



Kim Wolhuter (above) with the camera he used to film leopards like the one pictured below.

## Rare Leopard Behavior Documented on Film

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Film footage of a wild leopard in South Africa's Mala Mala preserve has documented unusual animal behavior.

Filmmaker Kim Wolhuter followed a single large male leopard for 18 months, recording the most intimate details of its life. Shot mostly in the dark, when the big spotted cats are most active, the documentary recorded a leopard killing twice in quick succession—once for the hyenas that dogged its footsteps and again for its own meal, so it could eat in peace.

National Geographic News interviewed Wolhuter, 43, about the making of the documentary.

*NG: You spent a large part of your childhood living in a big African game park, where your father and grandfather were rangers. What was it like growing up in the wilderness like that?*

*KW: It's hard for anyone raised in a city to appreciate what it was like for me to grow up in the bush. In the veldt you live life more from the perspective of survival and being part of the natural system. You take each day as it comes. You are, to a degree, governed by the events that are happening around you. You don't have total control over what you do.*

*I am hugely fortunate that I have that experience. It gives me an edge in doing what I do, especially when it comes to understanding and documenting animal behavior.*

*You were set to follow in the footsteps of your father and grandfather and you studied grasslands science at college in preparation for a career in conservation. How did you get into filmmaking?*

It started some years ago when I worked with Richard Goss, who was making a documentary on meerkats for the British Broadcasting Corporation. Before that I shot perhaps no more than a dozen slides a year. Goss wanted me to build camps for him in the remote areas of Botswana.

When Richard came out again to do a second documentary he gave me a camera and told me to start shooting. This resulted in my working for him for six years or so, before I started making films for myself. I have been filming for 14 years now, working with hyenas, leopards, and jackals.

The first documentaries I did for National Geographic were working with Richard. They were *Beauty and the Beast* and *Strandwolf*. This one, *Stalking Leopards*, is the first one I have done for the Geographic by myself.

*A striking feature of Stalking Leopards is that so much of it is filmed in the dark. It certainly gives us a different perspective on the African savanna and the nighttime behavior of the animals. How did you do this? And don't you find it really scary being out in the dark, surrounded by carnivorous wild animals you couldn't see?*

I started to specialize in filming at night, using lights and camera in a combination that tries to replicate moonlight as much as possible, making it look natural. I use two vehicles to film at night, with one going off a bit to light up the scene and the other for the camera from a different angle.

For me it is a lot easier to film at night than it is in the day because I have total control over the light. I don't have to wait for the light of the early morning or the late afternoon; I light up the night whenever I need to, and I find it a lot easier.

It sounds like it would be intimidating and scary being in the bush at night—but I find I have more control of the situation. It's true that a lot of animals come out at night, but that's a good thing for a filmmaker. There's a lot going on at night, especially with the big cats, because that's when they do most of their hunting.

I find temperature plays a role. If it is cooler, they are out hunting, and that is also when they do perhaps 80 percent of their activity. This is mostly done at night.

*In Stalking Leopards you have focused on one specific animal to tell the story. Why did you do that?*

Previously, I focused on animal behavior in general, and I had never concentrated on one individual animal. Then I started following Tjololo, a big male leopard in Mala Mala, and I spent 18 months filming him.

Once you spend that amount of time with an animal you really understand it, how it operates, and what its life is all about. Getting into Tjololo's life was amazing. Leopards are extremely solitary and secretive, and they are aggressive about being left alone. It was a huge challenge to get into his world, and it was a real honor to be accepted by him.

To get that shot of Tjololo that was featured on the cover of *National Geographic* magazine [in October last year], I sat on the ground in front of him and held my position as he walked towards me. That's an illustration of how he came to accept me into his world. He was not in the least bit interested in me. He walked towards me from about 30 meters [30 yards] away until he was half that distance and then he stepped past me. In all that time he didn't even glance at me.

This experience made me realize that I had gotten into the incredible position where I meant nothing to this leopard. I might as well have been a rock or a tree. To be accepted like that by an incredibly

aggressive and secretive animal meant that everything I documented would be totally natural behavior. He would do what he wanted to do, go where he wanted to go, and never see me.

*In making your documentary, what have you contributed to knowledge about leopards?*

At one stage leopards were thought to be endangered because they are so secretive that we don't see them often and we don't know that much about them. Now we have found they are not endangered but they are very good at keeping out of sight and well away from people. They are still a threatened species, of course, but that's because of human encroachment on their habitat. As they lose their habitat so they are being threatened. My documentary confirms that.

The film also shows some behavior not seen before, especially the rivalry between leopards and hyenas. There is constant competition between leopards and hyenas. Hyenas snatch prey from leopards and smaller leopards cannot stand up to them. With Tjololo we saw not only a leopard standing its ground but also feeding on the same carcass alongside a hyena.

Another thing we saw Tjololo do, which had not been seen before, was how he would kill twice in quick succession. He would leave the first one for the hyenas so that he could kill again, this time for himself. This was how he had learned to be able to keep a kill for himself.

*You say the leopard did not see you, but was there no sign at all of some kind of bond between you and the animal?*

I don't think so—but then again on quite a few occasions we did experience something interesting. It would happen when we were resting with him. He would be sleeping on the ground and we would be snoozing in our vehicles next to him and he would get up so quietly that we were not aware that he was moving away. Then, when he was about 50 meters [50 yards] or so away, he would start calling. I don't know if this calling is natural behavior or not.

However, if I had not seen Tjololo for a while and then I came across him again he never showed any sign of recognition. If I got out of my vehicle he acted as if I wasn't there. But if someone with me also got out of the car he'd know it immediately and run off.

*What makes you get out of a vehicle in close proximity to a large, aggressive, wild leopard? Where did you get the courage to do it for the first time?*

It took a long time to be able to get to that point. Slowly, as he got used to my presence, I would venture out of the car when he was some distance away. Over time, the distance between us could be a lot less. At one stage, I got so close to him that he pissed on me while he was marking his territory.

*The leopard urinated on you and you had no sudden urge to wet your pants yourself?*

No. I have developed an understanding of leopards over a long time. I was charged by a leopard once, the female in the documentary. But I had seen how hyenas stand their ground in the face of a leopard charge. They stand confidently but avoid eye contact.

I've found that eye contact is a big issue and a sign of aggression in the animal world. You must try to avoid contact with a leopard's eyes, not only because they think you're being aggressive but also because they might pick up the fear in your eyes. You need to watch leopards out of the corner of your eye and be aware of the tiny signs of trouble.

If I get out of my car I am already keenly alert, looking for the first little indication that something is not right. This is not something you can put in a manual of how to walk up to leopards. It's something developed over a long time. It's a feeling you get that's impossible to put into words.

*How are the leopards you filmed doing now? Do you ever look for them now that the documentary has been completed?*

The female probably died as it hasn't been seen for about eight months. The male [Tjololo] is alive and well. He has his territory totally under control. Whenever I am in Mala Mala I still see him, and it is always nice to see him. If I see his tracks I do go out of my way to look for him. He still shows no sign of recognizing me.