

SEDONA

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Walking in the Wild
at Out of Africa

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Celebrating 20 Years!

Walking in the Wild



*This page: Java, a rare cape lion, is considered king of the park. He is 21 years old, which translates to about 100 human years.
Opposite page: Diligence, a male zebra, asks safari visitors for food.*

at Out of Africa

Never before had I been so close to a lion that I came away with an idea of his individual personality. This is the wonder of Out of Africa Wildlife Park.

Story by Monica Galvan

Photos by Prayeri Harrison



Lazarus stalked back and forth, just five feet away, glaring at mesmerized onlookers – he knew it was nearly dinner time. Standing on top of the photography platform where we waited to capture unobstructed views of this brawny predator’s feeding, I felt sure that this 600-pound lion could not make me into his meal – for a brief moment. As his appetite grew, he slowly walked away from the platform where we stood and then ran back toward us, only to stop directly below us and let out a deep, grumbling roar as he looked me in the eyes. A bit shaken, I told myself not to worry – it was impossible for him to reach me from below, right? Peering through the spaces in this wooden platform, I wondered how high a hungry lion can jump. To my relief, he was walking away, staring at the growing crowd outside his habitat. Seconds later, he came charging in our direction again, growling a low rumble that resonated inside my chest as he watched us intently.

Finally, the feeding crew stepped up behind us, arms heavy with huge slabs of raw meat. With great effort, they flung the meat over the chain-link fence onto Lazarus’ plate, where the hungry lion stood waiting. Without taking his eyes off of us, he bowed his head and effortlessly gripped his dinner between his threatening teeth. At once, he stood, stately and proud, with his head raised to show all the spectators his tasty chunk of meat, then he strode back and forth, as if displaying the fruits of a treacherous hunt. A majestic being, Lazarus captivated the crowd, and he loved it. Minutes earlier he had crunched through chicken legs

and bones (a meager appetizer) as our tram driver lovingly scratched deep within the lion’s thick mane – their mutual love apparent to all of us. Now he demonstrated his prowess as he prepared to retreat back into his den to enjoy his meal. Never before had I been so close to a lion that I came away with an idea of his individual personality. This is the wonder of Out of Africa Wildlife Park.

“I’ve walked in the wild for 51 years. I’ve had many near-death experiences,” said Dean Harrison, president and co-founder of Out of Africa Wildlife Park. And even after just a short visit with husband-wife duo Dean and Prayeri Harrison, it is apparent that they have found their calling. They both exude an enlightened energy and their tireless smiles tell the story of two lives completely dedicated to and enriched by following their passion for learning and living with wild animals.

This unparalleled park began more than 25 years ago at Dean and Prayeri’s home in Oregon. “The idea came to us when we saw that we as people did not understand the needs of big cats, and we thought that was an area that needed to be explored,” explained Dean. “So we lived in the forest in Oregon with the animals on an exclusive basis – we built a house for them and us. They could come and go as they pleased, and they could see us from all the rooms in their section of the house. That allowed us to mingle relatively comfortably.”

Sleeping and eating where seven large cats can watch



every move may sound a bit unnerving, but this unique cohabitation turned out to be a wonderful learning experience, not only for Dean and Prayeri, but also for these big cats. “It was very interesting – we became a part of them, and they became part of us,” said Dean.

As Dean and Prayeri observed and joined the predators’ society, neighbors began to hear about the Harrisons’ “experiment,” and they dropped in with increasing frequency to interact with these big cats. Because so many curious visitors stopped by throughout the day, plus the costly responsibility of feeding these animals and the interest of the county, Dean and Prayeri opened Tigerville USA at their home. Restricted hours and a small admission fee allowed Dean and Prayeri to continue living with and learning from their household of tigers, lions, a leopard and a cougar – and they were delighted to share what they had learned by demonstrating these unique relationships to the public.

Eventually, this extraordinary family needed more space to grow and play. Dean and Prayeri moved back to Dean’s home state of Arizona, and they opened Out of Africa Wildlife Park in Fountain Hills on a 16-acre parcel owned by the Ft. McDowell Indian Community, where the park operated for many years.

In May of 2005, after quickly moving all of the animals, Dean and Prayeri reopened Out of Africa in Camp Verde, on 104 acres of wilderness land about 25 minutes south of Sedona. Now, this impressive park boasts of more than 400 exotic animals that visitors can interact with up-close.

A visit to Out of Africa reveals that Dean and Prayeri

consider the world from the point of view of their wild friends. Every effort is made to ensure these animals are as comfortable and happy as the humans they live among. After all, Dean and Prayeri live in a modest home at the park, overlooking a lion’s den and they surely would be the first to know if their family was unhappy. “The goal of the park is to focus on the value of our relationship with the Lord, with each other, with the animals and the plants,” explained Dean. This is not your typical theme park out to make a dollar – it is a journey that has brought about valuable relationships between humans and predators, and the spiritual rewards that Dean and Prayeri have attained are priceless.

“In all these years, we’ve learned more from them than they have from us, as far as living a life on this planet,” said Dean. “They definitely are not as inferior as we all say. Instead, what we see is great intelligence, the ability to understand, to be patient, to be kind – the degree of love is seen frequently – one animal offering its life for another by taking a chance and putting itself in harm’s way, where it could be killed.” Dean has learned about what he refers to as “the greatest love,” the desire to give one’s own life for someone else. He and Prayeri witness it over and over again in the animal kingdom, and through their years of “walking in the wild” they have put themselves in danger to save each other, as well as many of the animals they live among.

In fact, putting themselves in jeopardy with these often-dangerous animals is what has allowed Dean and Prayeri to coexist peacefully with their furry friends. “When a person

Opposite page: Kibo, a reticulated male giraffe, waits for hand-fed biscuit treats from visitors on the Serengeti Safari. This page: Tigers demonstrate their instincts as they pounce and play with caretakers during Tiger Splash.



finds himself about to be killed by wild animals, but then ends up not being killed, a lot of learning comes from the experience,” explained Dean. “Not only learning about one’s self, but also about the animals and how they operate – from the prey’s point of view. I’ve learned what to do and what not to do – what triggers attacks, what abates attacks, and where one can be caught. Thus, we’ve learned to avoid riskier moments by understanding the behavioral signs we observe while working with the animals.”

Learning to trigger behavioral patterns that result from the animals’ instincts has aided the staff at Out of Africa immensely – and the results can be seen in the popular Tiger Splash show, which is scheduled to open at the park’s new location early this summer. During Tiger Splash, spectators will witness Bengal tigers and other big cats interacting in a predator/prey relationship of romping and splashing in a 30-foot by 50-foot pool as they play with their caretakers and various colorful toys. With all the running, diving and biting displayed during Tiger Splash, it sometimes is difficult to remember that these are not dogs – these are dangerous, wild tigers.

In addition, Dean has learned many valuable life lessons through his experiences with these animals. “Animals can teach many things: To love your neighbor as yourself; to not think more of one’s self than one should; to realize that others count as well; and that all the money in the world isn’t an objective, it’s a condition,” he stated. “The only things that we can take with us are relationships.”

Dean described how even the most seemingly inferior animals, such as lizards, value their own lives and the

relationships that they form with their loved ones. “We have seen, with a pair of lizards, when one of them dies the other one dies afterward, and not from any particular cause other than a broken heart,” he explained. “This is easy to understand when you think of humans. However, if it happens with lizards, then maybe we’re underestimating their feelings, their intellect and how they consider their lives and the lives of those they care about.”

Indeed, Dean’s experiences living with these animals have changed his views not only with regard to the different fauna with which he lives and learns, but also with regard to humans. “Human and animal instincts are the same, except for three areas: pride, greed and lust. And those are the three areas we associate with morality,” he reported. “Those are the three areas we make laws against, to hold ourselves in check.”

Briefly, Dean defines animal behavior (including humans) as consisting of three general components: instinct, intellect and feelings. Instincts are divided into primary and supporting categories. Primary instincts are concerned with an animal’s survival, and they include self-preservation, acquisition of food, maintenance of territory and marriage/family relations. Supporting instincts are manifested behaviors such as possession, play, chase, holding and biting, and exploration and adventure, to name a few.

Intellect is an animal’s capacity to consider alternatives, weigh consequences and make a choice or decision. It involves memory – if an animal remembers that a certain action caused it to get hurt on one occasion, it will consider an alternative action the next time, and thus the animal is



learning. Feelings are an animal's physical and psychological likes and dislikes – as with a certain food or individual.

“Instinct, intellect and feelings provide us with clear-cut pathways for communicating with animals,” explained Dean. “Learning to recognize signs relating to what they’re saying is our objective. They communicate through vocalization and body language, which form an actual alphabet. This alphabet, if we understand it, is a form of communication that’s not written – it is usually visual and verbal combined. On top of that, when we are close, like a mother who knows what’s wrong with her child, there is an intuitive sense about what is occurring within the animal. And this sense can be highly developed.”

Certainly, Dean and Prayeri use their intuition when working with these exotic animals, some of whom they have raised since infancy, and some of whom are rescued animals. There have been times when an unexplainable feeling has overcome Dean, only to send him rushing through the park to aid a helpless animal. In the same way, Prayeri has listened to the calls of wolves alerting her that something is wrong between Dean and one of the giant predators. “When one is close to these kinds of animals, particularly the wild ones, it’s a spiritual experience, which can be attained with all of the animals – especially with the king cobras,” said Dean.

And while Dean and Prayeri surely feel blessed by the bonds they have formed with these creatures, many of the animals at Out of Africa literally owe their lives to Dean and Prayeri. “We have many rescued animals. We continually

are being called and asked if we’ll take a bird or a snake or an elephant – any type of animal,” Dean reported. Still, by putting to use everything that they’ve learned over the years, Dean and Prayeri are able to make these rescued animals feel comfortable in their new habitats.

“Inside all of us is an instinct to be part of something greater than ourselves. In other words, we don’t want to be alone, and this instinct drives people and animals,” he explained. “It allows us to share and be useful – to feel good about ourselves. If an animal comes in and it has been deprived of companionship, or it has lived in poor conditions, if we give them what they need, if we fulfill the needs of the animal in the form of safety, food, habitation and friendship, then the animal instinctually gravitates toward us.” Most importantly, Dean and Prayeri always remember that they are working to bring the animals to peace, and that it’s not always peaceful getting there – but the transformations that they’ve witnessed are amazing.

Out of Africa also plays a role in the preservation of exotic animals, housing many endangered and threatened species. Preservation, according to Dean and Prayeri, begins with education. “The first step is to educate, and that is done through sharing information so that one can see that there’s value,” Dean explained. “Animals all over the world are at our mercy because we control their lives, not necessarily directly, but indirectly by what we build. When we build our cities, roads and dams, anything we put into the environment has an effect on animal life, plant life and water, as well – everything living is affected. Sometimes the effects are minimal, but it’s necessary to present all of these

"If we choose only ourselves, we will be alone and we cannot stand to be alone.
Therefore, we must keep the planet happy – it's our assignment."

Dean Harrison



Opposite page: Rediki, an African black ostrich, is ready for her close-up on the Serengeti Safari.

This page, clockwise from top: Harmony and Harvest, baby Siberian tigers, will be part of the new Tiger Splash show scheduled to open summer 2006; Prayeri Harrison strikes a pose with Asian black leopard-panther, Jamaica; Dean Harrison socializes with two of the park's wolves.





Taj, a white Bengal tiger and Jamaica, an Asian black leopard-panther, as viewed from a photo deck in the Wildlife Preserve. Different species live in close quarters to mimic a real-life society.

factors in order to understand our role. If we choose only ourselves, we will be alone and we cannot stand to be alone. Therefore, we must keep the planet happy – it’s our assignment.”

At its new location in Camp Verde, Out of Africa seems to be doing its part with regard to keeping the planet happy – at least the area surrounding the park. “We have noticed that the indigenous animals have become more numerous. The rabbits have increased, the birds have increased. When we first arrived we could not find a bird – any kind – all day. Now we see them all over,” said Dean. “Basically, this area was devoid of animal life. Now, we see animals all over – and the more vegetation we put into the park itself, the more animals will inhabit this area.”

Additionally, Out of Africa strives to keep its human visitors happy, too, by focusing on interesting, educational attractions and providing a unique experience for the public. Attractions include the Wildlife Preserve, which is accessible on foot or via educational tram tour. Here, guests are able to interact with giant predators including lions, tigers, wolves, hyena, bears, cougars and more, as these amazing animals roam in their large, natural habitats. Conditions may be primitive, but it allows for an unparalleled experience like what would happen in the wild. The real spectacle takes place at 3 p.m. Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays, when these predators are fed. Visitors can witness more than 800 pounds of raw meat being hurled to hungry man-eaters as their basic instincts surface.

A more friendly bunch, the Sarengeti Safari introduces

guests to giraffe, zebra, wildebeest, antelope and more during a 45-minute photo safari. Here, ostriches come close enough to poke their heads right inside the safari vehicles, and giraffe gladly accept treats from guests – in fact, the luckiest passengers have been known to receive giraffe kisses! Perched on the hills above this simulated African plain, lions look down over their domain, assuring visitors that they are being watched from afar at all times.

Don’t miss Tiger Splash (opening summer 2006), and soon the Giant Snake Show will allow people to handle huge pythons and anacondas; the Avian Flyway will feature hundreds of flocking, exotic birds flying through a series of spacious aviaries; and Wonder of Wildlife will bring bears, wolves, hyena and other animals into the Tiger Splash arena to jump and play in the water.

Surely, the most unique and valuable aspect of Out of Africa is the staff’s obvious relationship with the animals and the personal activities conducted with the park’s visitors. Guests truly can get close to these animals, and the shows effectively expose the spontaneous personalities of the animals.

In the end, it’s not so rare for a bear to live in harmony with cougars, or for an English mastiff to raise tiger cubs as her own. “Animals in the wild congregate with different species, not just with their own. It makes for a real-life society,” noted Dean. Maybe what is rare at Out of Africa Wildlife Park is the degree of love demonstrated in the actions of the animals and the staff at the park.

Give it a try – mingle with different species, walk in the wild for one day! 🐾