

Xpl 15 – The cat with nine lives?

It was early in 1999, as the Kunene Lion Project got off the ground, and we were still feeling our way through the basalt rocks and heat of the Kunene Region that we first came across the unusual social habits of the Kunene lions. We followed tracks and signs of a large group of lion cubs that moved considerable distances, without the guidance or protection of adults. There were approximately ten cubs, and from the size of their spoor, they were no older than a year. These were unusual observations. Generally, lionesses give birth to small litters of 2 – 3 cubs, although they do occasionally synchronise their oestrus cycles and produce litters about the same time. But lion cubs, of that age, are mostly in the company of adults. Textbooks and the scientific literature suggest that one-year-old lions are dependant on the adult lionesses of their pride, and could not survive on their own. With tracks and scant signs in the vast desert, as our only evidence, we were weary to conclude too much.

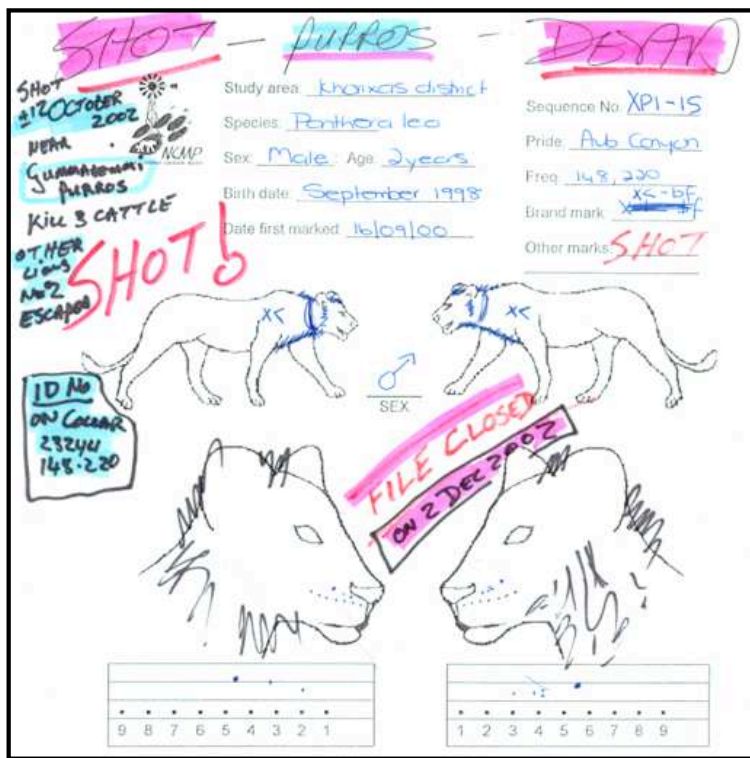
In the early morning hours of a pitch-black night in October 1999, our speculations of this mysterious coalition of lion cubs were confirmed when they paid us a personal visit. For months we had been setting bait and calling stations at night, with the hopes of attracting them, or any other unmarked lions. Our theories and expectations of the “cub-coalition”, however, left us unprepared for the sight that met us that night. The red-filtered spotlight illuminated a scene of chaos and aggression, as the cubs descended on our bait-station with confidence and determination. They ripped into the meat and fought brutally for a share of the free meal. There were lions everywhere, and their vicious growls and snarls were intimidating. We counted ten lions and estimated their ages between 12 and 14 months. The cubs behaved like adults, they were confident, aggressive, and fearless.

We darted two individuals that night. An assessment of dental structures confirmed our estimates of their age, and calculations suggested that they were born in September 1998. Both lions were marked with a unique brand mark, and fitted with a radio-collar. Our introduction to the “cub-coalition” that night, marked the beginning of a long-term quest to study and understand the socio-ecology of the Kunene lions. During the next few weeks, as we followed the “cub-coalition”, it became clear that they were not dependent on their mothers, nor on other adult lions. They moved far and wide, and hunted successfully as a group. In July 2000 (20 months old) the coalition separated and formed two independent groups. We decided to fit more radio-collars and to intensify monitoring of the two groups.



On 16 September 2000 we darted a 2-year old male. We named him XPL-15. He was brand marked and fitted with a new radio-collar. XPL-15 became one of our key study animals, as we monitored the movements of the sub-group. In July 2001, less than age of 3 old, XPL-15 and his siblings dispersed and settled in the Hoaruseb River, some 130 km to the north. We tracked XPL-15 often and kept detailed records of their demography. Our last visual observation of XPL-15 was in August 2002.

Sadly, in October 2002, we learnt that XPL-15 had been shot. Reports suggested that he and his group had moved onto land occupied by livestock farmers, and had killed donkeys and cattle. The livestock farmers retaliated and, in protection of their livelihood, shot one of the lions. The report came from a reliable source and it included reference to a unique ID number inscribed on the radio-collar of XPL-15.



For several months after this incident we continued searching for XPL-15, but to no avail. We tracked and observed the remaining lions of that sub-group, but XPL-15 had disappeared. Finally, by December 2002, we updated our records: XPL-15 (aged 4 years) was assumed dead, his personal file was closed, and life continued.

A long-term study, like the Kunene Lion Project, requires regular and routine maintenance. For example, the batteries of a radio-transmitter last 2.5 years, and radio-collars must be replaced routinely to continue monitoring of marked lions. On 9 December 2004, a male lion was earmarked for regular maintenance work. The lion's radio-collar was nearing its' expiry date, and we planned to replace it during a standard darting operation. That night, as we slowly approached this lion in the failing light, we noticed a second lion nearby. The unknown lion was skittish and weary. However, a careful and painstakingly slow approach, under the cover of the night, paid off, and two well-directed darts were met by two sharp and angry growls.

We waited silently in the pitch darkness for 20 minutes to allow the drugs to take full effect. A brief inspection revealed that both lions were down. The vehicle headlights were turned

on and we drove up for a closer inspection. The lion we were after, was fast asleep and awaiting his new collar. We turned our attention to the unknown male, admiring his beautiful black mane. Then we noticed the mark on his shoulder. It was a unique mark, used only for the Kunene lions, but we had no record of a big adult male lion with such an individual mark. There was pandemonium as we reasoned, searched, and eventually realised that the lion at our feet was XPL-15.



The mark on his shoulder is unmistakable and unique, but we were confused, initially, because XPL-15 “died”, more than 2 years ago, and his personal file had been closed. The scrawny cub, we first marked in September 2000, had grown into a magnificent male lion. He was in excellent physical condition, six years old, and clearly in the prime of his life. Two years after his reported death, and subsequent absence, XPL-15 made a dramatic reappearance. The observation gives rise to many intriguing questions:

- 1) Were the reports of a dead lion, shot by local livestock farmers, false?
- 2) If these reports were false, how did the local people obtain the ID number inscribed on the radio-collar of XPL-15?
- 3) Why did XPL-15 disappear after the reported incident?
- 4) Where did XPL-15 go and where did he live, undetected by local people and this study, for more than two years?

We may never have answers to any of these questions, and the remarkable incident may be explained only by the myth that cats, including lions, have seven lives.

Notwithstanding, the net result is of ecological and evolutionary significance, simply because XPL-15 survived to adulthood. As a healthy male lion, in the prime of his life, XPL-15 is perfectly poised to spread his successful desert-adapted genes.

Dr P Stander
10 January 2005

