

Cheetah kill

- by Mario Fazekas

Most nature & wildlife photographers would love to have the opportunity to photograph a 'kill'. I would like to share my experience of photographing a Cheetah kill in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, as there are some important learnings.

No matter which park in Africa we visit the majority of visitors seem to be asking the same question, "Have you seen any lions?" If not lions then leopards or cheetahs! We have been visiting national parks for over 10 years and we had not seen one leopard for about the first 6 years, so we know how it feels. We also used to rush around the parks reading the visitor comments book at each camp and then race off to the sighting area, only to find nothing! We then changed our strategy and would stop and watch any animal – just enjoying their behaviour - and we found that our predator sightings started to increase as well as our enjoyment of the parks. We are now on 14 leopard sightings and we have lost count of our lion sightings. We also learnt various behaviour patterns of Impala, for example, like snorting signals danger and we could be rewarded with a leopard sighting.

The Cheetah kill

We were spending a 17-day holiday in the Kgalagadi Park in December and on the last day we were deciding if we should venture out, as it was very hot. We decided to drive from Twee Rivieren up the Nossob riverbed and then back to camp for lunch. At 12h00 we stopped to watch a herd of Springbok near KijKij waterhole. They were all grazing together except for one...



...who seemed to be keeping guard. He kept looking down the Nossob, towards Rooiputs waterhole, and we couldn't see what he was looking at, even with binoculars.

We then drove down the Nossob in the direction he was looking and over one kilometre away we found a cheetah, which was stalking the springbok from that distance. She would hurry from one Camel thorn tree to the next and would sit patiently in the shade until the time was right to race to the next tree.

This went on for nearly two hours until we had reached the area where the Springbok were grazing. My wife and I had our Nikon F5s on continuous* and we hoped that the Cheetah & springbok would run across our field of view and not away from us. The cheetah disappeared behind a small hill & then erupted from her hiding place...



* It was tempting for us to set our cameras on the maximum frames per second but I had found in the past that the camera might lose focus. Also, at 7 fps, the spool would be finished in 5 seconds. We decided to shoot at one fps, which it turns out was the right thing to do as it took the Cheetah about 30 seconds to catch the Springbok. (I was shooting a Nikon F5 with AF 300mm f2.8 plus 2X converter to give a 600mm f5.6, & Kodak 100ASA Elite Chrome).

She caught the 'lookout' springbok within a few seconds – not by tripping it like we see on most videos, but by jumping onto its back!



She suffocated the springbok and then got up and walked all the way back to where we had first seen her. She started calling and out of the bushes comes her baby....



She walked back to the kill with her cub and the two of them started to eat...



We left the Cheetah to eat in peace and drove a short way north and at the next waterhole, Melkvlei, photographed a pride of lions walking through the bush...



...unaware of the potential meal a few kilometres to the south. Many Cheetah kills are taken over by lions and other stronger predators so they need to eat very quickly. By then it was after 16h00 and we headed back to Twee Rivieren camp. It was the most memorable moment we had spent in the wild. The whole event took four hours and we were the only witness, even though at least ten cars had driven past us they either did not even stop – who wants to watch boring old springbok hey! – or they would stop for a few seconds to shoot the cheetah sitting under a tree and then they were off...

The lessons to be learnt from this are the following:

- Ø Be patient – nature has its own time.
- Ø To obtain these types of photographs be prepared to endure uncomfortable circumstances. You can imagine how hot it was, midday – December – Kgalagadi – no shade!
- Ø Don't fixate on lions and other predators – learn to enjoy all animals and you may be rewarded with the sighting of a lifetime.

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