her.

After the mother caught the gazelle, she held a suffocating bite for nearly two and a half minutes. One cub tried to bite the neck too, but couldn't get a secure grip. The other cubs tore open the gazelle's abdomen and began eating. Then the mother released her bite of the prey and sat panting, although the prey was not yet dead. The gazelle raised its head, but one cub immediately grabbed the neck and chewed and held the prey down for several minutes until it died. Mother and cubs ate until nothing was left but some skin and bones.

The cheetah family slept all day, and by late afternoon the mother again hunted and caught an adult male Thomson's Gazelle. The cubs this time only sat and watched the hunt. Afterward they joined their mother under a shade tree, where she sat resting from the chase. The cubs approached the dead gazelle cautiously, and looked at it. One cub stretched out its paw to touch the carcass. After several minutes they took turns biting the gazelle's throat, as if they were suffocating the prey. Three cubs then bit the gazelle's skin and held on tightly for nearly five minutes with their eyes closed. Afterward they joined a cub who was devouring the meat on the inner side of a hind leg. All the cubs ate slowly, perhaps because they were not very hungry, and squealed loudly as they fought with each other. After a quarter hour, they stopped eating and again bit the carcass for several minutes, lying completely still with eyes closed as they held their bite. A few minutes later they resumed eating. The gazelle seemed to

serve as a stimulus that compelled the cubs to bite.

Cubs as old as eight months were seen playing with an adult Thomson's Gazelle while it was still alive, but in this case they did not kill it. When their mother suffocated the prey, all four cubs joined in eating.

Around eleven months old, cheetah cubs regularly participate in stalking and chasing gazelles. Their mother still initiates most hunts. Often the cubs run too soon during the transition from stalking to chasing and scare away the gazelles, but sometimes a cub successfully intercepts and catches the prey. Although still far from perfect, cubs this age are finally developing the hunting skills that will enable them to survive as adults.

Of the many cheetah cubs that I watched in the Serengeti, all separated from their mother when they were 13 to 20 months old. The littermates, however, remained in groups and hunted and ate together for several months longer. By 23 months old, all females had become solitary. The males, in contrast, often stayed together for several years and perhaps some males remain together for their entire lifetime.

Young adult cheetahs, when they first separate from their mother and littermates, are relatively inexperienced hunters. Most cubs, however, have learned enough from watching and assisting their mother, and through playing and hunting with their littermates, that once they are on their own they quickly become skillful hunters.

A mother brings a live fawn to her seven-week-old cubs.

