

When they arrive at the river, the wildebeest are thirsty and desperate for a drink – but the crocodile may not have eaten in months, so where do your sympathies lie?



Cheetahs make a kill more often than not, but can get muscled off their prey by larger carnivores.

**IN NUMBERS
HUNTING
SUCCESS RATES**

85%

AFRICAN WILD DOGS are one of the most successful predators around, with a kill rate per chase of more than 85 per cent, according to one study – but they may lose half of these to larger carnivores such as hyenas and lions.

58%

A study from the Serengeti in 2012 observed 192 **CHEETAH** pursuits, of which 114 ended in a kill – a success rate of 58 per cent. They have been shown to lose about 10 per cent of their kills to more dominant predators.

38%

Studies carried out on **LEOPARDS** have revealed wide-ranging success rates, varying from 38 per cent for individuals in north-east Namibia to 14 per cent in the Kalahari (though females with cubs were more successful).

17–19%

A single **LION** hunting in daylight has a success rate of 17–19 per cent, but this increases for those hunting as a group to 30 per cent. One study revealed a hugely increased chance of success if hunting on a moonless night.

10%

POLAR BEARS hunt either by ambushing seals in their snow lairs or when they come up to their breathing holes, or by stalking seals on sea-ice – in both cases, their odds of success are about 10 per cent.

HUNTER VS HUNTED: WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?

MOST OF US AUTOMATICALLY SIDE WITH THE GAZELLE RUNNING FOR ITS LIFE WHEN WATCHING TV, BUT DID THE HUNT PERSUADE YOU TO THINK AGAIN, ASKS JAMES FAIR?

“Come on,” whispers cameraman Mark Deeble to the GoPro attached to the inside of his hide. “You can do it. One more footstep, that’s all the croc needs.” As if listening to his siren call, the wildebeest takes another step out into the Grumeti River and, in a split second, the lurking crocodile launches itself, snapping its jaws around

a single, spindly leg and dragging it unceremoniously to its doom. This scene is in the ‘making of’ section at the end of the first programme of BBC One’s landmark series *The Hunt*, and to some viewers it might seem unsettling that Deeble is willing the wildebeest to become prey. But then, as Deeble says: “It’s very easy to have empathy for the animals being hunted, but in

this instance, my sympathies are all with the croc. Over the past month, they’ve had nothing to eat, and that’s been what they’ve experienced for the past year. If they don’t feed now, they’re in absolutely dire straits.” **COLD-BLOODED KILLER** Eliciting sympathy for a cold-blooded reptile such as a crocodile – and one that preys

in what could be viewed as an underhand manner – is clearly harder than making an audience feel for a lone cheetah heroically chasing down an impala in order to feed her four cubs. But in general, says Huw Cordey, producer of *The Hunt*, the team started from an assumption that most people automatically side with the hunted, not the hunter, whether it’s a cat or a croc.

“Most people feel the prey is the underdog,” he says. “The huge challenge of this series was to get people, if not to sympathise with the predator, at least to admire its endeavour.”

And certainly it’s hard not to respect the never-say-die spirit of the African wild dog pack in the first programme. Pursuing and then bringing down a bull wildebeest that weighs 10 times a single individual, the dogs appeared to overturn odds that were massively against them.

As Cordey says: “The wild dogs had to go through so much to get their kill. By the end, I was hoping the audience would feel they needed it.” In fact, this wasn’t totally the outcome. Participants in Channel 4’s *Gogglebox* were shown watching the wild dog sequence, and all urging on the wildebeest.

SILENT WITNESS

Favouring a side is a very human reaction: empathising with either hunter or hunted is like sitting on the sofa supporting our football team on *Match of the Day*. But some people don’t have quite the same latitude to take sides as the rest of us. In order to do their job, scientists must keep a lid on their emotions, but wild dog researcher and conservationist Dr Emma Stone says that doesn’t mean she isn’t also rooting

IT’S EASY TO EMPATHISE WITH THE ANIMALS BEING HUNTED, BUT MY SYMPATHIES ARE ALL WITH THE CROCS

for her study species. “When you are watching them hunt and recording their behaviour, you are being completely objective,” she says. “How many animals are involved, who took the lead, who took the animal down. But in the back of my mind, there’s always something willing them on to succeed.”

Stone, of course, not only knows precisely how rare this species is now (fewer than 10,000 wild dog individuals across the whole of their sub-Saharan range), but also that a successful hunt doesn’t necessarily mean a satisfied pack. “Up to 50 per cent of kills are stolen by hyenas or lions,” she points out. “You are always willing them on, because you know that at any moment a lion could turn up.”

Dr Grant Hopcraft is also a scientist but, as a landscape ecologist, he’s looking at the issue from a completely different angle – Hopcraft studies the wildebeest, not the carnivores. Watching



Were you urging on the wild dogs or the wildebeest in *The Hunt*?

predation can inspire a whole host of mixed feelings, he admits.

“I got into this research because I love natural history,” he says. “And when I see animals getting killed, there is always a sense of disbelief. Life is this remarkable bunch of chemicals making something what it is, and you go from a fully functional animal to one that still has all the components but is no longer there, in an instant. The sudden switch is pretty awe-inspiring.”

And he adds: “You see a wildebeest calf, and you’ve got this big, fat ugly hyena chasing it down, and there’s automatically a sense of injustice. But as scientists, we never get involved.”

SPLIT LOYALTIES

Cameraman John Aitchison wrote about these divided emotions in his book *The Shark and the Albatross* (our Book Of The Month in October 2015). In French Frigate Shoals, an atoll in the Hawaiian archipelago, he filmed tiger sharks attacking black-footed albatrosses that were preparing to take their first

flight. Standing in a boat, his job was to concentrate on the birds, while a colleague filmed the sharks underwater.

“Richard would come up from a dive, enthusing about the sharks and how amazing they were,” Aitchison says. “How they travel 600 miles to get to the atoll on the day the albatrosses first fly. But I was seeing things from the albatross’ perspective, and I couldn’t help but side with them as I watched them die.”

“The thing is,” Aitchison continues, “we empathise and we are inviting the audience to empathise, and as camera-people we wouldn’t be any good

“YOU SEE A WILDEBEEST CALF BEING CHASED DOWN BY A BIG, UGLY HYENA, AND THERE’S A SENSE OF INJUSTICE”



Tiger sharks travel to French Frigate Shoals to hunt black-footed albatrosses.

at what we do unless we did. I had to enter those birds’ lives to some extent, and then it was horrible when they were killed.”

And while producer Huw Cordey is in no doubt that he wants to gently nudge his audience into at least considering the life obstacles in the way of the predators featured in the series, there are, he admits, some species for which any fondness is extremely difficult to generate.

“The sequence that is hardest to stomach is where a baby humpback is separated from its mother, drowned and then eaten

by a bunch of killer whales. These are smart, determined animals, and you’re not going to sympathise with them. The only way you can make people sympathise with orcas is to talk about captive ones.”

So, now that you’ve heard the views and maybe watched the series – and perhaps leaving aside orcas – whose side are you going to be on? Hunter or hunted? Predator or prey? 🐾

+ FIND OUT MORE
Catch up with *The Hunt*:
<http://bbc.in/1MSvUrB>



Orcas taking sealion pups was a famous sequence in *The Trials of Life*.

HUNTERS ON FILM

One animal pursuing another for food can make for a dramatic, exciting sequence and has always been a staple of natural-history documentaries.

ORCAS THE TRIALS OF LIFE

The extraordinary sequence of orcas beaching themselves at Península Valdés, Patagonia, in order to seize sealion pups was first broadcast in 1990.

CHIMPS THE TRIALS OF LIFE

The hunting technique that was used by chimpanzees in pursuit of colobus monkeys in the Ivory Coast revealed their sophisticated teamwork, with different members of the troop taking different roles.

PEREGRINE FALCONS THE NATURE OF BRITAIN

Peregrines were filmed hunting wildfowl on the Somerset Levels for the Alan Titchmarsh-narrated

The Nature of Britain, which was broadcast in 2007.

POLAR BEARS BLUE PLANET

Polar bears may exploit a situation where beluga whales are trapped by pack-ice and must surface through a small opening in order to breathe – in the sequence filmed the bear was unsuccessful, but it’s known that they can make kills this way.

ORCAS PLANET EARTH LIVE

In 2012, a BBC/NG film crew recorded an orca attack on a grey whale and her calf while filming for *Planet Earth Live*. A group of humpbacks was also observed attempting (unsuccessfully) to disrupt the hunt.