

Natural World Press and Publicity
Africa's Fishing Leopards



TX: BBC Two 8pm Tuesday 24th February 2015

BILLING

David Attenborough narrates the intimate story of a leopard mother and her two cubs. This very special family must survive in the wilds of Botswana alongside some less than friendly neighbours: lions, wild dogs and hyenas. The competition for food is tough and if they are going to make it they must learn a new skill - they must learn to fish. This is an epic family drama. With them every step of the way is local cameraman Brad Bestelink. Brad's eighteen month journey following the lives of these secretive big cats offers a rare glimpse into an otherwise hidden world.

Narrator - Sir David Attenborough

Producers - Steve Gooder/Brad Bestelink (for Icon films & NHFU Botswana)

Series Editor - Roger Webb

www.bbc.co.uk/naturalworld

MEDIUM DESCRIPTION <179 characters

David Attenborough tells the intimate story of a leopard mother and her cubs. The family must survive in the wilds of Botswana where competition is tough and predators are fierce.

SHORT DESCRIPTION <90 characters

David Attenborough narrates the intimate story of a leopard mother and her two cubs.

THE STORY TOLD IN THE FILM

Leopards are loners, and famously secretive. But in a wild corner of Botswana a magic door into their world opens up when film-maker Brad Bestelink discovers a mother with two young cubs. During an extraordinary year and a half of filming, Brad reveals the real life ups and downs of his newly adopted family: a reckless, fumbling young male, his cautious twin sister, and their incredibly resourceful mother. Brad knows that it is highly unlikely that *both* cubs will survive to adulthood.

Danger can strike at any moment. When a pack of wild dogs blasts in, the youngsters must scramble for their lives. This first, critical, life lesson is swiftly followed by another as the sharp-eyed mother spots and kills an impala fawn, the perfect size for her son to practice on.

With two young cubs, avoiding predators like lions and hyenas is a top priority. The mother's solitary role in raising the youngsters, from bathing and feeding them to keeping them safe, puts her under constant pressure. Crucial to the family's continued survival is a rocky hideaway at the heart of their territory.

Though the thriving cubs grow fast, they lack experience. The adolescent daughter is cleverly deceived by an ostrich, while her equally naive brother receives an important lesson from an elephant. Venturing out on their own the young explorers are soon running into more serious trouble, and are lucky to escape with their lives when pursued by lions.

The bigger the cubs grow, the harder it is for their mother to keep them fed. Yet as the river shrinks the leopards discover stranded catfish in muddy pools, and in a moment of triumph the son manages to catch one. Following his lead the family feast on fish while they can. Floodwaters eventually allow the catfish to escape, temporarily putting an end to the bounty. Away from the river the cubs have no success with more usual prey species: the daughter can't even grab a guinea fowl, while the young male's attempt to catch a full-grown giraffe is typically over-ambitious.

Returning to the replenished river at night, the hungry leopards find that the catfish are still around. This time it's the daughter who makes the breakthrough - plucking up enough courage to dive in head-first, sinking her teeth into a fish. By learning how to hunt them - a remarkable achievement, as well as a 'film first' - this endearing feline family takes a giant leap towards survival.

The blossoming daughter is growing in confidence, and she appears to have taken a shine to Brad. Yet as the wet season arrives, an ominous new development spells danger for the family.

Having become sexually mature, the younger female is now a direct threat to her mother. In a heart-breaking turn of events our mum turns on her daughter and chases her away from the family, from now on she must fend for herself. While her brother continues to

enjoy a life of ease, with meals provided by his mother, the evicted daughter is nearly killed by a herd of zebra. Failing to make the grade as a hunter, she continues to weaken.

Just as she looks doomed, however, the daughter's determination pays off and she takes down a young kudu, her first big kill. For Brad this is proof that she has finally 'come of age' and gained the skills she needs to survive. Against the odds, and in the toughest of places, our leopard mum has not only survived but has successfully raised both of her cubs to adulthood.

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THE CONTRIBUTOR

Africa's Fishing Leopards was produced over a two-year period by film-maker **Brad Bestelink**. Brad is fourth generation, born-and-bred in Botswana. His grandfather was a crocodile hunter, while 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 when the mother leopard 'presented' her cubs to him, he had an unusual opportunity to document in great detail the life and struggles of this rarely seen animal.

"I remember the first time I saw this leopard... I knew it had young cubs so I gave it quite a lot of space. After a while, slowly, one of the cubs emerged from a thicket. The mother climbed a tree right in front of me, and naturally the cubs followed her. In a weird way it was almost as if she was presenting those cubs to us."

Brad works with lifelong friend and fellow cameraman **Richard Uren**, who filmed throughout the two-year period, capturing many of the key events in the leopards' lives.

The film was written and co-directed by **Steve Gooder**, a BAFTA-nominated, multi-award-winning film-maker who has previously made five Natural Worlds.

LOCATION

Savute is an area covering the western end of Botswana's Chobe National Park. Situated on the northern edge of the Kalahari, it is a large 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. The Leopards' territory encompasses a rocky hill overlooking the thickets, river, and marshland of Savute.

SPECIES NOTES

Leopard - Panthera pardus

Leopards are powerful, tree-climbing predators of the cat genus, *Panthera*. Comparatively stocky, they are built for strength rather than speed, with short legs and a very muscular neck and jaws. Lacking the stamina of other predators, they attack by ambushing their prey, stalking close to their target before making a short charge or pounce. In brief bursts leopards can run at speeds of up to 36mph. Enhanced night vision and long whiskers help them to operate under the cover of darkness, as does their finely developed sense of hearing.

Superbly camouflaged and notoriously stealthy, leopards are widely distributed across Africa and Eurasia. They are able to thrive in a broad range of habitats - from deserts to rainforests, and even tolerate life within large cities.

Adult males and females both defend mutually exclusive territories from same-sex rivals. Mothers bear sole responsibility for raising the young. Litters typically consist of one to three cubs, which are born after a three month pregnancy. As with other cats (and indeed many mammals), males will try to kill cubs that aren't their own. Cub survival rates are generally low.

The typical lifespan for a wild leopard is between ten and fifteen years. Aside from rival leopards, the main threats come from other large carnivores - including lions, which will kill leopards if they can. Hyenas and pythons will also kill cubs.

Leopards are opportunistic feeders that will eat pretty much anything, from a cockroach to a buffalo. Their diet often includes a wide range of small or medium-sized prey, such as frogs, civets, hares, porcupines, monkeys, and even - as demonstrated in this film - large free-swimming catfish. But they are extremely strong, and fully capable of tackling larger antelopes like kudu. Their classic technique for killing large prey is a powerful bite to the throat that severs the windpipe and major arteries. Clawed hind legs are sometimes used to rake and shred the flanks of their prey, opening up the abdominal cavity. Leopards are also scavengers with an exceptional ability to stomach rotting meat.

Depending on availability of prey, leopards vary widely in size - from as little as 20 kilos to as much as 80 kilos or more. Males are typically around 30% heavier than females.

Other species featured:

Elephants, Lions, Wild Dogs, Spotted Hyenas, Zebra, Giraffe, Impala, Ostrich, Catfish, Tree Squirrel, and numerous other kinds of birds and antelope.