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THE PREGNANT LION

*Jo and I find ourselves camping
in Namibia's Caprivi Strip as I join
a team working on lions and hyaenas.*

ONE TROUBLE WITH LIONS is that while you are conducting a pregnancy test, you need always be aware of what you can learn from the lion's front end. It is there that the first signs of awakening from anaesthesia will occur.

The pregnancy check was fairly routine, as the swollen belly of the lioness made her condition pretty obvious, but it was reassuring to feel the hard masses of at least two cubs inside her. As I gently pressed down with my right hand against the slight upward pressure of my left hand underneath her, I felt one of the cubs move.

I fervently hoped that none of her relatives were lurking in the grass and watching me. As for her head, all was quiet.



2:00 A.M.: the author checks the vital signs of a darted lion in the Caprivi Strip.

He pulled the six-centimetre dart from the lioness' shoulder and walked over to the male lying not more than two metres away. Another aluminum-bodied dart was glinting in the glare of the truck headlights as it stuck up from his hip, the orange tailpiece clearly visible. Lue leaned over and, with a scalpel in his hand, made a nick in the lion's skin, just beside the dart, and pulled it out.

Next came the pregnancy check. As she lay on her side I put my left hand under her abdomen, pressed up gently and simultaneously pushed down with my right hand.

"That's a pretty easy call," I said to Mike, who was standing beside me. "You could even feel some movement in there." I let go and pointed to her abdomen.

"Not exactly rocket science," he said as he knelt down beside her back leg, needle holder and blood tubes in hand.

"Can you hold off the vein for me Jerry?" Mike asked as he removed the cap from the needle and leaned forward. I turned sideways, put one hand under her hock and pressed down with the other on the vein as it coursed across the bone just above the joint. Mike slipped the needle into the vein with practised ease and we watched as the succession of tubes filled up with dark red blood.