



SHIVANI THE lionheart

Managing the Ewaso Lions project in northern Kenya, Shivani Bhalla is indomitable in her quest to involve the community and rally the local Samburu warriors to help save the big cats in their homeland. Science editor **Tim Jackson** visited the camp of this diminutive woman from inner-city Nairobi and was blown away by her enthusiasm and integrity.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM JACKSON

In 25 years of working with lions, these are really the ugliest individuals I have ever seen! That was the comment of lion researcher Paul Funston on a visit to Shivani Bhalla and her Ewaso Lions project. Bhalla laughed as she shared his reaction with me earlier this year.

Fortunately beauty, they say, is in the eye of the beholder and the somewhat dishevelled appearance of some of the lions here, on the western border of Kenya's Samburu National Reserve, has no effect on Bhalla's passion for the predators. Which is a good thing, considering the statement released just two years ago by the Kenya Wildlife Service to the effect that lions could disappear entirely from the country within two decades. Its estimate was based on fact: there are currently about 2 000 lions in Kenya, and about 100 individuals are being lost annually. Few are protected within national reserves (numbers have dropped 30–40 per cent in the past 20 years). In the semi-arid north, where Bhalla works in the Westgate Community Conservancy, lions are in even deeper trouble.

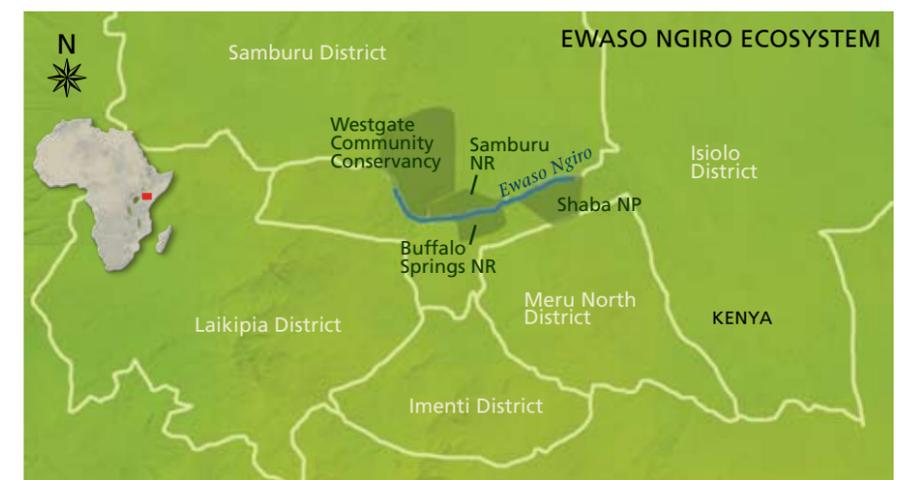
In fact, operating with any chance of success would be almost impossible for conservationists in northern Kenya were it not for organisations such as the

Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) and Laikipia Wildlife Forum. It is with their support that the conservation ethic has been embraced by many local villagers, who are now actively protecting the wildlife on their land.

Earlier in her career, Bhalla worked with zoologist Iain Douglas-Hamilton's Save the Elephants foundation at its research camp in Samburu. 'My first introduction to the big cats took place in 2003, when I helped Iain's daughter Saba Douglas-Hamilton with her film *Heart of*

a Lioness,' she recalls. The documentary recorded the remarkable relationship between a lioness called Kamunyak and the 16-day-old oryx calf she had 'adopted' after it was separated from its mother.

'I realised then that no-one had done any work on the lions in the area: their numbers, the prides, what they were doing and their conservation.' The predators became the subject of her thesis, and she spent many hours observing them in the Samburu and Buffalo Springs national reserves, which face each other across the Ewaso Ngiro River. ▶



At the time, Bhalla was also running Save the Elephant's community outreach programme, and she became immersed in local education. It was a productive experience. 'Save the Elephants taught me how to develop a project from scratch,' recalls Bhalla. But her Master's degree left her with many unanswered questions and in 2007 she moved on to start conserving predators in the Westgate Conservancy and see what was happening to lions outside the parks. 'For example,' she says, 'Are the lions in places like Westgate there all the time, or are they park-based lions that move out in



WARRIOR WATCH

Stephen Lenantoiye has been head of security at Westgate Community Conservancy since 2004 and is in charge of 26 scouts whose mandate is to look after both the people and the wildlife in the protected area. His office receives its principal financial support from entrance fees and overnight accommodation.

'When Shivani came to Westgate,' he tells me, 'she gave conservation a big boost.' The main problem was the Samburu warriors (above), who had been ignored and didn't understand how wildlife could benefit them. 'They needed targeting,' Lenantoiye explains. 'Now they agree that it is worth protecting wildlife. Being without the project would be like having a vehicle without wheels.'

Samburu warriors are young men who are ranked socially between boys and junior elders. Traditionally they are expected to leave their families and spend several years on their own, fending for themselves in the bush until they can qualify as junior elders and return home. 'The warriors used to kill the animals and steal,' Lenantoiye says. The young men admit it openly. 'Before Ewaso Lions came we lived in the bush like the animals,' one of them says. 'It's good that we can now support wildlife and not kill like we used to.' It hasn't taken much to effect this change in attitude – apart from basic training and education, a food stipend is all that Ewaso Lions provides. Initially there were just five wildlife warriors, but that number is growing. 'We realised the importance of what the project was telling us,' one of them explains, 'even before we learned how to write our names or those of the animals.'



the wet season? We *definitely* need parks, but most areas are too small for lions and they get into trouble when they move beyond them. Working with lions on community-run land is important for their conservation.'

It's obviously quite a challenge. 'I originally came here for three months – that was four years ago – and I'm still here!' she tells me.

Part of the problem is the ongoing conflict between livestock owners and lions. 'One of the biggest challenges we face is the retaliatory killing of lions – normally by shooting,' Bhalla says. She tells me about a recent incident in which a lion had attacked a camel, injuring it. 'There was only a little girl looking after the camels. While she walked the injured animal back to the village, the lions came and ate two more of them.'

The case highlights two main issues. The first is the lack of adequate protection for livestock. According to Bhalla, 'Some 90 per cent of the livestock we see in Westgate is unattended and most attacks occur on domestic animals, especially donkeys and camels, that have wandered off.' The second is the age of the people left in charge of the domestic herd – typically young children unable to cope with an attacking predator. 'People are basically feeding their livestock to the lions,' she exclaims. Part of her focus is to provide better security for the cattle and goats, making sure that they are

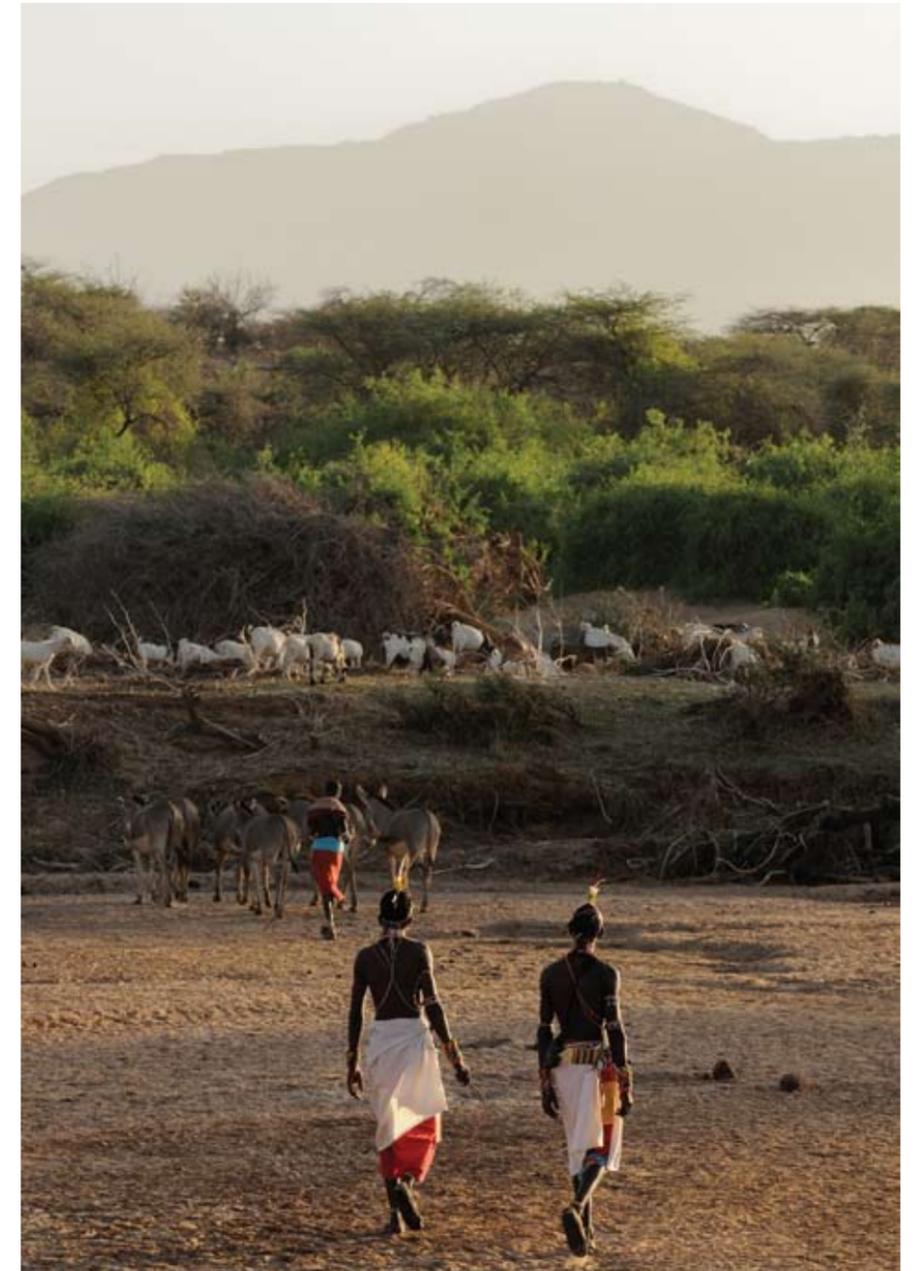
tended by adults during the day and are protected at night in predator-proof bomas. It's a method that is used elsewhere by the AWF and Bhalla is hoping that the foundation will help her develop it in Westgate.

The problem is compounded by the rapid increase in the human population. Between 2008 and 2010, many new villages sprang up, some forming a barrier to movement between the core conservation area in the conservancy that has been set aside for the sole use of wildlife, and the hills beyond. 'When livestock encroaches into this core area, both predators and prey just disappear,' Bhalla says.

It's even worse during times of drought. 'The Ewaso Ngiro is the area's only source of water, and people burn vegetation that may conceal predators on its banks,' she continues. Habitat fragmentation and degradation are problems here too.

Despite visiting Westgate to see Bhalla's work, I did not see a single lion – they proved to be elusive. I did see other animals, though. African wild dogs, the conservation darlings here, have also benefited from the project. 'Dogs had disappeared completely from the area, but now there are 30 or so packs in the Laikipia and Samburu districts. It's a sure sign that the conservancies are working,' says Bhalla.

Westgate is a strategically important area for conservation. Leading from it, the Kipsing Corridor links the national reserves of Buffalo Springs, Shaba and



ABOVE For livestock and wild animals to survive in each other's ranges, the livestock must be appropriately guarded and adequately sheltered at night.

LEFT The lions of arid northern Kenya are known for their 'ragged' appearance. Here a hopeful individual revisits an earlier kill.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE The Samburu wildlife warriors keep a sharp lookout for signs of the big cats' movements. Here they pick up a spoor of a leopard that had walked along the riverbed the night before.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Surveying the Ewaso Ngiro ecosystem, Shivani Bhalla and her wildlife warriors work tirelessly to save the lions that roam across the study area.



DO I KNOW YOU?

Samburu lions are unlike any others. The most obvious difference is in the male's mane. It's very short, even non-existent. Why?

Shivani Bhalla theorises that the lack of hair may have something to do with the environment. Generally, male lions living in tough conditions such as those in the hot, semi-arid areas of northern Kenya don't develop the thick manes produced by their cousins in milder climates.

Harsh living conditions are not the only challenge to male Samburu lions. With few females in the vicinity, they are forced to hunt for themselves.

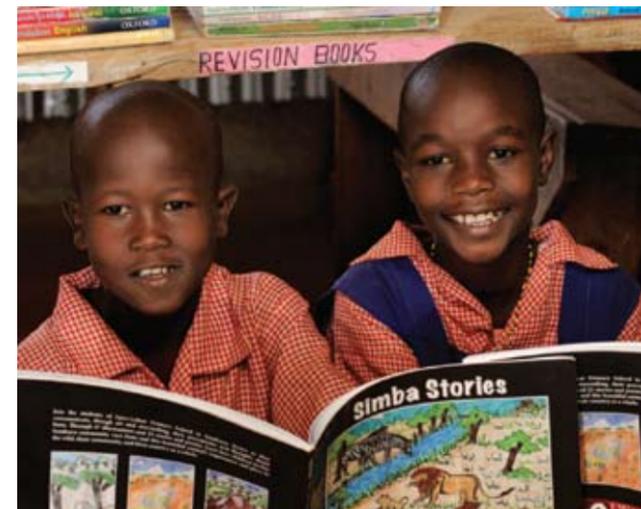
Currently there are just two breeding males in the Samburu and Buffalo Springs area, and they have formed a stable coalition for the past three years. That means that competition between males to breed with the females is low. The chances of a male takeover are slim, so the lionesses don't have a hard time defending their cubs. This is thought to be the reason the individuals do not form large prides. In contrast to the norm, pride structure here is very fluid.

Lions that live on community lands outside the reserves have a different social structure. 'They are more wary,' says Bhalla. Solitary animals, they hunt smaller prey such as impala, which they can bring down on their own. The big cats resident in the reserves have richer pickings – their prey animals need to access the Ewaso Ng'iro for water and the lions simply lie in ambush on the riverbank.

Samburu with the communal and private conservation areas of Laikipia District to the south-west – including well-known conservancies such as Ol Pejeta and Lewa. This provides a passage for the likes of elephants, Grevy's zebras and wild dogs to move freely.

One of Bhalla's most successful projects is Warrior Watch (see page 56), which engages young Samburu men to conserve wildlife. She has also published a book called *Simba Stories*, with colourful drawings of wild animals created by children at the local Lpus Leluai Primary School. (The book is available online via www.ewasolions.org, and US\$5 from each sale is used to fund the school's wildlife club.) The school has also benefited from a tree-planting competition.

Further afield, Ewaso Lions has led groups of schoolchildren on safari to Samburu Reserve. For transport Bhalla uses a game vehicle supplied by nearby Sasaab Lodge. It's a successful venture as many of the youngsters have never seen lions before. Armed with cameras, binoculars and a printer for their pictures, the children have a great time. (Find out more about the project at www.kidson safari.org)



I wasn't having as much luck. To escape the drought, many of the local people had moved away to places where the grazing was better, so I wasn't able to witness the Ewaso Lions' mobile film unit, Wildlife Cinema, on tour. The unit travels to rural villages, giving the inhabitants a real understanding about the local wildlife. It's a rudimentary affair –



just a portable generator, a DVD player, a projector, speakers and a white bedsheet for a screen – but it gets everyone excited about the animals. 'People can see predators in a safe context and they get to see the animals close-up,' says Bhalla. 'Many

have never seen moving images before!'

A newer venture is the Westgate Half Marathon, managed jointly with Sasaab Lodge. First prize is a pregnant goat; others include a second female (not pregnant!) and a billy goat.

Bhalla struggles to write up her doctoral thesis while running a conservation programme. For now, she's aiming to complete the

first at Oxford University. 'I can't wait to finish my PhD so I can do some real stuff!' she says. 'I'll focus on what has worked here and hopefully expand it to other communities. My dream is to have a great warrior network working for wildlife here and in other conservancies. Only then can the parks continue to be successful.'

AG

ABOVE Getting people to look after their livestock properly is key to the success of predator conservation outside national reserves. Ewaso Lions is looking to introduce the predator-proof boma system rolled out nearby by the African Wildlife Foundation.

LEFT Learners at the Lpus Leluai Primary School. It is their depictions of wild animals that fill the pages of *Simba Stories*, a book published by Ewaso Lions and sold, in part, to help fund the school's wildlife club.

BELOW Shivani Bhalla.

