

In the quest for the perfect photograph, **Jan Latta** gets up close and personal with Africa's animals.

Spotted ... (right) children's book author and photographer Jan Latta sharing a magical moment with two cheetahs.

It's 5.30am at Tortilis camp, Amboseli, Kenya. I wake up to a soft African voice on the other side of my tent flap - a smiling "good morning", with tea and freshly baked biscuits served at my bedside. Though it's my second visit to Tortilis, it never ceases to surprise me.

The view from my tent is of Mount Kilimanjaro, while a parade of animals goes by - impalas, bush bucks and a family of mongooses, which entertain me with their antics. Half an hour later I meet my guide and we drive out to search for a herd of elephants.

My guide, Letaloi, has a great knowledge and respect for elephants and this morning we find one that has just given birth. Its baby is tiny - the calf is wobbling along, trying to decide what to do with his trunk, while an "aunty" stands by, offering comfort to mother and baby. The caring and bonding between elephants is extraordinary and one that makes each visit to Kenya a joy, especially for a photographer.

We drive out onto the grasslands, where we see a huge bull elephant that looks rather threatening as he approaches. I am excited, terrified and fascinated all at once. I have never seen an elephant so large - more than six tonnes and about the size of a double-decker bus.

He is in musth, the mating time for elephants, which makes his behaviour unpredictable and dangerous. He is very close when he starts a fanfare of loud bellows, screams, flapping ears, stamping and throwing dirt around with his trunk. Then he charges. Letaloi quickly drives away but then, to my horror, he comes to a grinding halt. "Go, go, go," I silently scream.

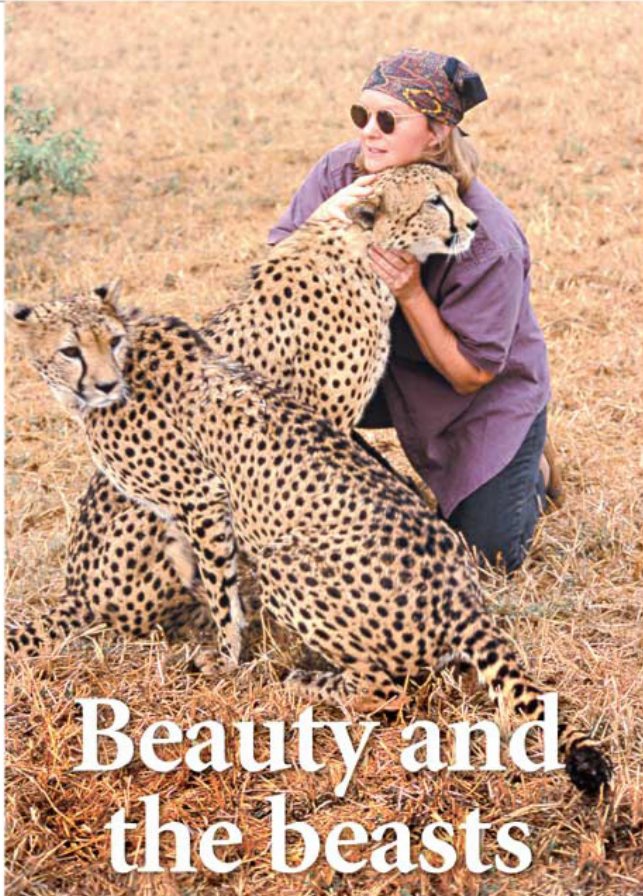
Letaloi says: "This is only Conrad - you're safe, it's only a mock charge." Indeed, Conrad eventually decides he has scared me enough and calms down. I manage to calm down, too, discover I still have a heartbeat and get some terrific photographs.

Back at Tortilis, the chef prepares great Italian food for lunch, much of it from the camp's herb and vegetable garden. Pleased with my three days of photography, I pack and fly to Nairobi to visit an elephant orphanage.

The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust was the first to hand-rear orphaned elephants and successfully return them to the wild. Each baby elephant has its own keeper, who is with it at all times, providing affection, feeding it on demand (which is often) and sleeping beside it in the stable at night.

I meet Angela Sheldrick, who is carrying on the work of her late father. She introduces me to a Samburu warrior, a member of the graceful, ochre-decorated northern tribe noted for its extraordinary ability to leap metres above the ground.

My warrior guide, who has rescued one of the orphans himself, takes me out in torrential rain to meet nine baby elephants. Just like friendly youngsters everywhere, they squeal with delight at seeing us and rush over to play. The calves range in age from a few months to a year.



Beauty and the beasts

Despite their youth, I discover they are surprisingly strong - I get caught up in their playful pushing and find it hard to take photographs while tangled in their trunks. A keeper puts his fingers into a calf's mouth and it sucks, just like a babe on a bottle. I'm invited to do the same and the look of pure bliss on the little elephant's face is reward indeed.

When it's time for their milk bottles, we follow them in single file to the

to Africa 14 years ago. I stayed here and now it has been refurbished with luxury tents for upmarket tourists.

The camp is on the Uaso Nyiro River under a canopy of trees and my lunch table is set up by the water. The first course arrives, but I am puzzled by a huge bread roll in the middle of my plate. To my delight, the top comes off to reveal spicy tomato soup. I relax, sipping a chilled chardonnay as an elephant looks over the bushes

by the river can be hazardous, because there are bushes on either side and often we have to screech to a stop when we come across a wall of elephant around the bend.

As a woman travelling alone, I am often asked if it's safe to get about Africa. I say "yes", if you show common sense and respect local customs. I've been to Kenya four times to photograph and write about endangered animals for my children's books. I organise my own guide, who knows where to find the animals, and each day at dawn we leave camp to search for the magic that always happens. To successfully photograph animals in the wild you need a good knowledge of their behaviour, to be able to anticipate their next move and a lot of patience.

On each trip to Kenya I visit my friends Kathy and Karl Ammann in Nanyuki, a small town at the foot of Mount Kenya. I met them 14 years ago when they rescued a chimp in the Congo. He was about to be cooked when Karl said he was so ugly he would be too tough to eat. They called him Mzee (meaning old man) and I fell in love with him.

Every day Mzee would groom me,



Destination Kenya

BEFORE YOU GO

Contact a licensed travel agent for information on visas and vaccinations, or tortilis@muthaiga.co.ke for Air Kenya flights and safaris.

WHERE TO STAY

Macushla House, Langata, email macushla@africaonline.co.ke. Tortilis camp, Amboseli, email safaris@chellepeacock.co.ke. Larsen's Camp, Samburu, email info@larsenscamp.co.ke.



Mmm, lunch ... (from top) lions move in to share the kill; elephants at play; and a selection of Jan Latta's children's books. Photos: Jan Latta

softly touching my face and hair. It is the most amazing experience to look into the intelligent eyes of a chimp. Because of this daily grooming I was able to be very calm when I came face to face with gorillas in Rwanda.

I've been in some hair-raising situations. Once I wanted to get close to a rhino. The animals are short-sighted and charge at anything that moves, so the trick is to move very slowly. After days of following one rhino I decided it was safe to get close and with my heart in my mouth I held his horn.

However, my cheetah encounter remains the highlight. A cheetah ran towards me while I was changing film. I didn't know what to do and when the keeper of the property saw my doubt he said, "Kneel down". I did, then realised I was level with his

jaws. The cheetah sniffed me, then flopped in my lap.

Two years later I went back to the area to see the cheetah again. I heard him purring before I saw him. This time I had no fear when the cheetah walked up to me - I just reached out and touched his forehead. His purring was so loud I ran my hand under his throat to feel the vibration. That was the magic moment of my life.

My focus on each trip has been the animal for my next book but there is so much to photograph: lovely little dik-diks, gerenuks (the elegant, long-necked antelope), zebras, giraffes, buffalos and the big cats. I'm always amazed I can get so close to lions (just a metre away) munching on the latest kill. It's a photographer's paradise.

Jan Latta is photographer, author and publisher of *True to Life Books*, a series of children's books on endangered animals. Her latest book is *Ele the Elephant*.