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It's a Jungle Out There: Big Cats, Big Body Counts

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Attention all water buffalo, impalas, zebras, ostriches, elephants and lizards: Run for your lives. It's Big Cat Week.

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Beverly Joubert/NGTV

A leopard cub rests near its mother in "Big Cat Odyssey."

Fans of overweight domestic cats will be dismayed to learn that Big Cat Week has nothing to do with the recently deceased Prince Chunk, the rather large New Jersey cat who achieved moderate fame in 2008, when he became homeless after his owner lost her house to foreclosure. No, this block of documentaries from Nat Geo Wild, which begins on Monday with Dereck and Beverly Joubert's "Big Cat Odyssey" as the centerpiece, looks at lions, leopards and such in all their gory glory. "Gory" because mostly what these animals do is kill other animals and eat them.

Did that opening sentence say "elephants"? Yes, it did; in "Big Cat Odyssey" we see a pride of lions swarming over an elephant, trying unsuccessfully to make a nighttime kill. "As she raced off into the darkness," Mr. Joubert says of the elephant, "alive and a survivor, we adopted a new

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philosophy in life: hope."

That kind of overwrought narration makes some of these documentaries a slog, as does the almost constant use of slow motion; in the wild, it appears, nothing happens in real time. There's also an almost creepy sense, in watching some of this filmmaking, that you are a voyeur peering in on someone else's obsession.

On Tuesday night, for instance, "Leopard Queen" gives us basically the entire life of a leopard on the Londolozi Game Reserve in South Africa, as filmed by John Varty. Mr. Varty projects rather a lot onto this leopard. He has to, given that he devoted 17 years of his life to her. Sure, a good documentarian has to become immersed in his subject, but Mr. Varty and the Jouberts sound as if they've gone beyond mere immersion. Their level of commitment is simultaneously admirable and unsettling.

Perhaps the filmmakers' closeness to their subjects accounts for all the blood; they've been watching big cats for so long that they may have lost sight of just how gruesome some of their footage is. The four featured films in Big Cat Week aren't programs you want to be watching with young children.

They are, however, programs with a point: each underscores a different aspect of the pressures that have left some species of big cats, especially lions, in danger of disappearing.

On Thursday night, for example, "Lions on the Edge" follows a pride in Tanzania as it tries to survive a drought. And Wednesday night's film, "Lion Warriors," examines the push and pull between efforts to protect Kenya's lions and the traditions of the Maasai, who have built lion hunting into a ritual-filled symbol of manhood (though one with a practical side: lions kill livestock). This interesting film, by Kire Godal, captures an awkward cultural moment, as spear-throwing hunter-warriors are being asked, improbably, to turn into conservationists.

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