

NATURE



THE WORLD'S FIRST HYBRID CHEETAH FAMILY

## A CHEETAH'S PRIDE

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**3 x 50 min., 4K, 5.1 + Stereo**





## A never-seen-before wildlife phenomenon is happening in the Samara Karoo Reserve on the plains of South Africa's semi-desert wilderness: the appearance of an extraordinary cheetah family: Two mothers, with nine cubs!

In June, 2020, two cheetah mothers met by chance. One is an experienced mother and effective huntress with five cubs. The other mother has four cubs, but she's younger and hindered by a blind eye, but affectionate and patient. After the initial meeting, the cubs become mixed up, resulting in one mother adopting the other's cubs as her own. Stranger still; the mothers meet again and, instead of going their separate ways, stay together. Female cheetahs are solitary, this hybrid-family is a world first.

The family would go on to endure what can only be described as a wildlife soap opera. They face the many dangers of the African bush, endure starvation and injury, overcome abandonment and loss, cubs rise to insurmountable challenges and look out for one another. One mother struggles while the other succeeds, but they need each other if they're to keep all nine cubs alive.

### **Episode 1: Two Mothers, Nine Cubs**

It's a cold winter morning, the sun is just rising when our two cheetah families meet; Chillli with her five cubs and Inara trailed by her four. A confrontation ensues. The situation is tense for hours until the desert sun forces a ceasefire. By noon, both families retire to the shade, waiting out the heat of the day before the mothers continue their routes. Chillli east and Inara west, but two of Chillli's cubs mistakenly follow Inara: Chillli's strongest cub Siya – and Kolisi, the runt of the litter.

First light reveals a miracle. Inara stands up, revealing Siya and Kolisi, and they are nursing! Allomothering (nursing cubs other than their own) in cheetahs has never been observed in the wild before. Over time, the smaller cub, Kolisi, forms a strong bond with Inara. Siya teams up with Inara's strongest cub, Blue. As the strongest cubs, they are aligned in their duty to protect the weakest. Kolisi now has a big sister and big nephew looking out for her. In nature, only the strongest survive. Kolisi is smaller and slower. These weaknesses will ultimately jeopardise the lives of all of these cats as Siya and Blue regularly fall behind to guide Kolisi.

After a week apart, our two mothers meet again. Only this time, there is no animosity. Chillli and her cubs are well fed and relaxing at a viewpoint when Inara marches by. Drawn by the determined mother, Chillli's cubs follow Inara, forcing Chillli to follow her cubs. They would go on to travel together for days. Nine cubs, two mothers; one enormous cheetah family.

Chillli is Inara's mother, and a skilled huntress. It's soon clear who is in charge.

It's been some days since the cats have eaten. Chillli and Inara have been staking out a herd of antelope. Inara's missing eye means she can't judge depth very well, which is crucial for triangulating her target. As she frequently does, Inara misjudges and chases after a springbok ram to no avail, putting distance between herself and the rest of the 'pride'. Chillli seizes the opportunity and kidnaps all the cubs, heading north into the mountains, as far as possible from Inara's range. Distraught, Inara spends hours wandering the plains, her desperate calls to her missing cubs drowned out by the wind.

Can Chillli raise nine cubs alone? The world record in captivity is eight. No wild cheetah has achieved this. Without cubs, Inara's body responds and she goes into oestrus, compelling her to go in search of Samara's male cheetah, Shadow. She may now be pregnant, if so, will she return to her family?

### **Episode 2: Struggle to Survive**

It's been a month since Chillli stole away with the cubs. So far, Chillli has successfully kept all nine cubs alive, but the odds are against them, no cheetah has ever had nine cubs.

Meanwhile, Inara has spent five days on a mountain courting the resident male, Shadow. If successful, Inara will deliver her third litter in ninety days. Inara travels down the mountain, back to her home range. Scent marking 'newspaper trees' helps cheetahs not only navigate, but communicate.

With nine hungry cubs to feed, Chillli takes a calculated risk and captures a warthog, the cubs are fed, but it has come at a price. In the skirmish, the tusk bores into Chillli's leg. Days later, Chillli's wound is infected. She isn't strong enough to hunt and the cubs are too young to fend for themselves. Without help, Chillli will die and her cubs will starve. The decision is made for conservation to intervene. Chillli is darted, the wound stitched and life-saving antibiotics administered. It's all that can be done. Chillli and the cubs aren't out of the woods yet. It's now up to Chillli to heal quickly enough to hunt again and feed her cubs. If ever she could use Inara's help, it's now.

It's possible Inara can detect the stress hormones in Chillli's urine on the trees as she travels. By chance, or intention, she heads straight to Chillli and the cubs. After a month-long separation, her timing is remarkable. Has she come to the rescue to provide for the cubs while Chillli recovers? Or has Chillli just slowed down long enough for Inara to catch up and claim her own cubs back? Reunited, neither mother shows





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any animosity. Perhaps Chillli realises Inara is their only hope. Perhaps she's too weak to fight.

While travelling, Inara teaches the cubs a lesson she learned from her mother Chillli- that cheetahs are fearless. She leads them through a ravine where they're charged by buffalo. After the altercation, Siya realises Kolisi is missing and goes searching for her, leading her safely back to the family. Inara is still an outsider, and is forced to sleep alone.

A week after the warthog incident, they head out to hunt again. The mothers are both instinctively independent, driven by a second instinct to care for all the cubs. So, Africa's most unusual cheetah family remains, separate, but together.

### **Episode 3: Lost and Found**

The family has stayed together, but the mothers have been hunting separately.

Cheetah females can't hunt big enough prey to provide for a 'pride' of this size, leaving the cats in a perpetual predicament. The mothers also don't share each other's kills and so when one is full the other is hungry. The result is varying prey drive, while one mother rests to digest, the other is on the hunt.

Inara has been failing hunt after hunt. They have been marching relentlessly and it's taking its toll on the cubs. She can't provide for five cubs, and there may be more on the way. By sheer luck, a steenbok wanders by and Inara strikes. Her first success in a long while, but it's barely enough to go around. Before sunrise the following morning, Inara is on the hunt again. She chases after the springbok, but again her eyesight fails her. Empty handed and desperately hungry, she just keeps walking. Her cubs wait for her call, but Inara doesn't look back.

It's not uncommon for cheetah mothers to leave their cubs for a day or two. They're left to fend for themselves in a graveyard of decaying agaves. The starving cubs eat dung and roots to quell their hunger. Eventually, they seem to realise they've been abandoned. At this age, they won't survive alone.

That night, Chillli happens to pass near the abandoned cubs but doesn't notice them. Shaka picks up a scent, and while distracted Chillli leaves him behind. At sunrise, another twist; Shaka somehow finds the abandoned cubs. He's frantic having lost Chillli and tries to lead the others, but they only know to wait for mom. The next day, all six cubs have disappeared and the area is filled with dangerous animals.

We find Inara and it's immediately clear why she abandoned the cubs, by the size of her belly, she is

pregnant. Three days later, nothing short of a miracle, Shaka leads the abandoned cubs back to Chillli. The runt of the litter has become the hero of the day. Chillli welcomes the ravenous cubs home by taking down a springbok. Four months later, Inara introduces her two new cubs to the outside world for the first time. Inara has a third opportunity to prove herself as a mother.

All nine cubs are still thriving with Chillli, new bonds have been formed and they also have Inara's involvement to thank for their survival thus far. Now, their next chapter begins. The cubs must learn to hunt, Chillli will show them the way.

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