

CHEETAH REHABILITATION - GETTING A TASTE OF THE WILD

Coco, Spud, Frankie, Hammer & Bones

The middle of May saw the release of the first six cheetahs onto the Okonjima reserve and the start of AfriCat's new Cheetah Rehabilitation Programme. Coco, Spud and Frankie, four-year-old siblings that came into AfriCat's care at the age of three months, together with two males, Hammer and Bones, were the first to leave the soft-release camp into the 40 000-acre wilderness area. A calcium deficiency was the cause of the siblings all arriving at AfriCat with broken legs. Their first six weeks were spent in separate crates, having to be kept as immobile as possible while their bones strengthened and the fractures healed.



As with the siblings, Bones (left) had no previous hunting experience, having lost his mother at six months. He came to AfriCat in a malnourished and emaciated condition as a result. Hammer was a year old when he was caught and removed from the wild, so there was a chance that he may have learnt some hunting and life skills from his mother.

This group got off to an excellent start; not eight hours had passed before they were found with the remnants of a steenbok. The hunting instinct was clearly evident when we witnessed Frankie throttling a small warthog the following day. The group went from strength to strength, pulling down young oryx and kudus on a regular basis.



In the second week of July Frankie had to be rushed to Otjiwarongo Veterinary Clinic after being bitten by a leopard. Dr Axel Hartmann flushed out the bite wounds and strong antibiotics were prescribed. Sadly the infection was too severe and Frankie had to be euthanased. Keeping away from other predators is one of those life skills lessons that cheetahs learn from their mothers while they are growing up. Having been robbed of this experience the cheetahs in the rehabilitation programme have to learn these often fatal lessons for themselves.

Cyclops

Two days after the release of the group, the gate of another soft-release enclosure was opened and a much shyer and wilder single male cheetah slipped out – a camera set up to monitor his movements being the only

witness to his return to the wild after eighteen months in captivity. Cyclops, just over five years old, is blind in one eye (glaucoma probably caused by an injury), which is why he wasn't released back onto farmland. If he proves that his disability doesn't affect his capacity to hunt, he may get the chance to go back.



Cyclops took his time to prove his capabilities and had to be fed on two occasions. We assume he was catching small prey as his stomach wasn't always empty. The first kill we found him with was a warthog; nine days after that he caught an oryx. Since then he has hunted steadily and is maintaining condition. Whereas the other cheetahs have explored almost every part of the reserve, Cyclops has mostly stuck to the perimeter. This habit may be because the strip of bush-cleared land adjacent to the fence may make it easier for him to spot prey. There are few water sources near the fence but the blood from regular kills makes him less reliant on water for hydration.

Twiggy

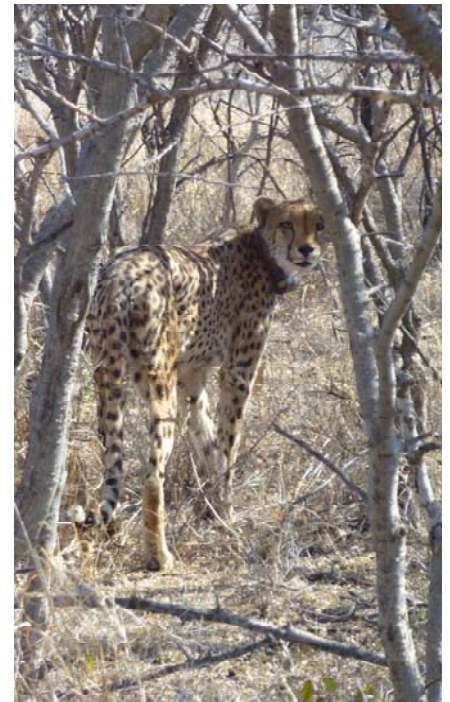
A month after the initial cheetah release into the rehabilitation reserve Twiggy had to be coaxed out of her secure enclosure with food. This five-year-old female cheetah has been at AfriCat for two-and-a-half years.



Arriving malnourished and emaciated, it was touch and go as to whether she was even going to live through her ordeal.

Around twelve kilograms underweight, Twiggy was deprived of food for the four months she was kept in captivity on the farm where she was caught. Blood tests showed that her kidneys had miraculously withstood the abuse and all she needed was meat to regain

condition. It took two months before she looked sleek and healthy. Because of the length and circumstances of her captivity, obsession with food and association of people with food was inevitable; her only chance of returning to the wild was being released into the reserve. Caught as a young adult, Twiggy had previous hunting experience so there was little doubt of her ability to catch her own food. She took one supplementary meal before we found her with an adult kudu cow. Now hunting regularly, primarily duikers, only time will tell whether she loses her habituation enough to return to the farmland from which she was originally removed.



Charlie & Trish



In the middle of June, this pair was also reluctant to leave the confines of their enclosure to start the next chapter of their lives. Both around four years old, these unrelated cheetahs were introduced to each other a year ago. They tolerated one another but never seemed to grow close. Charlie (left) came to AfriCat as a four-month-old cub after he was confiscated from a farmer who wanted to keep him as a pet. Trish was captured when she was a year old and was too young to fend for herself in the wild. Her age however meant



that she probably had learnt some hunting skills from her mother. Although Charlie and Trish hadn't bonded and we were skeptical that they would stay together after their release, we hoped that some of Trish's experience would rub off on Charlie before they split up and went their separate ways.

They too had to be fed on two occasions but this sustenance was enough to spur them on to catch their own food, starting with a young kudu. Six weeks on the two are still together and hunting regularly.

Toby, Zen and Zippy

This sibling trio was released in the last week of July. Toby and his two sisters couldn't even be bribed out with food and eventually we resorted to opening the gate of the soft-release enclosure and leaving them to wander out in their own time. Within a few hours they had moved a short distance away and a day later they had made their first kill – a young kudu. These siblings are a little older than the other cheetahs in the reserve but, even at nearly eight years of age, their teeth are in good condition, they are all healthy and, surprisingly, they have maintained a degree of “wildness” even after being in captivity since they were a year old. Caught without their mother, the siblings couldn't be released on their own and had to remain in captivity at AfriCat until this opportunity came along.

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August 2010

