My Wild Life
J Smith

This book is for everyone who said, " You should write a book ".

J. Smith

People often ask me, "How did you become a wildlife photographer?"

I wasn't one of those kids who always had a camera, taking pictures for family albums, working as a photographer for the high school yearbook, or ever really wanting to be a photographer at all. Looking back, I wish I had been one of those kids. I was too busy hanging out, playing sports, and chasing girls to get into any of that "nerdy" stuff.

Photography was different than it is today. We didn't have smartphones, autofocus cameras, drones, or GoPros. If you were lucky, you might have had a plastic Kodak Instamatic camera in your household that used those square flashbulbs you attached to the top. There was no digital photography; you shot film and then had to take it to the drugstore or "Fotomat" to get it processed, which would yield a pack of 3x5 prints. All of that cost money, and I didn't have any to spare.

So many of my cherished memories would be much better if I had taken an interest in photography back then. When we were about 14, my friends and I spent weekends at an old hunting cabin in the New Jersey Pine Barrens. A parent would drop us off on Friday and pick us up on Sunday night. There were no cell phones, no phones at all, and no supervision. It was our "coming of age" time, where we learned many of life's lessons at that cabin—a true milestone of my youth.

Yet, not a single picture was taken.

After high school, I drove across the country with my girlfriend in a van (real hippie stuff), and we did bring along one of those Kodak cameras. We only had one roll of film with 12 exposures, however. After messing up a few shots due to my lack of photographic skill, I think there are about seven pictures that still exist. Years after that, a childhood friend and I hitchhiked to Montana to go back to college one summer, an epic journey filled with stories. Yet again, not a single picture was taken.

You get the idea.

I was always a creative kid; I could draw and write well. My dad had what seemed to be a decent camera and even an 8mm movie camera. I also had a famous uncle who worked in Hollywood making movies, but I had little interest in photography or filmmaking then.

I didn't develop a genuine interest until I went to college. After spending a year at college in New Jersey, I transferred to The University of Montana. It was a scary and gutsy move that probably helped shape who I am today. I knew no one in Montana—zero. My assigned roommate had a girlfriend so he basically spent all his time in her room. I remember hoping someone would drop by and introduce themselves, but everyone else was already pretty entrenched in their friend groups by then.

Eventually, a guy named Bob Wolfe came by and asked if I played baseball. He was our floor Resident Advisor and would later become my best college friend. They needed a second baseman, and since I was pretty good at snagging ground balls, I was in. Friendships followed; sports have a way of fostering connections.

Wolfe was a graduate student who taught black and white photography classes to help pay his way through college. One afternoon, he stopped by my room and mentioned he was heading to a wildlife photography exhibit at the Student Union, featuring some renowned wildlife photographers. With nothing but time on my hands, I said yes. Montana is a fantastic location for wildlife photography, and displayed on temporary walls, set up in the Student Union, were some incredible pictures.

One photo, in particular, caught my attention: a Tundra Swan (at the time I didn't even know what a Tundra Swan was) shot at dawn as it took off from a mirrored lake about an hour north of Missoula. The image was backlit and perfectly focused, showing where the swan had stirred up the water as it ran to take off. There were tiny, star-like highlights in the droplets of water forming on the mirrored surface as it became airborne, with a gentle morning mist in the background. It was—and still is—one of the coolest wildlife pictures I have ever seen. I wanted that picture, but being poor, it exists only in my imagination now, likely larger than life due to the passage of time.

That picture flipped a switch in me. Wolfe suggested I take one of his photography classes. Although I didn't own a camera, the course provided each student with a Nikon to use for the semester.

Wolfe's class was a unique experience, unlike any other class I had ever taken. It was the first time I actually wanted to learn instead of feeling obligated to do so. Montana was filled with rich subject matter —cowboys, rodeos, wildlife, heavy snowfall, old barns, and majestic landscapes. The wild west.

By today's standards, my class was considered "old school." We shot black and white film using manual cameras, processed the negatives, and printed the pictures ourselves. These were the first images I produced that were larger than the standard 3x5 prints from the drugstore. I would spend hours in the darkroom. There were no computers, no photoshop, and no fancy filters. I quickly realized that the darkroom was where most of the magic occurred and I immersed myself in the process.

Eventually, one of my roommates sold me an old Olympus camera along with a couple of lenses, and that's when my journey began. Looking back, I realize I had always been a fan of photography without fully recognizing it. Growing up, I loved LIFE magazine. It was filled with incredible images from around the world, captured by talented photographers. I eagerly awaited its arrival; it was like a window to a world I had no idea I would eventually explore. My true passion, however, was found in Sports Illustrated magazine. The photographers captured perfect sports moments—the crack of a bat, the instant a swimmer broke the water, and the moment a ball landed in a receiver's hands. They accomplished all this without in-camera light meters, automatic exposure, autofocus, or image stabilization.

To this day, I am in awe of those guys.

In those early days, Montana was my playground. It was not unusual while hiking or camping on the weekends to run into a herd of elk, a coyote, a lynx, a wolf or even an occasional bear. That's where my love of animals really blossomed. It was still wild there and most of my friends there were hard core hunters. But I couldn't bring myself to shoot those animals. So on the weekends I would "hunt" by myself or with like-minded friends… using cameras instead of guns.

For a long time, I had a wildlife gallery in Asheville, NC. One day, while I happened to be at the gallery delivering new pictures, a young college student came in and admired a photo I had taken of a pod of Orcas in the San Juan Islands. The whales were chasing a school of salmon, and a bald eagle had just swooped down overhead. I named it "Air Support".

It is a striking shot.

The student told me he loved that picture, claiming it was one of the coolest he had ever seen, and he would buy it if he could afford it— but he couldn't. This touched something within me… reminded me of my younger self. I asked if he was a wildlife photographer, and he replied that he wasn't, but he loved taking pictures.

I took the picture off the wall and gave it to him.

"You will be," I told him.

Wildlife photography is more than just capturing images—it is about telling stories… but without the words.

A photograph freezes a single moment in time, but the story behind it—the journey, the challenges, the unseen surroundings, the unexpected surprises—is what truly brings it to life. The backstory holds the emotions, the context, and the unseen struggles that led to that final image, making it far more compelling than what the eye initially sees.

First, there's the adventure leading up to the shot. Maybe it took days of waiting in brutal conditions, hiking through dense forests, or braving extreme weather just for the chance to capture a fleeting moment. Perhaps the photographer had to earn the trust of a wary animal, adapt to sudden changes in light, or seize an opportunity that lasted only seconds. These unseen efforts add depth and meaning to the final image in a way that no single frame ever could.

In the end, a great photograph is not just about what you see—it's about what you feel when you know the story behind it.

Then, there's the emotional and environmental significance of the scene itself.

A photograph of a lion might be striking, but knowing that it was the last of its pride, struggling to survive, adds a layer of emotion that transforms the image. A stunning shot of a bird in flight is beautiful, but learning that it was taken in the final seconds before the bird migrated thousands of miles makes it unforgettable.

The backstory gives the image weight, turning it from a simple visual into a powerful narrative.

This first volume marks the beginning of a journey through my lens, showcasing a collection of moments from across the globe. What you will see here is exactly what I saw, standing out in the wild, for that second when I pushed the trigger. Each one of the photographs in this series of books has a backstory. From the sweeping savannas of Africa to the dense jungles of South America, from the icy wilderness of the Arctic to the remote deserts of the American West, each photograph is a window into the untamed world.

In the end, a great photograph is not just about what you see—it's about what you feel when you see it.

As you turn these pages, I invite you to step into the world as I have seen it—raw, unpredictable, and full of wonder. Thank you for taking the time to join me. I hope these photographs fascinate you as they have me.

This is just the beginning.

Onward.

I am not a cat person. But I admit we did have one when I got married… Scooter. He had a mind of his own and never had much time for any of us as long as he was fed. One day, Scooter went out and never came back. Being an animal lover, I like to think he just went off and lived a happy life with some other family.

My "circle of life" education thinks otherwise.

When I went to Africa the first time, I really wasn't into the cats. Everyone else was, especially lions…

But me… not so much.

So when the radio would crackle about a lion or a cheetah or a leopard sighting and the trucks all rushed to where the animal was last seen… we drove on and enjoyed a relatively empty Serengeti. On the last day, my guide said, "There is a lion up here in the grass." We stopped. Nothing. No lion. We waited. We were just about to drive off when this big male lion popped his head up out of the grass, looking into the wind.

The power and grace with which this lion moved was impressive, almost as if in slow motion. Every step this lion took screamed "King." He walked with a purpose and a confident swagger. All muscle.

Perfection. He was a machine, and on that day, I became a fan. Over the years, I have taken photographs of a lot of cats: lions, leopards, and cheetahs; mountain lions, lynx, tigers; males, females, young, and old. They command your attention. They ooze respect. They are hunting machines, killers for survival, protectors. What follows are some of the photographs I have taken of animals around the world, beginning with a full-page shot of the one who started it all for me …

..the Lion in the Wind.

The Lions

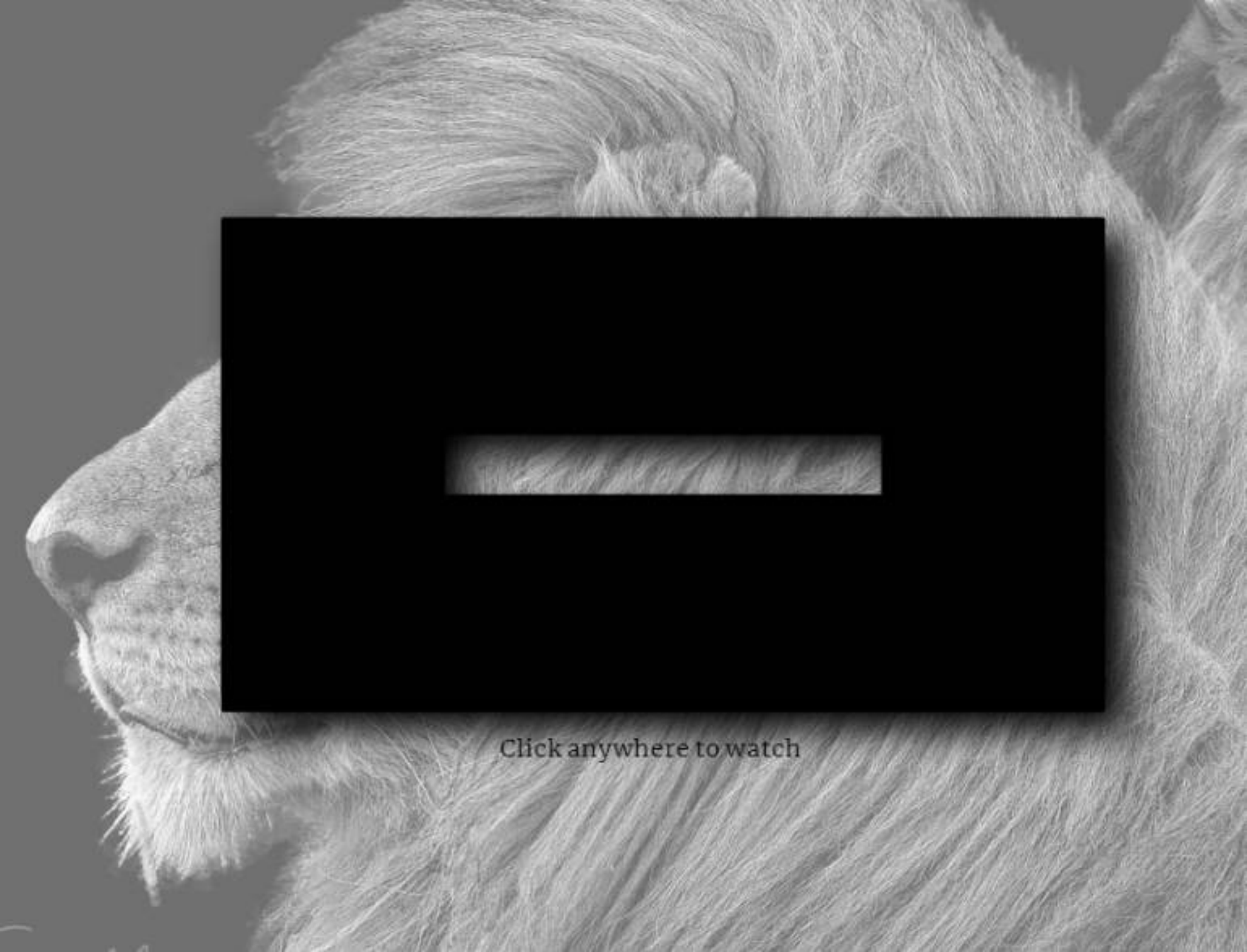
Lions, often dubbed the "Kings of the Jungle," are actually more commonly found in savannas and grasslands. Their natural habitat is an open landscape where their impressive speed and strength come in handy for hunting and protecting their territory. Lions are the only members of the big cat family that live in social groups called prides. This social structure is crucial for their survival, as it allows them to cooperate in hunting and defending their territory, making them the ultimate team players of the animal kingdom.

Lions have an impressive vocal range, with their roars being heard from up to 5 miles away. This is a way for lions to communicate across long distances, mark their territory, and rally pride members. Each lion's roar is unique, much like a human fingerprint, allowing pride members to identify each other.

In terms of diet, lions are formidable predators. Typically, the females do the hunting. But the males eat first, then the females, then the cubs. Male lions do participate in hunting occasionally, especially when it comes to protecting their pride or when food is scarce. Their more laid-back lifestyle has earned them a reputation for being somewhat of the "couch potatoes" of the savanna, while the lionesses are seen as the diligent breadwinners of the pride.

Lions also have a peculiar trait that distinguishes them from other big cats: their manes. The mane, which only males sport, is not just for show. It protects their necks during fights and makes them look larger and more intimidating to rivals. The darker the mane, the healthier the lion is believed to be. This has led to a sort of "mane envy" among lions, where those with the most impressive manes gain greater respect and breeding opportunities within the pride.

Speaking of which, when lions mate, a male and a female bond over a period of about 3 days. They typically "mate" every 15-25 minutes over a period of 36 hours to ensure insemination. A lioness in estrus may mate with multiple males during this time. This behavior encourages genetic diversity within the pride and creates uncertainty regarding the paternity of cubs, thus reducing the chances of other males within the pride killing the newborns because they are not theirs.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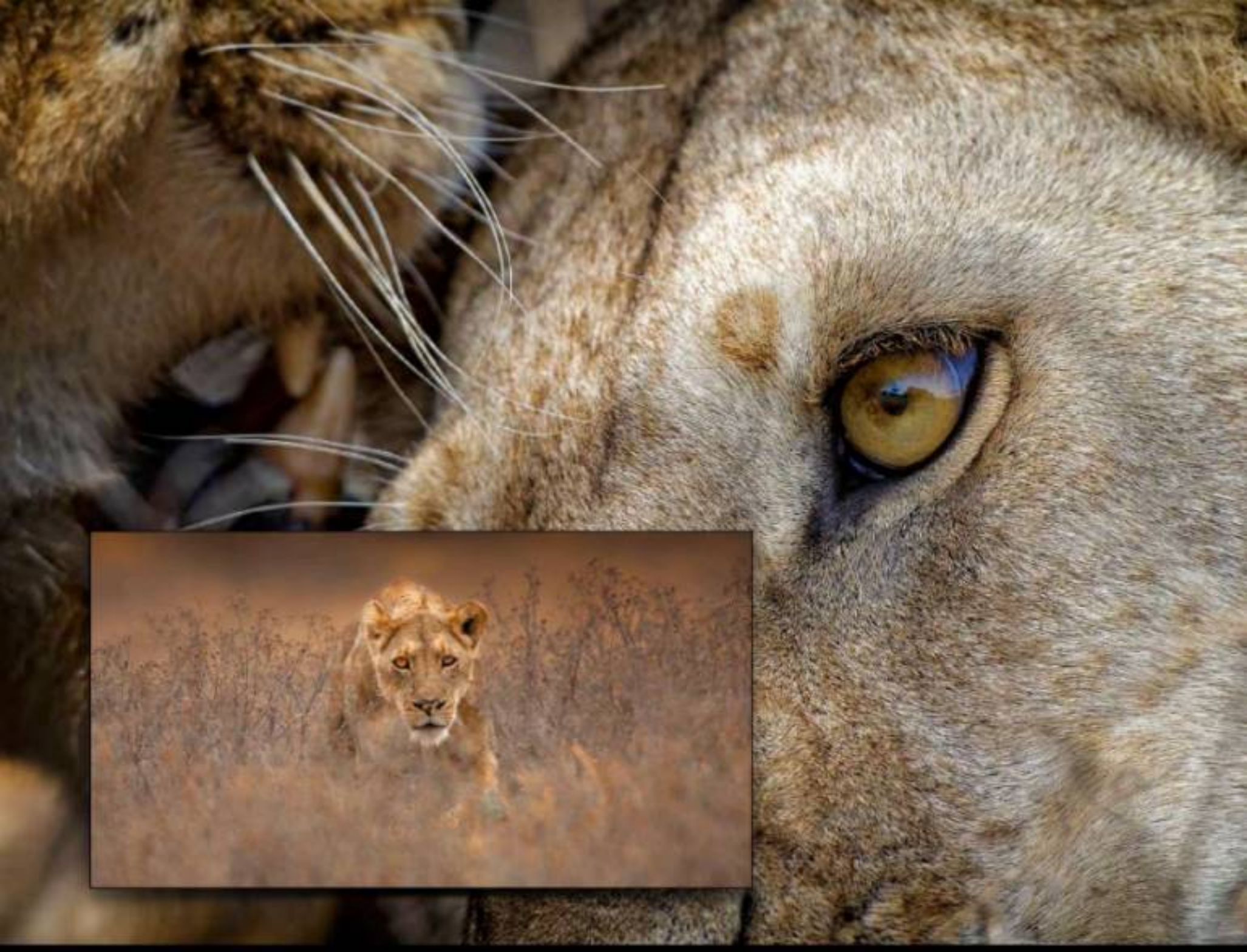
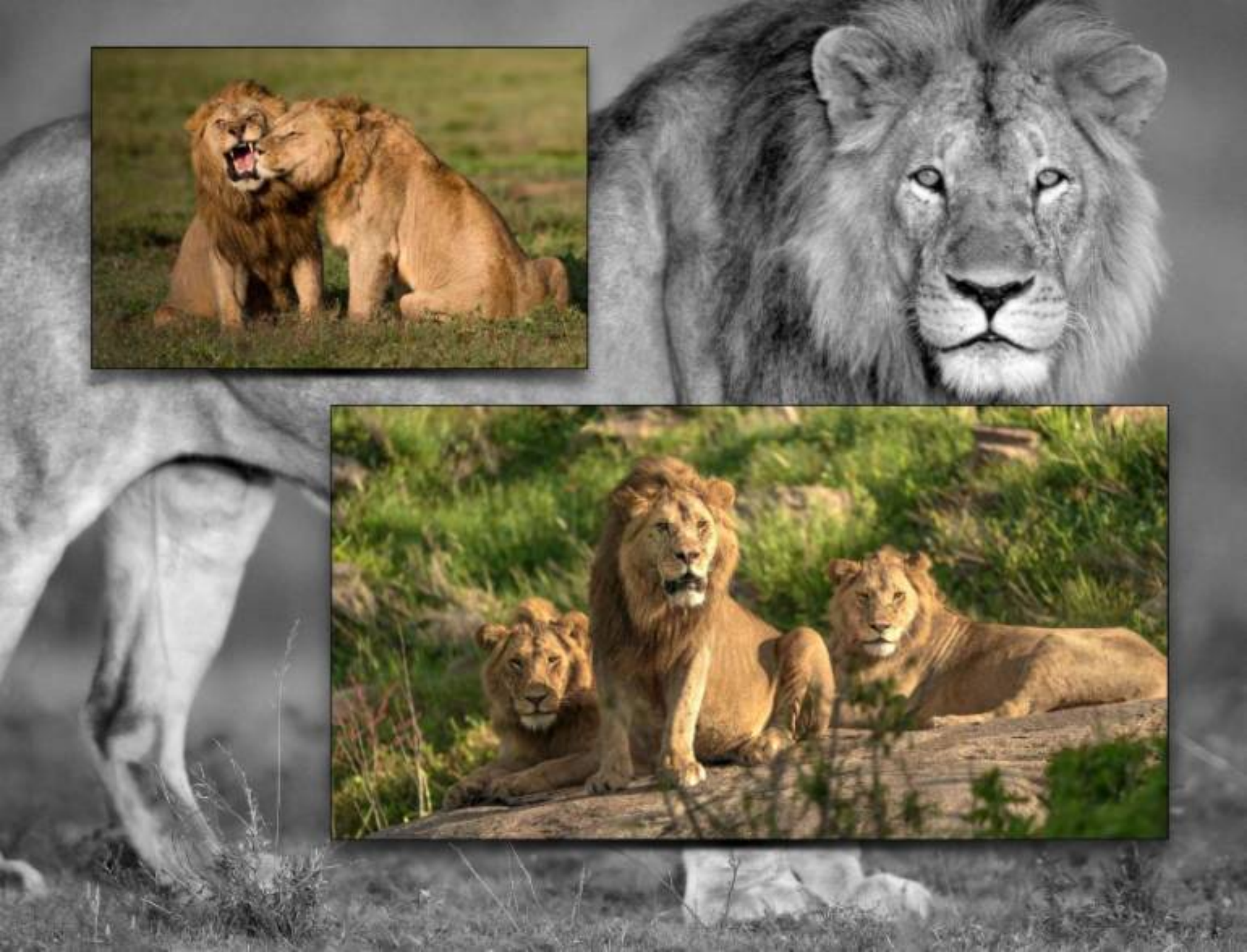
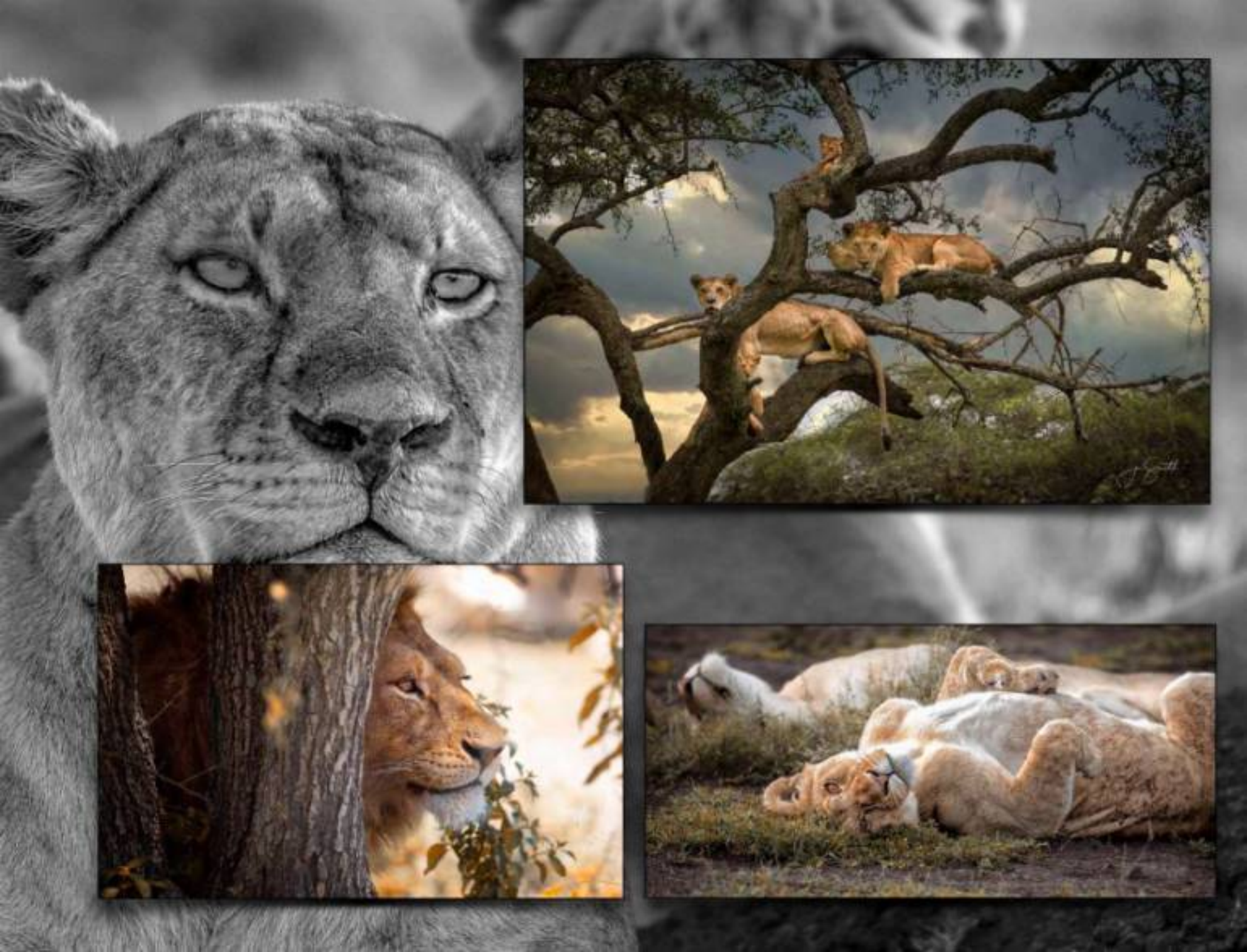






The Tigers

I got the chance to work with a tiger once on a documentary for Animal Planet. Her name was "Sasha." She was what we called a "TV cat." Sasha had been raised in captivity and was somewhat used to humans, but it was still a wild animal, and it proved its strength when it playfully jumped up onto one of my cameramen. Five hundred pounds of muscle knocking you down into the snow will quickly teach you who's boss.

However, despite their fearsome reputation, tigers do have a surprisingly playful side. In the wild, tiger cubs are known for their boundless energy and playful antics, engaging in mock fights and playful pouncing with their siblings. Their playful nature might make them seem like oversized house cats, but don't be fooled—these games are crucial for honing their hunting skills and strengthening their muscles.

In the wild, they have been known to stalk and kill humans.

Tigers are the largest of the big cats and are renowned for their striking orange coats with black stripes. Each tiger's stripes are unique, much like human fingerprints, which allows researchers to identify individual tigers in the wild. This unique stripe pattern also helps tigers blend into their natural habitat, providing excellent camouflage as they stealthily stalk their prey through the dense underbrush.

Tigers are solitary creatures, preferring to live and hunt alone. However, they do have a special fondness for water, which is somewhat unusual among big cats. Unlike many of their feline relatives, who shy away from water, tigers are excellent swimmers and often take to water to cool off, hunt for fish, or even just to play. Some tigers have been observed swimming across rivers and lakes to expand their territory or evade rivals, proving that they're as comfortable in water as they are on land. While they are famous for their deep roars, tigers also make a range of other sounds, including growls, chuffs, and purrs. The "chuff" is a friendly, non-threatening sound that tigers use to greet each other or show contentment. We heard some of these "chuffs" while we were working with this one, but we also heard a growl or two.

And those you don't soon forget.

The Mountain lions

Mountain lions, also known as cougars, catamounts, panthers, or pumas, are some of the most adaptable big cats in North America. They can thrive in a variety of habitats, from the dense forests of the Pacific Northwest to the arid deserts of the Southwest.

There is a saying among photographers: "If you see a mountain lion in the wild, it will be the last thing you see." Fortunately, I can tell you from experience that this is not true. But they will stalk you and follow you for miles, and most times you do not even know it. When they attack, it comes from behind you.

Mountain lions have a remarkably quiet demeanor. They don't roar like lions or growl like tigers. Instead, they are known for their peculiar and eerie scream-like calls, which sound like a woman screaming. This vocalization is often heard during mating season and serves to communicate over long distances. Imagine hearing a blood-curdling scream in the middle of the night and having to decide if you run to help… or just run to get away.

Despite their impressive hunting skills, mountain lions are known to have a bit of a clumsy side, especially when it comes to young cubs. Mountain lion cubs are famously playful and prone to mishaps, often tumbling over each other and their surroundings while practicing their hunting skills. Their antics can resemble a furry game of tag, and watching them fumble and play provides a charming glimpse into their youthful exuberance and learning process.

One quirky aspect of mountain lions is their remarkable ability to leap great distances. They can jump up to 20 feet in a single bound, which is about the length of a small car! This incredible leaping ability allows them to navigate rugged terrain and escape from potential threats. It's as if mountain lions have their own built-in trampoline, making them the high-flying acrobats of the feline world. Their powerful legs and agile bodies make them not only formidable hunters but also impressive athletes in their mountainous and varied environments.

The Leopards

Of all of the cats, the leopard is the one to be most feared.

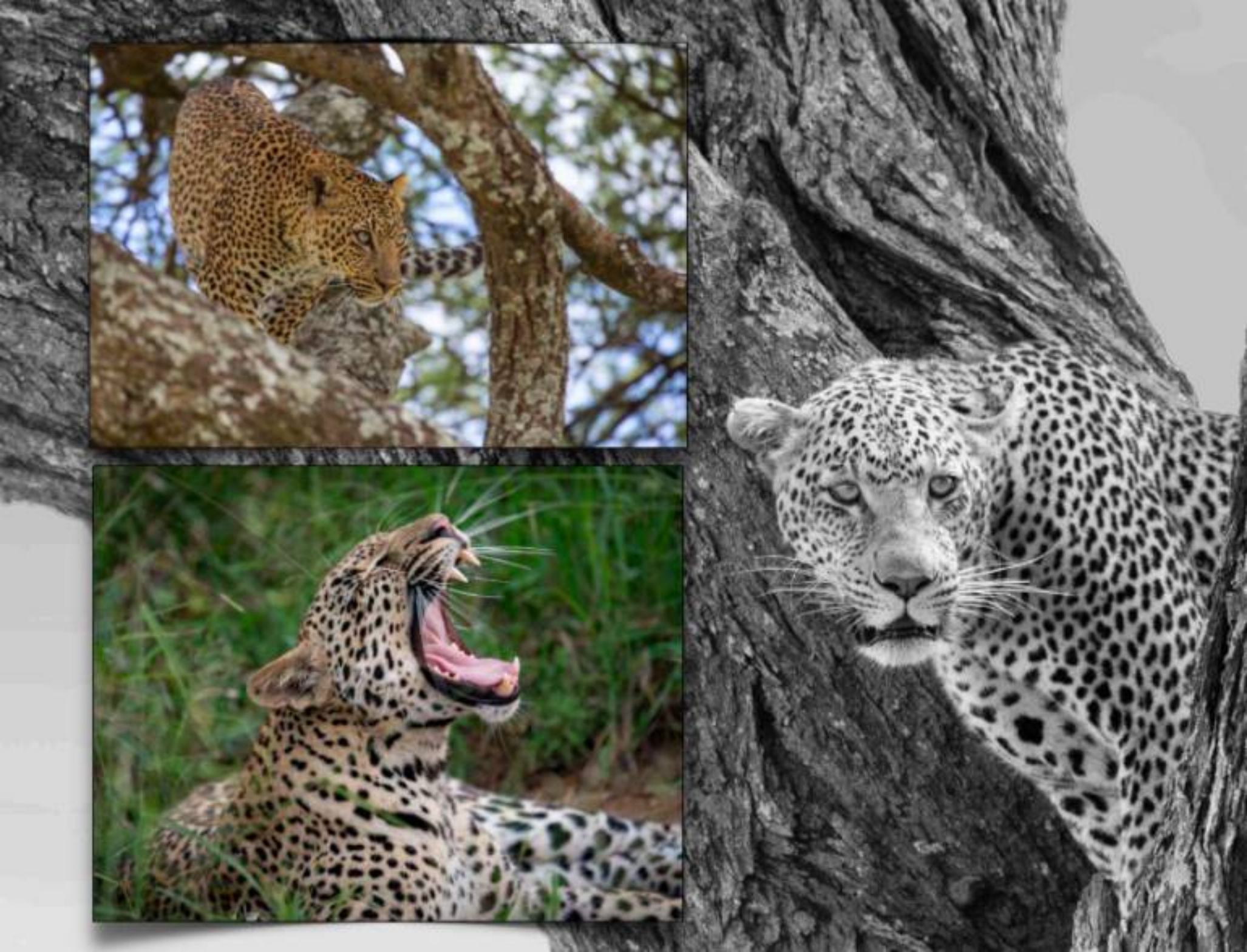
They are what we call "opportunistic eaters." If they see an opportunity to catch a meal, they take it… not knowing when the next opportunity will come. They are known for their impressive ability to haul their kills up into trees to avoid scavengers and other predators. They are known to have the strongest neck muscles of all the cats. This tree-dragging act showcases their incredible strength and agility.

Even other cats avoid them.

Leopards are also known for their versatility in hunting. They can adapt their diet based on what's available, ranging from small rodents to large antelopes. Leopards have sometimes been observed hunting unusual prey, like porcupines. The sight of a leopard attempting to take down a prickly porcupine is quite the spectacle, with the leopard probably wishing for a more straightforward meal! This adaptability not only highlights their survival skills but also their willingness to tackle just about anything that crosses their path.

Leopards are renowned for their stunning coat, adorned with rosettes that vary in shape and size. What's fascinating is that these patterns are unique to each leopard, again, much like human fingerprints. These rosettes serve as excellent camouflage in the dense, shadowy forests or tall grasses where leopards hunt. These rosettes become more pronounced as leopards age, leading to a sort of natural "makeover" that helps them blend even more effectively into their surroundings.

In terms of vocalizations, leopards have a repertoire that includes growls, snarls, and even a distinct, raspy call known as the "sawing" call. This call, which sounds like a sawing noise, is used to communicate with other leopards over long distances. It's a reminder that leopards have their own unique way of making sure their presence is known, adding an unexpected layer of drama to their already mysterious and elusive nature.



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The Cheetahs

Cheetahs are the fastest land animals on planet Earth. They can reach speeds of up to 60 to 70 miles per hour in short bursts of around 500 yards. They are the only land animals that can actually "steer" themselves, using their tails as a rudder like a boat does, with all four feet off the ground… and actually change their direction! Their highly specialized hunting technique relies almost solely on their speed rather than stealth. They use their keen eyesight to spot prey from afar and then initiate a high-speed chase to catch it.

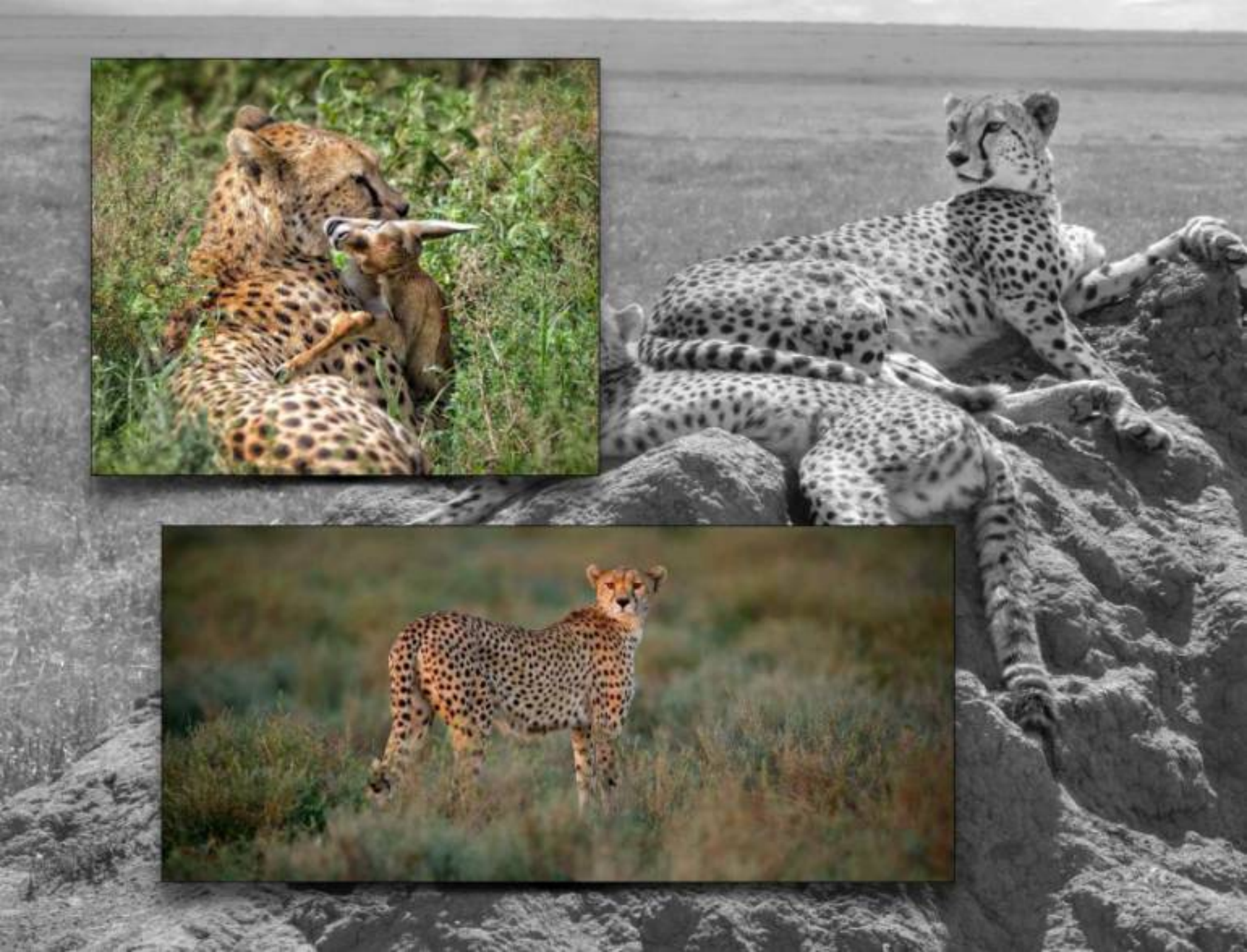
However, this speed strategy comes with a downside: cheetahs can't sustain their top speed for long and must rest after each sprint. Their sprinting ability is so intense that a cheetah's body temperature can actually rise to dangerous levels during a chase. To cool down, cheetahs have to take a break, lying down and panting vigorously. A cheetah might spend as much time resting and panting as it did running.

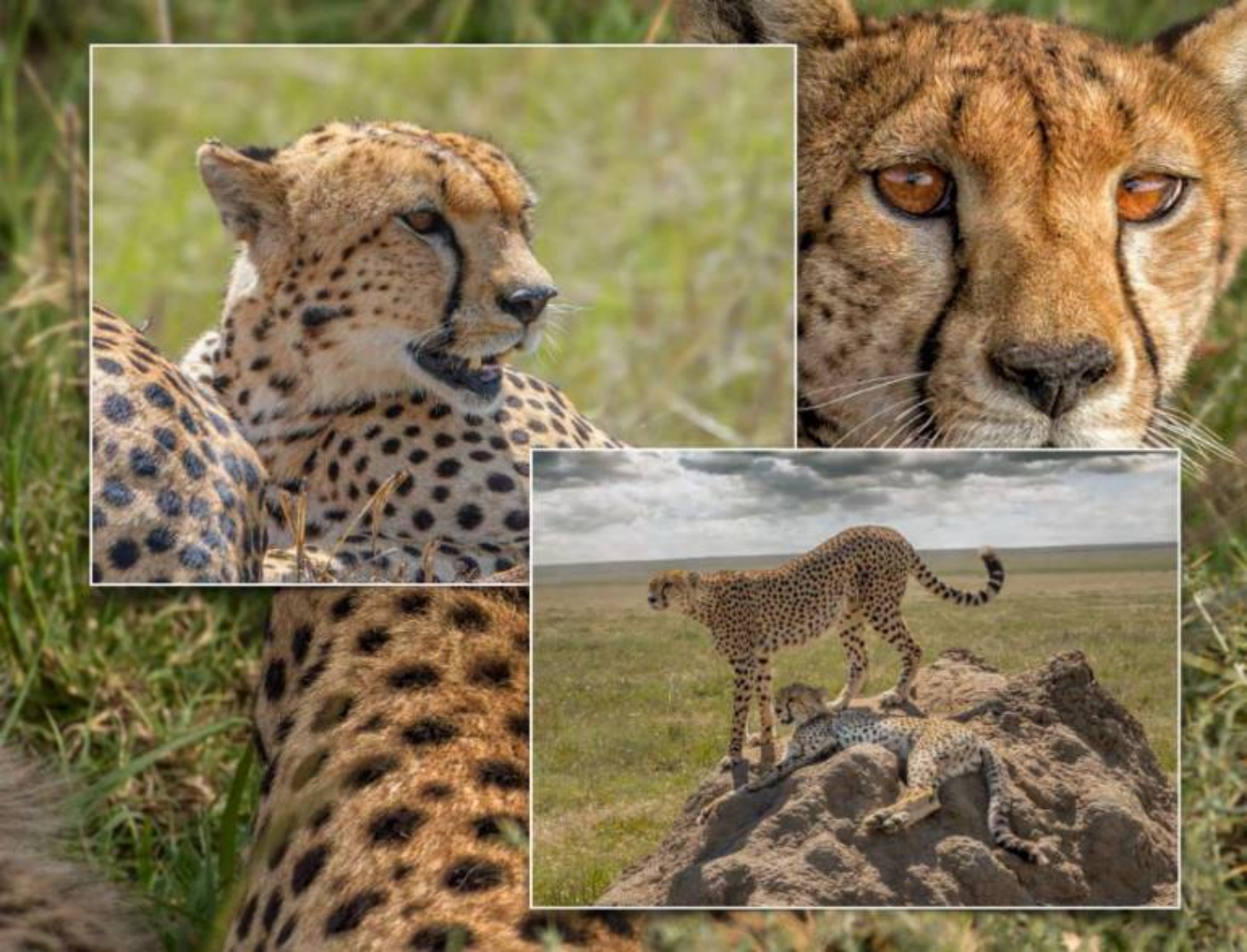
Cheetahs have several unique adaptations that enhance their speed. Their large nasal passages allow for increased oxygen intake during high-speed chases, and their oversized adrenal glands help manage stress and energy levels. Additionally, cheetahs have specialized, retractable claws and distinctive pads on their feet that provide extra traction and grip on the ground, allowing them to make sharp turns and sudden stops while running at high speeds.

And all cheetahs have a distinctive and somewhat comical feature: their black tear marks. These dark streaks running from their eyes to their mouths are believed to help reduce glare from the sun and improve their focus on prey, much like the way professional football players put eye black under their eyes to keep the sun out of their eyes. These marks give cheetahs a striking, almost warpaint-like appearance. And those spots? Yep, unique to each cheetah… like a human fingerprint. You don't see a lot of pictures of cheetahs in the middle of a hunt… mainly because they run so fast and turn so sharply that the cameraperson has a difficult time keeping them in frame and in focus.

Trust me… I know this.

Click anywhere to watch





The Lynx

There are 4 species of lynx… the Canadian lynx is probably the best known. But most people don't realize the bobcat is actually in that family as well.

One of the most distinctive features of lynx is their tufted ears, which are not just for show. These ear tufts, which resemble small brushes at the tips of their ears, enhance their hearing by helping to funnel sounds directly into their ears. It's almost as if nature gave them built-in satellite dishes, amplifying even the faintest rustle of prey in the underbrush. It's a reminder of how evolution fine-tunes creatures to their environments in unique ways.

Lynxes, particularly the Canadian lynx, have evolved specialized adaptations for snowy environments, such as large, snowshoe-like paws that prevent them from sinking into the snow. These furry, oversized feet make them look like they're wearing natural snowshoes.

Lynxes are skilled hunters with a specialized diet that primarily consists of small to medium-sized mammals, such as hares, rodents, and birds. They rely on their excellent sense of hearing and sight to locate prey, often using a "sit-and-wait" approach to ambush unsuspecting animals. They employ a silent, stealthy approach and make quick, powerful pounces to capture their prey.

In terms of diet, lynxes have a particular fondness for snowshoe hares, which make up a large portion of their diet. Interestingly, lynxes have developed an almost symbiotic relationship with these hares. During years when hare populations are high, lynx numbers increase as well. Conversely, when hare populations crash, so do lynx numbers, leading to an unusual predator-prey cycle. It's as if lynxes and snowshoe hares have an unspoken agreement to keep their numbers in sync, leading to a delicate dance of survival.

The Elephants

Elephants are not only the largest land animals on Earth but also some of the most intelligent. I could write paragraphs of amazing elephant facts, but instead, I will share this story.

Elephants also have unique ways of communicating. They use a range of sounds, including infrasound—low-frequency calls that are below the range of human hearing—to communicate over long distances. These sounds can travel for many miles, often underground. There are theories that they could be telepathic.

Socially, elephants are known for their strong family bonds and emotional depth. They have been observed mourning their dead and even showing empathy towards other animals. One particularly heartwarming example involves elephants approaching and gently touching the bones of deceased family members with their trunks. It's as if they're paying their respects in their own unique way, demonstrating that these gentle giants have a remarkable capacity for love and memory.

Lawrence Anthony, owner of Thula Thula game reserve and the author of The Elephant Whisperer, took in 21 elephants when African wildlife management had to move them out of Kruger National Park because they were uprooting all of the trees. He was a conservationist, not an elephant expert. The elephants tried and tried to "go home," and eventually, high voltage fences had to be erected to keep them from leaving. Anthony would go out every day and sit with the elephants, telling them they were safe, that this was their home now… that everything would be OK. Slowly, he won their trust… and they stopped trying to escape. The fences came down. The elephants did not leave. In fact, the elephants would sometimes show up at Anthony's house unannounced, often to show off their newborn babies… and then leave.

Elephants have long been known to mourn their dead.

When Anthony died in 2012, the elephants he had saved walked 12 hours to his house and stood outside for two days to mourn the man who had saved them. They stayed for two days.

And the year after that, and the year after that… they showed up again.

j smith

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The Bears

I've spent a lot of time with bears. Mostly grizzlies in Alaska. I even got bit by one while bending down trying to photograph a baby who walked out of the brush on two legs. I froze. It walked up to me and playfully wrapped its mouth around my entire thigh and exerted just enough pressure for me to know who was boss. I was young, less educated, and stupid back then.

The mama grizzly would have killed me for getting anywhere near its cub.
I was lucky.

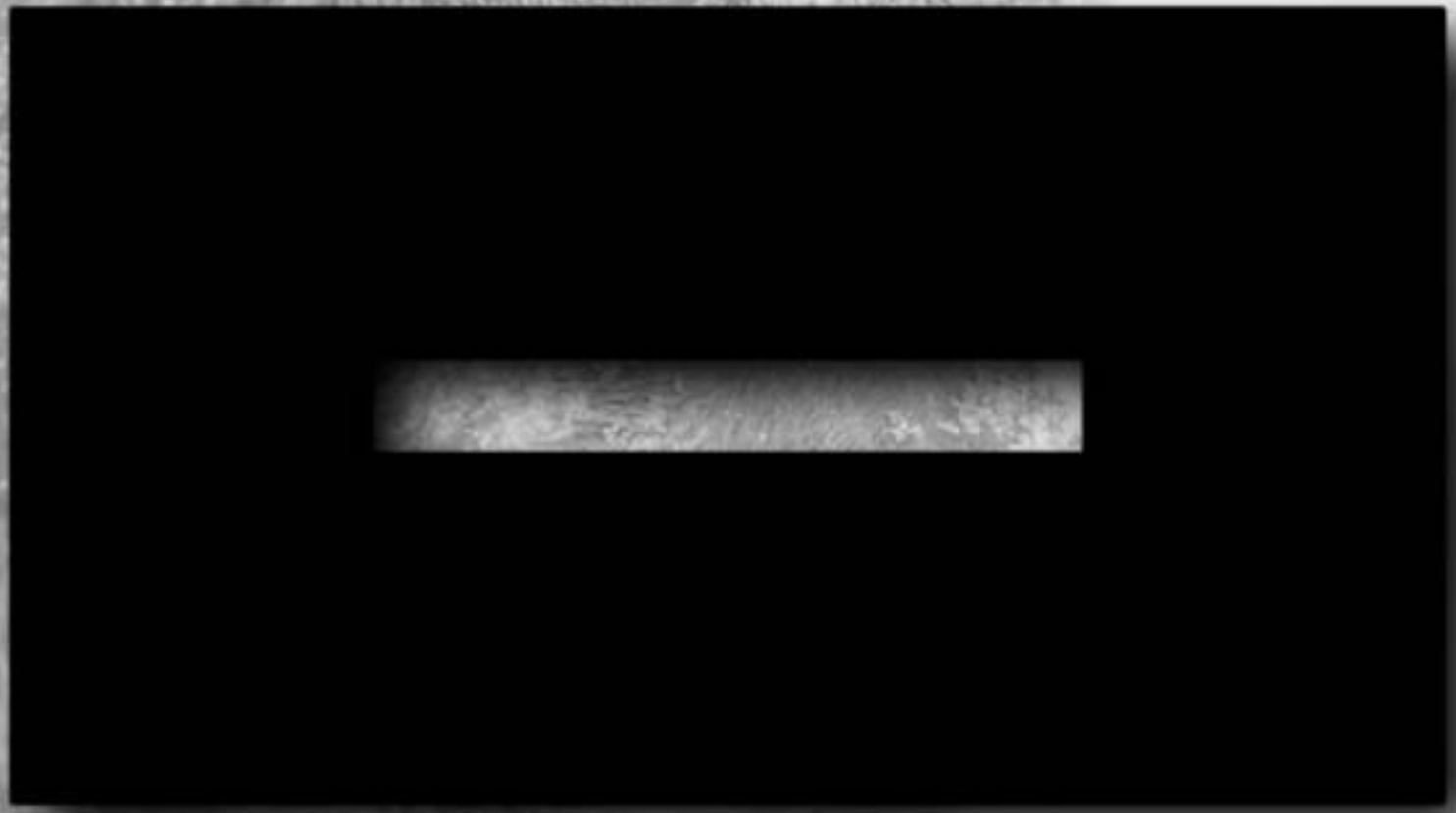
Grizzlies are solitary animals. The only time you see more than one together is when food is so plentiful that there is no competition, like when the salmon run up the rivers. Each bear has its own fishing technique, and it's fun to watch. I've stood on the banks of the Brooks River and watched almost a dozen bears all fish at the same time. It's quite a sight.

When a grizzly comes out of hibernation in Alaska, it has to gain about 400 pounds before the snow sets in late in the fall. Every day is about gaining weight to survive. At Brooks, when a bear catches a salmon, it carefully strips the skin off the fish and leaves the pink part behind… the part we humans pay so much money for at the supermarket. The bears just want the fat. They leave the rest for the bald eagles to swoop down and get.

Male grizzlies play no role in raising their offspring. Adult bears don't hibernate together. The babies are born during hibernation, and they learn to nurse while the mother is in a semi-conscious state, depleting the mother of almost a quarter of her weight.

Cubs stay with their mother for almost 3 years, until they are called sub-adults. During that time, she does not go into estrous. The males, who have one thing on their mind besides eating, often attack the cubs, killing them, which allows the mother to mate… and the party continues.

Because of this, the female grizzlies are the toughest bears out there. They viciously fight to protect their young. I've seen it… and respect it.



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The Giraffes

They are the tallest of all land animals, with adult males reaching heights of up to 18 feet. Their neck alone can be 6 feet long. Despite their length, giraffes have the same number of neck vertebrae as humans (7). But each vertebra is longer than ours.

If you have ever seen a giraffe's tongue, you probably know that it is almost black. The dark color helps protect this 18-inch tongue from getting sunburned since they use their tongue all day to reach for vegetation. Their tongue is a remarkable tool that allows them to reach, grasp, and strip leaves from branches… even those with thorns (the acacia tree, their favorite).

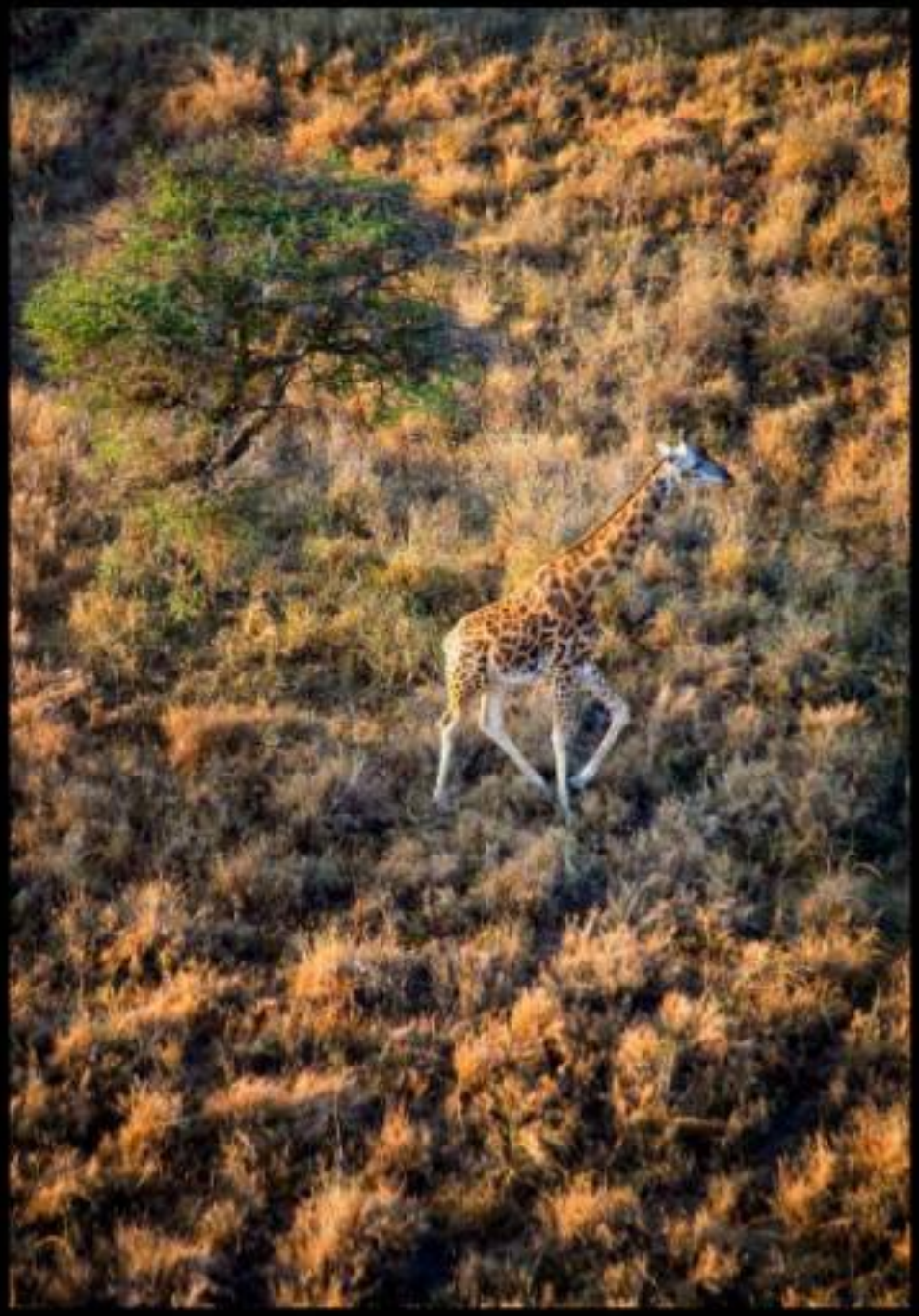
As with many of the animals on these pages, the patterns giraffes have on their coats are unique, like a human fingerprint. The males and females also have distinctive horns on their heads called ossicones. Strangely, these cartilage horns have no real purpose. Although the males do use them while fighting other males for dominance… which they do by swinging their necks at one another violently. This is called "necking." Their 12-inch hooves are also so sharp and so powerful… they can kill a lion.

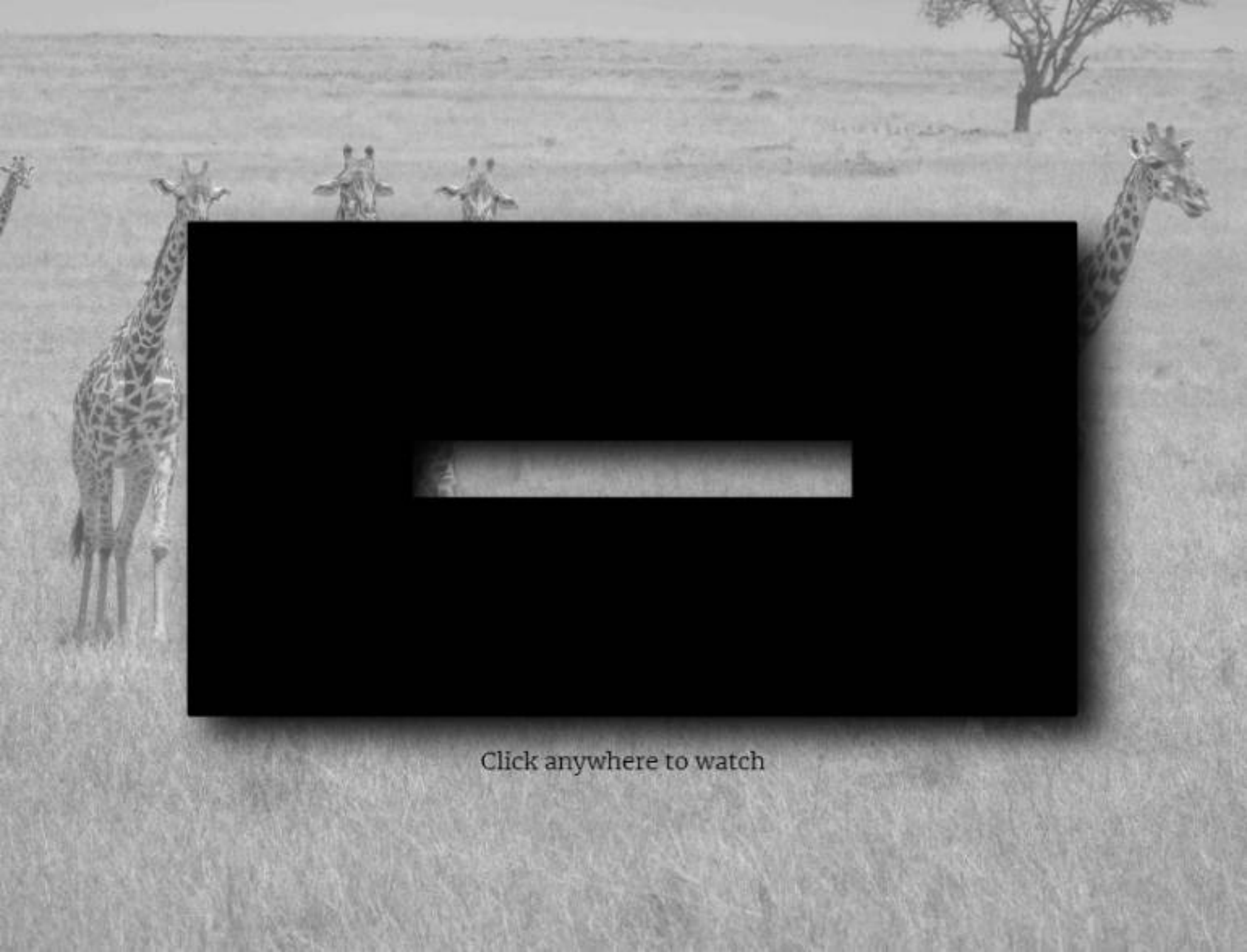
A group of giraffes is called a "tower." Unlike many other animals, giraffes do not form "herds." Their social structure is a loose association where members change frequently. In short, they hang out and socialize for a bit… and then often move on to another group.

Their height is their number one defense mechanism. In fact, zebras often gather around giraffes. If a predator is seen, the high vantage point giraffes sound the alarm, and the zebras gather into a tight herd. Their stripes confuse the predator into thinking that they are picking on something very "big." This also helps the giraffes hide.

Female giraffes give birth standing up. This is also a defense mechanism. Newborns are dropped 4 feet to the ground and are able to run, typically, within a few hours of being born. A newborn giraffe is about 6 feet tall at birth.

And not only are their necks long… they also have the longest tail of any animal. It can grow to 8 feet long!





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The Wolves

Wolves are the largest members of the dog family.

Once a familiar figure in almost every state in the nation, they were, in fact, the most widely distributed predators in the world. But over time, they were hunted to near extinction. They were the first animals placed on the US Endangered Species list.

They are fascinating creatures with a social structure that rivals even the most organized human communities. Living in packs, they have a complex social hierarchy where roles are clearly defined. When they are born, all wolves have blue eyes. About six weeks in, they begin to change. Their method of communicating within the pack is interesting. Wolves use a combination of vocalizations, body language, and facial expressions to convey messages. The classic "howl" is not just for show; it helps wolves coordinate hunts and maintain pack cohesion.

Another intriguing feature of wolves is their exceptional sense of smell. A wolf's sense of smell is estimated to be between 10,000 and 100,000 times more acute than that of humans. This powerful olfactory capability allows wolves to detect prey from great distances and even identify individual animals. Plus, they can hear 20 times better than we can. And when they howl, it can be heard for over 5 miles.

Swim? No problem. They can swim up to 8 miles. Wolves do have territories, but they can travel up to 124 miles in 24 hours and run 20 miles per hour. So if a pack of wolves sets its sights on you as their next meal, chances are you are not getting away. Although wolf attacks on humans are extremely rare.

The

Elk

Elk, with their impressive antlers and majestic stature, are among the most iconic animals of the North American wilderness. Their antlers can grow up to an inch a day during the summer. The largest elk antlers ever measured 12 feet across and weighed 90 pounds. These antlers are not only a symbol of strength but also serve as a status symbol among males. Watching a bull elk proudly display his massive antlers is like witnessing a wild beauty contest, where size really does matter.

During the fall, elk enter the rutting season. Male elk, or bulls, engage in vocal duels known as "bugling," where they emit loud, high-pitched calls to establish dominance and attract females. These bugles can echo through the mountains for miles, sounding both haunting and a little out of place—almost like an otherworldly scream.

Elk are also known for their incredible migratory patterns, traveling long distances between their summer and winter ranges. These migrations can cover hundreds of miles, often over rugged terrain and through challenging weather conditions. It's not uncommon to see a large herd of elk moving in a seemingly endless line, like a grand parade through the wilderness. This impressive journey showcases their endurance and adaptability.

They may be heavy, but they are fast. An elk can outrun a horse in short sprints, and they can jump over an 8-foot fence. A newborn elk can stand within minutes, but it spends its first two weeks lying motionless in high grass with no scent whatsoever. This is by design so predators cannot find them.

Once hunted to near extinction, there are now just under a million elk throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Click anywhere to watch

The

Moose

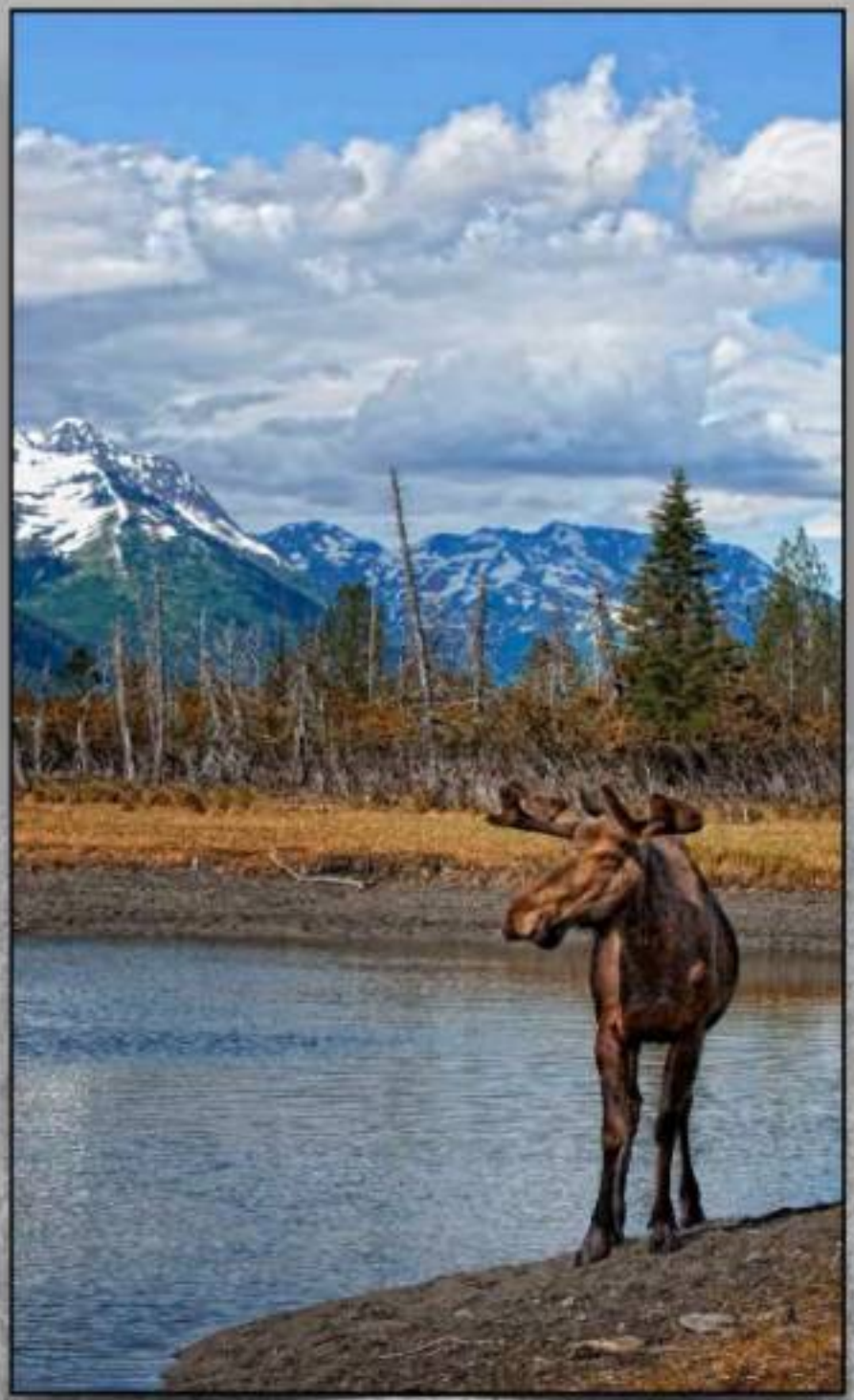
Moose are the largest members of the deer family, and their sheer size is nothing short of impressive. Adult moose can stand over 6 feet tall at the shoulder, with antlers spanning up to 6 feet across in males. These massive antlers, which can weigh as much as 40 pounds, are shed and regrown annually. The process of growing these antlers is so energy-intensive that moose often spend their summer months in a feeding frenzy, munching on up to 70 pounds of vegetation a day.

They are solitary animals, except for calves that remain with their mothers until they no longer need them.

Moose are excellent swimmers and will often be found wading into lakes and ponds to feast on underwater vegetation. They can swim up to 10 miles nonstop and can even dive as deep as 20 feet to reach tasty plants at the bottom. They can also run faster than you can… by a good bit.

Despite their size, moose are surprisingly nimble, especially in deep snow. They have long legs that act like natural snowshoes, allowing them to move with relative ease through snowy terrain that would bog down most other animals. Their awkward, long-legged gait might look a bit clumsy at first, but it's perfectly adapted to their environment.

Perhaps one of the funniest quirks of moose behavior is their tendency to get a bit tipsy in the fall. As they feast on fallen, fermenting apples or other fruits, the natural sugars can turn into alcohol. This can lead to moose appearing a bit wobbly or uncoordinated—basically, a moose can get drunk!



The

Bison

Tatanka, the name by which the Native Americans called the Bison, are the largest land mammals in North America.

They weigh in between 1,000 to 2,000 pounds. Not surprisingly, they carry an air of ancient grandeur with them wherever they roam. To the Native Americans, the Bison represented strength, resilience, and abundance. The sheer size and power of this animal embodied the qualities that Native Americans admired and sought to emulate.

The bison's spiritual significance is closely tied to its role as a provider. Native American tribes believed that the bison had a spiritual connection to the land and the Creator. They saw the bison as a generous and selfless being, providing them with sustenance, clothing, and shelter. A bison's sacrifice of giving up its life was seen as a sacred act, and every part of the animal was utilized to honor its spirit.

At one time, there were 40 million bison in the North American West. The greatest migration on planet Earth.

In the 19th century, European settlers and hunters nearly drove the bison to extinction through overhunting and habitat destruction. Sadly, this was all but sanctioned by the U.S. government. Their goal was to populate the American West. But the Indians, who the U.S. government saw as savages, laid claim to the American West as their land, given to them by the Creator. Since they could not seem to eradicate the Indians militarily, the government decided to eliminate their food source to defeat them.

It worked.

The loss of the bison had a profound impact on Native American culture, spirituality, and traditional practices. The bison population dwindled to just a few hundred individuals. Native American communities, whose way of life was intricately tied to the bison, suffered starvation and eventually life on reservations.

By 1894, Yellowstone National Park hosted the only known wild herd in the United States. Lucky for us, the Native nations and ironically the U.S. government conservation efforts have gradually rebuilt the herd to about 45,000.

The

Owls

As I often say… I'm not a "birder."

But with that said, I do love birds of prey… eagles, hawks, falcons, and owls, to name a few. I especially like owls. Owls are some of the most fascinating and mysterious birds in the animal kingdom, stealth-like and fast, with razor-sharp talons they are, literally, death from above. There are over 200 different types of owls: big, small, and in between… and they all share certain traits.

One of the most striking features an owl has is its ability to rotate its head almost all the way around—up to 270 degrees. This impressive flexibility is due to the owl's 14 neck vertebrae, twice as many as humans have.

An owl's eyes are not spherical like those of most birds (or humans). Instead, they are tube-shaped, making them appear large and expressive. These tubular eyes are fixed in their sockets, meaning owls can't move their eyes from side to side like humans can. To compensate, they rely on their extraordinary head-turning ability.

Owls are also known for their silent flight. Unlike other birds, they make no sound when they fly. Their feathers are specially adapted to muffle the sound of air rushing over their wings, allowing them to swoop down on prey without making a sound. This stealthy approach is incredibly effective. They are some of the most deadly hunters in nature's air force. Owls have incredible eyesight. Like many raptors, owls can focus on a distant object and blur out their peripheral vision. This gives them the ability to pinpoint their prey and see nothing else. But it also has its downside. Once locked in, owls often are not aware of oncoming vehicles that they would normally see in their peripheral. If you ever see a dead owl, this is most likely why it died.

Finally, owls have a quirky habit of "playing dead" when they feel threatened. Some species, like the burrowing owl, will lie on their back and spread their wings, pretending to be dead in an attempt to avoid predators. This behavior, combined with their expressive faces and dramatic head movements, adds to the owl's repertoire of odd yet endearing traits. Picture an owl suddenly flopping over and playing dead at the slightest hint of danger—it's an unexpected, almost theatrical move from a bird that usually exudes such calm, composed wisdom.

The Eagles

If Benjamin Franklin had his way, the turkey would be our national bird. Instead, the bald eagle is.

One of the most iconic features of the bald eagle is its white head and tail, which stand out against its dark brown body. Interestingly, this striking plumage doesn't develop until the eagle reaches about five years of age, meaning younger eagles are often mistaken for different species due to their mottled brown feathers. It's as if bald eagles go through an awkward "teenage phase" before finally maturing into the regal birds we recognize.

Bald eagles strike a menacing silhouette in the sky. Their wingspan can reach 8 feet. With that, along with their sharp talons and razor-like beak… they own the sky. When diving, they can reach speeds of up to 100 miles per hour.

Despite their majestic appearance, bald eagles are known to be thieves, not above stealing food from other animals. In fact, they are notorious for being opportunistic scavengers. They often swoop in to snatch fish from ospreys or scavenge on carrion left behind by other predators. Their eyesight is stellar. They can see five times better than humans.

Bald eagles are also known for their massive nests, called "aeries," which are among the largest in the bird world. These nests can reach up to 10 feet in diameter and weigh over 2,000 pounds after years of use and additions. Eagles use the same nest year after year, adding new materials each season. Eventually, these nests become colossal structures.

One particularly amusing aspect of bald eagle behavior is their vocalizations, which are surprisingly less majestic than you might expect. Instead of the fierce, screeching call often used in movies (which is actually the call of a red-tailed hawk), bald eagles have a rather high-pitched, almost chirpy sound. Hearing this small, almost comical voice coming from such a large and powerful bird can be a bit of a surprise. It's a reminder that even the most formidable creatures can have a softer, more unexpected side—a trait that only adds to the charm and mystique of the bald eagle.

The Whales

Humpback whales are the ocean's great performers.

These massive creatures, which can grow up to 60 feet long, often launch their entire bodies out of the water in a move known as breaching. It's a jaw-dropping (and rare) sight to see such a huge animal leap into the air and come crashing down with a splash that can be heard from miles away. Some scientists believe these breaches are a way to communicate or dislodge parasites, but it's also possible that humpbacks just enjoy putting on a show.

Humpback whales are also known for their enchanting songs, which can last for hours and travel for thousands of miles underwater. In one study, humpbacks 9,000 miles away from a group of humpbacks halfway around the globe picked up their song and started to mimic it. These songs are complex and constantly evolving, with each population of humpbacks having its own unique "hit songs" that they pass down and modify over time. Interestingly, only male humpbacks sing, and they seem to do so primarily during mating season, leading some to believe that these songs are a way to woo potential mates.

One of the more unique aspects of humpback whale behavior is their cooperative feeding technique known as "bubble net feeding." A group of humpbacks works together to corral fish by blowing bubbles in a circle around them, effectively trapping the fish in a "net" of bubbles. The whales then swim upward, mouths wide open, to gulp down their trapped prey.

Humpback whales are famous for their long migrations, traveling up to 16,000 miles each year between their feeding grounds in the polar regions and their breeding grounds in the tropics.

Whales are some of the hardest animals to photograph. Imagine being out in the ocean scanning the horizon and seeing nothing. Then, suddenly, there one is, seemingly coming up out of nowhere. You have to locate it in your viewfinder, steady it, expose it, focus on it… and click.

And they are only up for a matter of seconds.

Click anywhere to watch

The

Zebras

Zebras are perhaps best known for their striking black-and-white stripes. Like so many other animals with unique fur patterns, no two zebras have the same stripe pattern, making them instantly recognizable to each other. Theories suggest they may help with camouflage, confuse predators, or even keep pesky insects at bay.

Another amusing fact about zebras is their peculiar communication style.

Zebras use a variety of sounds to communicate, including barks, brays, and high-pitched squeals. But perhaps the most entertaining aspect of their communication is their facial expressions. Zebras will often show their teeth and flatten their ears back when they're annoyed or trying to establish dominance, a gesture that looks a bit like they're flashing a cheeky grin. This mix of funny faces and quirky sounds makes zebra interactions a lively and entertaining affair, as if they're constantly engaged in a game of charades.

Zebras are also known for their strong social bonds and live in groups called harems, which usually consist of one stallion, several mares, and their offspring. The stallion takes his role as protector very seriously and will bravely fend off predators to keep his family safe. Even so, the zebra is a favorite food of the large predator cats of the Serengeti.

They are also notoriously difficult to domesticate, and even though they belong to the same family as horses and donkeys, they have a strong independent streak. Early explorers and settlers who tried to ride zebras found them to be more than a little uncooperative—kicking, biting, and generally refusing to be tamed.

It's as if zebras decided long ago that they'd rather roam the wild plains than follow human orders, making them the ultimate free spirits of the animal kingdom. This untamable nature only adds to their charm, as they gallop across the savannah with a mischievous twinkle in their eye, reminding us that some wild things simply can't be domesticated.

Click anywhere to watch

j smith

The Rhinos

The rhinoceros, with their thick skin and imposing horns, is one of the most formidable animals on the planet. And one of the most prehistoric-looking.

The first rhino I saw was over a mile away. Still, I was excited.

They are shy and elusive… and they can overturn a safari vehicle if they want to. Their eyesight is not great, but they make up for it with incredible hearing and a great sense of smell. A rhino might charge at a perceived threat only to realize, at the last moment, that it's just a harmless bush or rock.

In short, it's hard to get close to them. Later in life, working with researchers, I was able to get within 100 feet of several… something I treasure to this day.

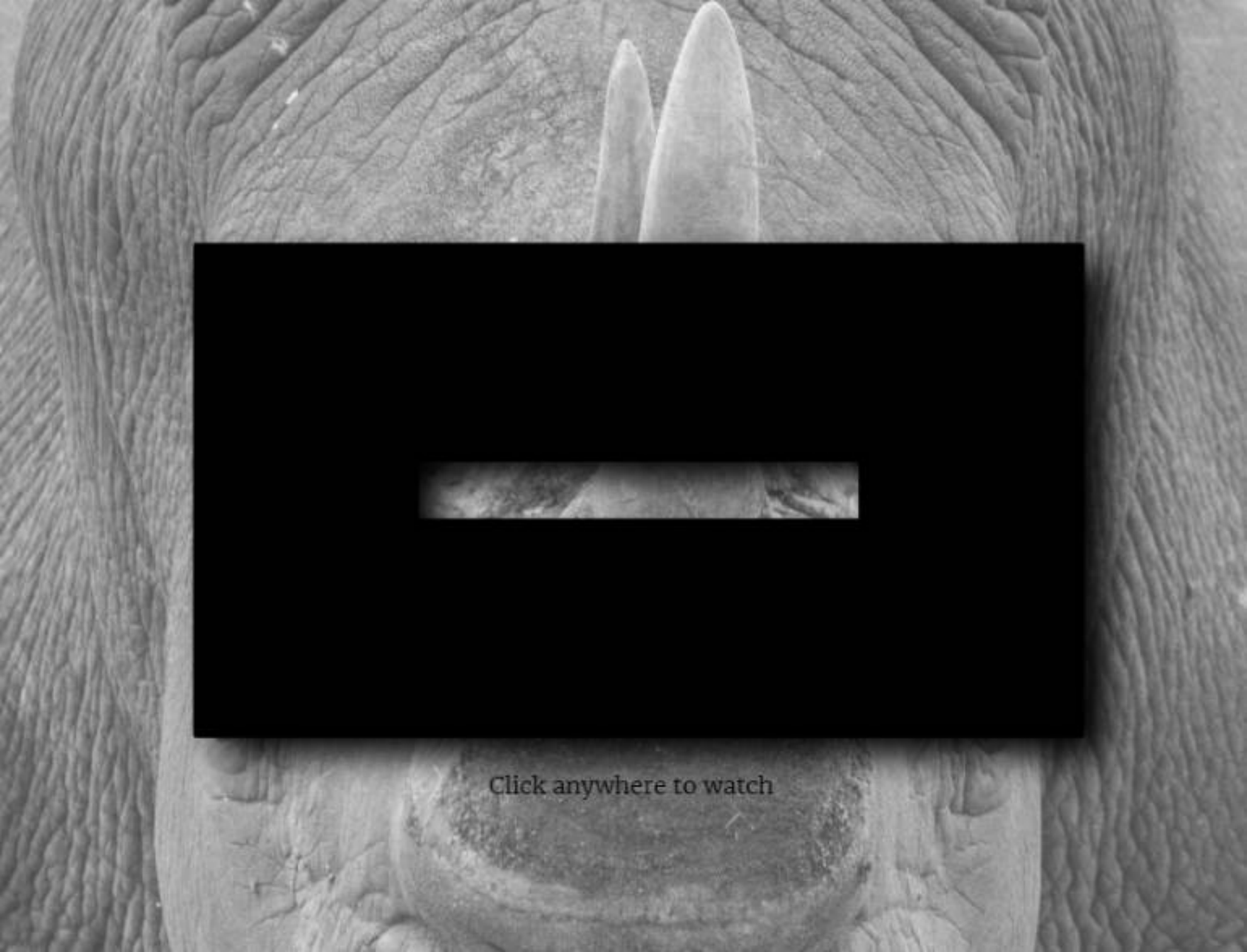
The horns that make the rhino so recognizable are also their curse.

Several Asian countries believe that a rhinoceros' horn powder can act like an aphrodisiac… like a crude form of Viagra. Other people simply believe it has medicinal properties. Whatever its supposed benefit, it has fueled the poaching of rhino horns. There are so few rhinos, and the demand is so high, that some people risk their lives for a chance to get rich.

The average Tanzanian makes about 25 dollars a day. Obviously, some people make much more than that, but also… some make much less. If you are one of those people making a lot less… and you find out someone in Vietnam (let's say) is offering several hundred thousand dollars for a rhino horn… you might take the risk to obtain one. Thus… the poaching of one of our most endangered animals.

The truth is, its horn is actually composed entirely of keratin, the same protein that makes up human hair and nails. Most Africans know the value of their wildlife. Most African countries use their army to protect the rhino.

But still, one by one, they are getting picked off.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The

Penguins

The most iconic penguin, in my opinion, is the King Penguin. These, along with the Emperor penguins, are the ones you see in documentaries on Antarctica. Sure, there are other types of penguins, and I have shot many of them… but I am drawn to the Kings. They typically live along the northern rim of Antarctica and even on the Falkland Islands… a much more hospitable environment for photography. They are the ones I was most interested in photographing, and that's what you see below.

Penguins in general, with their distinctive black-and-white tuxedo-like appearance, are some of the most endearing and recognizable birds in the world. What's particularly fascinating is that these birds are incredible swimmers, often referred to as "flying" through the water. Penguins can reach speeds of up to 15 miles per hour while swimming, thanks to their powerful flippers and streamlined bodies. But they can't actually fly. In fact, they're known more for their "waddle."

One of the funniest aspects of penguin behavior is their famous waddle. Penguins walk with a side-to-side gait that looks almost like they're constantly balancing on a tightrope. This waddle, combined with their upright posture, gives them a charming, almost human-like appearance as they move across the ice, sand, or rocky terrain. Not to mention that they look like they're always dressed for a formal event and are just a little bit late to the party, hurrying along.

Penguins have incredibly strong social bonds, particularly during breeding season. Emperor penguins, for example, engage in one of nature's most remarkable displays of parental teamwork. After the female lays a single egg, the male takes over the responsibility of keeping it warm, balancing it on his feet to keep it from touching the ice and covering it with a special flap of skin called a brood pouch. While the females head out to sea to feed, the males huddle together for warmth in the frigid Antarctic winter, often enduring months without eating. This dedication to family is both awe-inspiring and a bit heartwarming, as these stoic fathers stand together, weathering the cold with nothing more than each other's company and an egg balanced on their feet.

J Smith

j smith

The Bighorns

Bighorn sheep are some of the most impressive athletes in the animal kingdom, known for their incredible agility and strength. These mountain dwellers can scale steep, rocky cliffs with ease, often leaping from ledge to ledge with remarkable precision. Not many animals can do this. It's one of the bighorn's primary defensive weapons against predators. Their specialized hooves, which have a rough outer shell and a soft, rubbery center, give them the perfect grip on rugged terrain.

One of the most iconic features of bighorn sheep is, of course, their massive, curling horns. These horns can weigh up to 30 pounds, which is a significant portion of the sheep's body weight. Male bighorn sheep, known as rams, use these formidable horns in dramatic head-butting battles during mating season. Their horns are made of keratin… just like the rhinoceros. These clashes can be heard echoing through the mountains. Despite the intensity of these battles, rams rarely suffer serious injuries, thanks to their thick skulls and built-in shock absorbers.

Bighorn sheep are also known for their unique social structure, which includes a kind of "bachelor group" for young rams. These groups of adolescent males live together, honing their fighting skills and learning the ropes of ram life before they're ready to challenge the older, dominant rams for mating rights. The fighting skills also come in handy against mountain lions, wolves, and coyotes.

Their memory is excellent. They can remember the faces of other sheep as well as humans. Even locations… just like a built-in GPS.

A humorous quirk of bighorn sheep is their seemingly fearless approach to human activity. I have often been face-to-face with bighorns. In places like national parks, it's not uncommon to see bighorn sheep calmly grazing by the roadside or even licking salt off of cars. They're particularly drawn to the salt used to de-ice roads in winter, which they find irresistible. This behavior can lead to some funny situations, like when a group of sheep surrounds a car, licking away while the bewildered driver waits for them to finish their impromptu car wash.

These fearless forays into human territory remind us that even these wild mountain dwellers can adapt to modern society to fill a need.

The Primates

First of all, not all primates are monkeys, but all monkeys are primates. Confused? No worries, for this short description think of it this way… Apes and primates don't have tails… but monkeys do. A quick Google search can explain this in detail.

Primates, with their diverse range of behaviors and personalities, offer a treasure trove of fascinating facts. For starters, they have bigger brains with regard to body size than other primates. I've watched primates interact for hours. One of the most entertaining aspects of primate behavior is their use of grooming as a form of social bonding. Primates spend a significant amount of time picking through each other's fur to remove parasites and dirt. This grooming behavior can be quite a sight, with monkeys forming long lines and engaging in what seems like a group spa day.

Another amusing trait of primates is their remarkable problem-solving skills and use of tools. Some monkey species, like the capuchin monkey, have been observed using rocks to crack open nuts, and others use sticks to extract insects from crevices. This tool use is not just practical but also showcases their intelligence and ingenuity.

Primates are also known for their playful and mischievous antics. For example, macaques have been observed stealing food from tourists, often with a cheeky grin. They can be surprisingly bold, and their antics can range from innocently stealing snacks to outright taking items like sunglasses or cameras. I speak from experience. Watching a macaque expertly snatch your lunch and then scamper off with it can be both hilarious and a reminder that these clever creatures are adept at taking advantage of any opportunity that comes their way.

One particularly interesting aspect of primate behavior is their tendency to mimic human actions. Monkeys have been seen copying human behaviors, such as using utensils or trying to mimic human gestures. In some cases, this mimicry is so precise that it's almost as if the monkeys are putting on a show. It's a comical reminder of how closely related we are to these intelligent primates and how they often playfully engage with their environment.

The Hippos

Hippos might look like gentle giants with their round bodies and big eyes, but they are actually among the most dangerous animals in Africa. Despite their seemingly sluggish nature, hippos can run at speeds of up to 30 miles per hour on land and are surprisingly agile in water. I learned this once, trying to get too close to photograph one in the water. In a second, it was within striking range.

Close call.

Their powerful jaws, which can open up to 180 degrees, are equipped with massive tusks that can grow up to 20 inches long. This formidable combination of speed and strength makes hippos the true heavyweight champions of the animal kingdom, capable of surprising anyone who underestimates them.

In Africa, hippos are typically credited with more human deaths than almost all other animals. At night, they come out of the water to graze. But they need to be back in the water when the sun comes up to protect their delicate skin. African school children typically head off to school each morning in the dark, and they often cross paths. Something you probably never thought of while you waited for the bus in grade school.

Hippos create well-worn paths by repeatedly traveling from their water habitats to grazing areas on land. These paths can become quite distinct over time, almost like rural roadways… which animals and humans alike use. Africa is not for sissies.

They have a very deep "voice" that can be heard over several miles. The sheer volume and depth of these calls are both awe-inspiring, as they seem to resonate from the depths of their massive bodies.

Hippos spend a significant portion of their day submerged in muddy water, which helps keep their skin cool and protects them from sunburn. Their mud baths can turn into quite the spectacle, with hippos rolling around, splashing, and playfully nudging each other. It's almost as if they're having a giant, sloppy pool party, where the main goal is to get as muddy and relaxed as possible. This playful side of hippos, combined with their otherwise formidable presence, adds a touch of humor and charm to these otherwise intimidating creatures.

The Alligators

... and lizards

Alligators and crocodiles are some of the most prehistoric-looking animals on the planet. They are often (deservingly) depicted as fearsome predators. However, despite their intimidating appearance, alligators are known to exhibit some rather amusing behavior during courtship. During mating season, male alligators perform a unique display called "bellowing," where they produce a deep, resonant roar that can travel for miles. This roar is not only a way to attract females but also to establish dominance. They are the loudest reptiles on earth. The sound is so powerful that it can cause the water around them to vibrate, creating a visual ripple effect that looks like a mini-earthquake in the water.

Both species are ectothermic, meaning they rely on external sources to heat up or cool down. To do this, they bask in the sun with their mouths wide open, a behavior known as "mouth-gaping." It might look like they're trying to catch some rays or simply displaying their impressive teeth, but this act helps them regulate their body temperature.

Alligators are only found in the United States and China… but crocodiles are all over the world. Alligators need fresh water, but crocs can live in either. With that said, the alligator is considered part of the "crocodile family." Recent studies surmise that alligators may actually have swum to America from Africa eons ago.

Pass almost any river in Africa and you will see crocodiles, and it is not safe to swim in remote African lakes or rivers. They thrive in slow-moving water, and large crocs sometimes only eat one large meal a year. If you don't see one, don't assume there are none… they can stay underwater for upwards of 20 minutes. They may appear lazy and slow… but they're stealthy and fast when they want to be. Although alligators are well known in the Animal Kingdom for caring for and nurturing their young, they also sometimes eat them. Yep. True.

There is still a lot to study about these creatures. A recent study determined that wild alligator blood boasts antiviral and antibiotic properties. Surprisingly, alligator blood can fight against the Herpes simplex virus, West Nile Virus, and HIV-1.

The

Wild Dogs

Wild dogs, also known as African painted wolves or African wild dogs, are among the most fascinating—and often misunderstood—predators in the animal kingdom. They are also some of the most rare and endangered.

One of the most intriguing aspects of their behavior is their exceptional teamwork during hunts. Unlike many predators that hunt solo, wild dogs rely on a highly coordinated pack strategy to bring down prey. Their hunts are a mix of strategy and sheer stamina, with pack members taking turns running at high speeds to exhaust and corner their quarry.

They have incredibly expressive communication using a range of vocalizations, including squeaks, whines, and distinctive high-pitched calls, to communicate with each other. Wild dogs are known for their surprisingly complex social structure. Each pack is led by a dominant alpha pair, but what's particularly interesting is how they manage conflicts within the pack. Instead of resorting to aggression, wild dogs use a system of social rituals and submissive behaviors to resolve disputes and maintain harmony. For example, lower-ranking members often engage in "appeasement" behaviors, such as licking the faces of higher-ranking individuals, to show respect. This sophisticated social interaction is like an elaborate game of etiquette, where the rules are based on respect and cooperation rather than outright dominance.

During a hunt, some of the older and younger dogs cannot keep up with the pack… this is where I found their behavior very interesting. Once an animal is taken down, one or two of the dogs that made the kill will actually run back to the dogs who couldn't keep up and direct them to the kill. This "sharing" behavior is fairly unique in Africa. But… wild dogs are known for being incredibly messy eaters. When wild dogs make a kill, they tend to eat with reckless abandon, often getting blood and scraps all over themselves and each other. This enthusiastic feeding frenzy can lead to some amusingly messy scenarios, with wild dogs looking like they've just had a food fight by the end of a meal.

The Hyenas

Hyenas are the garbage disposals of the Serengeti. They do hunt, but they also steal kills from other animals. And they will eat everything except the skull. When I first got to Africa on my first trip I was amazed how many skulls there were on the ground. I actually thought as we were landing on the grass runway…."wow, there are white rocks here".

But they are far from being just scavengers. While they are infamous for their role in cleaning up the savannah by consuming carrion, hyenas are also skilled hunters. Spotted hyenas, for example, can make up to 60% of their diet through hunting, often working in groups to bring down prey. Their hunting strategy is characterized by relentless pursuit and teamwork, demonstrating that these animals are not just opportunistic but also highly capable predators.

One of the most striking features of hyenas is their distinctive laugh. This "laugh" is actually a series of high-pitched whoops and giggles that hyenas use to communicate with each other, especially when they're excited or agitated. The sound can be quite eerie to human ears, but to other hyenas, it's a crucial part of their social interaction.

The hyena's body is often described as a mix between a dog and a cat, but their most distinctive feature is their unique gait. Hyenas have a peculiar, rolling walk that makes them look like they're perpetually swaying from side to side. Hyenas also have a rather interesting social structure. Unlike many predators, hyenas live in matriarchal societies where females hold the top positions of power. Female hyenas are larger and more dominant than males, and they lead the clans with a strong sense of authority.

The

Coyote

Coyotes are often celebrated for their remarkable adaptability and cunning. They can actually mimic other animals' sounds. This means coyotes can imitate the calls of other wildlife, such as foxes or even domestic dogs, which they use to lure prey into a compromising position.

Coyotes are also known for their impressive adaptability, which extends to their diet. While they are primarily carnivores, coyotes are opportunistic eaters and will consume a wide variety of foods depending on what's available. Their diet can include small mammals, birds, insects, fruits, and even human garbage.

Coyotes are famous for their haunting and melodious howls, which they use to communicate with their pack members. However, these howls can sometimes turn into a full-blown vocal performance, especially after a kill, with multiple coyotes joining in and harmonizing. The resulting chorus can sound almost like a wild, off-key choir, adding a touch of humor to their otherwise eerie calls.

Once hunted to the brink of extinction (when I went to college in Montana, there was a bounty on coyotes that the state supported), they are now in all 50 states. For the most part, they are nocturnal. So sometimes the only way to know you have a "coyote problem" is when all the cats or rabbits in the neighborhood disappear.

Nature is always a fascinating scientist, and this is on full display when it comes to the coyote population. When there is an overabundance of coyotes in a certain area, Mother Nature lowers the size of the litters coyotes have in a given year. If coyotes are aggressively hunted in another area and their numbers are down, Mother Nature senses this and the litter count goes up. Fascinating.

I often say that no matter what your view is on evolution and the origins of different species… or how we all got here… someone stayed up all night figuring this stuff out.

The Fox

The fox is a loner.

They hunt and sleep alone. When raising their young, they live in small families while their "kits" are young. Then they return to their solitary lifestyle. That family is called a "leash of foxes."

They are related to dogs, but act more like cats. In many cities around the world, foxes have become adept at navigating human-made landscapes, often seen scavenging through trash cans or wandering through parks. Their adaptability is so remarkable that in some cases, they've even learned to use crosswalks and wait for traffic lights.

Yep. True.

Like a guided missile, the fox harnesses Earth's magnetic field to hunt. Other animals, like birds, sharks, and turtles, have this "magnetic sense," but the fox is the first one known to use it to catch prey. The fox can see the planet's magnetic field as a "ring of shadow" in its eyes that darkens as it moves toward magnetic north. When the shadow and the sound of prey line up, it's time to pounce.

Although foxes are wild, their relationship with people goes way back. In 2011, researchers opened a grave in a 16,500-year-old Jordan cemetery to find the remains of a man and his pet fox. This was 4,000 years before the first-known human and domestic dog were buried together.

Some foxes can run up to 42 mph, giving new meaning to the phrase "quick like a fox." They're agile—able to jump three feet in the air and climb fences and over roofs—and have impressive endurance: one Arctic fox walked 2,700 miles, from Norway to Canada, in three months.

That's over 30 miles a day.

J. Smith

The

HORSES

There are hundreds of horse breeds and dozens of interesting facts about these icons of the American West. But none of those breeds are native to North America. Every horse you see as you drive along the backroads in America is a descendant of European horses. Even the horses that we regard as "wild" are actually feral horses whose ancestors escaped from captivity.

A horse can learn human words and remember you even if you've been away from each other for a long time, especially if you treated them well. Their memory is comparable to that of elephants. And, like dogs, horses can be trained.

Horses have a strong sense of hearing, able to pick up sounds that humans cannot. In addition, horses can see very well. Their eyes are larger than those of any land mammal, and they can move their eyes separately. Those eyes are mounted on the sides of their head so they can watch for predators. Their brains then process these two images into one continuous image. This gives them an almost 360-degree field of vision, nearly four times what humans have. But this comes at a price as their depth perception is extremely poor. They can sense movement on the edges of their vision, but they cannot determine exactly what an object is. This is why they spook easily.

Animals with eyes mounted on the front-facing side of their heads are typically predators. The ones with eyes on the sides of their heads are usually prey. Horses fall into this category. They also have an incredibly fast reaction time… less than one second, also to protect them from predators.

It requires a lot of oxygen to keep a horse moving, but unlike humans, they cannot breathe through their mouths. Instead, they have extremely large nostrils.

They are also fast, the fastest being recorded at a little over 55 miles per hour. Their hooves are made of keratin, just like the horn of a rhino… who they are actually related to.

The Birds

Earlier in the series, I mentioned that "I'm not a birder."

"Birders" are those people who walk around with those long white lenses looking for birds to photograph and study. I have some of those lenses… I'm just not that into birds.

With that said, there are about 15,000 species of birds on planet Earth. Birds come in an astonishing variety of shapes, sizes, and colors, each with its own set of fascinating and unusual traits. In the United States alone, there are over 40 million "pet" birds.

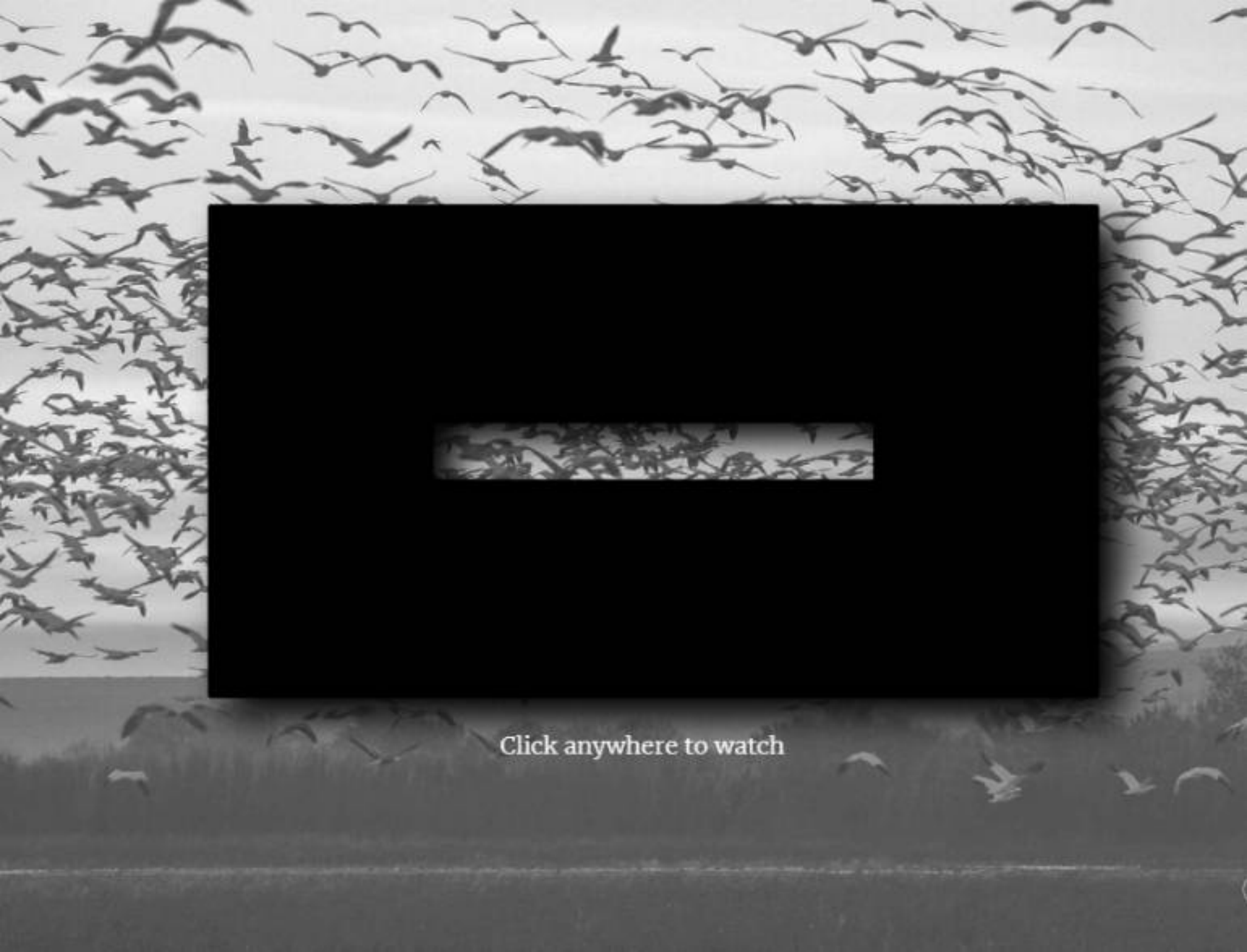
Birds have been around for about 150 million years. Technically speaking, birds are dinosaurs since they've evolved from them. Their ancestors were small, feathered, meat-eating creatures. After the disastrous change in the environment that wiped out most other species, birds were able to survive due to their small size, ability to fly, and adaptability. Over time, they evolved into thousands of different species with unique characteristics and strengths to thrive in various habitats.

It is believed that there are more than 50 billion birds in the world. Every year, new bird species are discovered. The bird world is full of fascinating extremes, from the massive Common Ostrich to the diminutive Bee Hummingbird – the biggest and the smallest of them all.

With their vibrant colors, unique behaviors, and incredible abilities, they captivate our imaginations. Did you know that birds are the only animals with feathers? These feathers not only help them fly but also provide insulation and play a role in mating displays. Birds also have a remarkable sense of direction. Many species migrate thousands of miles each year, navigating with pinpoint accuracy. Depending on the bird, they can fly, run, jump, sing, talk, use tools, hunt, dance, fight, swim, dive, and fish.

From the tiny hummingbird to the majestic eagle, birds are truly amazing.

Over the years, I have photographed many birds mixed in with the wilder animals I prefer. And on my hard drive, I have a folder just called "birds." What you will see here are some examples from that folder.



Click anywhere to watch

The

PUFFINS

There are 3 species of puffins… the horned puffin, the tufted puffin and the iconic Atlantic puffin. All are small, diving seabirds that spend most of their time roaming the open ocean, returning to land only once a year to nest in burrows on isolated, predator-free islands.

Atlantic puffins have been observed using sticks to scratch themselves.
This type of behavior dubbed 'body-care related tool use', has only previously been recorded in primates and elephants, and suggests high levels of intelligence

They are faithful partners.
Every year, during the breeding season, pairs separated by thousands of miles, for months on end, somehow reunite at the same burrow.

The flamboyant beak of the puffin is one of its most distinctive features, but the showy colouration is only useful during the breeding season but making them more obvious to both their predators and prey.
Once puffins return to the open ocean after breeding, the colorful outer layer of the beak falls off, rendering it dull brown and significantly smaller.

Puffins can paddle on the surface of the ocean like ducks, but when they dive they flap their wings to produce forward thrust. Underwater, their feet function as rudders that help them to pursue and catch agile prey.

Their short, stout wings make them excellent swimmers, but the drawback to this is that they need to flap around 400 times per minute in order to fly. Pretty exhausting.

And oh yea… they have a nickname.

Sea Parrot

Click anywhere to watch

The

WARTHOG

We're lucky that there are any photographs of warthogs in the wild, to be honest. Of all the animals I photograph, the warthog is the most camera-shy.

First of all, you "want" to photograph them. Why? Because they are so ugly that they are actually cute. They're basically the Serengeti's version of the pig. But they are fast… capable of running up to 35 mph. And when they run, their tail sticks straight up like an antenna while their short legs move at almost cartoon character speed. The piglets look like mini-me versions of the adults… and they run the same way.

They run, they stop, they look… and then they take off again. It's almost a given that as soon as you lift your camera to your eye… they take off running. Every time.

Warthogs have large, fairly flat faces containing wart-like structures just above the snout, which is where their name is derived from. They have two sets of warts, and these are a lot bigger and more pronounced in males. Warthogs also have tusks, which develop from their canine teeth and protrude above the upper lip. At times, warthogs can appear (and are) quite ferocious.

One of the most interesting aspects of warthogs is their impressive tusks, which are not just for show. Male warthogs use their tusks in combat to establish dominance and compete for mates. Warthogs are often seen rooting around in the dirt with their snouts, using their tusks to turn over soil in search of food.

Warthogs are considered to be a great meal for Africa's biggest predators, and this is where it gets hard to watch. Typically, they are hunted by the big cats. Those cats usually take down their prey by grabbing it around the neck, either snapping its spine or crushing its esophagus. It's quick.

The warthog, however, is almost solid muscle, and it has an incredibly strong and muscular neck. When taken down, the cats can't suffocate it or break its neck… and they usually end up eating the warthog alive while it screams.

The circle of life can be hard to watch sometimes.

The Cape Buffalo

Over the years, I have become friends with several guides and rangers in Africa. On several occasions, I have asked them the question, "Which animal do you fear the most?" The answer is unanimous.

The Cape Buffalo.

Cape buffalo are among Africa's most iconic and formidable animals, known for their sheer size and strength. They are members of "the big five." Simply put, the big five were the most dangerous African animals to hunt on foot by early explorers. They're very difficult to maneuver around and are highly unpredictable.

Most importantly, "the big five" are the only animals that charge and fight back against guns, and the cape buffalo is the most dangerous of them all, extremely feared by hunters.

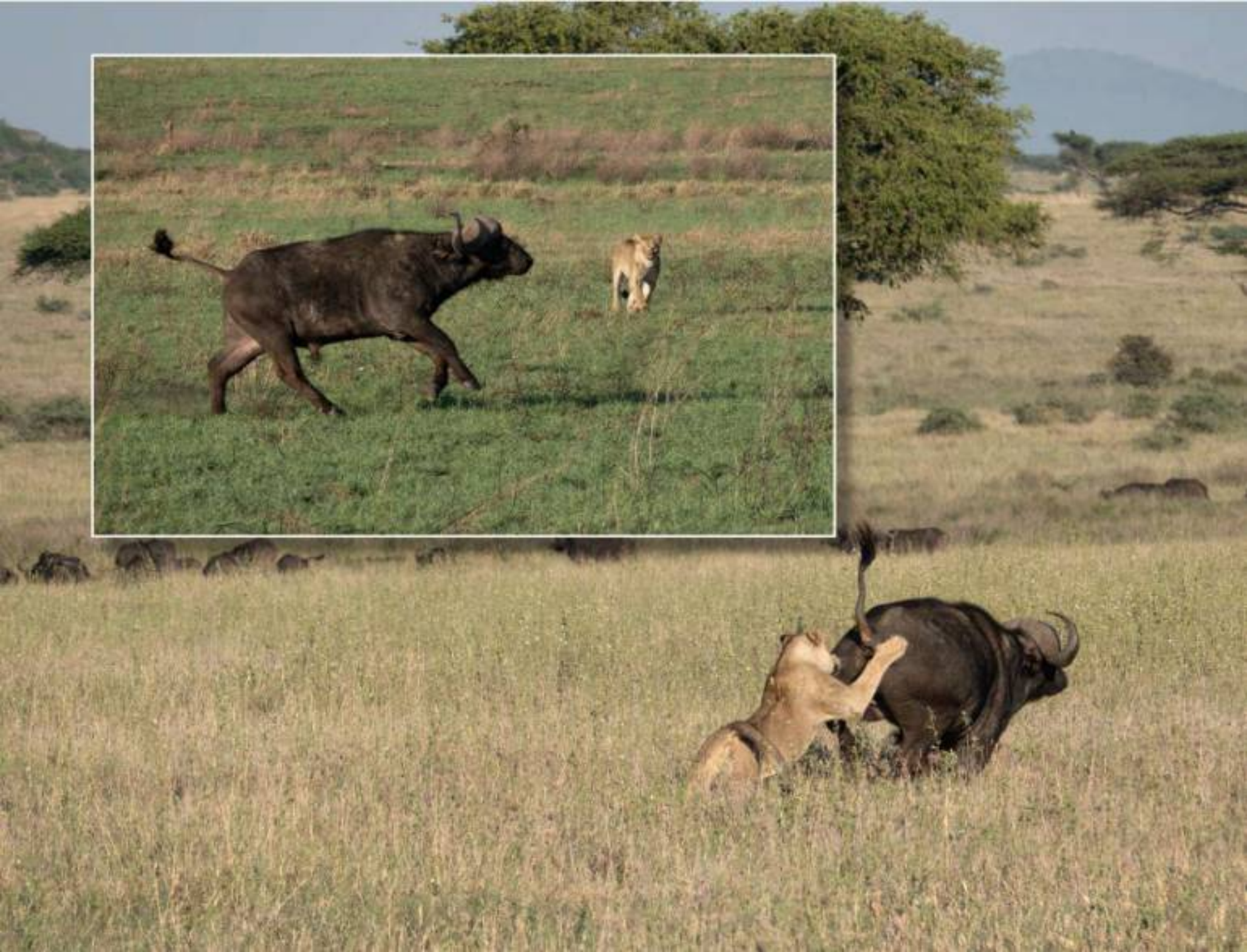
"The Black Death" and "The Widowmaker" are nicknames given to the cape buffalo because of their aggressive nature. It is estimated that around 200 people die every year from these animals, making them one of the most dangerous creatures in Africa.

They can weigh up to 1,900 lbs. and are one of Simba's favorite steaks.

Yet, they won't go down without putting up a fight. Buffaloes will protect and try to rescue another member of the herd if a lion catches them. They're even known to murder a lion that's killed a group member in revenge.

One of the most notable features of the Cape buffalo is their massive, curved horns. These impressive horns are not just for show; they play a crucial role in their social interactions and defense mechanisms. They live in large herds that can range from a few dozen to over a hundred individuals. The herd structure is intricate, with strong bonds forming between members, especially between mothers and their calves.

They are notorious for being difficult to manage, and they often refuse to move from their chosen spot, even in the face of approaching predators. Their unwillingness to be easily moved or intimidated adds a layer of "angry" to their already formidable presence.



The

Wildebeest

The name 'wildebeest' quite literally means 'wild beast or animal'. It was created when Dutch explorers settled in South Africa.

One of the most striking aspects of wildebeest behavior is their annual migration, which is often referred to as one of the greatest wildlife spectacles on Earth. During this migration, millions of wildebeest, along with zebras and gazelles, travel in a massive, moving wave across the plains… like a giant lawnmower. The sheer scale of the migration, with wildebeest moving in tightly packed herds, can look like a gigantic, undulating river of hooves and horns as they navigate the challenges of predators, river crossings, and unpredictable weather.

Around 200,000 of the weakest wildebeest and zebras will die during the migration due to starvation, disease, or drowning. In eastern Africa, an average of 6,250 wildebeests are attacked and drown in the Mara River per year. The African crocodiles are responsible for this and often wait all year for the wildebeest to cross. It is sometimes their only meal of the year.

Still, they march on perpetually, following the rain and the grasses it produces.

Sad as those statistics are, it's advantageous for other animals in the ecosystem… including buzzards, lions, cheetahs, crocodiles, and other predators. The decomposition of wildebeest corpses also serves as a much-needed source of phosphorus and other nutrients for surrounding rivers.

It is the "circle of life" on full display.

Wildebeest also have a surprising habit of forming "friendships" with other species. During the migration, it's common to see wildebeest mingling with zebras and gazelles, forming mixed-species herds. This intermingling is partly due to the benefits of mutual vigilance, where each species keeps an eye out for predators while the others graze.

Click anywhere to watch

The Humans

No book on animals would be complete without mentioning the most dangerous animal of all:

Humans.

While we share numerous biological traits with animals, we differ significantly in essential ways. Many species exhibit intelligence; dolphins recognize themselves in mirrors, crows use tools, and some primates learn sign language. Though humans may not be the strongest or fastest, our strengths lie in abstract thinking, planning, and technology.

Humans communicate through complex spoken and written languages, unlike the various forms of communication seen in animals. Many animals have intricate social structures, but human societies are uniquely diverse and adaptable, creating institutions and global networks.

Some animals use tools, but humans have developed advanced technology. While animals typically live harmoniously within ecosystems, humans have drastically transformed the Earth, leading to environmental challenges like deforestation, climate change, and pollution.

Forests are cleared, cities expand, and plastics harm marine life. Many animals struggle to adapt to rapid climate changes, while illegal hunting and unsustainable fishing threaten species with extinction. Additionally, invasive species disrupt ecosystems, and barriers like roads , fences and urban areas fragment natural landscapes.

While humans have caused harm, efforts like conservation programs, protected areas, and sustainable practices are helping to restore balance.

The challenge now is ensuring that future human activities coexist with wildlife rather than endangering it further.

Through the Lens of Hope.

As a wildlife photographer, I have witnessed the raw beauty of our planet—sunrises that set the sky ablaze over endless savannas, rivers that carve through time itself, and creatures that remind us of nature's quiet wisdom.

I have also seen fragility, the delicate balance that sustains life, and the scars left by human hands.

Yet, through my lens, I try to see hope.

I see it in the resilience of a mother elephant guiding her calf through parched lands, in the quiet patience of a leopard waiting for the perfect moment, in the return of wolves to landscapes they once lost.

Nature does not give up—it adapts, it perseveres, it thrives.

And so must we.

Every frame I capture is a reminder that this world is worth fighting for, that beauty and wilderness still exist, and that our choices matter.

Really matter.

There is still time to protect, to restore, to heal. But time is growing short.

The story of our world is still being written.

How the next chapter turns out is up to us.

I hope the photographs in this book have given you a glimpse into what I like to call "My Wild Life."

However, these pictures tell just a tiny part of the story—that one moment when I pressed the button. There are plenty of pictures that didn't make the cut. Photo books can only fit so many images on their pages.

As you read this, I might be cruising through Africa, exploring trails in Alaska, or sailing off the coast of South America… camera in hand.

It's what I love to do.

Thankfully, we're fortunate to live in a time rich with digital platforms—websites, blogs, vlogs, and social media—that can be updated continuously. Like many photographers, I maintain a website designed to showcase a broader and evolving array of my work, allowing me to share new content regularly.

If you're interested in exploring more of my photography, I encourage you to visit oasisfilms.com.

The adventure continues.