

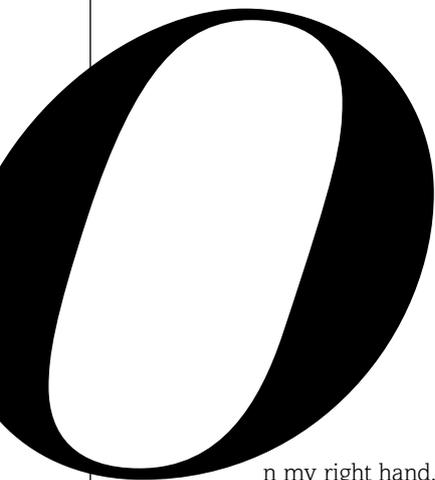


# WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Big cats are under threat. Right now, they're also notorious. **Denis Beckett** recounts a personal encounter with John Varty's tiger

— *plus* —

your guide to exceptional wild-cat encounters in sub-Saharan Africa



On my right hand, between thumb and forefinger, is a brown indentation. What it most looks like is a freckle. There are times it's on public display, and people furrow their brows and say, 'Weird, hey, like stretch marks.'

These times occur once or twice a year, when conversation turns to subjects like happy endings, or implausibility, or tigers. I display my freckle-dent, and wait for the stretch marks comment, and say, 'Do you want to know what it is?'

Of course, the truthful answer would be no, as few sights are less dramatic than a freckle, with or without indentation. But people lie politely in that way we do, and say yes.

Whereupon I say, 'That is where I was bitten by...' and I pause while they think, 'That's a bite? A mosquito's, maybe.' Then I resume: '... a tiger.'

Thought bubbles express doubt but someone (politely) asks where. I reply: 'In the Karoo', and smash any residual credibility to smithereens. Which is funny, because it's all true.

When the 2000s were infant, man-of-the-wild John Varty was on a mission. Tigers were dying out in India; he would found an African line, recreating tigers here where, his research informed him, they had lived in Gondwanaland days.

Of course, half the world immediately shrieked that John is out of line; he can't do such things. My first instinct was exactly that: tigers don't belong here, tigers aren't ours, tigers are India's, along with a bit of China and other places very, very far from the Karoo.

But why do we think that, exactly? We eat pizza, right, and vindaloo and chow mein? Never saw no one holding up a No Entry notice over foreign food. And look at ostriches. They were ours, once, when it was their feathers that made fortunes, long before anyone thought of eating them. Now? Argentina, I'm told, leads the revolution, installing ostrich fillet as the world's healthiest meat, and they aren't importing it from the Little Karoo, which in the meantime does all it can to punt itself as the home of port, putting its fingers in its ears to outraged complaints from Portugal.

To me, John's reshuffling of the wild is an admirable venture. Strength to his arm. I confess that when I contemplate an Indian entrepreneur setting out to stock Rajasthan with lions, co-opting our proudest piece of branding and the economic potential attached to it, violent thoughts enter the mind. But hey, people, this world is shrinking. If John's usurping wakes up Asian conservation, he's done everyone a favour. >

## WHERE TO FIND WILD CATS

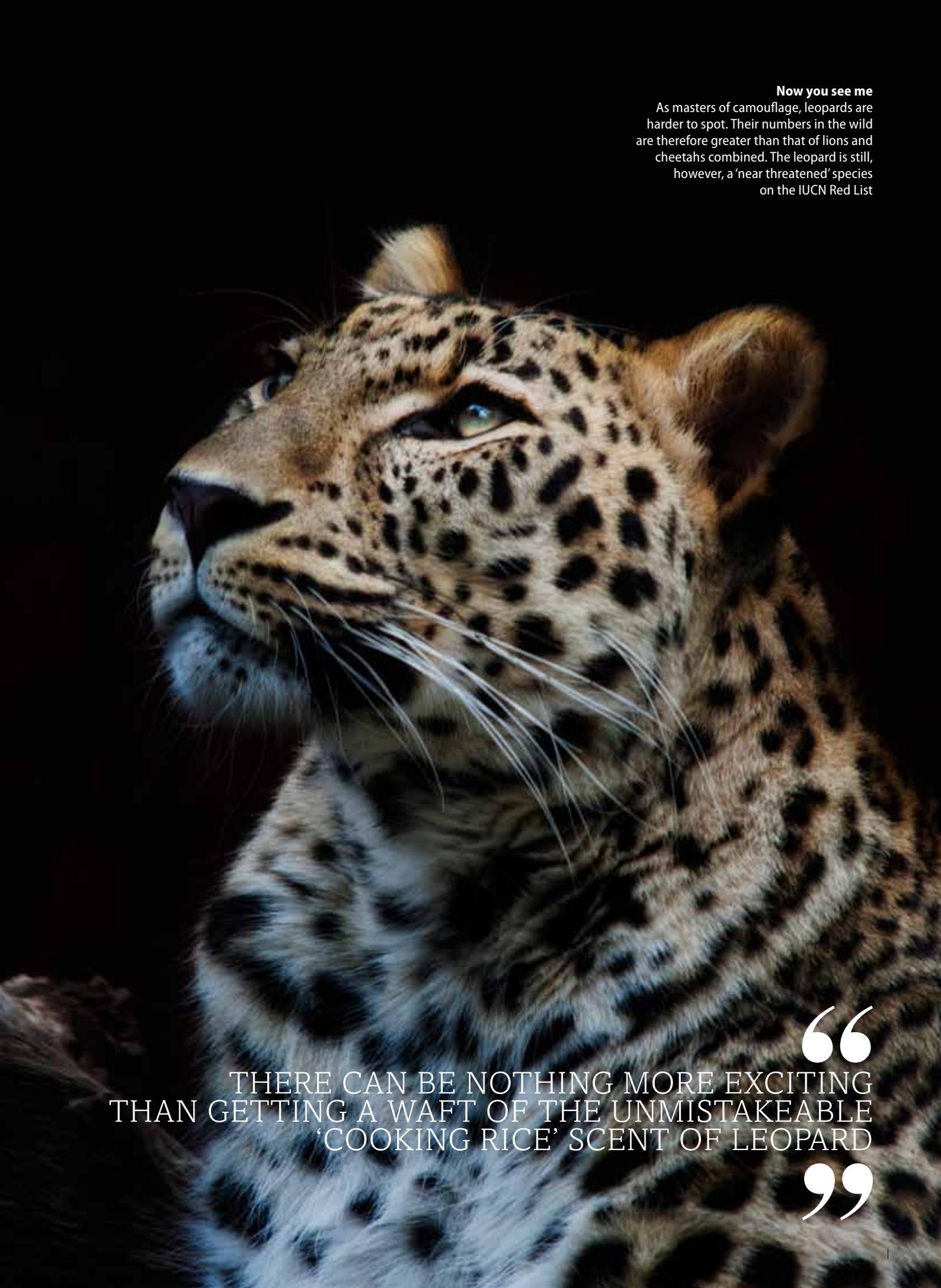
Everyone wants to see big cats on a game drive, but finding them in the vast landscapes of southern Africa is no picnic. Visiting key reserves is the best bet. Self-driving is possible in many national parks, but a private safari with experienced guides and trackers dramatically ups the chances of success.

### LEOPARDS

In South Africa, hit the **Sabi Sand Reserve**, which adjoins the Kruger Park, for one of the densest concentrations of these elusive cats on the planet. At MalaMala, an average of four a day were spotted in 2008, and they're as habituated to visitors as wild leopards can be. [malamala.com](http://malamala.com)

In the **Madikwe Reserve**, close to the Botswana border, sightings cannot be guaranteed – even with Morukuru Lodge's Shangaan trackers on your side. But should a kill be spotted and conditions right, a ranger may be persuaded to set up a camera trap for exceptional pictures. [morukuru.com](http://morukuru.com)

In Zambia, **South Luangwa National Park's** ox-bow lagoons are home to vast quantities of game – and leopards. Self-driving is possible, but Norman Carr Safaris bush camps offer better chances of success. At Kakuli Camp guests can track the predators on foot. 'There can be nothing more exciting than respectfully and unobtrusively tracking a leopard,' says director Christina Carr, 'maybe seeing her at "prey's-eye view", perhaps even getting a waft of that unmistakable "cooking rice" scent of leopard, then creeping away without alarming her.' [normancarsafaris.com](http://normancarsafaris.com)  
(continued on page 49)



**Now you see me**

As masters of camouflage, leopards are harder to spot. Their numbers in the wild are therefore greater than that of lions and cheetahs combined. The leopard is still, however, a 'near threatened' species on the IUCN Red List

“ THERE CAN BE NOTHING MORE EXCITING THAN GETTING A WAFT OF THE UNMISTAKEABLE ‘COOKING RICE’ SCENT OF LEOPARD ”

## Cool cat club

(this page) Until 10,000 years ago, the lion was the most widespread land mammal on the planet after humans. They were found throughout Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas; (opposite) There are around 12,500 cheetahs left in the wild in Africa, with the most in Namibia. They have been extinct in India for 100 years, and there has been talk of reintroducing them there



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THE NUMBERS OF THE KING OF CATS HAVE PLUNGED TO A MAXIMUM OF 40,000 IN THE WILD

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## LIONS

The numbers of the king of cats have plunged to a maximum of 40,000 in the wild. For the black-maned variety, target the **Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park**.

Early morning walks (no under-12s) and night drives can be booked from Twee Rivieren, Nossob, Mata-Mata and the Kalahari Tented Camp. [sanparks.org](http://sanparks.org)

For unusual behaviour, the Savuti area in **Chobe National Park**, Botswana, is the place to go. Here

a family of lions began to prey on young elephants during a drought. Now numbering more than 30, the pride has learnt to dispatch adults, and at one point elephant made up half its diet. In **Hwange National Park** in Zimbabwe ([zimparks.org](http://zimparks.org)), elephant-hunting lions have also been spotted, and the famous lions of **Moremi**, in Botswana's Okavango Delta, have dispatched youngsters.

For tree-climbing lions (all the better to photograph), **Lake Manyara** in Tanzania is most famous (and there's the chance to stay in &Beyond's Tree Lodge). [andbeyondafrica.com](http://andbeyondafrica.com)

Closer to home, they've been spotted in trees in both the Kruger Park and **Hluhluwe-Umfolozo** in KwaZulu-Natal, spotted on the reserve's famous wilderness trails. [kznwildlife.com](http://kznwildlife.com)

## CHEETAHS

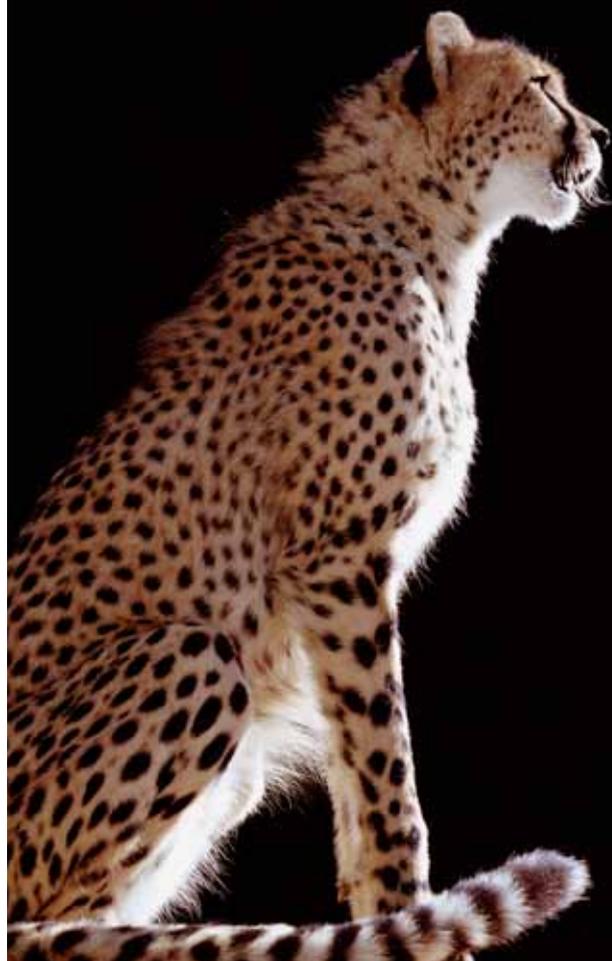
The best bets to see these rare, exceptional felines include the **Masai Mara** in Kenya and **Etosha** in Namibia ([etoshanationalpark.co.za](http://etoshanationalpark.co.za)) – and sometimes the Kruger.

Now, after 125 years, they can also be found in the Karoo: the amazing Sibella, rescued and relocated to **Samara** some years ago, has raised 18 kittens – two per cent of the wild cheetah population in South Africa! The reserve has just welcomed a new breeding female, Bellini. The odds of seeing them in action are better than most, and you can track them on foot. [samara.co.za](http://samara.co.za)

## SERVALS

Rangers will shake their heads if asked to pull this big-eared cat out of the bag. The trusty **Kruger** – especially the grassy plains north of Lower Sabie – is said to be a good bet. [sanparks.org](http://sanparks.org)

Those in the know say the very best spot is **Ngorongoro Crater** in Tanzania, particularly in the tall grasses of the eastern section of the crater floor (lions and cheetahs are also commonly sighted). [ngorongorocrater.org](http://ngorongorocrater.org)



John's idea might have elicited scepticism, not to say screaming denunciation, but these were not things to distract a man with a plan. His farm on the Orange River received its first two tigers from a Canadian zoo, healthy youngsters of around 200 kilograms each, bearing the exotic tigerish names of Ron and Julie.

Walking to the river for his morning swim with the tigers, John showed me 89 stitches in his thigh, from a day that Julie was having such fun on bathtime games that she forgot to retract her claws. As we walked, Julie gambolled; a kitten with elephantiasis. Ron ambled calmly beside me making a purr-like sound from his innards. That meant friendship, John said.

Then suddenly, eye-bogglingly, my hand was in Ron's mouth. My thumb and its thigh were tightly clamped. This showed more friendship, said John; it'd be just a moment.

That was consoling, but I couldn't help wondering why John's voice rose an octave. Just-a-moment stretched. It stretched some more. I developed an awareness that if Ron hiccupped I'd be his nine-fingered friend.

John eyeballed Ron and whacked his nose with a little discipline baton, saying 'bad tiger!' in the tone you say 'bad dog!' when your spaniel digs up the dahlias. Ron's mouth stayed clamped. John whacked again. I hoped that nose whacks did not induce hiccups.

It was like stalemate, except that my pain meter was rising and so was John's sweat meter. Then, abruptly as it started, Ron opened his mouth and resumed his amble, and it was all over except for two startling dents in my hand, neither drawing blood.

John and Ron and the sound 'bad tiger!' will live long in my mind. And if, one day, John's vision is fulfilled, at least the Karoo part of the story will sound believable. ■

## CLOSER ENCOUNTERS

### TRACK CHEETAHS

Private reserves like Samara (see previous page) have offered this activity to guests for some time, but now the **Mountain Zebra National Park** in the Eastern Cape gives budget visitors the chance to find the reserve's six cheetahs. A ranger will use antennae to locate the spotted beasts, who all have radio collars. Once in range, guests can approach closer on foot – a heart-in-mouth feeling until the cat comes into view. There are no lions here, so cheetahs are the top predators. It costs R250pp; book via +27 (0) 48 881 2427.

### SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

&Beyond's **Phinda Private Reserve** in KwaZulu-Natal, known for its cheetahs and leopard research, offers a tip-top big five experience. But for R625pp, the lodge arranges private visits for its guests to Emdoneni, a local breeding centre for the smaller of SA's endangered wild cats: servals, African wild cats, caracals and cheetahs. 'Even as a South African working on a reserve, you don't get to see caracal – here you can see them from 30cm away, tufted ears and all,' says Phinda's Celeste Vorster. Guests walk through enclosures, but this is not a petting zoo. The exception are a few cheetah 'ambassadors', who can be approached and who 'purr like steam engines' when scratched behind the ears. This is a breeding centre, and the intention is for young to be released into the wild where possible, according to Vorster. [phinda.com](#)

### RESCUED CATS

**Shamwari** in the Eastern Cape has some expansive enclosures for a number of big cats who had fallen on hard times. The rescued animals of the Born Free Foundation (freed from circuses, zoos and sometimes private homes) have space to live out their lives in sunshine with good care. Visitors have the chance to observe them in their enclosures – a poignant comparison with the wild cats that can be seen on the reserve. [shamwari.com](#)

### WALK WITH LIONS

Stroll through the African bush, dust in the nostrils and a couple of young lions padding alongside – no leashes. **Lion Encounter** works to rehabilitate captive-bred lions (find out more at [lionalert.org](#)). Guests can accompany the cats on their daily walks as they begin to hone their hunting skills. The walks take place near Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe (\$130/around R1,100), and near Livingstone, Zambia (\$140/around R1,200). [lionencounter.com](#)

### SOFT TOUCHES

At the **Cheetah Outreach Centre** at Spier in the Cape winelands, the captive-born cats can be petted (mood swings allowing) for R110. Some funds raised pay for Anatolian shepherd dogs to be placed on farms. The dogs prevent predation, which stops farmers from hunting the big cats. [cheetah.co.za](#)

The granddaddy of cheetah breeding centres is De Wildt, in the Magaliesberg in Gauteng, now renamed the **Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre**. For R380, visitors can see cheetahs run at top speed (120 km/h) as part of a three-hour tour. It costs R180 extra to actually stroke a cat. [dewildt.co.za](#)

**Tenikwa**, near Plettenberg Bay, is a place to see the cats that evade game-drive sightings: slinky servals, pint-sized black-footed cats, African wild cats and caracals. They are housed in enclosures, which guests stroll through – handler present – for R160; no touching allowed. One can also join cheetahs on their morning or evening walk through the forest. As a staff member put it, 'The cheetahs really walk you.' R500pp, adults only. [tenikwa.com](#)

**NOTE:** Many places offer the chance to pet cute cubs, but find out what happens to them when they grow up – rehabilitation is difficult and costly, and some may end up in canned hunts. According to the NSPCA, allowing people to handle wild animals sends the 'incorrect message that they exist for our entertainment. We urge the public to consider the long-term implications for the animal. . . . Predators are naturally dangerous, and hand-reared animals lose their fear of humans. It is astonishing that people are surprised when tourists are attacked.'



**From top** Caracals, along with African wild cats, servals and black-footed cats, are among the most elusive of the felines; volunteers help tag and monitor cheetahs in Namibia, which is leading the way in conservation



## Ire of the tiger

Recently, there've been some big-cat attacks. A cheetah attacked a tourist, and **John Varty** was seriously injured by one of his tigers. He remains undeterred. This is his story...

If you're a visitor to Africa there are certain places which are prime areas to view big cats – for example, you'll find leopards at Londolozi, cheetahs in the Masai Mara in Kenya. There are big prides of lions in the Serengeti, as well as the Kalahari, and again at Londolozi, Singita and the Kruger Park, although that's more limited because you can't go off the road.

In terms of Tiger Canyons and tigers, this is an experiment. It's not a Big Five reserve. We started this project because the wild tiger is declining. When I started it in 2000, there were reputed to be 5,000 tigers in the wild. Today that number is close to 1,000 and still rapidly declining. This is due to the massive number of people encroaching on their space. A tiger in India competes with 320 people per square kilometre. The problem also lies with apathetic governments, corruption and poaching.

What we're doing is an ex-situ conservation project. We're trying to save the tiger away from where it's at threat. We have people visiting Tiger Canyons simply because they can't get decent pictures of tigers in the wild.

My situation was a freak accident. This tiger was brought up in the wild and had lost his territory due to a flood, so I had to put him in

“OUR AIM IS TO CREATE WILD POPULATIONS OF TIGERS, SO PEOPLE CAN COME TO VIEW THEM HERE, JUST LIKE THEY DO LIONS OR LEOPARDS

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a temporary boma, out of his natural territory. As I closed the gate to the boma, I saw a tiger up on a rock about 120 metres away from me. I thought it was him. In fact, the male was lying only about 10 or 20 metres away. As I turned my back he put his paw through the gate and pulled me back.

In the case of the cheetah attack [in Kragga Kamma Game Park in the Eastern Cape], the people made a fundamental mistake – they took children into the enclosure. It's a big cat's instinct to attack anything smaller and weaker than it.

I'm not a fan of captive animals and petting parks; it's against our principles. I don't believe in incarcerating animals for people to look at. Our aim is to create wild populations of tigers, so that people can come to view them here, just like they do a lion or a leopard. This can create tourism, and the jobs that come with tourism. That's how we can save the tiger. ■

*Tiger Canyons is in the Free State and is open for visits. [jvbigcats.co.za](http://jvbigcats.co.za)*

## WAY TO GO

### VOLUNTEERING

- Biosphere Expeditions offers 14-day working holidays in the Khomas Hochland of central Namibia; participants set up cameras and cage traps to catch leopards, caracals and cheetahs, track collared animals and collect data. Leopards are the main focus and their interactions with prey and other predators are carefully documented. Plus there's a chance you'll encounter black-footed or African wild cats. It costs £1,690/about R22,300; expeditions run from July to October. [biosphere-expeditions.org](http://biosphere-expeditions.org)

- Wildlife ACT gets you behind the scenes in four reserves in KwaZulu-Natal. Supported by the WWF and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, volunteers help survey lion and cheetah populations by collaring, following individuals and collecting data. 'We work in very small teams of four, and are the only volunteer opportunity in provincial parks. You're contributing to key conservation work,' says Wildlife ACT's Dr Simon Morgan. It costs R10,750 for two weeks, and R8,400 for every subsequent two-week period. [wildlifeact.com](http://wildlifeact.com)

### TAKE OFF

British Airways flies to Johannesburg from London. From Jo'burg it has flights to Windhoek, Namibia, and Livingstone, Zambia, as well as within South Africa to Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth. [Visit ba.com](http://Visitba.com).

