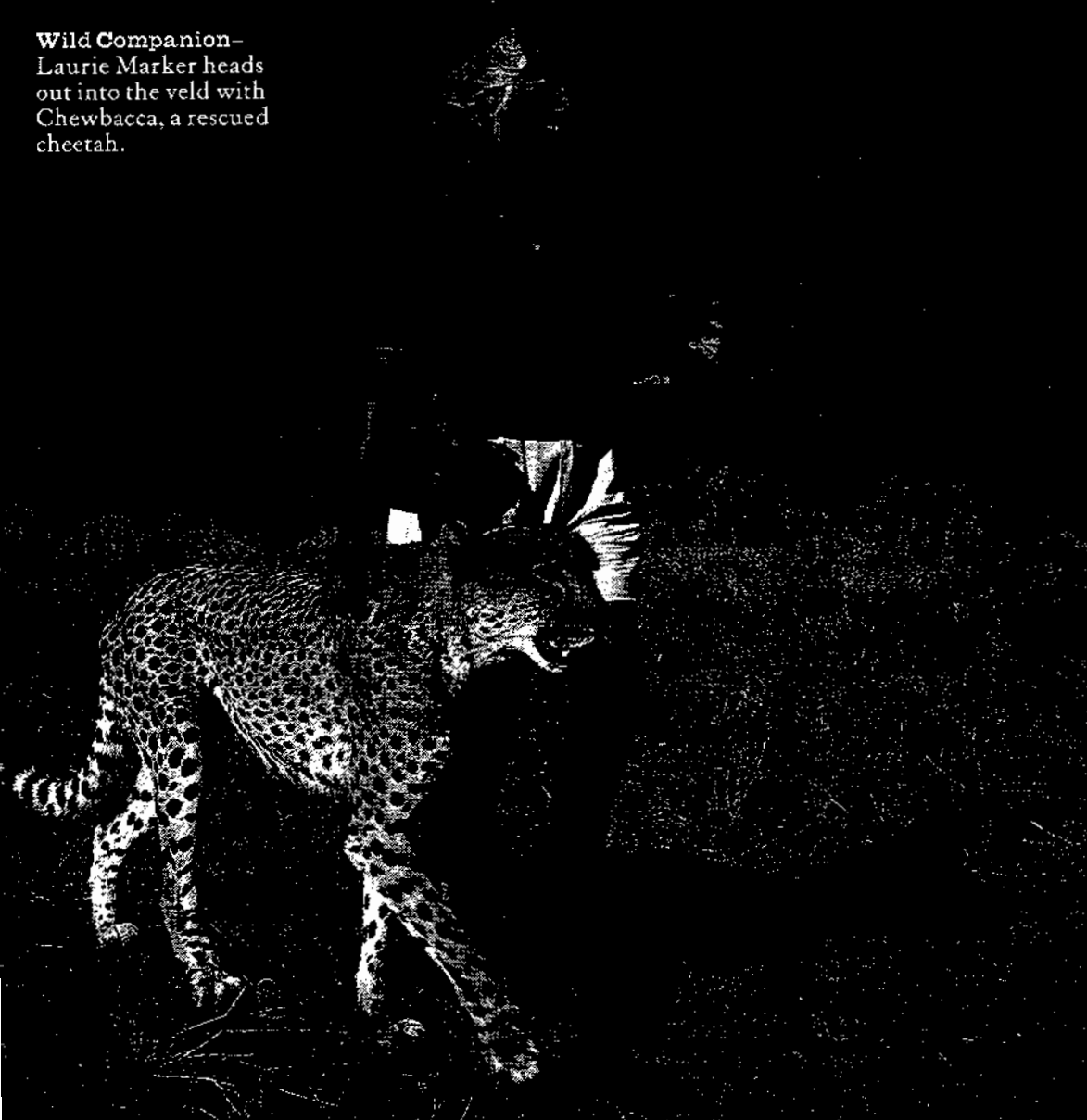


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Abstract: The article describes the story of the establishment of Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia and how farmers gradually started to cooperate for the save of the cheetahs.

**Wild Companion—**  
Laurie Marker heads  
out into the veld with  
Chewbacca, a rescued  
cheetah.



*The fastest beast of all may be speeding to extinction. But not if Laurie Marker can help it.*

# The Cheetah Runs for Its Life

By PAUL RAFFAELE

**I**T'S MIDDAY when the phone rings at a white-washed bungalow in Namibia's sprawling bush country. Laurie Marker listens to an urgent call from the manager of a nearby game-hunting ranch, then jumps into a four-wheel-drive vehicle and roars down a bumpy track, scattering herds of oryx and hartebeest.

At the 65,000-acre spread, a big male cheetah bangs against a crate-size cage, canines flashing. The captive's amber eyes glow with anger.

"I don't want him to eat any more of my antelope," ranch owner Jean-Charles Lung explains to Marker, founder of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF). But he supports her work, and as they talk he agrees that this is a magnificent specimen. "I'll give him to a farmer friend

to keep for show," Lung decides.

Marker pleads that the cheetah's natural urge to roam, to run faster than all other creatures, will be crushed by a lifetime of confinement in a small compound. Lung hesitates, but she does not give up. "You can have this fellow," he finally says, "provided you release him a long way from my ranch."

That night, an exhausted Marker makes many phone calls around the country. Finally, a farmer agrees to let the cheetah be released on his ranch 185 miles to the south.

### Born to Run

**L**AURIE MARKER was a veterinary assistant at the Wildlife Safari park near Winston, Ore., when she caught her first glimpse of a cheetah at full speed. Hurling across a hillside, the golden blur bounded seven yards a stride, four strides a second, its long, lithe spine bending and snapping like a bow at every step. "It was a revelation," she recalls.

The cheetah's shoulder blades are not attached to its collarbone, allowing it to move freely and lengthen its stride. Even its large heart, lungs and nostrils seem to have evolved for speed.

Marker noticed how each explosive dash ended in a few seconds. The cheetah can accelerate from a standstill to 60 m.p.h. in just three seconds, one second faster than the fastest Ferrari road car. But the effort overheats its system and the cheetah

can only run for about 400 yards at its top speed of 70 m.p.h. Then it must cool down, resting for at least 30 minutes.

Marker was captivated by the willowy grace of these predators, but was surprised to learn that they have a timid nature. Though they growl when angry, the cheetahs also mew and purr like a pet tabby, and even chirp like birds to call each other.

Cheetahs are one of man's oldest animal companions. Ancient Sumerians kept them 5000 years ago; Egyptian Pharaohs revered them as goddesses. Over the centuries Austrian emperors, French kings and Italian princes treasured the stately cats as status symbols.

Marker's growing attraction was sealed when she adopted a six-week-old in 1976. "Four of the litter were hissing, spitting, fireballs of fluff," she remembers. "The fifth was calm and gentle."

She named the gentle cub Khayam and raised it in her home with Sheso, her Labrador retriever. "Sheso licked Khayam's fur clean and played throat-bite with her," Marker says.

By then Marker was curator of the safari park's cheetah program, overseeing breeding. She began wondering if captive-bred animals could be released into the wild, and she took Khayam to northern Namibia to try.

In the cool mornings and late afternoons, favored cheetah hunting times, Marker and Khayam sat for

hours at water holes watching different prey species come and go.

It took two months for Khayam to begin chasing small antelope called steinbok. But the cub didn't know what to do with them next until her adoptive "mother" showed her.

"I didn't want to do it," Marker says, "but one day Khayam tripped a steinbok near me. I held it down, and when she came to look I placed her teeth over its windpipe and clamped down."

Khayam soon got the message. She learned to stretch out her tail like a rudder to steer her body through the sharp turns of the chase. And she began to use her hooked dewclaws, anchored to each front foot, to knock down and capture antelope, which she swiftly dispatched.

### Startling Discovery

**A**FTER THIS successful experiment, Marker returned to America, joining geneticist Stephen O'Brien of the National Cancer Institute and David Wildt of the Smithsonian Institution, who had just learned one reason captive cheetahs were not breeding well. Wildt had taken sperm samples of dozens of cheetahs, and he came up with a startling discovery.

"Compared with domestic cats, the cheetahs' sperm count was re-

markably low," he explains, "and 75 percent of what they produced was abnormally shaped, unable to fertilize an egg." Wild cheetahs suffered from the genetic deficiency as well.

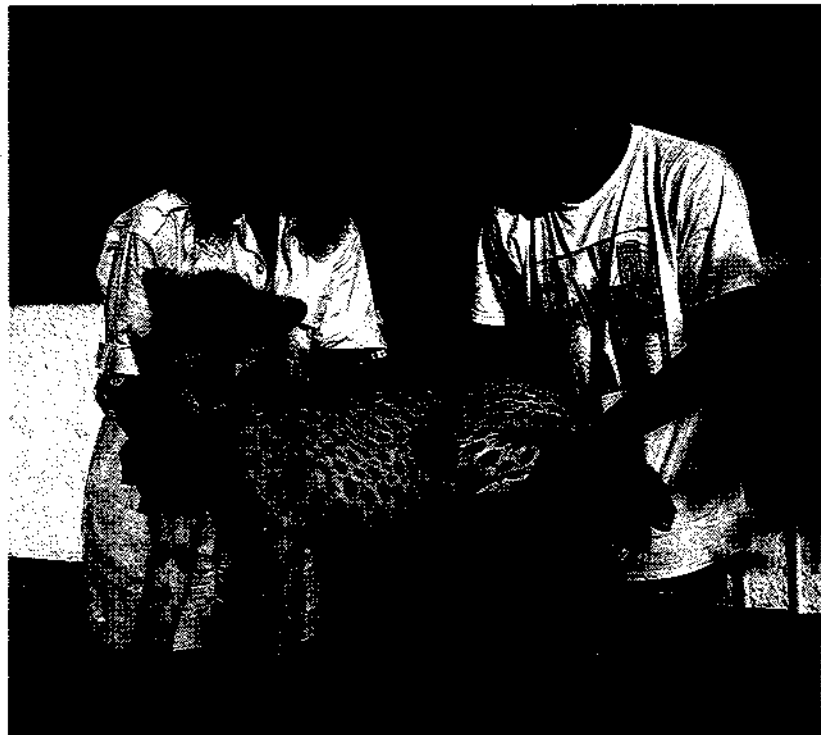
The cause was inbreeding, the result of a "genetic bottleneck." About four million years ago, when the cheetah evolved in what is now Texas,

Wyoming and Nevada, their numbers were plentiful and they crossed over land bridges into Europe, China, India and Africa. By the end of the Great Ice Age, about 10,000 years ago, many of the world's large mammals had become extinct. The cheetahs were pushed to the edge, but a few survived in Africa and Asia.

All cheetahs have since descended from those survivors. "Inbreeding leads to poor sperm quality and also to higher infant mortality," Marker notes, adding that cheetahs have a dangerous susceptibility to disease because of a compromised immune system.

Though wild cheetahs were less in danger from epidemics, their future, too, was shaky. About 100,000 cheetahs had roamed over Africa, Asia and the Middle East at the turn of the century, but habitat loss, hunting and competition from other predators reduced their numbers down to only about 30,000 by





PHOTOGRAPHED BY PAUL RAFFAELI

**Catnap**— After being captured and sedated by researchers for blood tests, this female will be released back to the wild unharmed.

the 1970s, most of them scattered across some two dozen sub-Saharan countries.

Their only stronghold was the northern Namibian bush, but here, too, they were beleaguered. Lions and hyenas had long since chased cheetahs from game reserves to the country's livestock farms. Now farmers were killing hundreds a year.

To raise concern about the fate of the cats, Marker traveled tire-

lessly across the United States with Khayam, her "cheetah ambassador," at her side. When Khayam died from kidney failure, Marker made a promise. "I'll make sure the wild cheetahs roam the earth forever."

On Marker's visits to Namibia, a local veterinarian, Arthur Bagot-Smith, introduced her to the farmers who were killing the big cats. These were stubborn men, not easily persuaded to change. But if the shoot-

ings went unchecked, there would be few cheetahs left by the end of the century. "One person can win through if you put all your heart and mind and soul into the task," Bagot-Smith said, challenging her.

### "We Must Help Laurie"

MARKER ULTIMATELY resigned a prestigious position at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., moving to Namibia in 1991. Her remote farm had no electricity or generator at first, and the tin roof leaked. Still she was sure she could make a difference. "Khayam's memory stiffened my resolve."

In the next few years, Marker would need all of that resolve. The farmers were mostly third-generation descendants of German and Afrikaner settlers who'd braved harsh conditions to turn arid land into cattle ranches. While many animal conservationists take a confrontational stand against farmers for harming endangered species, Marker knew this strategy was futile; Namibian law recognized the right of farmers to kill wild animals that threatened livestock. "I had to find a peaceful compromise," she says.

So Marker crisscrossed Namibia, hoping to persuade them to change. They were not always eager to hear what this woman had to say. Some delighted in telling her how they rode down cheetahs on their horses and happily bashed the exhausted cats to death with clubs or rifle butts.

During one discussion a farmer

stared her in the eye and barked, "Go back to America and take all our damned cheetahs with you." Marker forced a smile.

But she persisted. By putting radio collars on a dozen cheetahs and tracking their movements, Marker was able to show farmers that these cats roamed widely. A cheetah could have been miles away when a calf was killed. The culprit was just as likely a leopard or baboon.

It was progress of a sort, but most farmers refused to stop killing cheetahs until they attended a meeting nearly two years after she arrived. There were about a dozen farmers, and one of the younger ones told an unexpected story. Jörg Diekmann was 12 years old when he saw his father shoot a cheetah as she crossed a track with her two cubs. The cubs got away but were doomed to die.

"I've never forgotten my sorrow," he revealed. "Cheetahs have been here much longer than us, and they are threatened," he declared. "We must help Laurie save them. They are free to run on my farm."

It was a breakthrough. Soon another younger-generation farmer, Harry Schneider-Waterberg, announced he would support Marker. "It became like the roll of a wave," she says. "Farmer after farmer came over to ask what he could do."

To protect their livestock, Marker suggested they corral their calves close to the herders' huts until they were big enough to defend themselves. She encouraged their efforts

to stock Brahman and Brahman crossbreeds, since these cattle guard their young more fiercely.

Marker has also helped farmers acquire Anatolian Shepherds from Hampshire College's Livestock Guarding Dog project in Massachusetts. At 100 pounds, the males of this tough breed are a match for wild predators.

As livestock losses dropped, more farmers came on board. Today Marker estimates about two out of three farmers in her area of the country no longer kill cheetahs.

"Laurie has made a substantial contribution to Namibia's efforts to understand and manage the cheetah population," says Philip Stander, a wildlife expert with Namibia's Department of the Environment.

At the Cheetah Conservation Fund's headquarters, a 37,000-acre farm named Eland's Joy, several volunteers and high-level researchers help Marker learn more about the cheetah's habits.

Marker has reintroduced cheetahs into a reserve in South Africa where they had become extinct; she is also working with researchers in Iran to find ways to increase the numbers of cats in that country.

Using the Internet, Marker keeps in touch with zoos around the world to monitor the well-being and breeding potential of some 1300 captive cheetahs in 50 countries.

TWO DAYS AFTER he was captured at Jean-Charles Lung's ranch, the big male cheetah was put on the back of a truck and driven to his new home, 15,000 acres of bush backed by low, rugged mountains.

The veld was aglow with a golden sunset when Marker and her helpers released the radio-collared cheetah. Bounding from the cage, the cat paused a moment as if bewildered by his sudden freedom. Then he dashed off into the safety of the trees.

"Releasing a cheetah back into the wild always gives me goose bumps," Marker says. "It also reminds me of the promise I made when Khayam died. The world would be a lesser place without these beautiful big cats. Each one we save makes it more likely that the cheetah will be around for a long, long time to come."

*The official Web site of the Cheetah Conservation Fund is [www.cheetah.org](http://www.cheetah.org).*

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