

# sole survivor



GRANT ATKINSON (4)

From 1983 until 2008 the Savute Channel was a dry river of grassland, providing ideal habitat for cheetahs. But then the water returned and changed everything, forcing the local big cats to adapt – or disappear. Savuti Camp resident and safari guide **Grant Atkinson** relates how one young male has survived by turning the new situation to his advantage.



**I**N 2000 A TRIO OF MALE CHEETAHS ARRIVED at the Savute Channel and settled in, making the most of the dry conditions for hunting. Their coalition lasted until the water began to return; as the riverbed gradually filled, two of the cheetahs disappeared, followed finally by the third.

As the water pushed eastward past Savuti Camp, a new pair of male cheetahs moved in. Quite young and at first wary of the game-drive vehicles, they took over the same areas that had been so productive for their predecessors. To begin with, the Savute was little more than a slow trickle and in places the big cats could leap over it in one bound. But slowly and steadily the grasses in the channel bed were covered with water, the open areas were gradually inundated, and it became clear that the habitat that had favoured the cheetahs was being transformed.

More than three years later the water has continued to rise and now the Savute is a permanent river, full and wide, with healthy stands of vegetation along its banks. The deep, dark channel shelters crocodiles and crossing it has become a risky undertaking.



OPPOSITE, ABOVE The surviving male cheetah still scent-marks where he and his coalition partner used to leave their scent along the edge of the Savute Channel.

OPPOSITE, BELOW As the Savute Channel filled with water, the nearby airstrip provided an alternative open space for hunting and the two cheetahs patrolled regularly, acting as if they owned it (and in cheetah society, they did).

ABOVE The newly arrived pair of young male cheetahs cautiously enter the rising waters of the channel, fully aware that a crocodile may be lying in wait.

LEFT Between a cheetah and a watery place... An impala's momentary hesitation on the bank of the Savute resulted in a meal for the big cat.

The cheetah pair began to spend less time roaming the river edge and more in the surrounding woodland. Although good numbers of impala are to be found among the mopane and apple-leaf trees, the vegetation can also hide dangers for cheetahs, such as male leopards and lions. So it came as little surprise when one of the cheetahs disappeared late in 2009. From time to time the remaining male called mournfully for his coalition partner, but now seems to have accepted the loss. We expected him to drift off to a more favourable

habitat – or worse, right out of the protected area – but he continues to weave a living in the woodland.

More remarkably, the solitary cat is making the most of the water that robbed him of his prime habitat. During the dry season many impalas feed on the green ribbon of vegetation that fringes the river, often in the open, and the wily cheetah chases them down to the channel's edge. Even a moment's hesitation before leaping into the murky water to escape spells a quick end for the impala. **AG**