

# The one that got away

Elliott wanted to experience the 'real' Masai Mara, not the glossy brochure image. But he was about to get more than he bargained for.



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**BOUNCING AROUND** in the back of a Land Cruiser, daylight clearly visible between my backside and the seat with each bump, I was feeling very pleased with myself – the Masai Mara was living up to all expectations. That morning, I'd already seen the quintessential sunrise, gazed around at the jaw-dropping expanse of savannah and captured hundreds of images of a male cheetah coalition as they walked and scent-marked. But as I reflected on these wonderful sightings, I wondered where the real drama was.

Big cats are certainly beautiful, and the spectacle of savannah herds migrating north is a vision I will never forget. But where was the grit, I thought? Where was the excitement? Somewhere beneath the glossy

Photos by Elliott Neep

The lick of life: mother and fawn moments after birth.



Protective mother: the Thomson's gazelle would do anything to save her newborn fawn from the black-backed jackal.



brochure exterior of gorgeous animals and blue skies, a battle was being waged between predator and prey, but I wasn't seeing it.

The jeep stopped abruptly, and I was jolted from my contemplation. Through the window, a Tommy (Thomson's gazelle) was giving birth. Tenderly, she licked her newborn into life. I recalled a documentary about how small savannah predators prey on the youngest and most vulnerable creatures in the environment, but I quickly dismissed it. I didn't want to ruin the beauty of the moment with such a dark thought.

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We moved on. After about 100 metres, we came across three jackal cubs playing around their den, while their parents trotted off into the distance. I grabbed my camera and fired off some shots. Suddenly, the jeep revved back into life and we fizzed off back to the Tommy, just in time to see the newborn dangling from the jaws of a jackal. From its den, the canine had homed in on the scent of blood.

The fawn was flinching and kicking as the jackal looked around warily. I was in shock. Another person in the vehicle with me muttered repeatedly, "Oh my God! I can't believe it!" It seemed so cruel that this fawn had known nothing of life and now was going to die to feed those higher in the food-chain.

As the jackal scanned the horizon, it was caught unawares by the mother gazelle bearing down at full speed. At the last minute, it heard her footfalls and glanced round, just as she smashed into it. The jackal crumpled and released the fawn at once, then tried to sprint away, but the Tommy was all over it,

ramming and butting with her small horns. Breathing hard, she slowed to watch her fawn race away... straight into the jaws of a second jackal. We were now watching one of life's cruellest games: tag team. The dazed, confused youngster ran so close to the jackal that it barely needed to move – all the predator had to do was snap its jaws around the fawn's throat.

**IN THAT INSTANT** the mother charged the second jackal, which couldn't flee fast enough with a fawn hanging from its mouth. As the Tommy closed in, the jackal dropped the youngster and ran off, the mother in hot pursuit. Then the tables turned. The first jackal, sensing the Tommy's growing exhaustion, began to hunt her down while its partner chased her baby. But she never conceded defeat. As soon as she had outrun her pursuer, she charged back to rescue her fawn.

It was hard to believe this youngster could survive. It had been throttled four times before the jackal pair finally gave up the chase. It was a bitter defeat for the dogs, who had invested so much energy in the hunt. I glanced back and forth between the panting jackals and the fawn galloping away to the safety of the herd. Together, the jackals trotted back to their den to rest and wait for the next birth.

Exhausted, I slumped back onto my seat. I would be much more careful what I wished for in future.

**Life is a trade-off on the savannah. A Tommy fawn may have to lose its life to feed a family of hungry jackal pups.**

