

sweet revenge

From a leopard's perspective, spotted hyaenas are the ultimate pest. They seldom pose a threat to an adult, but they can account for a significant number of cub deaths. They also have an uncanny ability to turn up uninvited to meals.

The spotted hyaena is the larger of the two predators and often travels in groups. The leopard, in contrast, is solitary and can ill afford to be incapacitated by injury; there is no one else to support it if it cannot hunt. As a result, leopards typically go out of their way to avoid confrontation with hyaenas. (It is thought that hyaenas are the main reason that the big cats evolved the well-known behaviour of caching their kills in trees; where hyaenas are not present, leopards usually feed on the ground.)

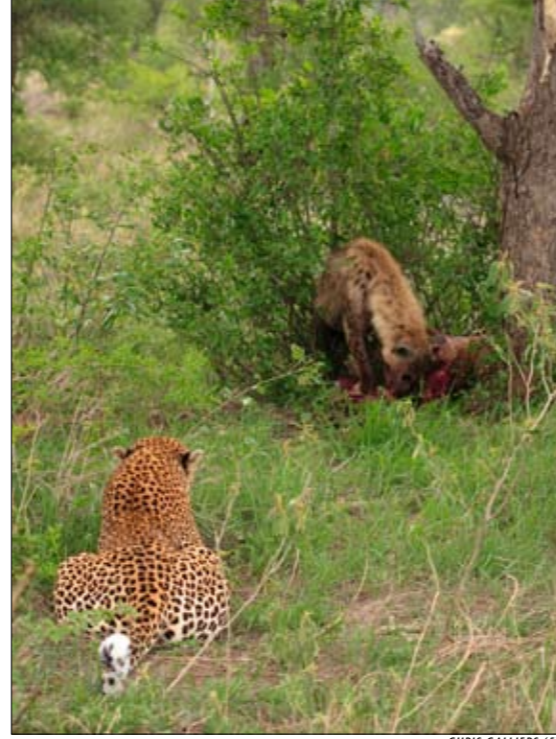
But now and then a leopard's frustration levels boil over and it decides that enough is enough. The recipient of one such decision was an unsuspecting hyaena at Mala Mala Game Reserve on the western boundary of South Africa's Kruger National Park. An adult male leopard had killed an impala ram and after feeding extensively he moved to a water-hole to drink. A loitering hyaena immediately took advantage of the carcass being unguarded and the leopard returned to find his hard-earned meal being enjoyed

by someone else. This was apparently too much to endure and he slowly stalked the culprit, which continued to feed, un-aware of the approaching cat.

The leopard paused a few metres from the kill and then rushed in, wrestling the interloper to the ground and sinking his teeth into its throat. The hyaena fought frantically to get free but its attacker maintained his grip. After 10 minutes the struggling subsided and the leopard released his victim, returning to the carcass to finish his meal in peace. The hyaena was left motionless, apparently dead. After a while its chest began to rise and fall, an ear twitched and it cautiously opened one eye. It soon realised that its tormentor had disappeared, but lay still for another 30 minutes before getting to its feet and staggering into the bush, unsteady but otherwise unscathed.

This is not the first time that a leopard has stood its ground against a spotted hyaena. One remarkable male in the Kruger Park caught and ate at least three hyaenas, presumably while they were investigating his kills. Leopards have also been seen feeding side by side with their rivals, usually on large carcasses. Clearly, the relationship between the two species is complex and there is still much that we can learn – as we can about associations between

Having found a spotted hyaena feeding on his kill, the male leopard approaches it cautiously (above) and then launches an attack on his unsuspecting foe (left).



CHRIS GALLIERS (5)



The leopard wrestles the hyaena to the ground (above) and after a 10-minute battle is satisfied that he has subdued his rival (right). Job done, he returns to the remains of the impala to polish off his meal (right, below).

most members of the carnivore guild.

Interspecific competition plays an important role in shaping wildlife communities, but remains a grey area in carnivore biology. For instance, most predators actively pursue and kill one another, but rarely go as far as feeding on the carcasses of their victims. In prey-rich areas, it is unlikely that the presence of smaller predators would limit the number or survival of larger species. So why do they go to such lengths to eliminate one another if not for food or to remove competition?

Perhaps it is just the inherent nature of predators to kill things, regardless of the quarry. It may also reflect a period of carnivore evolution when the number of competitors was greater than it is today and removing other predators carried a direct benefit.

Although many facets of interspecific competition remain a mystery, we do know that it can have a major influence on where carnivores occur and hence on their conservation. A study in Bardia National Park in Nepal showed that leopards avoid encounters with tigers by using the margins of the latter's territories, which lie in the core of the reserve. Leopards are consequently forced into the border regions of the park, where they come into conflict with neighbouring communities and are vulnerable to persecution.

Conversely, leopards appear to have benefited from human activity in parts of Tanzania, where the trophy hunting of lions has removed their chief competitor. Interactions such as these need to be considered when devising strategies to ensure the long-term persistence of carnivore populations. *Guy Balme* ■

