



Life on the southern plains

BY SUE WATT

Keziah is basking in the sun surrounded by six adorable, sleepy cubs. She's one of Dennis Minja's favourite cheetahs, a star among several big cats he knows personally that prowl Serengeti's southern plains.

"Keziah's a 'super-mum'," he explains. "She's successfully raised five babies, even though 95 per cent of cubs die through bushfires or predation. She's even adopted a cub whose mother died. That's very rare."

Dennis is a researcher for Zoological Society of London's Serengeti Cheetah Project, based in the south of the national park. Vast and mesmerizingly flat, this is perfect habitat for the fastest mammals on Earth. Researchers here have been building up invaluable knowledge of cheetahs since 1974. With around 7000 surviving in Africa, this is one of the best places to see them, home to around 100 adults.

In February I've seen these southern plains transformed into the Great Migration's maternity ward. The savannah heaves with heavily pregnant wildebeest

giving birth to some 200,000 babies all within a couple of weeks, while predators lie in wait for easy pickings.

Even when the wildebeest move on, these lands are rarely empty. Little Tommies dot the plains like freckles and are a favourite meal for cheetahs. Sometimes our guide catches a twitch of an ear or a flick of a tail in the grasses. It's a cheetah stealthily stalking a gazelle, then running like lightning and pouncing on its prey in a blur of power and beauty.

On leaving Keziah, we see three males sitting bolt upright in perfect synchrony, looking like china statues. They do some stretching and furtively stalk a lone hartebeest, but he spots them. The moment is gone. They lie down, defeated. There's no point wasting energy.

Later, a beautiful young mum is panting heavily amid golden grasses guarding a freshly killed Tommie, its blood still glistening red. Her spiky-haired cub jumps joyfully over the grasses to share the feast, another Serengeti star in the making. ●

For more on the Serengeti Cheetah Project visit zsl.org/cheetah-conservation

Left: A cheetah protects her kill on the plains near Naabi

PAUL JOYNSON-HICKS / SERENGETISAFARITV