

# Walking with wild

# CHEETAH

*Cheetah are back, roaming their old territories in the Karoo. Not only can you see them on game drives, but you can track and walk with them in the wild – on the iconic plains of the Camdeboo.*

by KERI HARVEY

From a rock ledge over 1 200m high, the Camdeboo plains roll out before you like a prickly carpet of thorn trees and scrub. These plains near Graaff Reinet in the Karoo once teemed with wildlife, and millions of springbok migrated across them, leaving a dust cloud that took two weeks to settle. When the thunderous sound of their running hooves were heard approaching, other animals scattered in fear and humans ran for higher ground. Everything in the migration's path was flattened.

"But that was a long time ago," says Samara Private Game Reserve ranger Shakemore "Shakes" Manzinde. Along with the massive herds of springbok, there were wildebeest, buffalo, zebra, and masses of antelope and plains' game – cheetahs too. All were decimated by hunting when the Great Karoo was turned into farm land and stocked with sheep and goats.

Now, 125 years later, cheetah have been reintroduced into the Karoo to patrol their old territories once more. Samara led the way, and the reserve has six cheetah. One of them – Sibella – wears a radio collar to keep track of her movements on the expansive 28 000ha wildlife reserve. Today our mission is to find her, an endeavour that is a little like finding a needle in a haystack, armed only with a magnet.

Shakes slips in behind the wheel of the Land Cruiser and places the delicate telemetry equipment behind his seat. It's late morning and already hot as we head out in the direction in which Sibella was last seen the previous day. This doesn't mean much, since cheetah can move across vast areas at a pace. Still, Shakes has tracked cheetah for many years, so if anyone can find Sibella, he can.

We drive for half an hour, stopping intermittently for Shakes to hold up his telemetry aerial and listen in on the receiver. There's nothing but crackle and static, which means Sibella is out of range. "I thought she may be in this area," muses Shakes, "but there is no sign of her. I'm going to head towards the river instead. It's hot and she may be looking for shade or water."

After doing a wide U-turn, we drive on across the vast plains, stopping en route to game-watch, as wildlife on Samara is plentiful. Only animals endemic to the area have been reintroduced, including rare mountain zebra that live in the lofty mountains encircling the plains. We pass blesbok and hartebeest with horns that form the shape of a heart, kudu and regal gemsbok, nimble steenbok and towering giraffe. Shakes tells quirky stories about each as he drives on slowly. Finding Sibella remains top of mind.

"She's quite a special cheetah," he says. "In her 13 years, Sibella has given birth to

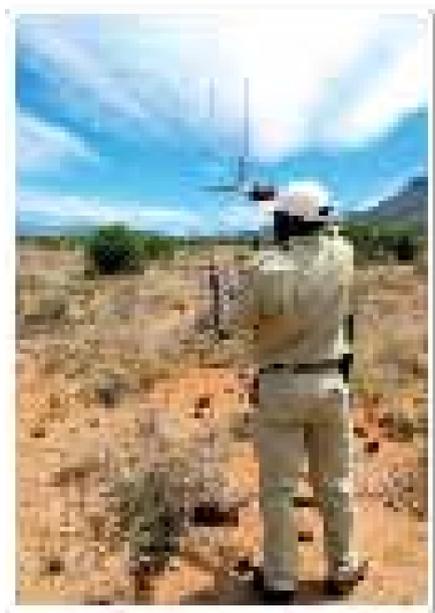
18 cubs, which may not sound like much, but that's over 2% of the entire cheetah population of South Africa. Plus, she is the first cheetah to be reintroduced into the Karoo since the last one was shot in the late 1800s."

Two hours have passed and still no signal from Sibella's collar. "We know for sure she's on the reserve," smiles Shakes, "it's just a case of where." Again, he stops the vehicle and climbs onto the bonnet, pointing the telemetry aerial in different directions. The radio receiver is pressed to his ear, but still only static is coming through. "Nothing," he says. "It seems she's moved quite far since yesterday."

Shakes jumps off the bonnet and back behind the wheel. He rubs his chin and

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ponders for a moment. “You know, my gut is telling me to go in another direction, so I am going to listen to it and see what happens. Are you okay with that?”

The reality is that although Sibella is radio-collared, she could be absolutely anywhere on this massive reserve, and there’s no guarantee of finding her. Even if we pick up her signal, she may be in a completely inaccessible area. In our favour is that it is hot today, so it’s possible that she won’t move around much, and may be resting, which means our chances of finding her are better.

Driving these vast Karoo plains, it’s a mind stretch to imagine that 150 million years ago, we would be driving on the sea bed. Now these sandy plains support four different biomes – riverine, thicket, acacia and grassland – and 63 different mammals, and over 200 recorded bird species live here. The mountains that encircle the plains tell the story of their ancient origin, a story embedded in the layers of sedimentary rock.

Sibella symbolises a new era of conservation in the Karoo.

Following his gut, Shakes is now driving close to the Melk River running through Samara. He stops intermittently, holds up his telemetry aerial and listens hopefully. Nothing. “I am not giving up,” he smiles.

*Driving these vast Karoo plains, it’s a mind stretch to imagine that 150 million years ago, we would be driving on the sea bed’*

“I feel in my bones that she is close by.”

Just a few hundred meters on, we stop again to check for a signal. There’s a faint beep at last. But Shakes doesn’t say a word; he simply drives on slowly, deep in thought.

Two and a half hours of searching for Sibella have yielded a beep, so she is not too far away. The radio receiver is going crazy. Beep, beep, beep – there’s little pause between them. In his calm demeanour Shakes says: “She’s close,” then he stops the vehicle under a tree and gets out. “Let’s go. She is here somewhere, probably watching us right now. It’s more difficult to find her among the trees, but she’s here for sure.

“Follow behind me closely and walk quietly,” he says softly, leading the way. “No sudden movements, please.”

I fall in line and mirror Shakes’s footsteps. He walks ahead, still holding the aerial up and the receiver to his ear, but the volume is turned right down. His eyes are darting all over the bush. “Her camouflage is excellent, but she is right here somewhere,” he whispers. “We just have to find her by sight now.”

Sibella’s spotted coat has completely disappeared in the dappled shade of an acacia tree, and by the time we spot her, there’s just 10m between us. There she is, reclining in the coolness, looking regal and proud. She had us tracking her across the vast Camdeboo plains for hours, and without a doubt watched us zig-zag our way to her on foot – and we never saw her until the last minute. If a cheetah could

smile, she was smiling smugly now.

Too close for comfort, we slowly step backwards so as not to threaten or intimidate her. Immediately she relaxes and shifts her gaze from us. Next thing, she yawns, stretches and flops back onto the grass, eyes closed.

In the heat of midday, Sibella is resting, while we lean against a nearby tree and watch her in silence. It’s awe-inspiring to be in such close proximity to a wild cheetah; heart-stopping in a way, too, for the reverence it evokes. There’s no fear in her presence, just heightened awareness at the unique experience. Watching a cheetah from a game-drive vehicle is nothing compared to being on ground level with her. There are no boundaries; the cheetah dictates the rules of the wild.

From fast asleep to on her feet in a single motion, Sibella has had a change of mood. She’s going for a slow stroll and we follow her, keeping a safe distance behind. Because it’s so hot, she’s not expending energy unnecessarily. Rather, she’s saving it for the hunt, when she’s hungry later and looking for a meal. For now we’re grateful to be able to keep up with her. Her long, lithe legs move effortlessly over the rough terrain, but it takes a little more

effort on our part to clamber along behind her – looking out not to fall into aardvark burrows.

We walk a while with Sibella, in perfect silence, following the wooded river course. She hardly notices our presence, but stops intermittently to sniff the air. She’s checking who is in the vicinity, so maybe she wants to hunt – then she’ll pick up speed to over 110km/h. We slack back and leave her to continue.

Sensing that we’re not behind her, she stops and casts a glance back at us as if in acknowledgment. We watch her as she disappears slowly into the shade, but she doesn’t look back again.

Heading back to the Land Cruiser, we still walk in silence. It’s hard to grasp that these graceful cats, so persecuted by farmers, are still so tolerant of humans. Now the circle is complete and cheetah again rule the iconic plains of the Camdeboo. They’re home again. This time to stay. ■

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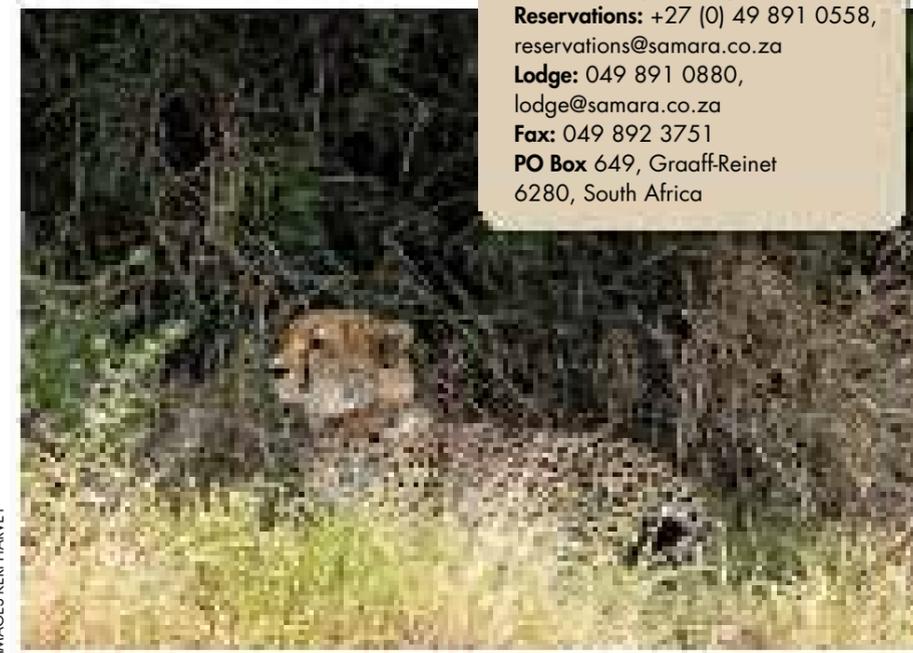
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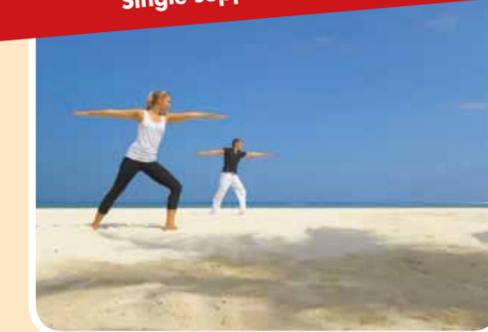
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