

A Year in the African Bush by Jon and Anne Anwyl

Introduction

Fumbling with the latch one-handed wasn't working, so I put the bucket down and wrestled the door open with both hands. "A child could have fitted that better," I muttered. And then shut the hell up because there was no-one around to hear me. I don't generally talk to myself, but then I don't generally carry meat into a predator's enclosure. Being alone in the middle of nowhere wasn't helping my stress levels either.

I stepped through the wood-and-wire door and latched myself in. A hefty stick was propped against the fence, and picking it up made me feel a lot more confident. Then stupid. If things turned ugly, the stick might buy me, what, an extra three seconds? And they wouldn't be pleasant seconds. Still, confidence counted for something in here, and I definitely felt better twigged-up. I hung onto it.

Now. Where was he? Patches of shade mottled the parched yellow grass, a perfect match for his camouflage. Clumps of bristly trees dotted the landscape with knee-high grasses huddled in their shade. Between these islands of thick bush the air was heavy with heat from the African sun, and the few straggly tufts of grass lay limp on the baked earth, leaf blades sprawled like legionnaires collapsed in the desert. I stood for a while, sweeping my gaze back and forth across the enclosure, straining to spot the slightest thing out of place. Nothing moved except branches swaying in a whisper of wind, and the only sound was an occasional bird call.

Forty meters to my right was a waist-high wooden platform. Positioned so the sanctuary's occasional visitors had clear views from the safe side of the fence, this was where I had to dish out the bloody chunks of horse meat I'd chopped up that morning. Forty meters. Really not far. Yet I hesitated, knowing that once I left the gate my only exit could be blocked. Another minute of watching and waiting then. There was no hurry, and besides, a spot like this did to the eyes what a massage does for the back. The only possible blemish on nature's quiet splendor, the tall wire fence that bounded the enclosure, was largely obscured by the scattered trees and shrubs. A blanket of yellows, greens and browns ran all the way to the horizon, unbroken by buildings, power lines or other human constructions. The enclosure, a couple of football pitches in size, was simply a fenced-off piece of Namibian wilderness.

I've always appreciated the beauty of the Great Outdoors, but that savannah landscape woke my senses like no other. In fact I breathed the view more than saw it, despite nostrils as blind as the next man's. Okay, so it probably wasn't the absolute middle of nowhere – patches of Siberia and Mongolia must have stronger claims to that zip code – but Namibia is hardly teeming with people, and the wildlife sanctuary was remote even by African standards. Civilization was a half-hour drive away, provided you felt a handful of shacks qualified as such. A version that came with hot water and medical aid was another twenty miles down bumpy dirt roads.

I wasn't really alone either. The sanctuary's administration block was only a hundred meters behind me, and there were other enclosures nearby. My wife Anne was feeding the bat-eared foxes, and other volunteers were busy with the various monkeys, cats, rodents and canids in other enclosures. But that didn't stop me feeling all rugged and intrepid. After all, there was nothing but bush and wild animals in front of me. I couldn't see anyone else, and I wasn't even sure anyone would hear me if I shouted. Or screamed, for that matter.

Whoops, bad idea to start thinking along those lines. Less thought, more action. Besides, sweat was trickling down my back, my already-pink nose was starting to itch, and if I stood there much longer the meat might start cooking. Time to stir things up.

I banged the bucket with my stick, yelling, "Come, kitty, come!" My shout was all chest and rumbling bass, a real manly holler, but it trilled up into a girly squeak when a cheetah flowed out of the grass ten strides away.

Sensual grace and liquid motion, that cat. Every inch of its body was gliding or rippling in one direction or another – except for the glowing amber eyes, which were locked on me. The shock of a cheetah materializing so close had already rocked me back a step, but the sullen heat in the look was what hit hardest. It knocked the rugged and intrepid right out of me.

Whenever I put myself in harm's way, my loins and stomach react the quickest and most violently. The bits on the outside try to squirm their way inwards, while the bits on the inside make for the nearest exit – which makes total sense when you look at it from their individual perspectives. With such clear signs of intelligence down there it's hard to dispute that men think with their loins and stomachs. Mine swapped places a couple of times before I noticed the kink in the cheetah's tail. It was Jirani. Not Kanja, I told my still-frantic heart. Easy, boy. It's not Kanja.

Satisfied with her entrance, Jirani drifted into a trot towards the feeding platform, chirruping softly as she went. Cheetahs can make all sorts of noises that better match the size and pointyness of their claws and teeth – growls, hisses and snarls for example – but believe it or not, a happily excited cheetah chirrups almost like a bird. I stood there for a second, savoring the simple pleasure of breathing again. Once the hairs on my arms and neck had settled back down, I headed for the platform at a steady walk, calling and beating the meat-bucket as I went. Two more cheetahs, Mandala and Shambe, appeared near the back of the enclosure, and they too ghosted toward the platform.

Still no sign of Kanja.

I began a little dance: two steps forward flicking eyes left and right; pirouette to face behind; two steps backwards, eyes left-right; pirouette to face forwards again; and repeat. There was nothing elegant about my routine – Nureyev himself might lack grace with a bucket of horse steaks in one hand and a weighty stick in the other – but at least it gave me a shot at obeying Rule Number One.

Never turn your back on a cheetah. That was the first thing the volunteer coordinator taught us at the start of our working vacation. Something facing away from a cheetah looks

like it's about to flee, and to the cheetah, that means the something is prey. Rule Number Two – don't run away – was really just an extension of Rule Number One, because running provokes even the most bone-idle cheetah into a chase – and there's only ever one winner in that race.

Simple enough you'd think, but then Rules One and Two only work when you know where the blasted creature is. If Kanja was behind me while I made for the platform, then I was breaking both rules, turning my back *and* running away. Granted, technically I was walking, not running, but to a cheetah that can top sixty miles an hour, my flat-out-sprint must look little different from my stroll-to-the-shops. My little dance was the best solution I'd come up with, a cunning ploy to keep my front facing everywhere all at once. Of course, logic said my back was facing everywhere all at once as well, but what with stress clogging up the brainwaves, logic wasn't getting any airtime. I danced on.

Halfway to the platform, Kanja made his move. Hackles bristling, head lowered and jaws agape, he prowled out from behind a clump of trees and came directly towards me with a slow, stiff-legged stride. Unlike the other cats, he was making all the right noises to accompany his pointy bits, and globs of drool dripped from his mouth.

Time to focus on Rule Number Three: don't be afraid. A cheetah senses fear, and that makes it more courageous and more likely to attack. Simple and logical, this rule was nevertheless the hardest to follow in practice. As Kanja stalked closer, I chanted under my breath, "No fear, no fear," to the rhythm of my thudding heart. Much good it did. The mantra only brought my fear to front-of-mind, together with all the reasons why shrieking panic was perfectly sensible. Cheetahs are pure predators, adapted in every way for hunting and killing. They're the same height and weight as an Irish Wolfhound, but the bits that matter – the teeth and claws – are much bigger, and they're not there for show. Kanja was hungry, and he knew I had food. He could smell the blood.

The good news, I'd been told, was that cheetahs are cowards. Tuned for extreme speed, they have the brittle fragility of sprinters and exotic supercars, so a dust-up with something that can give a decent account of itself makes little sense. Rules One and Two work precisely for that reason: a cheetah figures that any animal confident enough to stand its ground must be a handy scrapper and is therefore best avoided. The bad news was that Kanja was no everyday cheetah. Raised as a pet and mistreated by his Namibian owners, he was bolder, edgier and more aggressive than normal when he arrived at the sanctuary. And boy did he show it.

Low growls and snarls accompanied every deliberate step, and when he was a couple of meters away Kanja snapped his jaws and hissed so hard I felt warm cheetah spit speckling my hand. The world seemed to close in on me, perhaps because all non-essential brain functions were shutting down. The brevity and simplicity of our training on the first morning now made sense: at a moment like this no-one would remember anything but the most basic of instructions. I knew what was coming, so I mentally glued my feet in place and held my stick out in front like a sword. A blunt and crooked sword, but inedible at least, unlike my hand and arm. I was drawing on the fourth and final chunk of the training: "Just keep a stick

pointed at him, and don't take a step back whatever you do. If he really starts getting feisty, shout and kick dust in his face. The best thing you can do is keep moving towards him."

Towards him. Riiiiight.

Kanja pranced back and forth, tail lashing, and then lunged, front claws aimed at my chest and jaws at my neck. It was only a feint, and he didn't travel far because the stick kept him at bay, but the temptation to drop the meat and get the hell out of there was overwhelming. In fact I'd seen my predecessor, a twenty-something American girl, do exactly that the day before. (Predecessor sounds rather dramatic – all I mean is I took over when her volunteering stint was over.) I knew it was a bad plan to follow her example. Cheetahs are smart enough to remember a coward, so although this time Kanja would probably take the abandoned meat and leave me be, next time he'd only be more aggressive. Perhaps even bold enough to go for a real bite, and then things would get properly hairy.

There was no choice. I had to follow the training as best I could. Heart hammering and mouth dry, I shuffled forward, kicking at the earth, bellowing profanities and shaking my stick. I must have looked ridiculous and feeble in equal measure, no more fearsome than an old codger chasing birds off his beloved vegetable patch, yet it worked. Kanja backed off – only a meter or so, and he was still hissing and snarling – but at least he wasn't making any more fake pounces. Gaining confidence with every step, I lengthened my stride and herded him back towards the platform where the other cheetahs were whipping their tails about in impatience.

The feeding itself was easy. Each cheetah was happy once it had its own steak, so I just had to be quick and accurate with my throws, starting with Kanja of course. After eating, the cheetahs were as docile as house cats. Kanja even relaxed enough to lie panting in the shade a few meters away, although he'd growl if I went any closer.

The next day Kanja was back to his aggressive self, and I had to face him down again. He put on the same show every day for our two weeks at the sanctuary, and it shook me every time, although it did get easier. Anne was assigned to more chilled-out cats, but she did face other trials. She was knocked down by an excitable baby giraffe – there's no such thing as a small giraffe, however young – and she never really got comfortable with the young baboons we took for walks.

Every second of our stay was extraordinary. Anne and I groomed cheetahs, fed them, stroked them, and adored them. They purred like house cats and licked us like dogs, drawing blood with their sandpaper tongues. We even slept out under the stars in an enclosure, and a pair of cheetahs came and slept on top of us. Lying under sixty kilos of muscular rug that panted and purred made for a bizarre tug-of-war between my run and sleep instincts. Although sleep won in the end, the run instinct proved handy in the morning – the first thing a cheetah does when it gets up is pee on the patch it slept in.

We had once-in-a-lifetime experiences with other animals too. We took a baby leopard for a walk, watched a caracal (African lynx) sniff delicately at our feet, fed ridiculously rare African wild dogs, and one day, in awed silence, we accompanied a young male lion on his imperious morning stroll. All against the magnificent tranquility and beauty

of the Namibian savannah.

It was our best holiday ever, made sweeter by the feeling we'd contributed to something worthwhile. Back home in Sydney we gabbled about the magic of African wildlife to anyone who listened and many who didn't. We organized our photos, spliced video clips into a short film, and checked the sanctuary website obsessively for news on the animals we'd cared for. Anne started volunteering part-time at a zoo, and we vowed that all our holidays would be working with wildlife from then on.

I spent many a lunch break browsing African volunteer programs on the web, dreaming of the next holiday that was oh so far away. My office-based working life seemed drained of color. Although the corporate world still offered intellectual challenge and regular pay, my career suddenly looked like an endless qwerty tap-dance broken only by conversations with people I wouldn't otherwise choose to talk to.

Anne is usually ahead of me in such things, and she'd quit her sales and marketing job five years earlier to become a remedial massage therapist. She was still enjoying it, but life in Australia didn't feel right after Namibia. Claustrophobic, she said. Oppressive, even. Not the afternoons of beach volleyball under cloudless skies of course, nor the hikes through vast wilderness areas, or the kayaking to idyllic coves with picnic hampers. No, it was the way things were being run. She talked of a "perfect control" mentality seeping into the developed world, and when she started pointing out examples it began bothering me too. Safety and security are great. A world where everything just works – first time every time – is wonderful. But I don't need to be told that a wet floor is slippery. Nor do I like the feeling that I'm being filmed almost everywhere I go. And perhaps this is just petty grumpiness, but when I'm producing papers to renew my driving license, I think the authorities should understand that the Jon Anwyl on my utility bill is the same person as the Jonathan Anwyl on my passport.

Over many evening conversations on the sofa, a life in African conservation grew from dream to plan. We'd adored working with animals, relished outdoor life, and fallen in love with the African landscape. Conservation is a big deal in Africa, and nowhere else in the world can you work with elephants, big cats, monkeys and bushbabies in their natural environment.

The decision to move country was easier for us than most, because it wasn't our first time. Adjusting to a new environment was of little concern too, since Anne and I live in a permanent state of mild culture shock. Anne is French and I'm British, and our nations have vastly different opinions on the way people should live. Eight years of marriage has only ironed out the bigger wrinkles, and we still disagree over whether cheese comes before or after dessert. A trivial difference of opinion, you might think. Not to the French it isn't – not when the proper way to enjoy food is in question. It took me several years to accept that in France the first topic over a meal is generally a thorough critique of other recent meals.

We met in Australia. I was living in Holland for work and had gone down under for a wedding. Anne wasn't really living anywhere, having quit her job in London and arrived in Australia with the intention of staying. When we met she was in the middle of a three-month

tour of the continent, trying to decide where to settle, but with little idea of how she might make a living or overcome the immigration hurdles. To be exact, we met when she head-butted my helmet during a white-water rafting experience. Spending every minute of the next five days together, we discovered a shared love of the outdoors and a determination to live in Australia one day. The moment I was on the plane back to Europe I knew we shouldn't be apart. Anne felt the same way, so we split the cost of a plane ticket and she moved in.

Romantic and impulsive it may seem, but we had little to lose and everything to gain. We moved to Sydney after a couple of years, and we couldn't fault it until our Namibian adventure three years later. Despite our apparent penchant for globe-trotting, the decision to leave Australia was hard. The developing world was an entirely different proposition, plus we had no job prospects and no experience in wildlife conservation. The tipping point came when we realized it was then or never. Childless and in our thirties, we might never again have the same convergence of freedom, financial stability, and physical fitness. Children would become impossible in a few years, and if we wanted a completely different lifestyle the switch would be easier before taking on parenthood.

Planning was easy, because our googling yielded nothing on how to start a wildlife conservation career in Africa, other than spending three years studying zoology or wildlife management. We decided we'd just join a volunteer program instead and figure it out from there. Enkosini Wildlife Sanctuary in South Africa gave a good impression on the internet, so we booked ourselves in for a month, bought the plane tickets, and began shutting down our lives in Australia.

We knew virtually nothing about wildlife when we arrived in Africa, but by the end of our first year we were working as safari guides in a beautiful South African reserve. This book is my journal from that year – with guest appearances from Anne – when we learnt more than we thought possible about things we didn't even know existed. When we look at a natural environment now, we have a basic understanding of what it is, how it works, and how it came to be – which magnifies the beauty of how it looks immeasurably. The really good news though, and the reason why we'll never regret starting this way of life, is that we'll *always* know far less than there is to know. Wide-eyed and over-excited amateurs we were, are, and forever will be.