



Natural World Press and Publicity
Africa's Giant Killers

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BILLING

Africa's largest herd of elephants and a fearless pride of young lions come face to face in an epic fight for survival. Rarely do their worlds collide, until now. This is no chance conflict; nature has played its part. Drought has weakened the elephants and the lions are desperately hungry - the dawn of the giant killers has arrived.

Filmed and produced by Icon Films
Series Editor - Roger Webb
www.bbc.co.uk/naturalworld

MEDIUM DESCRIPTION (<179 Characters)

Africa's largest herd of elephants and a fearless pride of young lions come face to face in an epic fight for survival. Rarely do their worlds collide, until now.

SHORT DESCRIPTION (<90 Characters)

Africa's largest herd of elephants face a fearless pride of lions in a fight for survival.

THE STORY TOLD IN THE FILM

Roughly once every forty years a natural phenomenon occurs in the northern Kalahari Desert of Botswana. A series of rare environmental conditions conspire to create nature's perfect storm, unleashing a dramatic episode of unique animal behaviour.

Tectonic movements deep beneath the earth's crust release an immense body of water to the surface, filling an ancient waterway called the Savute channel. The name Savute means unpredictable in the local language, as no-one can predict when the water will appear and disappear. The water flows into the surrounding marsh, bringing it back to life, and attracting thousands of grazing animals from across the Kalahari region. They in turn attract all kinds of predators: the largest and most powerful of all is the lion. Savute was once famous for its mega-prides, and when the marsh comes back to life, new prides of lions move into the area in large numbers.

One of these new groups is a pride of seven lions: two mature lionesses and their one-year old offspring. The young males have one year left to learn how to hunt for themselves before their mothers mate again and they have to leave the safety of the pride. The film follows the fortunes of this young pride as they try and fail to hunt a succession of prey animals: warthogs, zebra and toughest of all, the buffalo.

The mother lioness is constantly alert to threats to her cubs and the biggest of these is infanticide, which is very common in lions. The marsh is ruled by a coalition of five large brothers. When one of the large males attacks her young, the oldest lioness and her youngest daughter keep their family safe by distracting him, and going off to mate with all five of the brothers.

As the dry season advances, the river and the surrounding marsh start to dry up. Savute becomes the only source of water for over fifty miles. All the prey animals are drawn towards the last remaining water at the centre of the marsh, where the lions are waiting. Thousands of elephants now flood into Savute, lured in from the surrounding area by the promise of food and water. These huge breeding herds start to have their own impact on already dwindling resources: they are literally sucking Savute dry. As vegetation also becomes scarcer, the elephants have to roam further to find it, but must always return to the water at the centre of the marsh to drink. Lions would never normally regard an elephant as prey due to their superior size and strength, but conditions in Savute become so extreme that the elephants start to succumb to dehydration and malnutrition. A mother elephant dies, leaving her orphaned calf to fend for itself. It's this calf that triggers the transformation of our young pride into Giant Killers.

Lions are opportunists. Having failed to kill, the young pride is hungry, and their mother and youngest sister team up to show them the way. Their first kill is the orphaned calf, who falls easily. The herd try to defend the calf and charge the lions, but the young pride will not give up their prey and the balance of power shifts in favour of the lions. They now develop a taste for elephant, and start actively hunting.

As the elephants get weaker, the lions become bolder. Over a period of two months they kill fifteen different elephants and gorge themselves on countless more. The culmination of this behaviour comes when the lions manage to isolate an adolescent male elephant from the herd, and then bring him down by working together as a pride. The lions are now fully-fledged Giant Killers.

The rains are unseasonably late, and many mother elephants are now giving birth at the worst possible time. The new calves are highly vulnerable, and struggle to cope with the lack of food and water. A baby calf dies, and its mother stands by its tiny corpse, grieving until the next day.

As the elephants suffer, the lions thrive. The youngest lioness has her first litter of cubs, and the pride of five brothers come to stand guard at the den, all believing they are the father. This is the cue for the younger males to leave their mother and sisters and set off on their own.

Finally the rains arrive and the surviving elephants can escape. As the waterholes refill across the marsh, they find safe passage back into the Kalahari basin. The marsh will recover, and the elephants will eventually return to full strength. But for the lions there is no turning back. Like their mother, the new cubs will learn how to hunt elephants, and Savute becomes home a new generation of Giant Killers.

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THE CONTRIBUTOR

Africa's Giant Killers was filmed over an eighteen-month period by wildlife cameraman and director Brad Bestelink. Brad is fourth generation born and bred in Botswana. His grandfather was a crocodile hunter, and his father set up the first photographic camp in the Okavango Delta. Brad has spent most of his life in the bush, and knew instinctively that a once in a lifetime event was about to take place. He gambled eighteen months of his life on the promise that the filling of the Savute channel and its subsequent drying up would lead to unprecedented drama. By identifying the predator dynamic in the area, Brad honed in on an audacious pride of young lions who were transformed before his eyes into Giant Killers

“The greatest thing about making this film is it's a journey, and you get to know all the characters. It was the personality of this one particular pride that really drove it. It says so much about lions' capability to adapt to circumstance, that was the most rewarding thing for me, and I look at lions totally differently from now on.”

Brad works with fellow cameraman and lifelong friend Richard Uren, who filmed one of the most dramatic scenes in the film, when a baby elephants dies on camera.

“To see a young newly born elephant die like that was very heart-wrenching. What I saw then is that elephants definitely grieve for each other. Mum hung around the whole night and was there the next morning. You feel helpless because you can't

do anything. It's hard but the whole story is part of a natural cycle: the lions have got their young to feed, they've got themselves to feed.”

The film was written and produced by Rob Sullivan, a BAFTA award-winning filmmaker and regular producer on Natural World.

LOCATION

The Kalahari, translated by name as “the waterless place”, covers an area just over two and a half million kilometres. It has only one permanent river - the Okavango - but on occasion and seemingly from nowhere, forced by the random shifting of the Great Rift Valley fault extensions, another river appears. Flowing on average for 20 years in 200, and in an almost West to East direction, the Savute Channel spills down into the desert and forms the marsh. In 2009 the Savute River returned after a thirty year absence.

Savute is part of Chobe National Park in Northern Botswana. It's a vast amphitheatre formed by an unusual collection of natural geological features: a sand ridge, dolomite hills, and an ephemeral marsh caught and suspended on the edge of a great sand mass. Water pushing down from the confluence of the Lynanti and Kwando waterways along the old fractured architecture of the Savute channel literally transforms Savute overnight into one of the most dynamic wildlife spectacles in Africa.

SPECIES NOTES

Lion - Panthera Leo

The film follows the lives of a pride of seven lions: two mature females, three young males and two young females. The youngest female is the boldest and most inquisitive, and always takes the lead when hunting. The young lions' lack of experience makes them bold and reckless. They fail spectacularly to hunt buffalo, but their mother teaches them to adapt to circumstance by learning to hunt elephants, and once they start they cannot stop.

- Lions are the largest of all big cats and the only big cat that is not solitary. They have complex social lives, based around family prides and coalitions. Pride sizes vary but can get as large as 40 individuals.
- Infanticide is common as males try to ensure the success of their own offspring by killing the young of rival males.
- A female will mate with several males when she comes into season.
- Lions have litters of between 1 and 6 cubs.

African Elephant - Loxodonta Africana

The Kalahari is home to Africa's largest herd of elephants. They normally inhabit the dry interior of the Kalahari, but are drawn in their thousands into the Savute Marsh when the river re-appears. They are then held hostage by their own huge hunger and thirst, and cannot escape. With a twenty-two month gestation period, giving birth is a seasonal guessing game for elephants. Normally they will try to

give birth during the wet season, but when the rains come late many new infants are born into the harshest of environments and struggle to survive.

- Elephants are the largest land mammal on earth, weighing up to four tonnes.
- Elephants are complex social animals: Male bulls are largely solitary, and inhabit the marsh all year round. Breeding herds are made up of mothers and their young, normally led by a matriarch.
- Elephants have a 22 month gestation period.
- Elephants live for up to 70 years
- Elephants drink roughly 200 litres of water and consume roughly 200 kg's of vegetation each day.

Other species featured:

Zebra, Warthog, Cape Buffalo, Impala, Waterbuck, Spotted Hyena, Hippo, Wild Dog, Giraffe, Great White Pelicans, Marabou Storks, White Backed Vultures, Carmine Bee-eater, Barn Swallows, White-faced Ducks.