

By the time Moto was five weeks old, Suzi was feeding her 'baby' every few hours. He would scratch her impatiently if she didn't give him the bottle quickly enough.



On the prowl: at two and a half weeks, Moto began to explore the camp, closely supervised by Suzi.

MOTO

and me

He was traumatised by the loss of his mother, so photographer **SUZI ESZTERHAS** adopted him. But could she be a good parent to an orphaned serval?

Interview by **JAMES FAIR**

THE EXPERT



SUZI ESZTERHAS is an award-winning wildlife photographer. She will never forget Moto – the kitten who changed her life.

I NEARLY KILLED Moto twice. I was feeding him milk with a baby's bottle, and though I had found a teat with the smallest possible hole, it was still too big for a baby serval. Once he choked so badly that, in a panic, I rang a vet working nearby who I knew had raised kittens. "He's dying, he's dying," I screamed down the phone. Little Moto's tongue had turned blue and gone stiff, and I knew I was losing him.

He was about two months old at that point, and became so excited when you put the teat in his mouth that he couldn't drink the milk fast enough. Unfortunately,

there's no way of telling a serval kitten, "Now, honey, don't drink so fast," so there he was, choking and dying.

The vet told me to turn him upside down and shake him, but it didn't work. Finally, she said: "Hit him as hard as you can. Don't worry about breaking his ribs – he's going to die, just hit him." So I did. Thankfully, the milk came flying out of his mouth and he started to breathe again.

I had come to Kenya two years earlier, in 2004, to photograph a family of cheetahs. I didn't have any commissions: I simply quit my day job, moved out of my rented



At three months old, Moto was far more adventurous. He loved to climb logs, trees and termite mounds.



Three weeks old

“Baby Moto adored the mixture of cow’s milk, egg and fish oil I fed him. But I had to be careful of his needle-sharp claws!”



Five weeks old

“Moto stalked and strangled this duck daily – a substitute for the rough play he would have enjoyed with a sibling.”



Six weeks old

“I used a toothbrush to groom him – the sensation was similar to that of his mother’s rough tongue.”

apartment in the US and raided my savings. Looking back, it was quite a reckless thing to do. And it was almost a total disaster.

I had planned to work in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, but by the time I showed up, the cheetah cubs had disappeared. With the help of some researchers, I found another suitable cheetah family in the Masai Mara – but then the guide I’d booked didn’t turn up to meet me at the airstrip.

At first, the pilot wasn’t even going to let me off the plane – we were in the middle of nowhere. I couldn’t afford to stay at the nearest tourist lodge but eventually found my way to the ranger station and they let me camp. I rented a 4x4 and before long had managed to locate the cheetahs I was going to photograph.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

I had been in the Mara for over a year and had moved on to photographing hyenas when the rangers asked if I could look after

“I spent every day in the field on my own, so I was really excited about having a little buddy to take care of.”

a baby cheetah. I wasn’t sure I had the resources to raise a big cat, but it turned out that it was a serval kitten, which made the decision easier.

Though I’d made friends at the lodge, I spent every day in the field on my own, so I was really excited about having a little buddy to take care of.

DID YOU KNOW?

Relative to body size, the serval has the longest legs of any cat – an adaptation for hunting in grass. It uses its forelegs to pull baby birds and rodents out of tree holes and burrows.

The poor kitten was so traumatised. He had been handed to the rangers by tourists, who found him crossing a road near a controlled burn (the name I gave him, Moto, means ‘fire’). I suppose his mother had been moving

him to a safer location but dropped him when the vehicle turned up. (The people who ‘rescued’ him, though well meaning, would have done better to see if his mum came back for him first.)

I spent the first few hours picking fleas off Moto. But what should I feed him? A friend knew an elderly lady in Nairobi, who had raised orphan civets, and found out what she gave them – cow’s milk, egg and a bit of fish oil. So I borrowed a baby’s bottle from the lodge and luckily he took to it straightaway.

Moto clearly wasn’t eating enough, though. He was too skinny and looked listless. The woman in Nairobi said that I had to make him think I was his mother so that he would bond with me. But I couldn’t



Moto went everywhere with Suzi in a special kangaroo pouch, and would doze in it for hours at a time.

just abandon my hyena photography project and hang out with him for the next week. Then I had an idea: I asked a tailor at the lodge to sew a ‘kangaroo pouch’ into some of my t-shirts so that Moto could come with me.

I kept him safe in the pouch all of the time – even when I went to the bar at the lodge to have a drink. People would come over and ask if they could see him. “He’s sooo cute,” they’d coo as I unbuttoned the pouch. But he always hissed at strangers, despite being so affectionate towards me.

HUNTING LESSONS

My next task was to wean Moto. I started him off on chopped chicken breast, but also spread the word among the rangers that I would pay them a few shillings for any dead rats that they could provide (a serval’s natural diet). Six weeks later, the first rodent was delivered. Moto immediately went berserk. Hissing fiercely, he raced into my tent and was extremely aggressive if I went anywhere near him.

Moto was clearly ready for his next lesson, so I asked if anyone at the lodge could bring me maimed rats. It sounds unpleasant, but that’s what his mum would have given him to practise on. The only rule was that no one could use poison.

The day Moto received his first live rat, it was brutal. He was completely incompetent at killing, so the torment went on and on.

FAMOUS FOSTER PARENTS

Moto’s story is far from unique – here are four other heart-warming tales.



JOY & GEORGE ADAMSON’S LIONESS
Elsa was raised by the Adamsons in Kenya in the 1950s after George was forced to shoot her mother. She was eventually returned to the wild.



SIMON KING’S CHEETAHS
Film-maker Simon King helped to rear cheetah cubs Toki and Sambu in Kenya after their mother was killed by a lion. Both were later set free.



CHARLIE RUSSELL’S BROWN BEARS
In the late 1990s, Russell released three bear cub orphans into the wild in Kamchatka, Russia. He returned to study their interaction with humans.



GAVIN MAXWELL’S OTTER
In Ring of Bright Water, Maxwell describes looking after a smooth-coated otter, Mijbil, in the Scottish Highlands. He had brought the kit back from Iraq.

All photos: susiezerhas.com

Joy: Elsa Conservation; First Simon: Marguerite Smits van Oyen; Charlie: Jeff Turner/River Road Films Ltd; Gavin: Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images



Moto quickly gained confidence around the camp – he was soon trying to catch rodents, lizards and birds.



Thirteen weeks

“Moto’s natural instincts soon took over – here he is tossing a mouse into the air, just like a wild serval.”



Six months old

“On our last game drive together, Moto was transfixed by the zebras. I always remember him like this.”

I felt awful for the rat, but knew it was what would have happened in the wild. I’ve seen enough feline mothers – lions, leopards and cheetahs – bring back live gazelle fawns for their offspring. If Moto was going to survive in the wild, he had to be able to kill rats on his own, and this was the only way he would learn. (I also gave him chickens, because servals sometimes hunt ground-living birds such as guineafowl.)

Until my Moti was about three months old, he was either in his pouch, with me in the jeep – he loved going on game drives – or in the tent. But, eventually, I started taking him on supervised walks around the camp. To begin with he was frightened of everything, but gradually he became more confident and

would wander off. It was so hard to let him go, though he was getting wilder every day and by now I was covered in scratch marks – he must have been feeling his oats.

I realised that I could no longer confine him to the tent at night (when he was most active) and left the zip open so that he could come and go as he pleased. Once a night, he’d return, rub up against me, purring, and be his old sweet self. Then he’d leave. I assumed he was catching food for himself – everything from rats to smaller prey such as lizards and locusts.

NO TIME FOR GOODBYES

One night, Moto went out and simply never came back. I had often imagined releasing him and I expected that not knowing where he’d gone would be hard. But it was so much worse when he just vanished on his own.

For the first few days, I was an absolute wreck. Moto was my baby and I was terrified that he had been attacked by a leopard or

hyena. I felt that I had failed; that I hadn’t taught him everything he needed to know or that I should have kept him for longer.

About a week later, I was driving on a track close to the lodge when a serval walked right up to my Jeep and lay down next to one of the tyres, staring up at me. It *had* to be Moto. I called out, “Moti, Moti,” but the cat did not respond or indicate that it recognised me, so I couldn’t be sure.

Just a few days after this chance meeting,



Suzi often wonders what happened to Moto (this is a wild adult female). Hopefully he found a mate and gave his own offspring the wild start in life he never had.

“The day Moto received his first live rat, it was brutal. He was incompetent at killing – it went on and on.”

a ranger for the conservancy also encountered a young serval that he was convinced was Moto.

On balance, I believe that Moto had become the wild serval I always wanted him to be. I don’t know why he made that sudden dramatic separation – he could have been chased away by a dominant male in the area, or maybe he’d caught the scent of a female in heat and followed her. Either way, he had definitely reached sexual maturity and was ready to strike out on his own.

LIFE LESSONS

Moto taught me a few lessons in parenting, especially when I started letting him come and go as he pleased. I worried about all the dangers he would face in the hazardous world of the Masai Mara. But in the end, I decided that I had done my job as best I could and would just have to hope that he would be okay.

I have witnessed many baby animals die

in my career as a wildlife photographer; for example, there was one cheetah litter in which all five cubs died over 19 days – it was devastating to watch. I’m not embarrassed to admit that I have cried many times. But looking after Moto gave me a much deeper understanding of how vulnerable these animals are.

When you see a family of young cheetah cubs with their mother, you naturally hope that they will all make it, but you can’t fully appreciate how much of a struggle it is until you try to raise a wild kitten yourself.

Then you think about how humans are lowering their chances even further. A little serval kitten born in the Mara has enough problems to face already, without humans making the situation worse. It’s a miracle that any survive at all.

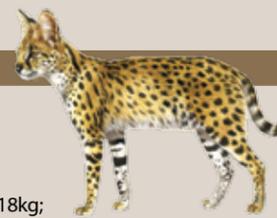
DID YOU KNOW?

During a study in Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania, servals were seen making 2,000 pounces on prey. The success rate was 49 per cent – exceptionally high for a wild cat.



Wildlife FACTSHEET

SERVAL
Leptailurus serval



THE BASICS

» **LENGTH** Head and body: 67–100cm; tail: 24–35cm.

» **WEIGHT** Male: 10–18kg; female: 6–13kg.

» **APPEARANCE** A rangy, medium-sized cat with extremely long legs, large ears and a tawny coat with variable black spots. In some individuals the spots merge to form stripes on the neck and back; fine-freckled variants also occur, for example in East Africa.

» **DIET** Mostly rodents such as swamp (vlei) rats; also birds, reptiles and amphibians. Occasionally wades into water to hunt flamingos and fish.

» **LIFE-CYCLE** Largely solitary: male and female associate for just a few days to mate. Female gives birth to up to four kittens after a gestation of 67–77 days, and raises them on her own. Male offspring are driven away when they can hunt, usually about one year old; females leave when sexually mature, about a year later.

» **HABITAT** Favours marshes and reedbeds, and to a lesser extent grassland; also frequents woodland edge. Absent from desert and forest.

» **LIFESPAN** Up to 20 years.

» **STATUS** Widespread and abundant, adapting well to farmland due to the increased rodent numbers. IUCN ranking: Least Concern; protected under Appendix II of CITES.

WHERE IN THE WORLD

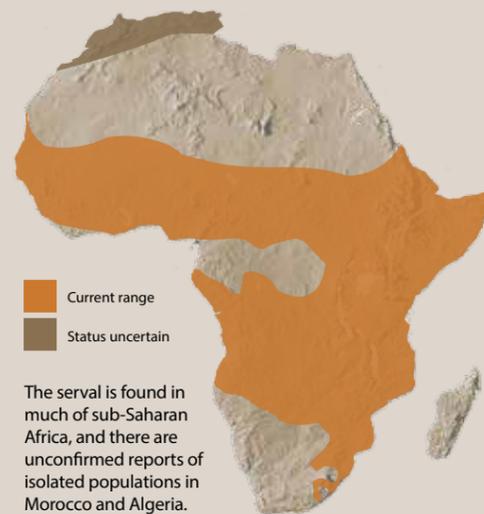


Illustration by Priscilla Barrett, taken from Traveller's Wildlife Guide: Southern Africa, Aris Publishing Ltd