

kulula.com

free copy

swipe me if you like me

february 2013

# khuluma

Hopeless romantic

## MELANIE JONES

gets bubbly with a Bok and whimsical with a weatherman

got the munchies?  
FOR THE MENU  
see back page

### Melanie interviews Breyton Paulse

Has Breyton ever eaten springbok?

### Derek van Dam

How does Derek feel living in the shadow of his cousin Jean-Claude?

PLUS Guides to CT, Jozi, Durbs and Garden Route • Hail to the chef

# Lions in the love den

*Keith Bain stumbles upon a rip-roaring romance.*



THERE'S A PHOTO of myself, aged five, posing with a lion. Vague snatches of memory take me to that actual moment at the circus – the first and last time I held a lion cub in my arms. A priceless experience for a wide-eyed city boy. At age five you don't much ruminate over diminishing wildlife numbers. Concepts like 'extinction' are extinct to young minds.

Beyond the awful threat to our rhino populations, South Africans can be blasé about animal numbers. Because wildlife is easily spotted on game drives, we seldom imagine that lions are in any danger. The fact is, though, that the radical decline in African lion numbers means that they are officially categorised as 'vulnerable' on

the Red List of Threatened Species. It's estimated that in 1950, there were some 400 000 lions in Africa. By the turn of the 21st century, numbers had fallen below 47 000. Most recent surveys estimate 32 000 – and they're still dropping.

It's worth noting that lions became extinct in Europe 2 000 years ago and in Asia, where a subspecies once thrived, only one tiny, isolated population in a national park in western India survives. In North Africa free-roaming lions were last seen in the 1940s.

A major problem is that populations tend to be geographically isolated, which leads to inbreeding. Lack of genetic diversity makes for weaker populations, which are prone to being wiped out.

Wherever humans have gathered to build their towns and cities, animals are forced to slink away quietly, or steadily face more violent forms of extermination. Inevitably, most of us don't imagine that these urban environments enjoyed a wilderness prehistory. Think of the Garden Route, for example, and free-roaming lions don't instantly jump to mind. Mythical elephants in the Kynsna forests, maybe. But lions?

## Cape-ulating cats

It wasn't always this way. Lions – apparently genetically similar to the large black-mane variety found in the Kalahari – were once part of the southern Cape ecology.

Human encroachment and hunting wiped them out some 150 years ago.

While turning back the clock isn't an option, lions are roaming the region once more, albeit within the confines of an 11 000-hectare game reserve set on rehabilitated farmlands. Gondwana is a luxury safari operation near Mossel Bay. It's the southernmost game reserve in Africa and the only fynbos reserve with the Big Five roaming free. It operates a dedicated endangered species protection programme and has reintroduced several species considered 'under threat' by scientists, including black rhinos, Cape mountain zebra, cheetah and bontebok.

Gondwana has had a pride of free-roaming lions since 2008, and it was always a hope that these big cats – brought in from Tswalu in the Kalahari – would be the start of a new population.

### Feline and frisky

With three young lionesses and a male, the cats were undoubtedly ready for romancing, but unmonitored breeding could get out of control. 'Lions breed exceptionally fast and a small pride can explode into numerous animals within a year,' says Gondwana ranger Mark Rutherford. 'To play it safe, we initially put the females on contraception.'

After four years they were taken off the contraception, and within four months, at the end of 2012, the first pair of cubs was born. This means that successful mating took place almost immediately, since the normal gestation period is roughly 110 days. Lions breed exceptionally well in captivity, and the relentlessness of each session usually ensures success. 'As long as the females are coming into season and the male is sexually mature, there is almost 100% chance of them mating successfully,' says Mark. Males are pretty insistent: 'Once the female starts coming into heat

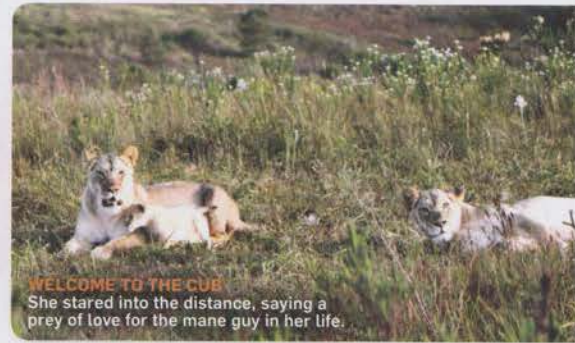


**PRIDE ON THE PROWL**  
He heard a cat whistle while strutting on his catwalk, and then 'nice loins'.

and the male gets wind of it, he shows intense interest in her, following her around and trying his luck.'

Initially, he's unlikely to get his way with her, but once the female is in full heat and they get down to the business of mating, they become pretty committed. In fact, a pair of mating lions will copulate between 20 and 40 times a day for several days. Usually, they're so preoccupied with mating that they stop eating.

'She will allow him to cover her every 20 minutes for up to four days,' says Mark. 'It can be loud and violent. The male may also bite the female on the back of her neck. There's growling and a bit of pawing but she eventually becomes quite submissive to him. There's no specific ritual other than that every time he dismounts her, she rolls onto her back, exposing her belly. She can either continue to be submissive or may try to swat him with her front paws.'



**WELCOME TO THE CUB**  
She stared into the distance, saying a prey of love for the mane guy in her life.

### Providing the pride

Since lionesses cycle virtually every month, it's possible to figure out if she's fallen pregnant based on mating habits. If a month passes without the four-day mating session, she's probably pregnant. Gestation lasts around 110 days. The tell-tale sign that the cubs are on their way is that, about 10 days before giving birth, a pregnant lioness will leave the pride and look for a den site. 'We saw this behaviour with our lioness and knew the cubs were on their way,' says Mark. Mother-to-be went deep into a fynbos-blanketed valley for a maternity break, and gave birth mid-October.

Young cubs are obviously extremely vulnerable and the mother is highly protective, so newborns are typically not seen until they're at least six weeks old. Forget Ndlovu, senior field guide at Gondwana, was the first to spot them, frolicking with the pride on a zebra kill just above the den.

By now Gondwana's cubs are eating meat, and will be fully weaned from their mother by May. It is a huge relief to know that these cubs will know what it means to roam, to hunt and to eventually indulge in some lioness loving, and one day, a wide-eyed city boy may see the babies that were born to the bold that once got busy in the bush. ■

[www.gondwanagr.co.za](http://www.gondwanagr.co.za)