

A cheetah is the central focus, standing in a field of tall grass and yellow wildflowers. In the background, a dog is visible through a wire fence. The scene is set in a rural, hilly area with trees and a building in the distance.

COMPANIONS FOR LIFE

A unique cheetah and dog partnership in Winston, Oregon, could help save the cheetah species from extinction.

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Sanurra, the cheetah, and Ellie, the Anatolian Shepherd, have been companions at Wildlife Safari in Winston, Oregon, since 2006. Sanurra was born as part of the park's Cheetah Breeding Program, and Ellie was partnered with Sanurra to ensure she had a companion.

Mud clings to Ellie's beige coat as she pads through the muddy grass. On the other side of her enclosure, an elk barks a loud warning at Ellie and her cheetah companion, Sanurra, as they investigate too close to the fence. Trotting back and forth, the small elk herd's fearful eyes lock on the predators, but the pair have already grown bored of the elk. Ellie bows, begging Sanurra to play. Sanurra flops down for a moment and lifts a paw leisurely as Ellie nuzzles close. As an adult cheetah, Sanurra rarely plays anymore, but sometimes Ellie, an Anatolian Shepherd dog, can coax her into a quick game.

To some this pair may seem unusual, but at Wildlife Safari, a drive-through wildlife park in Winston, Oregon, Ellie and Sanurra's story educates the public about wild cats and raises awareness that may help save the cheetah species from extinction. "It's a good story for guests. Most people have not seen a carnivore cat in with a domestic dog. A lot of people ask us, 'Is it her dinner?'" laughs Arielle Schepmoes, Wildlife Safari's lead cheetah keeper.

Ellie and Sanurra became companions at the park in 2006. Sanurra was born on November 15, 2005 in the organization's Cheetah Breeding Program, which has produced 171 cubs since 1972. Although the program has been successful, not every cheetah cub grows up with its mother. Female cheetahs often abandon single cubs in favor of later having a litter of multiple cubs because maternal energy can be better used ensuring the survival of more young. As the only cub in her litter, Sanurra was rejected by her mother when she was only 11 days old. The Wildlife Safari staff quickly stepped in and cared for Sanurra, but they worried she would grow lonely when the staff wasn't by her side; instead, they decided to get Sanurra a companion. As an Anatolian Shepherd, Ellie, who was only a few months old at the time, was chosen to help symbolize her breed's relationship to cheetah conservation efforts in Africa. When visitors at Wildlife Safari are curious about the domestic dog living in the same enclosure as a predator, the staff cheerfully shares Ellie and Sanurra's story.

"Having Ellie here really helps bring in that link from Africa. A lot of the time, people are interested in hearing about the cheetahs we have here and they forget about the animals in the wild," says Beth Benjamin, a Wildlife Safari cheetah keeper.

In Namibia, where the largest population of cheetahs is found, the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) created a guardian dog program in 1994 when it began providing farmers with Anatolian Shepherds to protect their livestock. There are no laws in Namibia protecting cheetahs from being shot, and they are often killed on sight if seen on a farmer's land. By first allowing dogs to ward off the cats, lethal conflicts between humans and cheetahs are greatly reduced. Kate Vannelli, a student at the University of Oregon, interned with the CCF in the fall of 2012 and witnessed the guardian dog program in action: "It's had a really high success rate. I think 90 percent of the farmers have reported reduction in livestock losses since they got a dog," she says.

Before Namibian farmers agreed to participate in the program, the CCF created a "model home" to convince farmers that the benefits of protecting livestock with Anatolians outweighed the expense of caring for a dog.



Cheetahs can reach speeds up to 60 miles per hour in as few as three seconds. Although Sanurra was raised by Wildlife Safari staff, care is taken when she is near humans, and trainers use large rakes to prevent Sanurra from getting too close to visitors.

"It's more effective to show native Namibians that the livestock guardian program works if we actually demonstrate [it first]," Vannelli says. With only a few breeding dogs, the demand for the puppies has outgrown the supply, and there is currently a two-year waiting period for farmers to receive an Anatolian Shepherd puppy.

The CCF chose the powerful, thick-muscled Anatolian breed because its dogs are known to be attentive, aggressive animals with protective instincts. To forge the strong protective bond the breed is famous for, Anatolian puppies bred by the CCF are given to farmers when they are about nine weeks old and then raised among livestock. Because a cheetah's lean body is not built for physical confrontations of brute strength, an Anatolian's loud bark can often ward off a hungry cat. In most encounters, a cheetah chooses to abandon its prey rather than risk being overpowered by another predator.

While Anatolians in Namibia are warding off cheetahs, back at the Wildlife Safari, Ellie and Sanurra bring awareness to the CCF's cause. "The pair brings attention to the CCF and it lets people know we are associated with a foundation that is trying to change the mindset of people who see cheetahs as pests," Schepmoes says.

As Ellie and Sanurra explore their habitat, a rumbling purr vibrates from Sanurra's throat. She jumps onto one of the enclosure's wooden platforms and sniffs the air, her purr fluctuating with each sniff. "Cheetahs are one of the cat species that only purrs and doesn't roar," cheetah keeper Benjamin says, adding that cats can either do one or the other, but not both. Wading through the mud, Ellie finds Sanurra, and Benjamin encourages Ellie to jump up and join her companion. Without a running start, Ellie jumps clumsily, her two front paws barely finding traction on the platform slick with rain. As she tumbles backward, Benjamin shouts, "Sorry Ellie!"

Despite her playful nature, Ellie is seven years old and suffers from arthritis. Sanurra is also seven. When she's feeling ill, Sanurra seeks out Ellie

for comfort, often rubbing her face on Ellie in affection. Even when the two are in separate enclosures, they lick each other through the fence. "We associate it with being like siblings. There's just this built-in love that we don't have a part of," Schepmoes says.

At the Wildlife Safari, Sanurra isn't the only cub to ever have been abandoned by its mother. Cubs Khayam and Mchumba, born on February 29, 2012, were also abandoned when they were just 24 hours old. Now they are on their way to becoming the new ambassadors of the park. Benjamin says even though most female cheetahs only abandon their young after giving birth to a single cub, sometimes two or four cubs are abandoned.

As ambassadors, Khayam and Mchumba will be the facility's face for education and cheetah conservation efforts,

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and they will travel with Wildlife Safari staff to schools and organizations to help spread conservation awareness. "Their main job is to get people to care about cheetahs, not necessarily in captivity, but in the wild, too. We'll take them out on daily walks—and of course everyone wants to stop and take pictures—so we tell them [the animals'] story and then try to throw in a little bit of a conservation message," Benjamin says.

In addition to conflict with humans, wild cheetahs, listed as vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species, also suffer from lack of genetic diversity. According to the CCF's website, about 10,000 years ago, all but one cheetah species, *Acinonyx jubatus*, became extinct near the end of the last ice age. As the animals died off, inbreeding led to lower genetic diversity, low survivorship, and poor sperm quality. While most mammals have about an 80 percent genetic variation, cheetahs have a 99 percent variation, meaning they have a less diverse gene pool. This makes the species less likely to ward off disease or to quickly adapt to environmental changes like natural disasters. "We try not to pull [cheetahs for conservation] from the wild anymore because

their numbers are so bad. We want to keep a genetically diverse captive population," Benjamin says. "That way, if something does happen in the wild, we would be able to replenish the species."

Zoos share similar concerns about animals in captivity. To support genetic diversity among captive cheetahs, the Wildlife Safari has partnered with the Association of Zoo and Aquarium's Species Survival Plan (SSP). Once a year the SSP meets and allows seven US cheetah breeding facilities, including the Wildlife Safari, to review breeding recommendations. Cheetahs are then shipped to member facilities across the US where they breed with other cheetahs to promote an increase in genetic diversity and to improve the success rate of cheetah births. "We try to trace back lineage all the way to the wild, but with some cats, it's not really possible. We do it as best we can," Benjamin says.

She and Schepmoes each hold a thick leash attached to Khayam's collar as they walk the one-year-old cheetah toward the park's open lawn near the flamingo enclosure. The two leashes are used for added protection and control. Visitors marvel at the predator as he walks out with his guides. "Look at that sweetheart! Oh my gosh!" one man exclaims, picking his daughter up to get a better look. Jumping on a nearby bench, Khayam poses as he's given raw meat treats. While Schepmoes and Benjamin keep Khayam at a safe distance from the visitors, Bethany Baran, a cheetah keeper intern, educates visitors about Wildlife Safari's cheetah conservation efforts.

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A little girl in the background squeals, and Khayam's ears perk up immediately. "What is he looking at?" a woman asks.

"Cheetahs are predators, so they look for the weakest prey," Baran jokes. As ambassadors for Wildlife Safari, Khayam and Mchumba were trained to become accustomed to public appearances. When the staff took the cubs in their care, they immediately began teaching them to be comfortable around loud noises, sudden movements, and other actions that might trigger the animals' natural fight or flight instincts. Even with these preparations,

cheetahs are still wild animals and the staff must take precautions.

When a lawn mower revs to life, Khayam scurries backwards

while Schepmoes and Benjamin keep him in their control. Determining there is no threat, Khayam quickly calms. It's a subtle reminder that despite his adorable face and tuft of fur sticking up from his neck, Khayam remains a powerful predator. Schepmoes rewards him with a chunk of meat for quickly regaining his composure.

While Khayam shows off for visitors, Mchumba paces the length of the park's cheetah spot enclosure where the staff teaches visitors about the animals' conservation message. Mchumba eagerly waits for her brother to return because, like Ellie and Sanurra, the cubs will be companions for the rest of their lives. Tired from a long day, Khayam flops to the ground and rolls his bright yellow fur through the moist grass. ♀

Khayam, a 13-month-old ambassador cheetah, has been trained to be comfortable around large crowds. As a park ambassador, Khayam will travel with Wildlife Safari staff to raise awareness about cheetah conservation.



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