

SPORTING CLASSICS

JULY / AUGUST 2021

40 YEAR ANNIVERSARY

1981-2021



Man Eaters of Tsavo

JOHN BANOVICH, 2002
OIL ON BELGIAN LINEN
50 X 80 INCHES



THE TSAVO TWINS



MEN BECAME PREY IN THE NIGHT, THEIR KILLERS DODGING EVERY MOVE TO STOP THE SLAUGHTER.

BY WAYNE VAN ZWOLL

I have hunted a lion. A lioness, actually. “It won’t be easy, finding her,” Jamy Traut had told me. It wasn’t. She had all of southern Africa to roam. We didn’t. She hunted at night. We couldn’t. Her prints might have reeled her in, had we found them. We hadn’t.

WE SAW LIONS. Sneaking up on one sprawled in the shade of a low bush, I photographed the bush from the other side, at 25 steps. No part of the 400-pound beast was visible in the frame.

“We might as well be looking for a field mouse in Montana,” I said. Jamy had been to Montana. He grunted.

A hundred twenty years ago, John Henry Patterson was twice as likely to kill. He could have shot either of two lions first. They improved those sunny odds by coming into his camps to eat.

In 1498, Vasco de Gama hanged his pilot after discovering the Arab’s plot to smash the explorer’s ship on a reef spanning half the entrance to Mombasa’s harbor. Five centuries later, Patterson entered that channel. A bustling thoroughfare during the slave trade, the narrow passage cleaving island and city from Africa’s coast was then still crowded with Arab dhows.

THE PORTUGUESE HAD GOVERNED

Mombasa from 1505 until the Arabs drove them out in 1729. After an 1887 rental agreement with the Sultan of Zanzibar, the island—its native name, *Kisiwa M'vita*, or “Isle of War”—became a ward of the British East Africa Association. A year later, the Association became the Imperial British East Africa Company. In 1895 the British Foreign Office assumed Company assets. The next year, Swahili chief M'baruk bin Rashed, who had thrice failed to slip the Sultan's rule, tried to shed British control. Defeated, he fled south into German territory.

Within a decade, administration of the area would fall to the Colonial Office. Construction of the Uganda Railway from the coast became a priority.

Patterson arrived in Mombasa March 1, 1898, and took a *gharry*, or rail trolley, the three miles to Kilindini on the far side of the island. This “place of deep waters” had already upstaged the original port as a harbor for ships. Pitching his tent under shady palms, Patterson set about gathering supplies for his journey inland. Orders from the Foreign Office reached him a week later. He booked passage on the train that crossed the Strait of Macupa over the Salisbury Bridge from Kilindini's jetty.

Chugging up through the wooded Rabai Hills, it breached their summit to enter the Taru Desert, “wilderness covered with poor scrub and stunted trees...carpeted in the dry season with a layer of fine red dust.” For 80 miles, only the color of the dust changed. But then, after a pause at Voi, the landscape became pleasantly wooded. To the south rose the N'dii mountains, to the north the N'dungu Escarpment. Dusk had overtaken the train when it reached railhead at the Tsavo River. Patterson spent the night in a crude palm hut.

Thousands of Indian coolies and other workmen were pushing the rails “with all speed” through wilderness beyond the river, spanned by a temporary bridge. Patterson was to erect a permanent structure and finish the project 30 miles either side of the Tsavo. After assessing needs for additional supplies and crew, he requisitioned both from Kilindini. Soon “the noise of hammers and sledges, drilling and blasting, echoed merrily through the district.”



J.H. Patterson (left center) was tasked with the construction of a rail bridge over the Tsavo River.

But each night the sounds of industry ceased. And from the darkness came death.

The first reports of missing workers were dismissed as rumor, or laid to illness, desertion or foul play within the ranks. But three weeks after reaching railhead, Patterson learned one of his jemadars, “a fine powerful Sikh named Ugan Singh, had been seized in his tent during the night, and dragged off and eaten.” Investigating, he was told by coolies sharing the tent that “about midnight, the lion suddenly put his head in” and seized its victim by the throat. They'd huddled in terror as their friend screamed his last outside. Patterson took the trail, noting places where the beast had “indulged in the man-eaters' habit of licking the skin off so as to get at the fresh blood.” Shortly he came upon “the most gruesome sight I had ever seen.” The victim's body had been reduced to “morsels of flesh and bones.” Close by lay the head, “intact, save for the holes made by the lion's tusks on seizing him.”

Patterson vowed he would purge his camps of such threat, writing later: “I little knew the trouble that was in store for me, or how narrow were to be my own escapes....”

He would soon confirm a double menace: two man-eaters. Their practice of hunting together and sharing kills suggested they were of the same litter.

Patterson's epic efforts to kill them, as they became ever bolder and eventually brought work on the rails to a standstill, appear in his 1907 book, *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*. It would inspire the 1996 film, *The Ghost and the Darkness*.

Patterson scraped together Ugan Singh's remains and piled stones on them. That night, with his .303 rifle and a 12-gauge shotgun (slug in one barrel, buckshot in the other) he sat in a tree near his dead jemadar's tent. Its surviving inhabitants joined him on his perch. No tent doors were left open that night. Presently, roars from approaching lions rumbled through the bush. Then as the predators began to hunt in earnest, all was silent. When, suddenly, frenzied cries erupted from tents half a mile off, Patterson knew what he would find at dawn.

Next evening he tied a goat to a tree near that camp and again began the night on a limb. Soaked by a drizzle, he endured. Around midnight his watch ended when shrieks pierced the blackness from yet another quarter.

Despite the lethal results of their visits and an uncanny knack for eluding Patterson, these were not yet seasoned man-killers. A slumbering contractor escaped when a lion entering his tent clamped its thick canines not on the man but his mattress, pulling it from under him and packing it off into the night.



Perched in this low, rickety machan on a dark African night, Patterson knew he was man-eater prey.

Fourteen coolies awakened by a lion that tore into their shelter froze in terror as the beast grabbed a bag of rice and bounded off. An Indian trader, traveling at night astride a donkey also laden with empty oil tins, was attacked by a lion whose leap flattened both man and mount. But when its scimitar claws caught ropes tethering the tins, the startled cat dashed off, clattering cans in its wake.

EXPERIENCE MADE THE MAN-EATERS smarter and bolder. Attacking in a different place nightly, they defied Patterson's ambushes. They ignored campfires, torches and thorn *bomas* ringing tents. They struck suddenly and bounded off right away, victims, alive or dead, in their mouths. They ate nearby, sometimes so close other workers heard the powerful jaws crunch the bones of their comrades.

Operating eight miles either side of the Tsavo, they bloodied the hems of rail camps. But trailing them beyond that blood proved a challenge. Even skilled trackers soon lost the spoor on stony ground.

Oddly, as the death toll mounted, coolies came to accept with fatalistic aplomb the loss of a man here and there. Patterson concluded each thought himself an unlikely target in a pool of 3,000. As railhead advanced, however, attrition at the bridge became more noticeable. For remaining workers, the odds had shifted.

Following the rails, departing coolies and their kit no longer ringed the hospital a short mile from Patterson's tent. Though a stout boma encircled that



Young, hungry lions here investigate the scent of meat on the wind. Lions hunt mainly by sight.

compound, a noise one night alarmed the assistant on duty. He parted the tent flap. A huge lion, having breached the boma, stared back. Then the beast sprang. The terrified assistant made an equally athletic leap backward into a box of medical stores. The crash of shattered glass confused the lion, which left to tear into a quieter tent nearby. It collapsed. Two patients of eight inside were badly mauled, but survived under shredded canvas. A third was seized and dragged off through the thorn fence.

Immediately Patterson and the camp's physician, a Dr. Brock, moved the hospital.

Suspecting the man-eater might return to the old infirmary, Patterson sat over it. Hours after dusk a shriek split the night—from the new compound. A lion had jumped the fresh boma, thrust its head under a tent and grabbed a sleeping water-boy by an ankle. Screaming, the lad had clutched the tent rope until it broke. The lion killed him, hoisted him as if he were a hare, then pulled him through

the boma, ribboned flesh leaving a bloody wake. Come dawn, Patterson found the boy's skull and jaw, a few large bones and part of a hand with two fingers.

Moving the hospital again, Patterson's crew built a taller, thicker enclosure. They left a couple of tents at the previous site and tied cattle near. Patterson and Brock began their vigil from a goods-wagon, the top half of its door open. Soon they heard a thump inside the boma. The cattle milled. Expecting the lion to kill one, Patterson strained to look. But the night was as black as it was quiet. Then: "I fancied...something coming very stealthily towards us...."

The cat had ignored the livestock to stalk the men. Suddenly it sprang. Brock and Patterson fired at once, and "not a moment too soon, for in another second the brute would assuredly have landed inside the wagon." The flash and ear-rending report under the iron roof turned the beast. It made off unscathed.

So ended the first ambush that presented Patterson with a shot. All told, it accomplished no more than had carcasses laced with poison, which the lions hadn't touched—no more than officials and sportsmen who'd visited to feather their reputations with a man-eater's hide.

THE LIONESSE JAMY AND I SOUGHT lived in a patch of the Kalahari Desert noted for its big gemsbok and eland. Ruddy dunes rim the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, comprising great slabs of Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. We'd begun the hunt in a 44,000-hectare swath on the Park's unfenced apron.

Lions are hard to see because they appear as background. When not obscured by landform and shrub, lion profiles melt into shards of shadow. Sunlight draws ocher from their fawn-hued hair to match the sand. Hours on end we scrutinized grassy flats and thorn-pocked red dunes for cat-shapes. We scoured sun-baked pans for prints. We hung two wildebeests. "Even when they aren't hungry, lions investigate meat," Jamy said. I'd not shoot over bait; but a visit from the lioness would give us her track.

Lions visited only one of the carcasses before warm days turned the flesh putrid. The lioness we sought was not among them.

We looked also to other magnets: water holes and vehicle tracks. Lions don't have to drink every day, but will where drinking is convenient. They leave their distinctive, triple-dented heel prints where walking begs the least effort. Nearly every morning we found lion spoor in our tire tracks. One male had padded along the furrows packed by our Toyos for a couple of miles. But the sand stubbornly refused to yield the prints of a single lioness.

DETERMINED TO KILL THE MAN-EATERS, Patterson built an over-size box trap with two compartments, iron rails three inches apart between the bait and any predator that might visit. To further deceive his quarry, he pitched a tent over it and built a sturdy boma around it. He sat as bait the first nights, with no success. Meanwhile, at railhead and other places some miles around, lions began killing and eating people. For a



time, it appeared the Tsavo bridge crew had been abandoned for other fare.

Then one night as a group of men slept outside their tent by their fire, one heard a lion forcing its way through the boma. Sticks, stones and firebrands failed to turn the animal, which burst forth upon the coolies, snatched a victim and made off with him. The other lion joined in the feast just beyond fire-light, both ignoring a series of shots sent in their general direction by the group's jemadar.

Camps were now widely scattered along the rails. Sitting over one that had just suffered an attack proved fruitless; the next kill would be elsewhere. Wrote Patterson: "I have never experienced anything more nerve-shaking than to hear the deep roars of these dreadful monsters growing gradually nearer and nearer, and to know that some one or other of us was doomed [to die] before dawn." Still he perched in the darkness, rifle ready.

Early on, a single lion had braved deterrents, the other sharing its kill beyond the boma; now both cats began breaching barriers, doubling casualties. Their success at thwarting Patterson satisfied workers that these lions weren't mere beasts, rather, that they possessed

demonic power. On the first of December, coolies at the river struck. Many hopped the next train back to the coast. Work on the rails halted for three weeks as Patterson and his staff up-graded housing. Tents were abandoned, bedding relocated atop water tanks. Some men dug sleeping pits to be capped after entry with logs. One night, so many workers bedded in a tree, it fell. "Fortunately for them," Patterson wrote, "a victim had already been secured...the brutes were too busy devouring him to pay attention...."

The lions became so brazen, even gunfire failed to drive them away. A stone's throw from Tsavo Station, both cats breached a boma, each grabbing a man. Hearing their cries, an inspector snatched a rifle and fired 50 shots toward where the lions were eating their prey. Calmly they polished it off.

Patterson requested *askaris*, or native soldiers, to guard his crew. District Officer Whitehead was due with them on an evening train. The boy Patterson dispatched to meet it dashed back immediately to report "an enormous lion" on the station platform. Laying this to the fearful boy's imagination, Patterson waited in vain for Whitehead. The next morning he found the station-



A big lion's skull and "tusks" dwarf an 8x57 cartridge, Germany's do-it-all round for a century.

advanced, pushing "a huge maneless lion" into his sights. "As I covered his brain with my rifle, I felt that at last I had him...."

At 15 yards, the snap of the misfire must have stopped Patterson's pulse. Exposed and unnerved, he forgot his second barrel. The lion looked him over briefly, then bounded off.

A DEJECTED IF RELIEVED PATTERSON inspected the dead donkey. True to form, its killer, or killers, had begun dining at the rear. Little had been consumed; despite the day's ruckus, there was a fair chance the carcass would get a return visit, so Patterson built a *machan* almost directly above it, and only 12 feet up in the branches of small tree. At dusk he began his watch, alone. Well after nightfall a growl jarred him awake. Then: silence. "I sat on my eyrie like a statue, every nerve tense...." A drawn-out sigh from the bushes signaled this lion was hungry. For the next two hours it crept "round my crazy structure, gradually edging...nearer and nearer." Pulse racing, Patterson held still. When a feline form took shape, almost at his feet, he fired—and kept firing as the lion thrashed about. Groans, then sighs, then silence cheered him.

The barrage brought inquiring cries from camp. Soon after shouting assurances that he was still alive Patterson was joined by torch-bearing throngs, hailing him as *mabarak* or "savior." Loath to look for the animal in the dark, lest it have one more rush in its demonic power, he waited until dawn. A short blood trail brought him to the dead lion. One bullet had struck a hind leg, another the heart. A burden for eight men, the cat taped 9 feet, 8 inches.

Any expectation that the death of one man-eater would reform the other soon evaporated. Shortly after news of Patterson's achievement reached Mombasa, an inspector at the Tsavo camp heard what he took to be a drunken coolie on his bungalow's veranda. "Go away!" he bellowed. The intruder left after killing and eating two goats. Next morning, Patterson surveyed the site, then tied three live goats to a 250-pound length of rail and settled into a *machan* above them. The lion returned, killed a goat, then dragged it and the others and the rail into the darkness before Patterson could fire an aimed shot. He hit a goat.

master had also seen the lion and had locked himself with the signalman in the station. A pale Whitehead turned up with claw marks on his back. His train had been late. On the short walk to camp with his askari sergeant by lantern-light, he had been knocked flat by a lion. Carbine in hand, Whitehead had managed to fire. The cat ate his companion.

The next day a score of sepoy under the Superintendent of Police arrived at Tsavo Station. The lion trap was dusted off, and Patterson installed two men as bait, arming them with Martini rifles to fire between the bars if a lion entered the opposite compartment. That night, all in camp heard the gate clang shut. But the sepoy were frozen in terror by the fiendish beast going berserk short feet

away. At last they fired, but with no aim. One bullet from their feverish barrage tore a bar in the gate. In an instant, the lion was gone. "How they failed to kill him several times over," wrote Patterson, "will always be a complete mystery...as they could have put the muzzles of their rifles [against] his body."

A week later, inexplicably, the lions vanished, Patterson's reinforcements left. On December 9, a breathless lad found him. "Simba! Simba!" he cried. Botching an attempt to kill a man at the river, a lion had turned on his donkeys and was still eating one. Patterson seized a double rifle and raced after the boy. Alas, a cracked branch on their approach spooked the beast. Desperate to salvage the moment, Patterson organized a beat, posting himself on a likely trail. The coolies

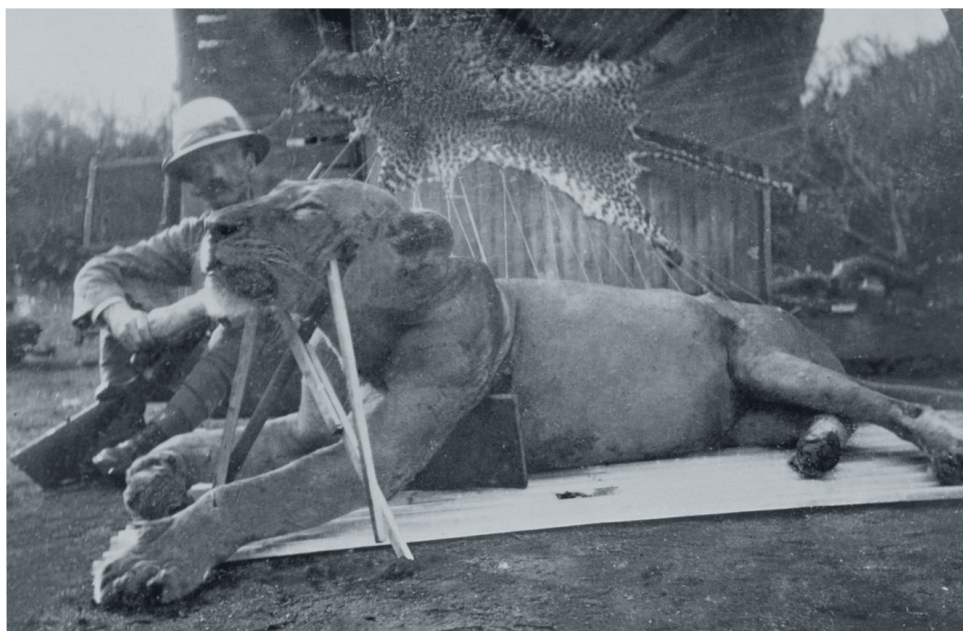
In daylight his party followed the plain path. Within a quarter-mile, the men heard a growl from a bush. Disturbed as it fed, the lion charged, sending its pursuers scampering up trees. But the beast did not press its rush. Advancing, Patterson found his goats scarcely touched. He quickly ordered a scaffold built nearby. That night on watch, he was dozing when his gun-bearer Mahina gripped his arm. Patterson made out a lithe form pass almost beneath them. "I fired both barrels [of the shotgun] practically together into his shoulder, and to my joy could see him go down under the force of the blow." But the animal recovered instantly. By the time Patterson brought his .303 to bear, all he could do was fire blindly toward where his target had vanished.

His early optimism waned next morning, as blood stains diminished on a track that led his party over a mile. Then the spoor was no more.

FOR 10 DAYS, no lions visited the camps, and it appeared the shotgun had taken delayed effect. But on December 27 a commotion roused Patterson. The brute was back! A volley of rifle fire drove it from under a tree festooned with terrified coolies. At dawn, prints showed it had breached the boma and poked its head into several tents.

Patterson secured a machan in a nearby tree. Under a cloudless sky that evening, he and Mahina took turns on watch. At 3:00 a.m. he roused himself, sensing a threat. Movement below caught his eye. The lion was stalking them! Aiming carefully, he sent a .303 bullet into its chest at 20 steps, firing thrice more as it scrambled off. The following day a growl alerted the tracking party. Patterson spied the wounded cat in thick bush. His shot brought it on. A second knocked it down, but it bounced up. When his third bullet had no effect, he reached for the Martini. It wasn't there! Patterson sprinted for a nearby tree, scrambling up to join Mahina just as the lion reached it. A careful shot felled the lion, and Patterson descended. But: "To my surprise and no little alarm he jumped up...." Bullets to chest and head killed the cat at five steps.

The second of Tsavo's man-eaters, almost identical to the first, had been hit



The second of Tsavo's man-eaters, almost identical to the first. Patterson had to shoot it six times to drop it for good.

six times. During the months Patterson had pursued them, these lions had killed and eaten at least 28 Indian coolies, besides an unrecorded number of African natives. In January, 1899, the bridge project resumed.

Not that lions forever ignored rail camps or crews, or that hunters thereafter always got the best of man-eaters. In June, 1900, a Mr. Ryall, Superintendent of Police, received a message: "Lion fighting with station. Send urgent succor." With two companions, Parenti and Huebner, he traveled by train 250 miles from Mombasa to Kimaa, where this lion had developed its taste for human flesh, and a disturbing ability to get it. On a siding, Ryall's carriage would serve as camp for the three hunters.

That night, Ryall kept first watch while his friends slept. Presently, however, he dozed. Soft paws crept from the dark bush and ascended two stairs. With one, the lion opened the sliding door, slightly ajar. But the newly laid siding was not level; the carriage had a pronounced list. As soon as the cat was inside, the door slid closed on its brass runner and latched.

Immediately the brute targeted Ryall. To reach him, it planted its feet on Parenti, suddenly awake on the floor. Huebner, berthed above, found the lion

all but filling the carriage. Main door shut, his only exit was a portal to the servants' quarters. Adrenalin powered him across the beast's back. He heaved on the hatch, only to find it held fast by terrified coolies on the other side. His incentive was strong, however; he tore it from their grasp and squeezed through. The lion had no such option. With a crash it carried the dead Ryall through a window. Unburdened, Parenti hurled himself through the window opposite.

The Kimaa lion was later caught in a trap and shot.

AT THIS WRITING, Africa's bush still harbors the lioness I sought. Unless she's taken up with the wrong crowd, she is neither man-eater nor ghost. Just hard to find. ■

