

# Family Pride

Lion cubs grow up strong with help from moms, aunts, and big sisters.

BY KAREN DE SEVE

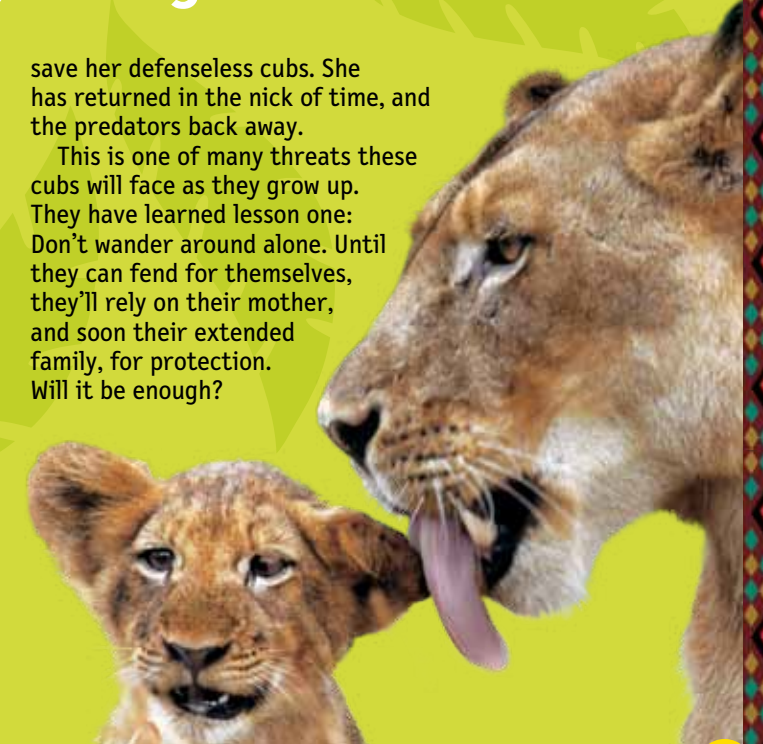
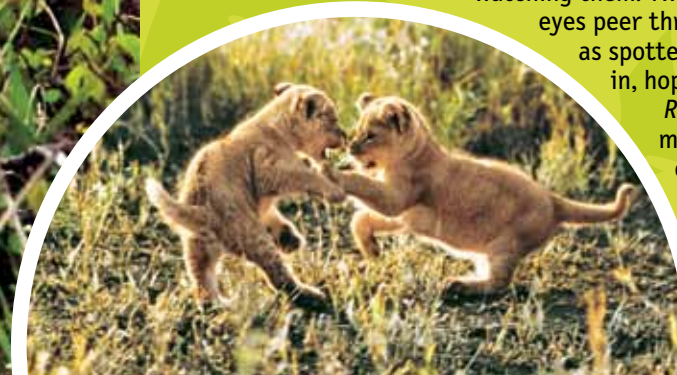
**T**ucked under bushes in Africa, two lion cubs stretch as they wake from their nap. Even though they are just five weeks old, they are alone while their mother hunts for food. She has been gone for a full day, and the curious cubs poke their heads beyond the tall grass curtain that camouflages their fuzzy, tawny bodies. Nothing scary so far. One cub timidly tiptoes ahead, until—*thump*—her brother tackles her from behind.

They tumble, but suddenly freeze. Something is watching them. Two pairs of dark eyes peer through the grass as spotted hyenas close in, hoping for a meal. *Rooooaar!* The mother lion charges the hyenas, her teeth bared, ready to fight to

save her defenseless cubs. She has returned in the nick of time, and the predators back away.

This is one of many threats these cubs will face as they grow up. They have learned lesson one: Don't wander around alone. Until they can fend for themselves, they'll rely on their mother, and soon their extended family, for protection. Will it be enough?

Once widespread throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe, only an estimated 32,000 to 35,000 lions still survive in the wild—almost all in Africa.



## Good Fences Make Safe Lions

In some parts of Africa, people are moving into lion territory, making it hard for lions to find food. That's when the big cats might kill cows or other livestock held in bomas, or pens enclosed by big branches. Weak bomas keep the cows in, but they don't always keep lions out. "It's like a supermarket!" says Anne Kent Taylor, a lion conservationist. "Lions just help themselves." The owner will often kill a lion in revenge.

Taylor and others work with local herders to build strong wire bomas to keep their livestock safe from lions at night. It also keeps the lions safe from angry herders. If the lions can't capture the livestock, they will move away to look for wild prey. And that gives these majestic creatures one more chance for survival.

"Survival as a cub is difficult," says Matt Becker, a lion researcher who runs the Zambian Carnivore Programme in Africa. "A lot of times we'll see cubs born and then they disappear. Sometimes there isn't enough food to go around and the cubs starve to death. Other animals may kill them." These cubs will quickly learn it is an "eat-or-be-eaten" world.

### Family First

With the hyenas on the run, the lioness lies down to rest. Her cubs bury their faces in her belly to nurse. They've eaten only mother's milk since birth. In a couple of weeks they'll start to eat meat, but first they must meet the pride, or family group.

After napping through the heat of the day, the cubs are roused by their mother. She often moves them to a new hiding place, but today she roars across the plain and follows the reply to the woods near a river. They meet a young male lion who snarls at the approaching cubs, prompting the mother lion to tackle him. She

growls her clear message: "Leave my kids alone." The male is the cubs' two-year-old cousin, and for now he keeps his distance.

Lions are the only big cats that live—and sleep—in close-knit groups.

Now a pack of six young cats romps toward them. This time the mother lion stands aside as the cousins greet each other for the first time. Two older cub cousins and five aunts watch from the shade of a nearby tree. They are familiar with the newcomers because their mom has been wearing their scent when she has returned to the pride for group hunts.

But one hurdle remains. A shaggy mane surrounding a massive male lion's head appears from behind the rock. The mother lion nervously waits to see if the pride ruler will recognize her cubs as his offspring. If not, he will kill them on the spot. He pads over to the little cats and sniffs their heads. They bat his nose with tiny paws. He bats back, knocking them down and growling. Will he attack? But finally he decides the cubs are his and plops down his 400-pound body to rest. The cubs pounce on him in celebration of toppling the giant. He snaps his jaws, causing one cub to yelp. Lesson two: Don't mess with Dad.



A MALE LION ACCEPTS HIS OWN CUB AS IT APPROACHES TO PLAY.

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YOUNG LIONS PRACTICE HUNTING SKILLS AS THEY PLAY.



HUNTING IS A GROUP EFFORT, ESPECIALLY WHEN PREY IS AS BIG AS THESE BUFFALO.



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As part of a big family, the two cubs enjoy some benefits of group living that are unique to lions. This pride is a crèche, or nursery, with many two- to three-month-olds. So the two cubs sneak a milk snack from an aunt's belly from time to time.

"The lion pride system is designed so that all the females have cubs at the same time," says Dereck Joubert, a longtime lion filmmaker and co-founder of the Big Cats Initiative with his wife, Beverly. "And they can look after all the cubs together. The females are more playful with cubs around, and part of that play is teaching the cubs to be better at stalking and running. That also forms family bonds."

### Pride Power

It has been a week since these lions ate. Hunting is an organized group activity involving the pride's lionesses and older cubs. A single cat could capture a warthog or a buffalo calf, but it takes several lions to overpower something like a one-ton buffalo bull. The younger cubs watch from a distance, trying to stay quiet and not give away the ambush.

"There is an immense amount of bonding when they are ready to go on a hunt," Beverly Joubert says.

"They rub heads and greet each other. That creates a very strong family structure."

There is also strength in numbers, especially in battle. The females fan out and disappear in the amber grass, surrounding a small group of buffalo that has broken from a huge herd. A lioness sprints toward a bull, and the other lions spring from position and jump on, digging in their teeth and jaws as they pull the bull to the ground.

Once it is down, the whole pride runs over to claim some meat. The pride's large male chases away the females and eats his fill. When he moves away, the rest of the pride fights over any leftovers. The two cubs gnaw small pieces with their new teeth, growling to scare away other hungry mouths.

Focused on food, the pride doesn't notice a new male lion approaching. He wants to take over this pride and its territory. He moves swiftly, first challenging the pride leader, who is older and weaker. The ferocious fight is nearly fatal, but the injured old ruler manages to limp away, abandoning the

pride. The new male moves to his next victims: the cubs. He wants his own offspring, so these cubs must go.

But he runs into a wall of fierce mothers intent on saving their young. Together, they fight him off, which gives the twins' mother a chance to escape with her cubs. "When a new male comes, the females with younger cubs will try to disappear for

a while," Becker says. "The females can't typically protect young babies against a new male."

Again on the move, the twins stay close to their mother. She and two of her sisters have split from the pride to save their young offspring. Even a small group has a better chance of survival than a lone lion with cubs. Lesson three: Watch and learn. That way, the cubs just might stay out of trouble.

Male lions live 10 to 12 years. Females can live up to 16 years.

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