He sat facing me, knees bent and hairy legs spread, his dark eyes dispassionately meeting my gaze. He huffed and sighed, cocking his head to one side and resting an elbow on his knee. Occasionally his stare flickered long enough to pick an insect from his dusty body and stuff it into his mouth. He glanced at my rucksack. “Elf…” I found myself saying reprovingly, raising an eyebrow at him. I paused. Why am I talking to a baboon? I thought. This fieldwork is making me nuts… The rest of Elf’s troop was foraging in the waist-high, summer’s-end grass around me, pulling up shoots and nibbling at their tender bases, stripping stalks of their seeds, or stirring up insects and maybe even, for the lucky ones, a lizard or two. I recognised Elf immediately when, as the rest of the troop cast me twitching glances, he casually strolled up and sat beside me on a boulder. His long muzzle, pointy ears, and shifty gaze were the same, though he had grown a bit since my research partner, Camille, and I had first seen him about 8 months before. Then, he had approached these two strange bipeds, sat meters away when the others wouldn’t allow us within a stone’s throw, spread his legs, rubbed nonchalantly at his chin, and released a long arc of urine in our direction. In him I saw some of my college friends. It wasn’t hard to imagine that he was a slightly stoned student hanging out in the common room of my dorm building, waiting for a chance to abscond with a bag of chips from the kitchen. Minutes later, as we refocused our
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between earth and sky. Lesotho looms just beyond those immutable cliffs that cast the country toward the heavens, into the realm of the soaring jackal buzzard (*Buteo rufolimbus*) and that drifting shadow of the Drakensberg, the eland (*Taurotragus oryx*). Despite being the largest living antelope, the size of a dairy cow, with thick, twisting horns and hooves that leave tracks the size of salad plates, the mountain eland can slip between boulders as quietly as the scuttling grey shrews that rustle the grass as they forage in the night. Otherwise the silence here is impenetrable, enclosing, until a baboon barks from behind its long fangs or a black-backed jackal (*Canis mesomelas*) gives its ululating yowl deep within the darkness. Two and a half millennia have passed since the Khoi-San began adorning these cliffs with red-brown paintings of beasts, the men who hunted them, and the half-man-half-animal deities that presided over it all. As I followed baboons through the gloom beneath rocky overhangs these faded images caught me unawares, like the phantasms that linger after waking suddenly from a dream. This was the kind of place that tempted you to melt away into the landscape, to disappear into the long shadows of river-canyons stuffed with old-growth trees and bottled-water brooks, or into the longer shadows of the immersive night where the only distinction between sky and mountain is where the stars lie.

Despite their wildness the Drakensberg aren’t empty of people. At the confluence of two brooks that trickle from deep and narrow river canyons lies the Cathedral Peak Hotel, proudly

Left: The sun sets behind Cathedral Peak. ©Jen Guyton

attention on observing the behaviour of his troop-mates, he made off with a box of cookies from Camille’s pack, flashing his bare bottom in our direction as he raced to a spot just out of reach, where he sat and savoured his spoils. A month or so later his ambitions had grown and, with the help of another male, he bolted with Camille’s whole rucksack. As the summer grasses began to wither and quiver with the winter’s winds, I travelled to the valley beneath Cathedral Peak, in the Drakensberg Mountains. I wanted to check in on Elf’s troop of chacma baboons (*Papio ursinus*) which Camille and I had spent a month tracking and observing last spring. This time I found them within their old range, methodically scouring this hillside meadow for forage, between the only road and the cliffs that walled in the country of Lesotho, ‘the Kingdom in the Sky.

From a distance the Drakensberg are little more than a wrinkle on the horizon, like a square stone skipped along the edge of the earth, leaving its low shadow in its wake. The Zulu call it uKahlamba: the barrier of spears. Afrikaners saw a dragon’s smoky breath in the clouds that rise in great spreading formations, like a river delta pouring into the heavenly firmament, and so they dubbed them the Drakensberge: the Dragon Mountains. In truth the Drakensberg are less a mountain range than an escarpment: great volcanic extrusions eroded by the inevitably decaying forces of weather and time into a matrix of plateaus, river canyons and steep stone cliff-faces. These broad canyons slip from Lesotho into curling rivers – the Orange, the Vaal, the Tugela – which provide water to thatch-roofed villages, tin-housed settlements, growing towns, and ultimately goliath metropolises such as Johannesburg.

The valley lies submersed in suspension
displaying a plaque at the door, each of four stars painted the colours of the South African flag. The hotel has sprawled for seven decades below the steeple of Cathedral Peak, beyond two colonial-era oak plantations, their trees tall and straight and distinctly un-African, and at the end of an immaculately black two-lane road that winds beside a clear and braided mountain stream.

On a continent where humans and animals increasingly share land, we wanted to understand how the people in the Drakensberg were getting along with baboons on a daily basis. In this part of South Africa, a strange thing had started happening in recent years - baboons showed up with missing or mutilated limbs. Camille and I were there to pilot a study that would try to understand why this was happening, and how the injured animals were coping with their handicap. Often there were no stumps or scars, no clues as to why these animals had lost their limbs. In an intact ecosystem, leopards would quickly pick off such debilitated individuals. But leopards had become victims of development and stock farmers with rifles, and hadn't been seen in this area for more than ten years.

For three days I rose with the sun, walked through the hotel grounds to follow the narrow trail to the rock face where Arry the baboon and his troop roosted, and waited for the acrobatic juveniles to make their first cartwheeling appearance as the sun dusted the boulders golden. I had found Arry's troop where I had left them eight months before, consistency being a wonder of nature almost as miraculous as the miracle of change. As the troop trickled down the slope, 29 baboons of all sizes. I stumbled behind them over the uneven ground, the grass so high that I couldn't see my feet. The 'grandfather' and babysitter of the group, Arry trailed the tumbling offspring of this past year as they chattered and wrestled and clung to him while he foraged his way toward the oak grove.

In the oaks the baboons parted the golden mantle of fallen leaves, meticulously picking insects and acorns from the detritus. They watched me closely, wary of this pale hairless primate that sat closely and observed as they traipsed across the hotel's lawn and the golf course, without shouting or throwing stones in their direction.

We spent time observing a female whose right hind leg was permanently pinned to her torso, as if her muscles had seized up and frozen in place. She hobbled along on three legs. We're still puzzling over how she sustained this injury, and how other baboons in this population had lost their limbs. There is no apparent genetic connection - the limblessness is inconsistent in type and springs up in different family groups. Some locals speculate that they lost them to snares that poachers set to capture wildlife. Our most promising lead came when a hotel employee told us about the time that he had found a dead juvenile baboon beneath a power line, his arms reduced to shrivelled black stumps. He had grabbed a live wire, the current traveling into one hand and out the other. Perhaps the same had happened to some of the baboons we had become familiar with, but by some miracle they'd survived this conflict with human technology.

Unfortunately, this isn't the only way that baboons are clashing with humans in this part of Africa. After my final day with Arry's troop I scrambled down a cliff face in the gloaming and came upon the hotel groundskeeper and his German shepherd walking along the golfing green.

"Peter! Good to see you... have Arry and his troop been causing any trouble at the hotel lately?"

"They have, hey... breaking into the garden and the chicken coop, some of them even entering guest's rooms..." He looked at his feet.

"Ah...that's not good..."
IN THE FIELD

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“Ja, it’s not, hey. We had to shoot one recently, a big male who was getting dangerous. Now there’s one in Arry’s troop here, a massive male with a sort of silvery back, like a gorilla. He may be the next to go.”

I nodded and stared at the ground, understanding. As human populations in Africa grow, they are forced to share more and more space with the wildlife. Some, such as baboons, manage to adapt remarkably well to urban life, raiding dumpsters and plantations to compile a diet of nutrient-rich manufactured or cultivated foods that is superior to that of their fully wild counterparts — just half a loaf of bread makes up for four hours of foraging. Studies have shown that baboons that have access to human foods have larger troops, smaller home ranges, and spend less time feeding and more time socializing, sleeping, or making mischief in human settlements.

Consequently, when humans make these foods available by leaving dumpsters uncovered and homes and agricultural plots unprotected, the baboons concentrate in developed areas and are regarded as vermin. Despite local baboon population declines and their consequent position on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, their tendency to enter homes and occasionally become aggressive toward humans has left offending animals unprotected under South African law. The isolated Cape Peninsula population may be extinct within the next decade.

In other places, though, baboon populations are exploding -- largely because people across Africa are exterminating their main predators, leopards and lions. Ecologists call this “mesopredator release,” where the elimination of top predators causes lower-level predators, like jackals, civets, and baboons, to multiply. This is happening in the Drakensberg too — as leopard numbers dwindle, baboons are booming. Though baboons are often thought of as fruit-eating vegetarians, they are actually omnivores known to eat small prey like scorpions, lizards, and birds. When they’re released from competition with bigger predators, they’ll happily upgrade to bigger prey, including young antelope or other primates. Their voracious appetites and generalist diets can make their abundance a problem for prey species, causing the ecosystem to wobble like a spinning top exhaling its terminal momentum.

Keeping these processes in balance is good not only for the ecosystem but also good for human well-being. Because baboons are so adaptable, when baboon numbers skyrocket, they can be increasingly troublesome for people. Crop-raiding baboons force families to wield sticks in the agricultural fields instead of attending school, contributing to the already difficult problem of accessibility to education in sub-Saharan Africa. Research has also found that outside one national park in West Africa, where 95% of baboons are infected with internal parasites, humans and baboons share those parasites — in other words, where baboons live and defecate, humans get their worms.

The best solution to these problems is to restore top predators to African ecosystems, which controls baboon populations and eliminates sick and debilitated animals. Reducing human-baboon conflict is critical for improving baboons’ public image, which seems to deteriorate in proportion to their abundance. Ultimately, reviving the ancient balance between baboons and their natural enemies will save both humans and these primates that are so reminiscent of ourselves.