

Lions and people do not mix, with the result that in most unprotected areas of Africa the lions have been eradicated. Laikipia District, NW of Mount Kenya, is unique in having healthy wildlife populations, including those of large carnivores, which are stable or increasing – rather than disappearing.

Lions are tolerated on many of Laikipia's commercial ranches, but this is an uneasy truce. When a lion starts killing livestock on a regular basis, even the most wildlife-tolerant rancher may have to shoot the animal.

When we moved to Sosian Ranch, near Rumuruti, in 2004, Laikipia's lion population was estimated at around 250, a very healthy population for an unprotected area. Unfortunately, there is only so much safe land available for these lions, and – as their numbers grow – many of the younger males, as well as the old ones, are forced from their territories and pushed into unsafe peripheral areas where people are hostile to large predators.

Between 2002 and 2004, no fewer than 22 known lions – and probably many other unknown ones – were poisoned, mostly on communal land. Strychnine-laced bait indiscriminately kills not only lions, but other scavengers as well, including hyenas, jackals, vultures, and eagles and other birds of prey.

In 1997 **Dr Laurence Frank** started the **Laikipia Predator Project** (LPP) in

a bid to reduce human-predator conflict, while also learning about predator-friendly livestock management from local people. I knew of Laurence's work in Laikipia, and one exciting aspect of our move to Sosian was the chance to help him and his project by monitoring and reporting on lion activity on Sosian.

Laurence and his assistants have collared more than 120 lions in Laikipia in order to monitor their movements and to identify livestock killers. We had purchased a radio-tracking receiver and antennae. We were all set, only first we needed to *find* some lions on Sosian – not an easy task. Our breakthrough came late in September 2004, when some lions killed an eland cow about five minutes' drive from our house.

Laurence and colleague **Alayne Mathieson** came over to Sosian for a few days to try to collar a lion. There are several ways of capturing a lion and collaring it. You can set a trap with bait in such a way as to force a lion to walk into a foot snare to get at the meat. Once the lion's leg is secured, you can move in and dart it. Alternatively, you can try calling lions in by playing a thoroughly obnoxious recording of a baby buffalo in distress, and then – when the lions are close enough – you can dart one with a gun. Finally, you can drag a big piece of meat, preferably part of the carcass of a large animal, around until a lion comes close enough to your vehicle to be darted.

The last two options can be used only where lions will allow vehicles close. That first night, Laurence and Alayne elected to set a foot snare trap.

### Day One – Foot Snare Trap

We drove to Acacia Dam late on a Friday afternoon to set the foot snare trap. Being so late getting out, we had time to set only one trap below the dam. Alayne had brought, in the back of her Toyota pickup, the remains of a camel that had died naturally. She tied one of the hind legs to a small Acacia tree above the two wire snares. Rocks were set in place around the snares, and the trap was camouflaged with loose foliage. Our lion would have to step on one or other of the snares to reach the meat.

Theoretically, on smelling the meat, a lion will walk up to it using the narrow path leading to the snares. When it steps on a snare, the wire noose is sprung and wraps around the lion's front paw, tightening as the animal struggles to get away. This does not injure the animal in any way, and the LPP has enjoyed a high success rate with these snares, which were originally designed to capture bears in the US.

Laurence and Alayne try to minimize possible stress by checking often to see if an animal has been snared. Other animals may also be attracted to the bait, and such traps sometimes catch hyenas, leopards, or other predators, rather than lions. Even where lions are in the snares for several hours, they

# Collaring a Sosian Lion

*Even for the Laikipia Predator Project, Deborah Wettlaufer finds that this is rather more easily said than done ...*





tend to settle down and eat all of the bait. It is only when humans show up that they become agitated, and Alayne and Laurence try to dart them as quickly as possible.

After setting the trap, we drove the short distance back to our house for dinner. Then, after two hours, we returned to the trap. Tense with anticipation, I was hoping to find a large male lion in one of the snares. Driving in through the bushes, we could see some movement. Our headlights revealed a struggling Striped Hyena, however – instead of the lion we had all been hoping for.

It took a while for the hyena to succumb once Laurence had darted it. He had to grip it by the scruff of the neck while Alayne administered another dose. Finally, they could take measurements and blood samples. I was surprised by how slight this creature was, having very scrawny legs – but huge ears. The poor beast was also very thin for some reason, possibly parasites, but recovered quickly after Alayne had administered the antidote and seemed no worse for the experience.

After releasing the hyena, Laurence played his tape of a baby buffalo in distress to try to call the lions in. This was a frustrating exercise. While setting up the trap earlier in the evening, we had heard a lions roaring a little further up the lugga behind Acacia Dam, but the tape player and speaker had malfunctioned. These took a while to fix back at our house after dinner. By

the time we returned to check the trap, and had found and released the Striped Hyena, the lions were long gone, probably heading north. Laurence and Alayne resolved to dismantle the trap at once, rather than to run the risk of catching another hyena.

### Day Two – Calling Lions

The next day, my husband Mike and our *askari* Leringanto followed lion tracks up the lugga where we had heard the lions the night before. They eventually lost the tracks in the stony soil, but Alayne decided to take a chance and try option number two: calling the lions in near enough to free-dart one. She and Laurence much prefer free-darting (where possible) to setting traps, as this is both safer and less stressful for the animals.

As luck would have it, we had found a zebra carcass for bait. Getting the carcass to our house was a comedy of errors. Our ranch manager had been carrying it around in the back of his truck for 24 hours and wanted to be rid of it, as it was beginning to smell. It was macabre, watching him drive around with four stiff black-and-white limbs sticking straight into the air from the truck bed!

On the Saturday morning our manager sent some workers out with the ranch tractor to drag the zebra carcass to Acacia Dam. There was some confusion, however, and the zebra was taken instead to another dam further up the road. For several hours, none of us knew where the carcass was. Only after several radio calls were we able to locate it, and to have it sent for. This time it was dragged to Duma Dam, below our house, and dumped there. Later that morning, looking out of the window, I saw the bloated zebra lying on the dam wall – quite a surprise!

That afternoon Alayne and her assistant **Stephen Ekwanga** drove down to the dam to cut up and gut the zebra. I chose to stay at the house and occasionally to take a peek through my binoculars at Alayne hacking away with her panga.

We headed back to the lugga behind Acacia Dam. Alayne had brought the rump and hind legs of the butchered zebra, and she and Stephen tied it securely to a small tree. Alayne then put on some surgical gloves and took a large, evil-smelling plastic bag out of the back of the truck.

Then, while Stephen was driving Alayne's truck to Acacia Dam, dragging another camel leg behind it, we drove slowly ahead of Alayne, as she walked along the road flinging pieces of zebra organs and blood out of the bag. The idea was to get the word about that something dead was up ahead.





We were fairly optimistic when, at 5:30 p.m., we set out for the zebra bait. As the sun was setting, we got into our vehicles and Alayne started playing the recording of the baby buffalo in distress. Listening to this recording once is bad enough, but being forced to listen to it over and over for almost two hours is unbearable torture. It was a beautiful star-lit evening, as we sat there, trapped in our vehicles listening to this bellowing buffalo build up to a crescendo ... and then start all over again.

Every now and then, Alayne would switch off the tape, and we could enjoy the quiet of the African night, listening intently for any sound. At one point, a European-bound jetliner passed high overhead. Its passengers, I thought, would never believe what was going on below them. Suddenly

said. They must have had a few beers, for they showed no fear and turned back only very reluctantly. Skirting around us, we could hear their loud voices in the distance. This probably did not help our cause, and eventually we gave up and went home.

The dam in front of our house, meanwhile, had become the scene of much frenzied activity. Our late dinner on the verandah took place amid a cacophony of whining, cackling and whooping, as Hyenas – Spotted and Striped – and jackals moved in on the remains of the butchered zebra, which was still on the dam wall.

This cacophony went on all night. Some hyenas came up to the house and tried to get into the back of Alayne's truck, where the zebra rump and the camel leg were stowed. The sound of hyenas giggling

roughly pessimistic about our chances of collaring a Sosian lion, but Alayne refused to give up. Leringanto had heard lions roaring to the north during the night, and after breakfast he took Alayne and Stephen out to track them. They spent all morning out on the plains, tracking lions near the Pinguone Lugga on Sosian's northern boundary.

When they returned, Alayne said, "I think we've found lions." My pulse quickened, but I tried to suppress my excitement, certain that we should be disappointed again. This was our last chance. Alayne and Stephen grabbed their equipment, and we took off behind them.

With her radio-tracking equipment, Alayne picked up a strong signal from LM-38, a big, collared male named Romulus. She decided to try dragging the bait, and



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**Ways and means** (clockwise from top left): **Inspecting the foot snare trap; tying the zebra bait to a small tree; tug-of-war with Romulus while dragging the bait, and – finally – examining the teeth of Bella (LF-83), a collared Sosian Lioness.**

we heard loud whooping noises. A large hyena charged towards the zebra meat, head outstretched as it whooped. On seeing us, it stopped abruptly in its tracks and moved off, but hyenas continued to patrol the vicinity.

A little later we heard voices, and soon two herders from a nearby *boma* walked up. "Hatari, simba!" Mike yelled at them. They seemed unfazed. Stephen urged them in Swahili to leave the area, as we were calling in lions. They wanted to go on, they

loudly outside the bedroom window was too much for our pet cats, which bolted under the bed and refused to come out. At least we do now know that there are plenty of hyenas on the ranch!

### Day Three – Dragging the Bait

At breakfast on the Sunday morning, we wondered if it was worth making one final try before Alayne and Stephen headed back to the Mpala Research Centre where their project is based. By now, I was feeling thor-

oughly pessimistic about our chances of collaring a Sosian lion, but Alayne refused to give up. Leringanto had heard lions roaring to the north during the night, and after breakfast he took Alayne and Stephen out to track them. They spent all morning out on the plains, tracking lions near the Pinguone Lugga on Sosian's northern boundary.

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**Collared duo: Bella and Romulus (LM-38) – and their two cubs (born October 2004) – were still together come late 2005, having moved on to neighbouring Kisima Ranch, after four new males took over Sosian’s ‘Acacia Dam Pride’.**

in low gear, managed to pull away, wresting the zebra rump from Romulus’s huge claws. Alayne and Stephen wanted to collar his companion, a shy female, before Romulus could eat all of the zebra. They had just retreated from the bushes when, from the road, we saw them and were able to join them in their truck. Our timing could not have been more perfect.

As we drove slowly back into the thick bush, I craned my neck out of the window. Then, suddenly, there he was: sitting beside a bush, watching us, one of the biggest lions I have ever seen, with a massive mane cascading over his shoulders and down between his front legs. Adding to his rakish look, a thick streak of black hair swept back from his forehead, blending in with his dark brown mane as if he had been to a hairdresser for highlights.

Romulus was evidently accustomed to vehicles, but his companion refused to leave the safety of the bushes. We sat for several hours, waiting patiently for the lioness to pluck up enough courage to come out and approach the meat. Unfortunately, both lions had fairly full stomachs, and so

were in no particular hurry to eat again.

A brave Black-backed Jackal circled the scene for a while; then had the nerve to dart in and grab some meat off the zebra rump. Immediately, Romulus emerged from the bushes and charged the jackal, which scampered off. It was not much of a charge from a very heavy lion, just a warning to the little jackal to stay away from the meat. Romulus flopped down next to the zebra to guard it and to watch us at the same time.

Sitting there with the windows open, I barely moved a muscle despite the adrenalin rush I was feeling. I found myself holding my breath, but Romulus was completely relaxed and even closed his eyes several times for a catnap. The plucky jackal was not about to give up, and darted in again to snatch more meat. Romulus was not amused. His tail twitched rapidly back and forth; then he charged the jackal again. Finally, he began eating the zebra rump himself.

Not happy with all the attention he was getting, Romulus picked up the rump in his mouth and tried to drag it off into the bushes, away from us and from the jackal.

As he pulled the rope taut, the truck with the four of us inside rocked back and forth. This was an impressive display of strength that had us laughing nervously.

Just as the sun was setting, the huge lioness came slowly out of the thicket she had been hiding in. After cautiously approaching, she too started to eat. Frustratingly, the angle was wrong (following Romulus’s tug-of-war with the bait) for Alayne to get a shot at the lioness’s rump or shoulder. It was getting dark rapidly, and soon it would be too late for us to get a shot off safely.

As a last resort, Stephen moved the truck, dragging the meat back out into the open. The lioness darted into the bushes. We thought our last chance to dart her had gone. Hunger overcame her nervousness, however, and she returned to the zebra. I held my breath as Alayne took aim. There was a loud pop from the gun. The lioness growled and jumped into the air, then ran off into the bushes. Ever the opportunist, the jackal now darted in and started bolting down the meat. Lazy Romulus, lying down barely ten metres away, lifted his head in mild surprise, but did not bestir himself.

After a ten-minute wait, we drove over to where the lioness lay unconscious. Mike and I, standing in the open roof hatch, scanned the area with torches to make sure


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Romulus did not approach, as Alayne and Stephen went to work: taking measurements, drawing blood, checking teeth, examining the lioness's body, and – most importantly – fitting the new radio collar.

Their work done, I alighted to take photographs. Although she was unconscious, I could feel myself shaking as I crouched beside her massive, powerful form. Her paws were immense, and her fur softer than I had expected. Best of all, she was heavily pregnant, and when I rubbed her stomach, I could feel her swollen nipples and the outline of her cubs within. Very soon there would be lion cubs on Sosian!

This lioness is now known officially as LF-83, but we named her Bella after our small female domestic cat. It seems a fitting name for one of the most beautiful lionesses I have ever seen. After Alayne had given her an injection to reverse the drugs, we got into the truck and pulled back a short distance to look on. After about 15 minutes, she lifted her head, then got up and walked off. At last, then, we could rid ourselves of the foul-smelling zebra rump that we had been carrying around for two days, leaving it for the lions and for that bold little jackal.

After several failures to collar a lion on Sosian, we had finally succeeded! Now, we had two collared lions to monitor, as well as new cubs to look forward to. Romulus, having been ousted from his pride on Loisaba, a ranch to the north of us, had come to Sosian and joined the three-male coalition whose territory seemed to extend all the way from our house, in the south, to Sosian's northern boundary.

I have decided to call this group of lions the Acacia Dam Pride. We still have much to learn about them. 

### ... Postscript ...

Soon after she was collared, Bella had her cubs in October 2004. She kept them well hidden from us for around five and a half months. In April 2005, we finally saw them: two very curious and healthy male cubs, with her and Romulus. By then, Bella had become used to our Land Rover and would allow us to watch her and the cubs.

In September 2005, four new males moved into our area and took possession of the Acacia Dam Pride. Alayne collared one of them, a young male with a blonde mane, and named him Achilles. The old veteran Romulus has been pushed out, but he and Bella – and their cubs – are still together, living on Kisima Ranch, our neighbour to the east.

The saga continues...