

A waiting game

What could be easier than photographing a drinking lion? Well, picking up a range of African parasites perhaps.



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IT SEEMED EVER so simple. I decided I wanted to photograph a truly wild lion drinking from a pool. As I live on the western escarpment of the Great Rift Valley in southern Kenya, I knew that both the animals and the water were plentiful. In early 2008, I had discovered a spring that wound its way down the Nguruman Hills and onto the valley floor where it formed a picturesque watering hole, and this seemed the perfect place to start.

Walking around the pool, I noticed fresh lion tracks in the fine volcanic dust. This cat would be unhabituated to people, I surmised, a semi-nomadic beast that lived outside any game reserve or national park. Operating under the cover of darkness, it would be shy and elusive – a photographic challenge I couldn't wait to take on.

My first task was to construct a hide. I dug a hole deep enough to conceal my entire body

and covered it with a zinc roof. Situated 2° south of the equator, I knew that the hide wouldn't be overly comfortable, but at least getting the shot shouldn't take too long, I reasoned. Every morning and afternoon, I retreated to my foxhole, along with at least a dozen tsetse flies. The intense heat and my profuse sweating gave me a small taste of what trench warfare must have been like.

Two months later, the pungent smell created by the baboons that were using my hide as a public convenience, combined with the

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irritation of the flies and the searing heat, had left me a little unhinged. In a bid to rid myself of all three nuisances, I leapt into the water – all three feet of it. I sat down with my rear end cushioned in the muddy bottom, so all that

protruded above the surface were my head, hands and camera.

Sitting motionless in the water for hours on end every day gave me time for detailed study of some of the smaller animals using the pool. I discovered, for instance, that dragonfly nymphs deliver an excruciatingly painful bite, while the whirly gig beetles enjoyed swimming along my skin and up my legs.

The water level was falling every day and the pool was becoming

increasingly putrid thanks to the sanitary habits of the baboons, so it became necessary for me to pinch my nose with a clothes peg to shut out the rank smell. There had still been no sign of my elusive lion, but if other waterholes were evaporating in the dry weather, surely it would have to visit this one eventually?

After eight months, my wife's patience was wearing thin and my skin was covered in unidentified bites and persistent red bumpy rashes, the cause of which I decided was baboon urine. One afternoon, just as I was about to give up, the ever-faithful pair of Egyptian geese leapt from the bank and hit the water with a furious honking and hissing.

Wondering what had alarmed them, I scanned the horizon, only to see two full-grown lionesses sauntering purposefully towards the water. This was it, I thought: eight months of blood, sweat and tears, and here was my chance to capture the shot and end this increasingly unhealthy obsession.

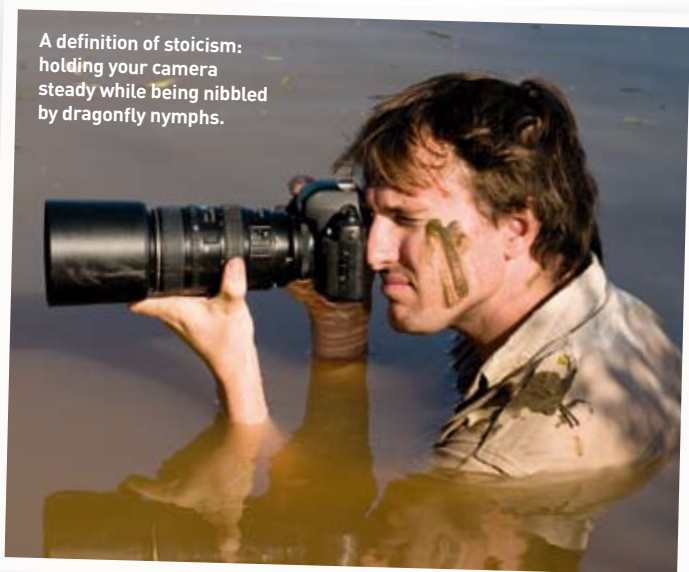
I quickly altered the camera settings to cope with the falling light levels. Looking up again, I was horrified to see the two thirsty lionesses lapping at the water a mere five metres away. They had piercing yellow eyes and their muscular bodies seemed to tower above me. I said a swift prayer and pressed my shutter button twice, more delicately than ever before.

A FEW WEEKS later, feeling decidedly ill, I arrived home and went for some blood tests, the results of which revealed an assortment of parasites. Our family GP phoned late one Saturday night, alarmed and wondering, "Have you been swimming anywhere you shouldn't have been recently?" Um yes, I thought.

That evening, I reviewed my lion shots for the first time, trying to assess whether my quest had been worthwhile. With rashes and bites reminding me of what I'd been through, I reflected that it had created quite a few itches, but I think I got them well and truly scratched.



Two lions five metres away: are you brave enough to press your camera shutter? Well, are you?



A definition of stoicism: holding your camera steady while being nibbled by dragonfly nymphs.