

Life in the Pride:

October 2010



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October 2010 NEWSLETTER

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ALERT Chief Operating Officer David Youldon...



This was the moment on Wednesday 1st September that Zimbabwean Minister for the Environment & Natural Resources, the Honourable Francis Nhema opened the gate to let the lions out into the Ngamo Release Site.

It has taken us a while to get this point due to lack of funding, but in front of invited dignitaries including the Director General of the Zimbabwean Parks & Wildlife Management Authority, Antelope Park volunteers and staff, the seven females were released into the next stage of the African Lion Rehabilitation & Release into the Wild Program.

It was an emotional moment for those that have worked so hard to create a perfect environment for the lions to prove that they can form a socially stable and self-sustaining pride. And with the later release of the male; Milo, to also prove that they can breed and naturally raise the next generation of lions that will one day be free to roam the African continent, to help save the species.

To spend each day tracking the pride and gain an insight into their social dynamic, to watch them hunt, to play, to simply enjoy their freedom is a pleasure and a privilege I will hold dearly forever. I hope that you will achieve a sense of that experience through reading this diary of the pride's continuing journey after release; to gain an insight into what it's like to live a life in the pride. Thank you to all of you who have believed in this program and helped us achieve this next vital step on our path together.

For the lions...

David Youldon
ALERT Chief Operating Officer





At the end of the first week

post-release the seven girls were all fit and flourishing having made a number of wildebeest kills. On the morning of the 7th September, the team found the pride on their latest wildebeest kill in the Tree Tops area of the site, but by this point only Nala and Narnia were still eating while the others were lounging around.

Kwali made several attempts to approach the kill but was rebuffed on each occasion either by the N girls or by Ashanti who was between Kwali and the kill.

The remainder of the day was spent near Leopard Tree sleeping it all off or grooming. As the day turned to evening the pride started to grow restless. On several occasions Narnia and also Kenge would walk off up the road only to return when no other lion followed.

All of the lions looked like they were ready to leave, but one member was still asleep; Phyre. Finally waking, she groomed herself for a while before getting up to greet Ashanti and the two of them rolled around for a while in play.

It was only when Phyre started to walk off that all the others got up and followed suit; as if they had been waiting for her to take the lead. Ashanti brought up the rear. With this evidence, plus the gathering evidence from our social interaction study that Phyre continues to be the lioness most others want to greet, are we seeing that Phyre has taken over the role of alpha female?

After all the gorging on wildebeest, the next few days were fairly quiet, with the pride spending a lot of time near waterhole one relaxing. It was around the 12th of September that Ashanti was noted to come in oestrus; but of course with Milo not released yet, it was a frustrating time for her.

The lions were in active and playful mood the following morning. After sunrise a failed hunt by Ashanti, Narnia, Kwali, Nala and Kenge was seen from a distance, evidenced by eight running zebra. The prey did not go far and stopped to look back once they had reached the relative safety of some shorter grass, some 50m from the edge of the long stuff.

Kwali led Nala and Kenge through the grass and at its edge Kwali made the charge. Kenge and Nala seemed surprised by this and immediately stopped where they were. Kwali's tail was seen heading over the hill in pursuit of the fleeing herd but she was back some 15 minutes later with nothing to show for her efforts. On her return she spent some time playing in the morning sun with her sister, Kenge.

The five regrouped and rejoined Athena and Phyre who were relaxing on an open vlei and surveying their territory. Before long the pride were sleeping in one big pile by an anthill.



Ashanti



Just as the female contingent of the pride were probably starting to think they had this whole being released malarkey sussed, the 14th September heralded a milestone; a male-shaped lion milestone.

But rewinding a few hours...at first light that day Ashanti, Nala and Narnia were found as they made their way along Grasslands towards waterhole one. However, refreshment wasn't required so urgently that a few minutes couldn't be spared to stalk and chase one another ending in a roll around in the grass.

Before long, playtime was over and Ashanti lifted her head, sending a deep resonant roar across the savannah. Moments later a reply came from about a kilometre away. Seemingly satisfied as to where the rest of the pride was she set off with the Ns in tow in their direction, stopping briefly at the waterhole on the way.

After plenty of greeting and more playing, during which Narnia decided to climb a tree whilst Ashanti watched, the pride settled in for just another lazy day; they had no idea that this day would be anything but.

Now the pride had decided to sleep, it turns out, not very far from Milo's holding enclosure and a bit of activity over in that direction quickly drew their attention.

As Milo was brought from the holding pen into the passageway the girls moved towards the release gate, and two in particular, Phyre and Kwali, decided to sit either side of the gate waiting. The rest waited, with no small amount of interest, in the tall grass about 15 metres away.

At 10.14 exactly Milo came through the release gate and straight into Phyre and Kwali's welcome committee.

From past experience, it was shown that Phyre is not the most submissive of characters, but the previous day, she had followed Ashanti's lead and had started to show signs of coming into heat, as well as Athena. And the last time Kwali tried to get up close and personal with Milo, he gave her a bit of a tough time.

So it was with a great relief that the first thing to happen was that Phyre started flirting whilst Kwali tried to greet the boss man. He took both interactions in his stride and simply strode off along the boundary, with the girls trotting along behind.

Ashanti was definitely the most hesitant; staring at Milo, but who can blame her? After all, for the past year or so he has simply been a hairdo behind a fence - albeit a rather impressive hairdo.



Athena



The girls were fascinated, and formed a train of lions trotting along behind Milo as he explored the site to take everything in.

Phyre and Athena kept going up and wiggling their rear ends at him, tails flicking in his face. The others trailed along behind trying to get a look in, maybe to gain his master's attention. There were a couple of small growls in the long grass, possibly someone was coming on a bit too strong for a first date.

Either way, before too long Milo had obviously had enough of the attention. Trying to shake his admirers he began making his way from the Amboseli area towards Serengeti East, covering over a kilometre at a fairly impressive pace.

But when he stopped to sniff something he soon realised - he was definitely not alone...

Unfazed Milo headed off in a different direction, but still not taking the hint the females continued to follow.

Another kilometre and by this point he must have been getting thirsty.

Having looked around for a moment Milo headed directly, with no deviation, to a waterhole - almost like he had been there before. And that's when the girls caught up with him again. Athena and Phyre continued to flirt whilst the rest walked around as if nothing new had happened today at all.

Milo went and rolled around under the girls' favourite tree before continuing his exploration. While his seven shadows slept, Milo covered another two kilometres before lunch before finding a quiet spot to settle in and survey his new kingdom.

That afternoon the new pride member was still blissfully alone, and seemed content enough for the time being.

The girls were also resting, but Phyre's slumber was interrupted by the not inconsiderable weight of Athena who had woken up and come to say hi. It would appear though that this action had the desired effect as both got up and marched off with a degree of purpose in the direction of some roaring.





Kenge



As the pair approached their target he rose to meet them, but what kind of reaction were they going to get?

It turns out that our girls, Phyre and Athena, were quite definitely on heat. They flirted for all they were worth before rolling around in front of Milo trying to look alluring.

Milo simply stepped to the side and urinated on his own feet. Then he found a bail of cut grass which seemed less intimidating than two over eager females and made friends with that.

But still, there were two pairs of eyes watching his every move...

Early on the morning of the 18th the different herds of zebra were located, but the combined total of which indicated that one was missing! However, technical problems with telemetry meant that finding the lions who were the presumed source of the absentee zebra was challenging.

The first breakthrough was Milo who was in the same location as the previous evening, flanked either side by Athena and Phyre. But there was no sign, or signal still, for the other five females, although two important observations were made from Athena.

The first thing was that she had been sporting a bad limp for the previous few days, most likely caused by a pulled muscle during a hunt. The continual following of Milo around the site had done nothing to improve its condition.

But under her chin was the tell-tale red smudge; blood. Her stomach also looked slightly distended. But not Milo's, and Phyre was partly obscured from sight.

The logical conclusion was that somewhere in the site there was a dead zebra, which these girls had fed from (they usually get to eat first) but had left to rejoin Milo, who at this point was seemingly completely unaware of the available meal. And most likely that the kill was made after sunset rather than before dawn so the girls had time to feed, lie around a bit and then return to Milo. All these assumptions however were frustrating rather than helpful, given that the telemetry was taking the morning off.

Patience however is a virtue, and after some wait, Phyre got up and started walking off, shortly followed by Athena.

Their route diverted away from the waterhole and straight into the middle of a herd of impala; which Phyre (despite having clearly eaten) attempted to stalk, but the hunt was ruined by a limping Athena who ambled into plain view.

Their march continued towards the Grasslands area of the site, an extremely open area of grass just over the height of the lions, but has been popular with zebra for the last week.

If they had indeed made a kill here it must have been one of their most difficult yet. Drawing closer, a head appeared above the grass.

And then one by one they came out to greet the arriving Phyre who had left the injured Athena trailing behind. All of them except Nala that is, who was rather preoccupied.



As Phyre stepped in to nibble on the remains all of the others headed off in the direction of the closest waterhole.

The rest of the girls had a drink, teamed up with Athena and started a very heavy snooze. Based on stomach sizes it is likely that Kenge with Nala and Narnia were present at the time of the kill, ate a fair portion of it and then all the other girls arrived at various points. Phyre rejoined them a little while later and they all went to sleep. Milo arrived some time later. Maybe he will notice the next time his pride makes a kill.





After the peak of activity surrounding the kill the pride fell into a trough of great in-activity for the next few days mostly lounging around the lower end of Southern Cross; only rallying their strength again on the 21st. The first sign that their stomachs weren't weighing them down as much anymore was early in the morning when the pride headed towards Amboseli for a roll around in the grass as the sun rose. All of the pride that was except Athena, who was struggling quite severely by this point with the limp to her front right leg. However, some 30 minutes later she did emerge over the brow of the hill by waterhole one a few hundred metres away from where the others were playing. Content to know the others were still close by she stopped and found a tree to rest under.

For the remainder of the day very little of Athena was seen; her signal was still being picked up in the same area, but she'd clearly found some deep cover to hide from the midday sun. The rest of the pride had returned to Southern Cross.

By late afternoon, Athena finally emerged from her resting place and was found at waterhole one. After drinking for a few minutes she limped a few metres and began to moan softly, apparently unable to go any further. But a few minutes later, Narnia, Nala and Kenge responded and could be seen in the distance making their way up Southern Cross as Athena gamely hobbled another 15 metres or so. But as she did so, a herd of impala also began making their way down from the other side of the vlei. She paid them no mind, and lay next to an anthill waiting for the others. After a quick greet, Narnia and Kenge carried on to waterhole one for a quick drink – but Nala stopped in her tracks on spotting the herd about 50 metres away. But in such an open area there was no chance; she'd most definitely been spotted.

Next to appear was Kwali who sat between Nala and Athena; also with an eye on the impala. But they were safe – with enough distance between the two parties, the impala continued on their way. At the same time, Phyre was on her way to join the Athena party; she spotted the impala – but this time, they had not spotted her and she inched closer in a low stalk. At 20 metres out, the warning snort went out and the impala dashed back the way they had come. Kwali was instantly on her feet as Phyre relentlessly chased the herd back up Southern Cross before they dived past her and headed back down. As Phyre ran out of steam, Kwali was on-hand to take up the baton and flew after the herd. She was too far behind to pose a serious challenge though.

The commotion had brought first Ashanti and then Milo to the group, and despite being spread out over some 60 metres as each picked a resting spot the pride now formed a ring. As the sun came down on another day for the pride, Athena began to roar from her anthill and was quickly accompanied by the N sisters of Nala and Narnia, Kenge and Ashanti were soon on their feet adding their weight to the chorus, before Milo stood to take his position centre stage and bellowed his 10 cents worth for all the world to hear.



Milo



The following day began where the pride left off the other night on Southern Cross, and there was little action for the majority of the day; the odd greeting and a move to a nearby area of shade, but other than that there was too much sleeping to be done. Although when Athena did move, all of about five metres, her limp did seem slightly improved on previous days.

As usual, it was towards the late afternoon when things started to happen. The first area of interest was Nala and Narnia. The group were still resting all together; with Milo perhaps 30 metres away. As the temperature began to cool, Nala got up and moved midway between him and the rest of the females.

Fixing her with a stare, Milo stood and approached. With an equally intent stare, Nala watched him and repositioned herself into a stationary stalk position and when he was a few metres away leapt up and smacked him once round the head before dashing a few metres away to safety. Narnia then rose from the remaining pile of lionesses and approached Milo; head lowered it looked as though she was coming in for a greeting, but instead began sniffing Milo's mane for several moments as he held his head in a rather regal manner. He didn't look regal for long as Narnia followed her sister's lead, smacked him round the head and flew to Nala's side and the pair watched him from a safe distance. Curiously, Milo didn't seem to mind either of them taking such liberties.

Gradually the rest of the pride started to rouse themselves and before long Phyre initiated what must have been the longest grooming session between herself and Athena known to lion-kind. If there was a speck of dirt left anywhere on either of their faces it would have been a miracle. One by one the other females began to congregate around the grooming pair; either joining in or starting their own social session with another.

Ashanti was the first to have enough though and lead a move towards waterhole one; everyone, even Milo, followed although despite the early positive signs Athena had to stop after about 50 metres and rest her foot.

As they drank, a number of the pride became aware of a herd of impalas' presence a little way off on the other side of the pan. With amazing stealth, they slipped into the tall grass, fanning out in a sweeping formation as they did so.

Disappearing in the tall grass, the odd flick of a tail gave a lion's position away, but the impala remained oblivious. That was until Milo came down to see what his ladies were up to and bumbled out into the open in full view of the impala – which wisely took a hike. Whether a lion can look confused is a matter for debate, but he genuinely seemed perplexed as the girls all stood and walked back to the waterhole.

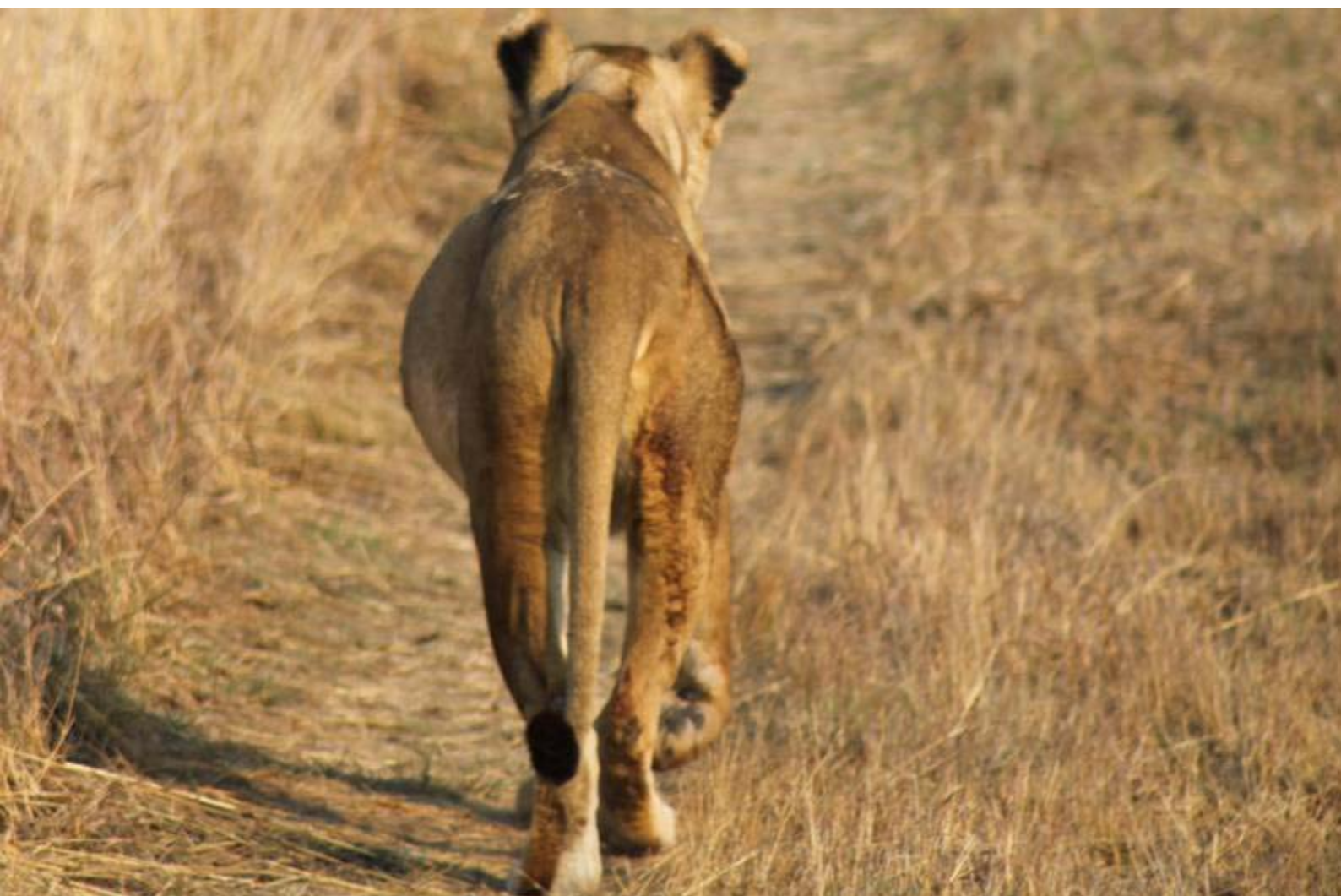


Nala

Milo remained on Southern Cross the following morning; and shortly after – the telemetry died. The girls didn't appear to be in the same area, nor were they at either waterhole. Without signals for them it was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. But sometimes a little perseverance pays off, and at the other end of High Street North were Ashanti and Nala waddling along the boundary, before collapsing in a heap in a bush. The blood streaks on the face and the size of the bellies – especially Nala's – said it all; they'd made another kill. But the other five were nowhere to be seen, and despite an attempt to track the girls' spoor back the way they had just arrived from there was no sign of the others.

With once more functioning equipment at mid-morning, the rest of the girls were located; on the scene of a zebra kill in the Hwange area of the site, some couple of hundred metres further along from where Nala and Ashanti (who were now back at the kill) had been seen earlier that morning. All looked ready to explode, although Kwali gamely tried to chase some pied crows off the remains of the carcass, but it seemed like quite an effort.

One face was definitely missing from the family meal though; Milo, who remained on the opposite side of the site, and from the size of his stomach it was clear that he had not followed the girls again. Another missed meal.



Quiet once again returned to the site for the next few days as the females spent their time between the kill site and waterhole two. The Ns disappeared for the best part of a day, but a reasonable signal for them put them close by the other females between the two water pans; they'd just found a very well concealed spot to sleep off the latest hunting success – and given that they are usually two of the fattest after most kills it was probably their own handiwork, so why not take a well-earned sleep?

The zebra population within the site had been categorised previously into two very distinct herds; but on the morning of the 26th both were close by one another, and more importantly two were missing from the current total count. While they could have been out of sight or perhaps lying in the tall grass, recounting the herd again and again, there were definitely two missing; the plot was thickening.

A feint signal was received for all eight lions at the top of the rise near waterhole one; the most likely location was their current favourite spot at the other end of Southern Cross.



Narnia



Sprawled across the road were six enormous stomachs attached to lions; there had definitely been another kill. Beyond Milo was a relatively intact zebra carcass – the stomach had been opened but beyond that it had barely been touched.

But Athena and Phyre weren't in view, although their signal suggested they weren't too far away. The second kill site was quickly located about 60 metres from the zebra in the road; which Milo had started to drag into a thicket. Athena and Phyre, faces bright red from blood were demolishing what was left of the "first" carcass.

Not surprisingly for the next few days no one strayed far until both zebras were completely finished.

Resting, the odd picking over of bones and an occasional wander up to one or other of the waterholes was pretty much the status quo for the next few days; the 29th however was to be a day to remember.

Six of the females had remained on Southern Cross; but there was no evidence that Milo or Ashanti were in the area. Towards Waterhole two, the signal for both missing lions grew increasingly stronger – what on earth could they be up to all by themselves..?



Initially, as it turned out, not much; Ashanti was having a drink and Milo was resting close by. But once she had finished drinking there was no mistaking she was back in oestrus and this time Milo was definitely interested.

For the next 30 hours or so, the pair distanced themselves from the rest of the pride and were observed mating on a number of occasions; sometimes as frequently as every 15 minutes. Even once they rejoined the other girls they continued their courtship, although Milo would not tolerate any of the others getting too close to Ashanti.

The six girls kept themselves occupied in the meantime with a kill on a juvenile zebra on Serengeti West; the lovers however were too preoccupied to notice and missed the meal.

Over the second day of Ashanti's oestrus, it seemed as though Athena and Phyre were also becoming increasingly amorous towards Milo, but he showed them no attention and remained focussed on Ashanti.



The 1st October found the pride scattered around Route 66. Ashanti appeared to be coming off heat and was desperately trying to get away from Milo and join the other girls, but he would shadow her wherever she went keeping between her and the others. Eventually, after 10 minutes of trying she did manage to catch up to the others who had by now moved to the other side of waterhole one.

Kwali and Nala had a fairly active morning as first the wildebeest came to graze at the other end of Masai Mara – both stalked out of the open area and into the tall grass on their left. Nala eventually gave her position away when she appeared from her cover, still some 80m or so away, in a rather lazy trot. Kwali walked out a few moments later and both made their way back to join the rest of the pride.

An hour or so later some zebra marched onto Masai Mara and began grazing. At first, they were perfectly safe as the lions slept but eagle-eyed Nala soon bolted upright and fixed two very keen eyes on the herd who were about 100 metres away. Rolling over, she moved into a stalk and went five metres directly to them, then five metres to the left, then... sat down. But the posture said it all; the herd was on dangerous ground. Nala's movement had woken everyone else from their slumber and while the others watched on Kwali got to her feet and began walking towards the zebra in plain sight.



What happened next looked like a well-rehearsed move; Kwali continued walking towards the zebra holding their attention, Nala then got to her feet and slinked off into the tall grass. Kwali covered another 20 metres before sitting down in full view of the zebra as Nala continued taking a wide arc through the tall grass. And Kwali waited, and waited. And almost half an hour later she was still waiting for Nala. Most likely, Nala had found a nice spot to rest in and by this point, Kwali looked a bit bored of it all.

As Ashanti came off heat, sister Athena finally got her chance with Milo and on the 2nd October the pair mated for the first time. Phyre was still desperate to get his attention but he continued to ignore her in favour of Athena – it seems that the A sisters are Milo's mates of choice.



Phyre



On the third of October, it was meal time again and the first lions sighted that day were Ashanti and Phyre, who were resting on Boundary Road near High Street North, and were shortly joined by Narnia

Kwali and Nala were slumped a little further away, but the others were all somewhere out of sight. Ashanti was the first to give the game away sporting blood on her neck. Phyre's stomach lent further weight to the idea that another kill had been made.

About 50 metres further down Milo and Athena were feeding on the remains of a wildebeest while Kenge and Narnia rested in the grass. There wasn't much left of the carcass but what there was Milo was jealously guarding.

Kwali greeted several members of the pride and led a move along High Street North towards Spaghetti Junction, one by one all the females followed – Milo however was too preoccupied with the former wildebeest.

Once at the junction, they cut across the tall grass and made their way to waterhole two, where after drinking they all flopped down in the shade for the morning. It wasn't until a few hours later when nothing of the wildebeest remained that Milo joined his ladies at the waterhole.

By late afternoon they were still in the same spot and still sleeping off last night's meal by the waterhole; although Milo and Athena did mate on several occasions.

After one particular mating and Milo had moved a couple of metres away from Athena, Phyre decided to try her luck again. Over the previous three days she had repeatedly run up to him, greeted him and tried to present herself; but on each occasion was either met by aggression or utter indifference. But this time, Milo at last accepted her invitation and mated with her, and continued to alternate between Athena and Phyre.

If Ashanti, Athena and Phyre have indeed conceived, and should their litters survive (these will be the first litters for all three), the cubs they give birth to will be the first lions which, when old enough, will be eligible for release into the wild having been raised by the pride rather than human hand. But there's still a long way to go as yet.

By the next morning, the entire pride had relocated back to Milo's favourite anthill on Southern Cross. There was very little to report over the course of the day; just a lot of relaxing and relocating to different patches of shade throughout the course of the day.

The next morning they were still in the same location, Milo was still giving Athena and Phyre some extra attention, but all seemed pretty calm.

It was however noted that both Kenge and Nala had blood on their coats. Their stomachs didn't look any fuller than the previous evening, and no one else looked to have been fed. A count of the wildebeest and zebra later that morning confirmed that all were present and accounted for. Perhaps the pair had picked off a young impala or one of the steenbok in the site.

In the first month since release, we have seen the female elements of the pride revive the hunting prowess that served them so well during their previous release in 2008.

The new female addition to the pride, Kwali, has settled in well, although there have been a few social issues involving her as she tries to find her place within the group. These will continue to be monitored over the coming weeks and months.

And of course there's Milo. After missing his first few meals courtesy of his pride, he's made up for lost time since. As one of the first lions to be born into the Rehabilitation & Release into the Wild program, it seems fitting that his offspring will be the first to head out into the wild.