



OVERLAND

JOURNAL



Kenya

Storage Boxes

Idaho

The Utah Traverse



A large, ancient baobab tree with a thick, textured trunk and bare, spreading branches dominates the right side of the frame. To its left, a white safari vehicle with a canvas-covered roof rack is parked on a dirt path. The vehicle's license plate reads 'KOL 813'. The background is filled with dense green acacia trees under a clear sky.

The Year of the Lion

Sam Watson and Chris Collard trek through the Kenyan bush in search of rhino poachers and the great lions of Africa.

By Sam Watson
Photography by Chris Collard





A tracking patrol with the KWS. **Opening spread:** Along the Tanzanian border, en route to Tsavo National Park.

A musky smell swept over the two Land Rover Defenders in the blackness of an East African night and we realised that the lions had come. In the darkness I could see one of the lithe, tan-colored cats, huge and powerful, emerge from a wall of brush. It walked softly towards us, inquisitive and alert. A ripple of excitement moved through our team as we hunkered down on the roofs. I whispered into my walkie-talkie, “Can you see her?” A rapid, quiet response came back from *Overland Journal’s* editor, Chris Col-lard, who was on the roof of our 1974 Range Rover about 30 feet to my left. “Roger, I see her.” The booming call of a dying wildebeest roared out across the plains of Kenya as we triggered the “callback” recording once again. In a moment the hungry lioness was joined by a second of the great predators who was equally vigilant.

Chris and I had come to Kenya to explore its beautiful backcountry and work alongside wildlife rangers on a project to survey the lion popu-lation of Meru National Park. This was the first time such a census had been carried out, and it was the initial step in developing a conservation strategy for the majestic carnivores of this region—surely one of the lions’ spiritual heartlands. Lion numbers across Africa are in steep decline: the total population has dropped by 60 percent in the last 20 years. In West Africa the species has been declared critically endangered, causing major concern amongst conservationists.

Our host was the Born Free Foundation (BFF), a worldwide organisa-tion whose aim is to keep wildlife in the wild, whilst enabling the explod-ing human population to exist alongside it. The foundation was created by actors Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna, who portrayed lion advo-cates George and Joy Adamson in the iconic, Oscar-winning film *Born Free*, released in 1966.

Born Free shared the story of George’s rescue of Elsa, an orphaned lion cub, and her subsequent liberation into the wilds of the Kenyan bush. Bill and Virginia were so moved by George’s work and saddened by the mur-ders of the couple, that they created BFF to carry the spirit of his efforts forward. Although the foundation operates all over the world, it main-tains a strong presence in Kenya, especially in Meru—an area George was once responsible for protecting and the place he called home.

Back in the early ’90s I became one of the foundation’s first mem-bers, and a few years ago was lucky enough to join them on anti-poaching patrols on the slopes of Mount Kenya. In these days of increased aware-ness of African conservation issues—ranging from the murder of Cecil the lion to the threatened Serengeti Highway—Chris and I had come to Meru to see how the work was progressing.



Our job this night was part of a callback protocol survey, one of three parts of the lion census. Atop one of the Defenders was a huge loudspeaker which played a recording of a dying wildebeest, bellowing in distress as it was eaten by lions. The plan was to play the call, draw in as many lions as possible, and identify and count them. It was the first night of the project and we were anticipating a good few weeks of interesting results. Supporting the callback protocol were daytime tracking initiatives; we moved through the brush along designated transects, tallying lion tracks and examining them for age and gender. Lions tend to rest in the shade during the day, but if we encountered a pride we counted and identified them as well. This provided the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and BFF (who work closely together) with an average number of the great cats present in the park and baseline data to plan conservation work in the medium-term future.

The lions mooched around the area hungrily with growing puzzlement as they tried to locate the strangely elusive dying wildebeest. As they sauntered by within 20 feet of us, we could smell them in the stillness of the night, hear their paws against the earth, and feel their guttural breath as they nosed around. They were fully aware of the primates skulking high up on the metal boxes, yet ignored we humans with magnificent disdain. The expiring wildebeest they'd heard did not present itself, and they eventually withdrew in search of easier prey. We could relax again. Will Travers, son of Bill and Virginia and president of BFF, sat on the Defender next to mine. He is a firm believer in hands-on conservation work and was happy with this first encounter. Laptops hummed as the collected data was entered into spreadsheets and notes were made. After some hours we packed up shop and drove back to our camp a few miles distant.

A proper bush trek in Kenya is no better done than by Land Rover, and we had borrowed a fierce old warhorse of a Range Rover from Erikson Rover Safaris for the job. It was 42 years of age and a legitimate old-school safari truck which we named Mama ya Simba (Mother of Lions in Swahili). She had spent most of her long life in the Kenyan hinterland, and her rumbling V8 was a terrific soundtrack to our undertaking. Some days earlier she had carried us to Tsavo West National Park near Lake Jipe under the shadow of the mighty Kilimanjaro on the Tanzania border. There we met up with the Bundu Rovers Club (Swahili for wilderness) and its enthusiastic chairman, Rikki Agudah.

We spent time with the club, as well as the Tsavo Pride conservation group, who works with local tribes to limit the spread of elephant poaching. Typically, poachers enter from Tanzania, kill an elephant, cut out its tusks, and take the ivory back across the border where it is sold to unscrupulous buyers who are often Chinese. The Bundu Rovers have, amongst other things, been raising money for a fence to protect the area's wild habitats and its endangered elephant populations. We moved with a small convoy of Defenders, Discoverys, and Range Rovers through the rough country along the border, stopping to chat with villagers at small-scale conservation projects and farms. The tracks of wild

Chris set to, dismantling the dash with a Leatherman, cutting, splicing, and repairing the cable whilst I kept watch for anything large, furry, and hungry.

A lioness responds to the callback protocol. Searching for lions in the African bush. **Opposite:** Luring lions to the survey site with the recorded calls of dying wildebeests.

Kenya eventually carried us north to the capital city of Nairobi and the home of longtime friend Lars Svensson. After a resupply and evening of Tusker beer, we turned Mama ya Simba north again and set out for Meru.

The road took us through a changing landscape, away from the semidesert terrain of south Kenya and into the lush highlands around Nanyuki. This is the land of the Great Rift Valley, a huge split between the tectonic plates that arcs its way across the surface of the continent from Mozambique to Jordan. A land of extinct and active volcanoes, the fertility of the landscape gave rise to thick rainforest as we crossed the equator and circled around Mount Kenya. Some miles outside Nanyuki, relieved to be out of the hustle and bustle of Nairobi, we were flagged down at a police checkpoint.

Chris and I exchanged *this could be interesting* glances. “Is this your car?” questioned the officer in a most pleasant and cheerful manner. Hmm...we informed him that we had hired it and were in Kenya to do conservation work with KWS and BFF. This was, of course, the first act in a pantomime. The dialogue touched on the fact that the car was licensed as a public service vehicle. He asked if we had the appropriate Kenyan public service driving licence, and we informed him that we each had universally accepted international licences. Disappointedly, our new friend, Mr. Helpful, said, “But by law you should have a Kenyan driver.” This of course was not true. Equally friendly, we informed him that the hire company told us that it was fine to self-drive this vehicle. The debate wrangled on and we knew we were being taken for a ride.

The officer announced that he must impound the car and that we would need to attend court the next day in a nearby town. Phone calls whizzed back and forth between the hire company and our antagonist. The senior sergeant strolled over—we were definitely the daily cabaret for these bored uniforms. All very matey, we took selfies with the grinning cops, jokes were exchanged, and Tusker beer materialised from our cool-box for our thirsty friends. Eventually, with an air of great magnanimity Mr. Helpful announced that he could help us out and overlook the infraction, but would we like to buy him and his mates dinner? Chris and I exchanged a resigned grin. Here it came...the inevitable scam. “Yes, of course,” we smiled, “How can we do that?” “Ahhh, well you can buy us a goat.” The eventual price of the supposed goat came in at around \$30 (evidently a gold-plated pedigree goat). Kenyan shillings passed, handshakes were exchanged, and off we went laughing wryly. We were now running late, and Meru was still a good distance away.

Darkness was falling, and after a couple of hours the rutted and potholed hardtop turned to red laterite and gravel as we bounced towards our goal. With confusing local directions, we ended up on the wrong track, heading north to the Somali border—on the wrong side of 11 p.m. Realising this, we eased the beast into a U-turn. It was then that the elderly and many-times-bodged throttle cable snapped and the engine died. We were on a badly eroded trail running through a forest in lion country. It was late and we had mechanical issues, so we decided to set camp and sort out a solution in the morning. With half a bar of cell service we sent





our intentions via text to Victor Mutumah, our Born Free contact. The return message said, “Bad idea, you need to return to town.” Chris set to, dismantling the dash with a Leatherman, cutting, splicing, and repairing the cable whilst I kept watch for anything large, furry, and hungry.

In true Disney style, eyes glowed in the darkness around us, reflected by my head torch light as various nocturnal creatures checked out the peculiar intruders. After a while of fiddling, the stillness was broken by the roar of an engine. Headlights blazed out behind us and a Toyota Land Cruiser barrelled by. It was a pickup stacked high with shrink-wrapped bales of unidentifiable cargo. Minutes passed, and then so did a second Toyota identical to the first. Then a third and a fourth. With no idea who they were, we felt vague relief that they had little interest in us.

It turned out that the Land Cruisers were armed Somali *qat* smugglers running a shipment of the narcotic leaf through the night to the lawless northern border where it could be sold. In time we finished the bush fix and fired up the V8. All was good. We set ourselves on the right road, met Victor in town, and followed him back to the KWS ranger base in Meru. Sleep came quickly this night.

The following days evolved into a pattern of anti-poaching patrols, tracking sweeps on transects in the park, and nighttime callback protocols. With us were Corporal Timothy Kano and Ranger Charo Mwenzah from KWS. Each was armed with a Kalashnikov AK-101, the export version of the venerable Russian AK family, chambered for the NATO 5.56mm round. This highly qualified duo was essentially our close protection detail for the next week. Also close at hand were Victor, Tim, and Martin of Born Free, along with their ranger and tracker team.

The patrols follow a set pattern. After selecting an area that poachers were known to operate in we moved quietly through the brush on foot in an extended line, similar to an infantry patrol. Communicating by whistles and hand signals, we picked our way between the thick, thorny vegetation. Most tiresome were the acacia bushes known in Swahili as *ngoja kidogo* (wait-a-bit thorn). This low-lying shrub comes to about shoulder height and is covered with backward-pointing barbed hooks. Sure enough, they snag the passing traveler and persuade him to “wait a bit” whilst he unpicks himself. They can easily snag an eye and demand respect.

Although our aim was to apprehend poachers (we were prepared to chase and, if necessary, exchange fire as I had done previously on Mount Kenya), our encounters would primarily be with their snares. Indigenous populations outside the park live in conditions of great poverty. Existing as they do, with very little investment from the central government, their crops and livestock find the going prohibitively hard in overgrazed and over-farmed lands. It is therefore understandable to an extent why they yield to the temptations of trapping wildlife within the park to provide sustenance.

Poachers cut the perimeter fence to gain access and fashion the wire into running snares—cruel traps that kill by asphyxiation, blood loss, or starvation. Victims can be anything from small antelope and lion to buffalo and elephant. They set dozens of traps in areas where animals are known to pass—near waterholes or on runs through thick undergrowth—and leave them for a day or so. When an animal gets tangled in one of these almost-invisible nooses, the wire tightens around a limb,



To find poachers and their snares we must think like a poacher. Today, hopefully we will save lives.

- KWS Corporal Timothy Kano

Top row: On the way to the village of Kisimane. One of the few remaining white rhinos left in the wild. The cost of poaching. **Middle row:** A lioness heading for a kill. Measuring a paw print to determine the size of the lion. Land Rover provides unstinting support for the BFF ranger teams. **Bottom row:** One of many spectacular days in the African bush. Wire snares removed by BFF. The Great Migration in progress. **Bottom:** Tracking large carnivores is an exacting task. **Opposite:** KWS and BFF rangers on patrol.





Clockwise from top left: Keeping scrupulous notes is critical to ferreting out poachers and their prey. Tireless ranger teams protect the region's heritage. The team rests after searching for signs of poachers. Patrolling the boundary of Meru. Recording the size of illegal snares.

BORN FREE

Born Free is closely supported by Land Rover, who has a long-standing commitment to supplying the foundation with vitally necessary four-wheel drive vehicles for projects around the world. Whether being utilized as elephant ambulances in Sri Lanka or patrol vehicles in Africa, the distinctive black-and-white liveried Defenders and Discoverys (each marked with Elsa's face and paw prints) have become a familiar sight to many as they carry on their good deeds.



neck, trunk, or head. In the following moments of struggle, it draws so taut that escape is almost impossible. On patrol we found the corpse of a tiny baby elephant whose trunk had been ensnared; it died in panic and terror over a period of several hours.

Although poachers often take the kill for their own consumption (known as bush meat), more commonly they sell it to unscrupulous butchers and food-stall owners who then supply it to customers (including Western tourists) as nameless *nyama choma* (barbecued meat). This is highly illegal, and during the last 20 years has resulted in the loss of almost half of Kenya's wildlife—a massive toll for a country that depends on wildlife tourism. On most patrols we found and removed dozens of snares, saving many creatures from a horrible and protracted demise. The inescapable logic though is that poachers keep track of where patrols have worked. After the teams clear an area they return to set more snares. Rangers then reappear and remove them. It is an endless game of cat and mouse.

In an attempt to lessen this destructive cycle, another task that KWS/BFF embarks on is educational outreach. One day we filled the Land Rovers with a film projector and equipment and made a trip to a school in the village of Kisimane, which was located just outside the park boundary. Victor, Born Free's education outreach officer, addressed about 100 children and their families. He emphasized the financial value of wildlife tourism to the local community, as well as the ecological impact and penalties for poaching. His message was supported by a short movie, a rare occurrence in this impoverished community.

After speaking with the village chief, we had a clear picture of how hard their lives are. Simple tasks such as getting drinking water entail a long walk to the nearest river with a large pail. Here, as elsewhere in Kenya, Born Free is working to provide villages with water from boreholes. I had previously visited Masai villages in Amboseli, where boreholes drilled by Born Free were providing a lifeline for the villagers and enabling conservation work to take a concrete form.

During one of our off days, Chris and I made an early departure for George Adamson's original research camp. Although the couple were married, George and his wife, Joy, pursued separate interests. Joy set up her home at Elsamere, a wonderful safari lodge on the shores of Lake Naivasha, where she worked with leopards. George, who was a man of the wilderness, built Kampi ya Simba (Camp of the Lions) in Kora National Park: an extensive semidesert wilderness area south of Meru and 200 miles distant from Elsamere. He worked closely with a pride of lions that became his surrogate family. I'd wanted to visit the camp and George's grave for years, but until recently it had been closed due to armed Shifita bandit activity.

With our security patrol riding shotgun, we crossed the Tana River at Adamson's Falls and headed due south for several hours. It was a long haul along broken gravel tracks through rough country. Deep into Kora we found feral camels and occasionally, their illusive Somali herdsmen, many of whom were in fact Shifita bandits. Timothy and Charo explained

The endless trail south to Kora. Crossing into the Southern Hemisphere. **Opposite, top:** Crossing the Tana River at Adamson's Bridge. **Bottom, clockwise from top left:** We enjoyed being part of a vibrant community. Education outreach in local schools. Kenya's villages are full of the joys of life. A film was part of a BFF presentation on the dangers of poaching.



In the bush we get by with what we have. Sometimes we have plenty of food to eat, sometimes we have very little. But it is okay; the important thing is that we can patrol each day and find snares and poachers.

- KWS Ranger Charo Mwenzah





Far from the light pollution of Nairobi, the stars, constellations, and galaxies leaped in brilliance from the inky African sky.



that the Somalis were allowed limited grazing in this area as long as they respected the protected status of the park.

The trail eventually brought us to Kampi ya Simba, which was rebuilt and is now run by George's trusted assistant, Tony Fitzjohn, field director of the George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trust. Tony had left for Tanzania the previous day, so we checked in with the KWS rangers in a nearby camp where we shared a meal of *sukuma wiki* (a stew of collard greens) and *ugali* (a stiff maize porridge). Before heading back to Meru we made an emotional visit to George's grave and absorbed the atmosphere of this remote outpost so rich in history.

Life in the bush is brutal on man and machine. We spent long hours in the saddle on patrol, working the tireless Range Rovers and Land Rovers hard. Their reliability record with BFF has been excellent, and the Rovers have been a welcome change as KWS retires their fleet of aging Land Cruisers. The head mechanic at the vehicle pound said with a pleased grin, "Now we will get stuck less." Each is kitted out with snorkels, winches, safari roof racks, bull bars, Hi-Lift jacks, and extra lighting. Some of this kit comes from local specialists like Schuhmacher's in Nairobi, but much of it

is sourced from the U.K. and U.S. Winch lines are a frequent casualty, and companies like Land Rover Special Vehicle Operations generously donate cables and other equipment to keep vehicles operational.

Sleeping in a ranger camp is something everyone should experience. Far from the light pollution of Nairobi, the stars, constellations, and galaxies leaped in brilliance from the inky African sky. Illuminated by headlamps or flickering campfire light, we relaxed and played beer bottle cap checkers with the rangers, prepared *sukuma wiki* and *ugali* (sometimes called mealie meal), and listened to their tales of life in the African bush. Genets, hyena, and elephants nosed about camp as we slept—a humbling experience to say the least. The KWS and BFF rangers are highly dedicated lads. They firmly believe in protecting Africa's wild heritage and make do in this harsh habitat with minimal equipment and limited pay.

Driving Mama ya Simba through the endless African backcountry was an exhilarating experience. River crossings didn't faze the V8 one jot and she tackled mud, gravel, and brush with aplomb, never worrying about the odd ding or scrape. Chris and I felt we were doing something truly worthwhile by helping BFF and KWS preserve something that is part of the world's heritage. When our time in Meru came to a close and we said our goodbyes, we did so with many new and firm friendships. 🌍

Editor's Note: This year marks the 50th anniversary of the movie *Born Free* and has been declared Year of the Lion by the foundation. In celebration of this monumental achievement they have rolled out a series of initiatives to conserve lion numbers across the continent. *Overland Journal* supports these pioneers of conservation and looks forward to a future where the great plains of Africa and their wild inhabitants are preserved for the awe and wonder of generations to come. Their efforts are not without cost, however, and support is greatly appreciated. Learn more at bornfree.org.uk, 44-0-1403-240-170.

Clockwise from top left: A ranger camp by night. We spent long hours on patrol. Playing checkers with beer bottle tops in the ranger camp.

ROUTE Kenya

Cartography by David Medeiros (mapbliss.com)

