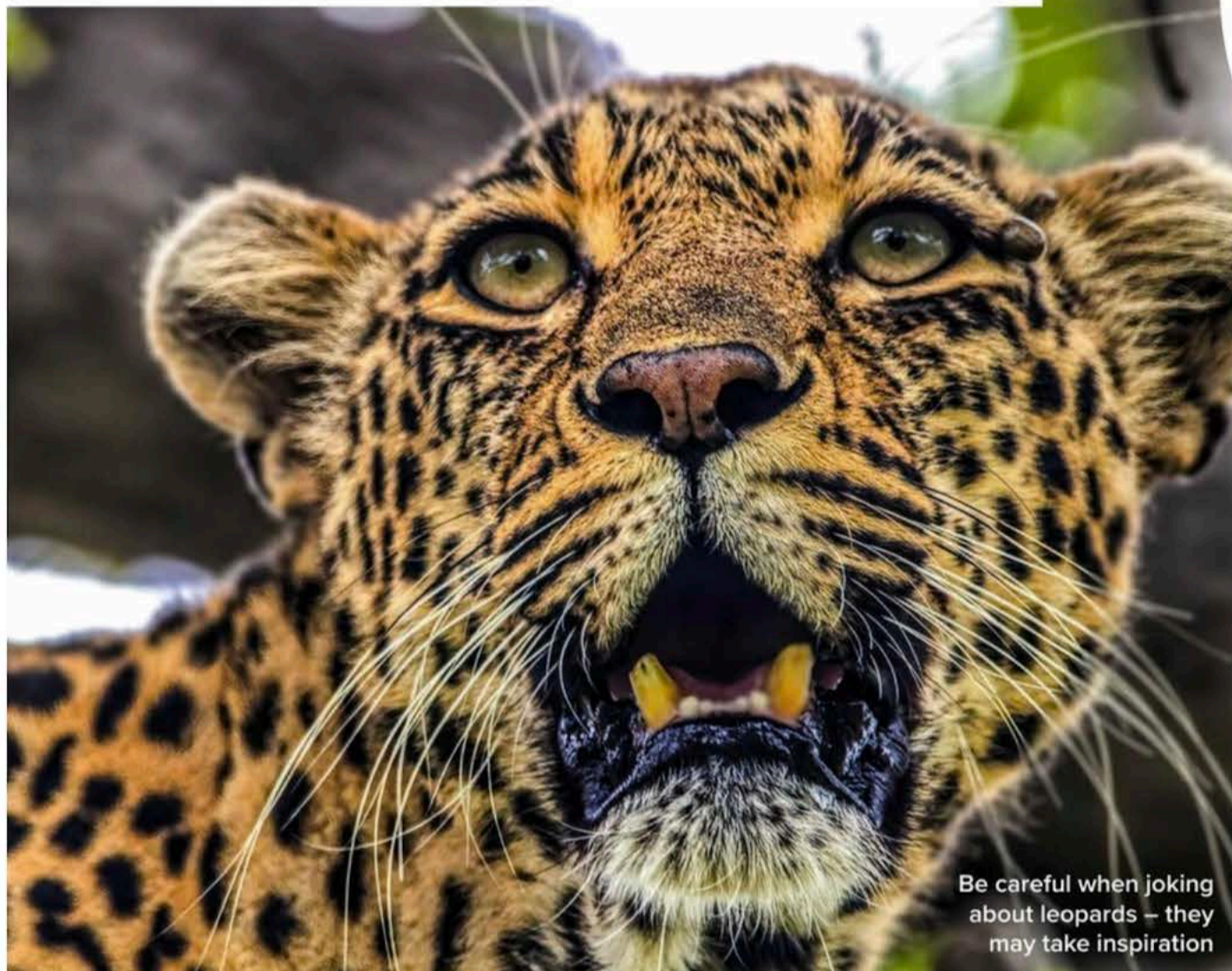


Tales *FROM THE BUSH*



Be careful when joking about leopards – they may take inspiration



Elliot (right) and his sister by the braai

“Its gold-green eyes locked on mine”

Leopard in Botswana

BY ELLIOT CONNOR

WE TOOK THE BRIDGE OVER THE River Khwai. A phalanx of firewood rattled in the back of the beat-up Land Rover.

Sardined beside it, my siblings nattered and quibbled. It was 2012 and we were a full-house family – two adults, three children – eight weeks and two breakdowns into a self-drive safari sabbatical.

Travelling across Botswana in such a manner had been a saga of nature at its most splendidly chaotic. When we broke down, it was beside a crotchety buffalo bull. No sooner had we lit the braai than a pack of wild dogs streaked through camp. Signs were sparing, fences fictional and, freshly turned 10 years old, with the *Boys' Own* writings of naturalist-adventurers Gerald Durrell and Lawrence Anthony running bright in my mind, I relished every second.

On this particular evening, the November skies were alight – burnt orange, then plum as a hippo's bum. We reached our camp and, just like that, it was dark. In the bush, night falls fast. I made my way down a beaten-earth track to the tiny ablutions block, that night's risotto rumbling inside. As I re-emerged, I fumbled for my torch as my eyes readjusted to the darkness, and stepped out into the night.

“WROUAAARGH!”

The gurning faces of my mother and younger sister launched at me from behind a leadwood tree. I yelped in alarm, springing back into the light of the toilet block.

“Very funny.” I tried to sound cross as they fell about in laughter. “And anyway, that's not what leopards sound like.” As we walked the 40m or so back to the

campsite, I ambled behind the others, treading quietly. I flicked my torch into the trees, searching for bushbabies. The stars shimmered like scales through the sparse canopy. Ahead, the trees parted and the bush buzz faded, replaced by the calm crackle of the campfire. The leaping flames sent whirligig shadows around the clearing.

I stopped. What was that? The faintest sound, a musky whiff on the breeze, a shadow? I turned. Crouched, stalking, barely 3m from me, was a leopard. Its gold-green eyes locked on mine. I wish I'd said something cool. Isn't that always the case? *Treppenwitz*, the Germans call it – staircase wit.

Instead, my voice came out as a prepubescent squeak. “I think there's something behind me.” My brother's torch hit it square. Everything froze for an instant. Then the cat melted into the treeline shadows and I regained my faculties.

The next five minutes are blotted to a blur in my memory. But I doubt that, in the moment, any of us appreciated the beautiful irony of the leopard-by-the-loo prank becoming reality. Quick as a flash, my brother and I were thrown into the ground tent. My sister, a wee, bite-sized meal, flew into the two-person tent on the Land Rover's roof, followed closely by my mother, crowbar in hand.

The leopard circled, silent, in the treeline, under the car. My father stood watch, a silhouetted sentry by the fire with a spade and a bottle of wine. Minutes stretched into hours until finally, around midnight, the big cat stopped coming back.

At that tender age, possessing the self-confidence of a hapless hedgehog, I was targeted by many animals – frisked and mugged by baboons, chased in circles by vervet monkeys and sent hiding by hyenas. But after that night I had a new nickname: ‘leopard fodder’.

Nature always has the last laugh. **W**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Elliot is a conservationist, wildlife film-maker and host of the *Wild Stories* podcast. In his spare time he rescues injured wildlife.