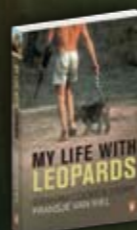


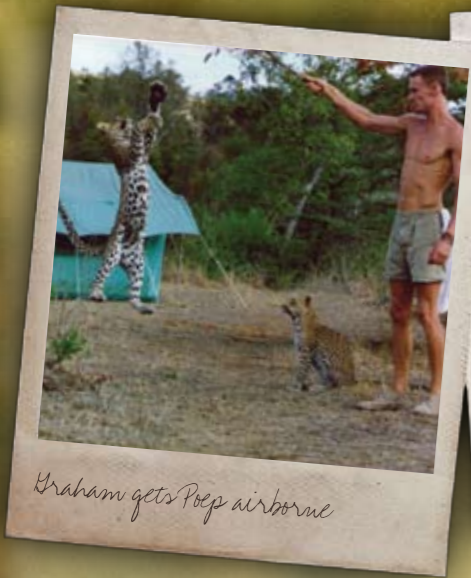
MY LIFE WITH LEOPARDS

The thought of raising two six-week-old leopard cubs in the bush was mind-blowing to Graham Cooke, but despite this, and some grave misgivings, he took on the task of rearing Boycat and Poep wholeheartedly. *My Life With Leopards*, written by Fransje Van Riel, follows Graham's remarkable story and of the leopards' coming of age. We are pleased to provide you with an inside look at this new book. ▶



Fransje van Riel was born in Amsterdam but moved to the British Countryside during her teenage years. After travelling the world working for KLM, she moved to South Africa in 1997 where she began her writing career.

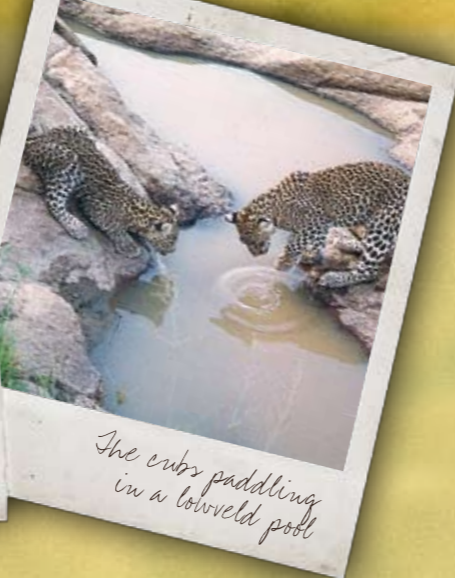
Poep lounging atop
Graham's tent in South
Luangwa National Park



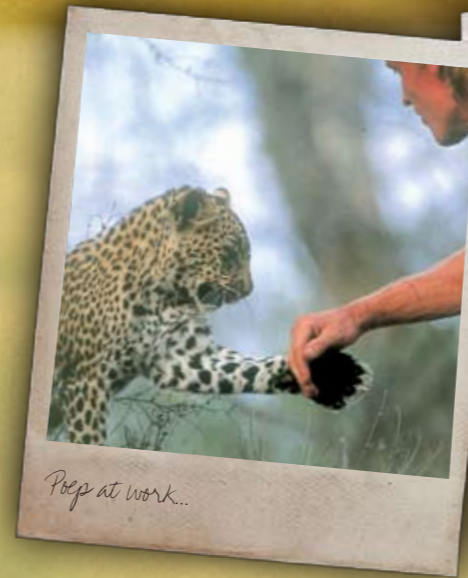
Kraham gets Poep airborne



Boycat and Poep bonding in Luangwa



The cubs paddling in a lowveld pool



Poep at work...



The siblings at rest...



And the pair at play in Zambia

The dry winter season began gradually to set in and the floodwaters around the island started slowly to recede, exposing new floodplains and island sandbanks which opened up new shallow pans, enticing Boycat into the water. It was on a Saturday morning, almost exactly two weeks after the cubs had arrived in Zambia, that Karin and I were once again following Boycat and Poep towards the north bank. As we came out of the long grass at the riverbank a rush of cool air played lightly with the water below the banks, and watching the cubs pacing up and down the riverbank almost compulsively, I nudged Karin on the shoulder. Something was different today.

Peering restlessly at the surface of the water, Boycat and Poep's gaze intensified and, barely able to speak as I comprehended what was going on, my

Casting her gaze from the river back to her brother, she flicked her tail in the air, unsure of the situation. And then, as if triggered by a silent signal, Boycat took the lead and started to move

heart began to pound. They were going to cross. Patrolling up and down the bank, Boycat and Poep stopped intermittently and stared at the water, before continuing to pace once more. For about ten minutes the cubs hesitated, as if their minds were warning them against what their instinct was urging them to do. Boycat was fidgeting nervously, despite his natural passion for water. Most days during our daily walks I'd watch him wallowing in shallow pools that were increasingly drying up, but it was obvious that he was

aware that the river was quite different to a mere pan, and that it spelt potential danger. Poep, too, appeared anxious. Never one to enjoy getting wet, it was as if she knew what her brother was up to, and she would have to choose between two evils if he decided to cross. Casting her gaze from the river back to her brother, she flicked her tail in the air, unsure of the situation. And then, as if triggered by a silent signal, Boycat took the lead and started to move in the direction of the water.

With our hearts in our mouths, Karin and I watched as Boycat scrambled down the dry crumbly bank and slipped silently into the water, wading in until his long sleek body was submerged to the shoulders. Then he began to swim. Squeaking nervously, Poep watched her brother moving through the water, the distance between them increasing every moment. We stood frozen to the ground, watching him negotiate the crocodile-infested river. Karin, panicking, pulled a 9mm pistol from the pocket of her shorts, loaded it and aimed it at Boycat in case something came up out of the water and grabbed him.

"Put that down," I growled nervously. "You're not going to change a thing if a croc gets him now, and if you fire that thing you'll risk shooting him!" She looked at me and then put the weapon

away, staring wordlessly as Boycat moved through the twelve to fifteen metres of water. Those were surely the longest moments of our lives. When he reached the southern bank of the mainland safely, and rose from the river, with sheets of water streaming down his body, we both heaved a huge sigh of relief.

Ouugwh ouugwh. Stepping cautiously across a strip of small pebbles and stones that had been pushed on to higher ground during previous flood seasons, Boycat turned and called for his sister. Still apprehensive, Poepface replied with a low, throaty rumble. She stared hard at the water, before negotiating her way down to the bank to enter the river. With my heart in my mouth, and powerless to change anything that might happen now, I said a silent prayer. Adrenaline raced through my veins as

I watched my little girl swim across the water until she too emerged safe and sound on the shores of the mainland.

"That's it!" I said, turning to Karin. "I'm going after them!"

Crashing down the bank I plunged into the cool flowing water, holding my loaded light automatic R1 rifle above my head, and pointed downwards in anticipation of letting off a shot the moment I felt the slightest movement around my feet. With the water rising against my legs I felt the soggy mudlike layers of sand levelling out when the water was halfway to my chest and, hearing splashing behind me, I realised that Karin had decided to follow.

Finally, the soft sand beneath my feet began to rise, as we neared the opposite bank, and I emerged with Karin close behind. Sopping wet, we stood on the >



This image: Boycat in the shallows of the Luangwa River



shores of the South Luangwa National Park and looked around us and despite my anxiety about the cubs I couldn't help noticing that it was overwhelmingly beautiful. Few, if any, people came here, and you could sense a wilderness that parks and reserves managed by the hands of man never quite achieved. Scanning the undergrowth beyond the flood line, I peered into the bush for any sign of Boycat and Poep, but it was as if they had vanished into thin air. We began searching immediately, but found that it was virtually impossible to track them across the wide band of rocks and stones. A dry river bed wound deep into the bush, penetrating the dense foliage like an artery, and, finding evidence of their tracks there, leading away from the river in a north-easterly direction, we followed the spoor for a few hundred

metres inland through riverine shrub. It was here that the ground became hard and their paw prints disappeared. I felt myself stiffen as I stared into the thick bush; we could go no further. Feeling my heart grow cold with hopelessness and defeat, I remained quiet for a few moments before turning to Karin. She shrugged her shoulders.

Together we made our way back to camp in silence. Battling with emotions of turmoil, admiration, worry and triumph, I felt confused and shocked. Surely this couldn't be it? Surely they were just exploring and would come back? I couldn't think of anything but the cubs and incapable of just sitting around camp, I got to my feet a few hours later. "I'm going," I told Cha. "I can't just sit here and wonder." She nodded, offering to come too, so we called Karin and prepared to leave right away.

Asking Sam to keep an eye on things, the three of us hurried back to the spot on the north bank where the cubs had crossed the river. I scanned the ground for tracks in case the cubs had returned to the island but when I failed to find any fresh spoor, I made a quick decision. "They're still on the mainland," I said, sitting down on the ground and taking my shoes off. "I'm going back there." "I'll come too," Cha said bravely, but I was having none of it. "Forget it!" I said. "This river is potentially fatal and there is no way I'll let you risk your life." She agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to stay behind, and sat down on the bank while Karin and I waded in a second time.

With our hearts in our mouths, Karin and I watched as Boycat scrambled down the dry crumbly bank and slipped silently into the water, wading in until his long sleek body was submerged to the shoulders

Main image: Boycat watching birds in South Luangwa

Top left: Boycat and Poep wrestling on the riverbank

After crossing the flood line of pebbles on the other side I randomly picked a narrow game trail and headed into the thick vegetation, every inch of which we combed for the next two and a half hours, without finding a single paw print. Exhausted and drained by anxiety, I peered up at the sky through a gap in the forest canopy. It was getting late. Soon the sun would begin to drop towards the horizon and it would start getting dark. I didn't want the day to end; I didn't want to spend a night in camp without knowing that Boycat and Poepface were safe. But I also had to remain cool, and could not afford to act irresponsibly. Lions, leopards, hyenas – they would all soon rouse themselves to roam the night under the treacherous mantle of darkness.

"We'd better get back," I told Karin. "I don't think we're going to find them."

My head was spinning and I felt a dull weakness descend over me as we traipsed back to the river and arrived on a sandy bank

a little to the east of where we had entered the bush. The first thing I saw as we came out into the open was Cha, who immediately stood up and began frantically waving her arms over her head to attract our attention. "Graham!" she called cupping her hands over her mouth. "She's there! Poep! Look behind you. There! There!"

Turning on our heels, Karin and I peered into the greenery to see Poepface walking out of the thick foliage in our direction. My heart soared. 'Poepity!'

Hurrying towards her, I fell beside her on the sand, feeling her sleek fur rubbing along my legs and running the back of my hand over her head and back. "Where have you been, my little baby? And where is your brother?"

I wanted her to come back with me across the river to spend the night safely in the cage, but, after following me the few metres to the edge of the river, she stopped

and withdrew sharply.

"Come, girl, come," I coaxed, but she was nervous and refused to cross.

I was torn between wanting to stay with her and obeying my common sense to go back to the camp. There is no way she'll come, I thought. She won't come back with me without her brother. And she so feared the water. The only reason she'd made the crossing at all was because she hated being separated from Boycat, whom she loved more than anything in the world.

Watching the river and the fading light, and then turning to Karin, I read her questioning gaze. I once again looked at Poep, knowing that there was nothing more distressing to me than leaving her behind, alone by herself in the wilderness. Yet I couldn't risk Poep crossing back with me only to change her mind while we were walking back to camp. What if she then to brave the river alone to look for her brother?

Was I just being selfish?

Giving Karin a brief nod, I swallowed hard and, turning back to the Luangwa River, we once again entered the water. I couldn't think. I just waded in, my emotions suspended in a cobweb of despair and, after climbing up the opposite bank and giving Cha a hug, I still lingered on the bank while Karin and Cha prepared to head back to camp. Across the darkening water I saw a leopard, a beautiful young female, stalking sandpipers in the shallows.

Crouching low, her white furry belly resting on the soft sand, eyes bright and alert and ears pricked, she flicked her tail as she tried to single out an individual straggler, oblivious of me, the human on the other side of the river who loved her more than life itself. Finally I turned my back. This was the beginning of a new life for her and for her brother. And for me.

My babies had turned into wild leopards. 🐆