

A lioness hunts at sunset in Kenya's Maasai Mara – female lions do the majority of the hunting.

Born Free

REVISITED

Fifty years after the film of George and Joy Adamson's lives became a global hit, the president of the Born Free Foundation visited vital lion conservation projects in Kenya. Joanna Eede accompanied him.

Will Travers was only five years old when his parents, the actors Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna, stayed in an old settlers' house at the foot of Mount Kenya while filming the classic film *Born Free* (1966). But Will and his siblings weren't allowed anywhere near the film set,

he explains now, over the engine drone of a Twin Otter. I have joined him to fly from Nairobi to Meru National Park in northern Kenya, where the action portrayed in *Born Free* took place.

"Kids and lions don't mix," Will continues. "The behaviour of children is just too volatile. We could have triggered unwanted responses in the lions being filmed." So Will and his siblings spent 10 months studying safari ants and learning how to ride horses (and the occasional

Joy Adamson's book about Elsa was published in 1960, and was a bestseller even before the film was released six years later.

boran cow). "I remember the venomous snakes in the loos," he smiles fondly. "And I spent hours sitting under a fig tree, fishing in the river."

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

Meru National Park has been closely associated with lions since game warden George Adamson and his artist wife Joy raised an orphaned lioness cub called Elsa to adulthood, and successfully released her back into the wild. Joy wrote about their intense love for Elsa in her book *Born Free*, which was made into an Oscar-winning film.

To mark the film's 50th anniversary, Will – now president of the Born Free Foundation, the wildlife conservation and animal-welfare organisation – is en route to Meru to visit some exciting new projects that aim to protect lions. The initiatives could be vital if lions are to survive in the area – populations are under real pressure.

The impact of *Born Free* on conservation, and attitudes to wildlife generally, is hard to





A lioness and her cub at dawn in Serengeti National Park, Tanzania – the country supports two of the world's largest surviving lion populations.



ELSA THE LIONESS

Joy and George Adamson raised Elsa to maturity after she was orphaned as a tiny cub in 1956, when George shot her mother when she charged. For the first few years of her life, she and her two sisters lived with the Adamsons at their game warden's house in northern Kenya.

After her sisters were sent to Rotterdam Zoo, the Netherlands, Elsa joined Joy and George on safari, travelling across the dry lakebed of the Chalbi Desert to the volcanic slopes of the Marsabit Mountains and to Kenya's coast. Joy referred to Elsa as "a clumsy little velvet bag" with "perfect manners"; the lioness' paws became damp when she was nervous, and when fully grown she still fell asleep with Joy's thumb in her mouth. This intimacy continued until the end: Elsa died of tick fever in 1961, her head in George's lap.

Joy scratches Elsa's face. The Adamsons adopted Elsa when she was only four days old.



overstate. "For many people it was... an inspiration," says Adrian House, author of *The Great Safari*, a biography of the Adamsons (William Morrow, 1993). "They suddenly felt how important it was to bridge the widening gap between man and the natural world."

Shivani Bhalla, an award-winning scientist who runs Kenya's grass-roots lion conservation organisation Ewaso Lions, says that the *Born Free* story informed her whole career. "I really believe that Elsa lives in all of us – in every conservationist who works to protect lions and other species," she tells me.

"Elsa was significant because she represented one of the first times – or maybe the very first time – that a lion had been given a name and was regarded as an individual," Shivani adds. "We follow this philosophy in our

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Top: Will Travers examines lion spoor in Meru NP with Geoffrey Bundotich and Shadrach Kimeu of the Kenya Wildlife Service. Above: a lioness carries a gazelle in the Mara.

work today, naming all our local lions according to their personalities and traits." The Adamsons' attitude towards lions, unusual for the time, was born of what renowned biologist Julian Huxley referred to as a "passionate patience and an understanding love". To them, lions were simply individual creatures that responded to human kindness.

"Working on the film introduced us to the concept of seeing each lion as unique, with its own distinct character," agrees Virginia McKenna, who co-founded the Born Free Foundation with her husband. "Bill and I learned so much from George Adamson's deep understanding of wild animals, and it allowed us also to respond to them individually like he did."

Now the Born Free Foundation has declared 2016 the 'Year of the Lion' to highlight the rapidly growing threats to African lions. "All too often, we send out the message to our children that wild animals are disposable," Virginia says. "The very opposite has to be true. We need to teach the next generation to care for wildlife."

The media furore surrounding the killing of Cecil the lion by a trophy hunter in Zimbabwe in 2015 alerted the public ▶



Clockwise from far left: an African lion in the Maasai Mara – Asiatic lions have shorter, thinner manes; a census is revealing how many lions live in Meru National Park; Born Free's Victor Mutumah shows how a wire snare traps an animal.



Virginia McKenna fell in love with lions during the making of *Born Free*. Inset: Virginia and Bill Travers feed a cub – the pair set up the Born Free Foundation in 1984.

to the catastrophic decline in Africa's lions, but numbers have been in freefall for years. In 1966, there were about 200,000 in Africa; today, there may be fewer than 20,000. Estimates vary wildly – one in 2014 suggested that the Kenyan population, a key stronghold, could be just 2,000.

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wilderness, yet human encroachment is evident everywhere. "The causes of lion depletion are many and complex, but in the end it all comes down to people," says Will as we listen to the sounds of children playing in the river downstream. The human population of rural Africa has increased exponentially; much lion habitat has been lost through the conversion of great tracts of land to agriculture, while poaching reduces the availability of traditional prey such as gazelles and antelopes.

CONFLICT WITH HUMANS

Hungry lions turn to easy targets such as livestock. In retaliation the owners shoot, spear or poison the cats that jeopardise their livelihood. "The greatest threat to lions is essentially the subdivision of land," Will continues. "Pressure from urbanisation and land conversion is immense, so it's essential to focus on not taking every bit of land for humans."

Many lion experts, such as Hans Bauer of Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (or WildCRU), think it is a pity that trophy hunting gets so much attention. "Trophy hunting is obviously a major ethical issue, but biologically it's less of an issue for lions," he explains. "The point is

After she died in 1980, Joy's ashes were buried at two sites – the grave of her beloved cheetah Pippa, and Elsa's.



But there are still places that offer hope, such as the 800km² Meru National Park, one of Kenya's oldest parks and part of the wider Meru Conservation Area which lies in the eastern shadow of Mount Kenya. This is lion country, a vast complex of protected areas that include the Bisanadi and Mwingi National Reserves, and Kora National Park. Meru was severely affected by rampant poaching during the 1970s and 80s, but the Kenya Wildlife Service helped to bring lawlessness under control, and today the park is recognised as having greater biodiversity than any other in East Africa. As we drive to pay our respects at Elsa's grave, the landscape is wild, lush and deep green from the longest rains the area has known in a decade. We cross mountain-fed rivers and clear streams lined with black-barked doum palms, where freshwater turtles sunbathe on smooth rocks. Elsa's grave lies in a shady glade on the bank of the River Ura, close to the Adamsons' former campsite in the south-east corner of the park. A couple of metres away is a fig tree under which Joy used to paint, while Elsa draped herself along its boughs. Stretching into the distance on the opposite bank is a vast field of sorghum – the park remains a

that we are losing many of the large ecosystems where lions are apex predators. These wild places are very valuable, and intensively managed reserves are a poor substitute."

In 2015 the Born Free Foundation, in association with the Kenya Wildlife Service, Land Rover and the local Meru community, launched a new lion conservation project called Lion Rover. "If you protect lions, you protect other wildlife as well," says WildCRU's Claudio Sillero, who is head of conservation at Born Free. He adds, "Equally importantly, the lions in Meru link other lion populations to the east, in Tsavo National Park and near the coast, and to the west, for example at Laikipia. This helps to maintain genetic connectivity."

Lion Rover's first priority is to conduct research into the number of lions in Meru. "We have to know how many of the cats there are in order to implement a conservation plan," explains Tim Oloo, Born Free's country manager for Kenya. "Current estimates vary between 30 and 150 lions in Meru. Once we have a baseline number, we'll repeat the census in two, four, then six years."

Will and I join a team surveying an area where lions have been seen, and through our open-sided Land Rover Will scans the road for paw prints. There is wildlife everywhere: helmeted guineafowl scuttle into the undergrowth, a rare Grévy's zebra gallops away at the sound of our vehicle and a huge martial eagle watches us from a baobab tree.

Then the lead tracker raises his hand and jumps down from his front-mounted 'spotter seat' to draw a circle in the red, sandy earth. We see the unmistakable pads of a large lion print. The margins are still sharp – the equatorial wind has not yet blown dust across the edges and filled the indentations, showing that the tracks are only hours old. ▶

BORN FREE AND ITS LEGACY

Born Free changed everything. "Elsa the lioness had become an ambassador for her kind," wrote zoologist Desmond Morris. "She had [also] made people start to query the morality of keeping animals in captivity."

Over 20 different lions represented Elsa and other lions on set, including cubs sent from Ethiopia by Emperor Haile Selassie and two that had been mascots for the Royal Scots Guards in Nairobi. The camera crew shot scenes from the safety of a cage, but Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers refused body doubles.

Through working closely with George

Adamson, they were soon walking on their own with the lions, playing football with them at dawn and sharing their lunch. For Virginia and Bill, working with lions was to shape the rest of their lives; they became committed wildlife activists and founded the Born Free Foundation.

● Find out more: www.bornfree.org.uk



Male: Andy Rouse; Meru: DeAgostini/Getty; Victor: Joanna Eade; Virginia McKenna: Everett Collection/REX/Shutterstock; Bill & Virginia: Anwar Hussien/Getty; Elsa's grave: Lynn Hillon/REX/Shutterstock



HOW TO VISIT AFRICA'S LIONS

- **Natural High Safaris** (01747 830950, www.naturalhighsafaris.com) organises three-night trips to Meru National Park from Nairobi, staying at Elsa's Kopje Lodge, generally as part of a longer safari.
- **Exceptional Safaris** (01608 638777, www.exceptional-travel.com), **Mahlatini** (0289 073 6050, www.mahlatini.com) and **Yellow Zebra Safaris** (0203 199 9423, www.yellowzebrasafaris.com) also visit Meru National Park.
- Lion-watching tours elsewhere in Kenya are organised by **Africa Travel** (0207 843 3500, www.africatrans.com), **Cox & Kings** (0203 797 1524, www.coxandkings.co.uk), **Expert Africa** (0208 232 9777, www.expertafrica.com), **Naturetrek** (01962 733051, www.naturetrek.co.uk), **Spencer Scott Safaris** (01825 714310, www.spencer-scotttravel.com) and **Wildlife Worldwide** (01962 302086, www.wildlifeworldwide.com).

the park to capture wildlife for bushmeat, and in recent years this has had a significant impact on the availability of lion prey. "People think of poachers using guns," says Tim Oloo. "But this type of poaching is just as dangerous." Lions themselves are seldom directly targeted but are inadvertently trapped, injured or killed, so the Born Free de-snaring scouts spend three days a week meticulously combing the bush for wire snares.

A DANGEROUS MISSION

We join the scouts one afternoon on a search through long grassland. A park ranger carrying an AK-47 assault rifle walks beside us. It is essential that we make as little noise as possible; we are warned not to call out if we see a snare. "We'll clap or whistle to alert you if we find something," instructs Newton Simiyu, Born Free's assistant field officer. Scouts tend to find snares in bushes near riverbanks, along boundary fences and across animal tracks; when each lethal noose is removed, the GPS coordinates are noted. The team has already retrieved over 1,000 snares since 2015.

The sun is lowering over the western Nyambene Hills, so we drive in the direction of Mughwango Hill, where a beautiful tourist lodge, Elsa's Kopje, has been sculpted into the granite promontory. We take a diversion down a barely passable track to 'George's Pool', where George Adamson used to swim in a hollow high on a crag. It is quiet but for the sound of clucking hornbills, the oboe-call of a wood dove and the distant crashing of a lone elephant through a thicket of African myrrh.

The bluff affords us extraordinary views over the volcanic plains to Kora, where George continued his work with big cats. "The true story of Elsa's journey to freedom inspires everything we do," says Will. "Africa without lions is simply unimaginable." 🐾

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➕ FIND OUT MORE

Watch David Attenborough's classic 1961 film about the Adamsons, *Elsa the Lioness*: <http://bbc.in/1UfBLLN>

Above: a lioness and her offspring – Elsa carried her cubs this way. Below: George Adamson, here aged 70, worked with lions for most of his life.

"George Adamson used to say that studying the animal prints he found every morning around his camp was like reading a newspaper," Will explains. Sure enough, our tracker identifies that the spoor belongs to a young lion, because the pad is still grooved – mature lions leave smoother prints. "Think of it like a tyre tread," Will tells me. "The older the tyre, the smoother the tread."

Lion Rover's census also deploys a 'call-back' survey technique. This uses a vehicle-mounted loudspeaker to broadcast the eerie sounds of hyenas at a kill or a buffalo calf in distress, which lure lions nearer so that they be counted and photographed. Data from the Meru census will be published later this year, though early findings suggest good numbers of lions, leopards, hyenas and black-backed jackals. "The next phase will involve profiling individual lions and building up a robust database," says Will. "And after that, we'll think about collaring some lions."

Another key element of project Lion Rover is anti-snaring work. The traps are used indiscriminately by people living on the edge of

