

Samara welcomes birth of first lion cubs

Samara Private Game Reserve has welcomed the birth of its first litter of cubs. Born to the first wild lion and lioness to roam the Plains of Camdeboo near Graaff-Reinet in over 180 years, the cubs represent a victory for wild lion conservation. "We are ecstatic about this birth," says Sarah Tompkins, founder of Samara. "It's a sign that our move to rewild the landscape to create the conditions for new lion populations has been successful."



©Marnus Osche, general manager at Samara Private Game Reserve.

The birth of the lion cubs is significant for its contribution to wild lion conservation in a region from which lions had gone locally extinct. Lions have come under threat globally for a number of reasons, chiefly habitat loss, conflict with humans and the illegal trade in lion bones as substitutes for tiger bones in Eastern medicine.

Within South Africa, the canned lion trade, in which lions are bred and hunted in captivity, threatens the survival of the species in the wild. There are now estimated to be just 3,000 wild lions in the country.

"Lions are the sentinels of wildness in Africa, and the success of these apex predators in our protected areas is a key indicator of the effectiveness of conservation measures," comments Professor Graham Kerley, Director of the Centre for African Conservation Ecology at Nelson Mandela University.

The latest additions to Samara's lion population are thought to have been born in September, after a typical gestation period of 105-120 days.

For the first few weeks of their lives, lion cubs remain hidden in dense vegetation to avoid detection by potential predators. In choosing to give birth on one of the reserve's steep mountain slopes, their mother has given them the best chance of survival. She has periodically moved den sites across the escarpment, not far from her hunting grounds on Samara's plateau grasslands, where large herds of black wildebeest and blesbuck abound.

Restoring biodiversity

The introduction of lions into Samara at the beginning of 2019 represents one of several initiatives by Samara to restore the Great Karoo's rich biodiversity.

Over the past 22 years, thousands of wild animals have been successfully reintroduced into the private reserve, the Eastern Cape's largest, including antelope, zebra, buffalo, cheetah and more recently, the elephant in 2017. Added to this, the Samara team has worked hard to improve vegetation communities by rehabilitating eroded land, planting Spekboom and managing water catchments in this semi-arid region.

All told, the activity undertaken by Samara in recent years means that the reserve – located in one of just 36 global biodiversity hot spots – is close to achieving its goal of restoring this Great Karoo ecosystem to optimal functionality.

"The birth of the first wild lion cubs in the region in almost two centuries is a wonderful milestone on our journey," concludes Tompkins. "It serves as a great incentive to continue our commitment to the preservation of this fantastically biodiverse region."

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