

MFIAP APPLICATION - BARRIE WILKINS

INTRODUCTORY TEXT - PANTHERA LEO - 'TEENAGE' LION BEHAVIOUR

"Teenager" (1½ to 2 years of age)

Despite what you may think, the teenager is not a uniquely human phenomenon. In the animal kingdom lions use that teenage phase to allow their youngsters to learn about complex social behavior and other necessary life skills such as the all important hunting.

Having first experienced and photographed the social interaction amongst lions of this age group in 1993 I had to wait 17 years before the opportunity presented itself to continue my photographic observation of this particular age group.

In the ensuing years I had plenty of opportunities to photograph lions of all shapes and sizes, but it was the particular teenage behavior that I still needed to record.

Finally in August 2010 I had the opportunity to spend ten days at the waterhole they frequented. Lions are however wild animals and do not remain in the same place all the time so although I could spend 10 days there they only came to the waterhole area in the daylight on three occasions - two early mornings for their early drink and, just what I had been waiting for, a day at the waterhole.

On the two mornings they appeared they came in with their mother just after sunrise to drink at the waterhole. After a drink it is play time and they learn the art of hunting by chasing virtually anything that moves from their own tails to the doves that arrived just after sunrise for their early morning drink.

They spent just under an hour there, chasing anything that came near before moving off to shelter from the hot sun in the shade of trees or bushes - not conducive to good lion action photography especially as they spent most of the rest of the day sleeping. They are more active at night but I was restricted to photographing them during daylight hours.

On one day however the young lions were left at the waterhole by the mother as part of the teaching process. Part of a lions hunting technique is to get the animals desperate for a drink so the teenagers job on this day was to lie in full view at the waterhole for the whole day keeping all comers away from the water. The animals eventually become easier prey for the adults as they appear to be more interested in keeping a wary eye out on the young and forgetting that an adult could be lurking somewhere close by.

Each lion teenager, just like its human counterpart, has its own character, two preferred to chase the doves while to another a giraffe was the perfect target. Needless to say neither were successful.

Each prey animal requires a specialized hunting technique - with the long necked giraffe being the most challenging. Elephant calves are also not immune if they stray too far from the adults, which is why the breeding herds will run down en masse to the waterhole and depart equally quickly at the slightest sign of danger.

Not only do the teenagers chase other creatures they also chase each other and are insatiably curious - dung makes a great toy! They will play in and out of the water

chasing each other and even going in for the kill reinforcing the skills required for the kill.

These semi desert dwellers are particularly large due to the environment in which they live. My aim was to record their antics and behavior and use photography to reveal their strength and beauty in action.

Each image forms part of a portfolio but at the same time stands as a powerful statement of the magnificence of these wonderful animals.