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*Mother
Nature*
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*A photographic look at the
universal need to nurture*

by Sean Crane





Some mammals are born seasonally. Some, randomly throughout the year. There are those that enter the world in litters, while others make a solo debut. Some come from eggs — some from a pouch. They are hatched, dropped, calved, and begotten. They are called foals, calves, pups, kits, cubs, fawns, kids, farrows, and even puggles. Gestation periods can be as short as twelve days, or as long as two years. In fact, it seems that about the only thing all mammals have in common, is that they all come from a mother.

As for the mothers themselves, well, they may all have their own unique take on motherhood, but they all adhere to the same basic rituals — to nourish, to protect, and to prepare. They have wildly different ways of getting there, but make no mistake about it, there can be no stronger bond between living creatures, than that of a mother and her baby. Flesh of flesh and blood of blood doesn't just sound dramatic, it is dramatic.

Life — biologically speaking at least — is about passing the best genes on to the next

generation. This isn't something that nature's mothers are likely to acknowledge on a conscious level, but it's the driving force — the obsession — of their lives.

And once a mother ensures that those genes find new life in her offspring, her obsession shifts to keeping those genes alive — so that eventually they'll be passed on once more. The cycle continues — and as they say, that's life.

For more of Sean Crane's wildlife photography, go to www.seancrane.com.

ORANGUTANS — INDONESIA

Infant orangutans are completely dependent upon their mothers for the first two years of their lives. In fact, during the first four months, the baby won't even release contact with its mother. Mothers carry their infants wherever they go and sleep together in the same nests. Typically, two of these nests are built each day — a sparse one for napping during the day, and another, much stronger one 40 to 60 feet up in a tree, for sleeping overnight.

When a young orangutan reaches the age of two, it starts to gain a bit of independence and will travel through the canopy holding hands with other youngsters. This is called buddy travel. It isn't until the orangutan reaches about eight years of age that it will finally strike out on its own. Adolescent males break ties at this point, but females return often to their mothers throughout their lives.

The mother and newborn pictured on the opening spread of this article were photographed in Tanjung Puting National Park in Indonesian, Borneo. The mother exhibited all the love and tenderness that one would expect from one of the world's most highly intelligent primates.

PADEMELONS — AUSTRALIA

Pademelons are the smallest species of macropod (of which kangaroos and wallabies are members). As with all marsupials, babies are born at a very early stage of development, and continue to develop while in the mother's pouch. In the case of pademelons, young are typically born three to six weeks after inception. They are blind at first and very weak. Their forelimbs, however, are just strong enough to haul their tiny bodies through their mother's stomach and into her pouch. The baby suckles from within the pouch for the next 26 to 28 weeks. Often times, a new baby enters the pouch as soon as the last baby exits.

Even after leaving the pouch, however, a young pademelon will pop its head back into the pouch to suckle. It uses the same teat that it used during the time that it was in the pouch, leaving the other teat to the new baby. This allows the mother to produce two different kinds of milk, each suited to the particular stage of development of her young.

The pademelons pictured to the left were photographed late one afternoon in Lamington National Park in Queensland, Australia. Mainly nocturnal, pademelons will emerge from the forest late in the day to forage.



TOPIS — KENYA

As with most antelope species, topis are born seasonally. This generally occurs from October through December, with about half of all births coming in October. The species is highly variable, however, and depending on the habitat and region in which they live, certain populations can be born as early as July.

After laying low for a day or two after birth, newborn topis have the ability to almost immediately follow their mothers — even keeping pace while running. Kindergarten groups are formed among similarly aged calves, enabling mothers to spread out and graze while a single mom takes on the duty of watching over the young.

The maternal bond lasts for approximately a year, after which time the mother may birth a new calf. Once on their own, both male and female yearlings join bachelor herds.

The above silhouette of a mother topi and her calf was captured in the Masai Mara in Kenya. It was late November and it seemed that every mother in the reserve had a calf of her own.

SPECTRAL TARSIERS — INDONESIA

Spectral tarsiers have two mating seasons with two corresponding birthing seasons. Relative to their parents, the babies are very big at birth and are almost always carried in the mother's mouth. Infants spend a lot of time alone when mothers "park" them on tree branches before going out to hunt.

This mother and baby were photographed on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia. She cuddled the baby for a while, before leaving it alone so that she could hunt crickets.



GIRAFFES — KENYA

Newborn giraffes suffer one of the more unenviable entrances into the world of any mammal thanks to the mother's habit of delivering while standing upright. This causes the six foot calf to fall several yards to the ground. And as if that's not enough, the mother kicks her baby when it tries to get back up. It sounds cruel, but in reality, she is teaching the youngster its first valuable lesson in the wild — get on your feet quick.

After this initial lack of tenderness, however, the mother will guard her newborn for up to two weeks. If the baby is born into a particularly large herd, a single mother may choose to look after all the babies.

The above are reticulated giraffes and they were photographed in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy of Kenya.



COQUEREL'S SIFAKAS MADAGASCAR

Coquerel's sifakas are an endangered lemur found only in a few of the last-remaining dry forests of northwestern Madagascar.

Like many lemurs, coquerel's sifakas live in matriarchal societies, with the females being dominant over the males. After choosing whom to mate with in January, February and March, the female will give birth in June or July following a gestation period of 162 days. Newly born infants cling to their mother's chest for the first month of life — after which, they transfer to her back. The infants become fully independent by about six months and are fully grown in a year.

This mother and baby were photographed high in a tree in Ankarafantsika National Park. Together with Bora Special Reserve, Ankarafantsika is the only place in the world that coquerel's sifakas still exist in the wild. Even in these protected areas, however, the species is at risk from hunting, fragmentation and deforestation.



HIPPOPOTAMUSES — UGANDA

Hippos are one of the few mammals that give birth under water (the others being manatees and dugongs). The babies weigh between 60 and 110 pounds when born and must figure out how to swim to the surface to take their first breath. They suckle under water too, usually after resting for a while on their mother's backs. The babies will also suckle on land whenever they get the chance.

Mother hippos become very aggressive and territorial when they have babies, often going after crocodiles, and even lions to ensure the protection of their young. They are also aggressive toward humans, earning them the distinction of being the most dangerous mammal in Africa.

During the day it is rare to see hippos on land, but this mother and baby were grazing midday along the Kazinga Channel in Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park. It was as if they were waiting at a stop light, waiting for all the cormorant and stork traffic to clear out of the way, before proceeding.



RED FOXES — DELAWARE

Red fox mothers give birth once a year in springtime. Litters consist of four to six kits, although litters of up to sixteen have been recorded. The babies are born blind and deaf and without any teeth. They also have a thick coat of dark brown fur and are a month or so away from developing their characteristic red coat.

During this vulnerable time for the kits, mothers will stay with them night and day for two to three weeks. The kits need constant attention and require milk every four hours, twenty-four hours a day. The mothers, in turn, are tended to by the fathers or other non-breeding females. When threatened, the mothers are extremely vigilant in their duty as protectors of their young and will often challenge larger animals in order to keep their kits safe. If the mother dies when the kits are still young, the father will take over as provider.

Red fox kits develop fast, growing to full size in six to seven months. Young females may even mate and have babies themselves by their first birthday.

Red foxes are widespread not only in the United States, but across the entire northern hemisphere. The photo to the left was taken early on a spring morning in Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge in Delaware.





AMERICAN BISON – WYOMING

Female bison live in maternal herds with other females and their offspring. By the age of three, the male offspring will leave these maternal herds to either go it alone, or join up with a bachelor herd. The male and female herds will usually avoid each other until the mating season.

Females give birth to a single calf after a nine-month gestation period. The newborns are reddish in color when born and can stand almost immediately. The mothers will seek out a secluded area to have their babies and the two will stay isolated from the herd for a couple of days before joining back up.

This mother and calf were photographed in Yellowstone National Park in late spring.

ELEPHANT SEALS CALIFORNIA

Northern elephant seals return every year to the same breeding grounds. It all begins in January with the males who arrive first to haul out on otherwise deserted stretches of beach. Fighting begins shortly thereafter, as the bulls compete for dominance and mating rights. The females arrive shortly after the males and promptly give birth to pups that were conceived the previous year. The new mothers will fast for five weeks and nurse their single pup for four. In the last few days of lactation, the females will mate once again and continue the cycle.

After giving birth, mothers can become very aggressive and fend off other females from getting too close to her pups. An individual mother usually just nurses her own pup, but in some cases, she may accept alien or orphaned pups — in effect, adopting the orphan. After two months of weaning, the mothers will abruptly leave their pups and return to the sea. The weaned pups, finding themselves on their own for the first time, will form groups and stay on shore for another twelve weeks before venturing out to start their lives at sea.

Elephant seal pups are born much darker than their parents, as is evidenced by the photo to the right that was taken near San Simeon along the central California coast. The new mother seems to be gazing at her baby with a universal look of motherly love.



CHEETAHS – KENYA

Female cheetahs can give birth to litters of up to nine cubs, although the norm is usually three to five. Unlike male cheetahs, females are solitary — except when raising cubs. The cubs will usually stay with the mother for thirteen to twenty months. This is a very important time in the cub's development, as the mother must teach her young many important lessons including both catching prey and how to avoid turning into it.

This mother had two cubs that she was raising in the Masai Mara in Kenya.



ZEBRAS – KENYA

The preceding spread depicts a Burchell's zebra mare and her foal in the Laikipia region of Kenya. Rainbows are common during the short rainy season in November when the landscape is lush and green and the sky is full of dramatic clouds.

Burchell's zebras are just one of the subspecies of the plains zebra. Much like horses, newborn foals are able to stand, walk and suckle shortly after birth. The young foals are protected by their mothers, the stallion of the group, and other mares in the stallion's harem. The less common Grevy's zebras are only protected by their mothers because Grevy's zebras never stay together in a group for more than a couple of months.

The female Burchell's zebras mature much earlier than the males and may start having foals of their own at the age of three. Conversely, males of both species are not able to breed until about the age of six.



LIONS – KENYA

After seeking out a secluded and sheltered area away from the rest of the pride, a female lion will give birth to a litter of one to four cubs. She will hunt by herself while the cubs are still helpless, never straying too far away. The mother will pick her cubs up by the nape of the neck and move them to a new den site several times a month. She does this to make sure that a strong scent doesn't build up at any one site and attract the attention of predators — be it jackals, hyenas, leopards, snakes, eagles or other lions. Even stampeding buffalo pose a threat to the young lion cubs.

Usually, after six to eight weeks, the mother will introduce her cubs to the rest of the pride. This reintroduction may occur earlier if another female in the pride has given birth at roughly the same time. It is believed that female lions will synchronize their reproductive cycle so that they can share in the raising and suckling of the cubs. Tentative at first, the cubs eventually immerse themselves in the lifestyle of the pride.

This mother and cub were photographed in the Olare Orok Conservancy, just north of the Masai Mara. The mother was resting up after having killed a wildebeest. She hid the kill in some thick bushes before plopping down with her cub.



MOUNTAIN GORILLAS UGANDA

Infant gorillas are very dependent upon their mothers for survival. Males are not actively involved in any care giving, but they do provide protection for the troop. New mothers therefore will often stay very close to the dominant silverback. The males also play an important role in peacekeeping within the troop.

This mother and baby were photographed in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda.

WHITE RHINOCEROSSES – KENYA

You don't want to mess with a fully grown white rhinoceros — and you especially don't want to mess with a fully grown white rhino with a newborn calf. The adults have no natural predators due to their formidable size and their tough skin, and the young are very rarely preyed upon because of the mother's constant presence. If the baby does feel threatened, it will run out in front of the mother for protection.

Newborn white rhinos usually weigh between eighty eight and a hundred and forty pounds and are very unsteady on their feet for the first few days after birth.

This mother and calf were photographed in Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya.





MOUNTAIN GOATS — COLORADO

Late October through early December is breeding season for mountain goats. The females, known as nannies, enter into a synchronized estrus as the males, known as billies, join the herd and compete for mating rights. When the mating season has ended, the billies will go their separate ways while the nannies form nursery groups of roughly fifty or so individuals.

New kids are born in the spring after a six month gestation period. The nannies will find an isolated ledge to have their kid. After birth, the new mothers will clean the baby and eat the placenta. As for the babies, they are active almost immediately and will run and climb in a spirited display.

Babies will follow their mothers closely for the first year of their life, or until the mother has a new baby. As with most mothers, nannies are very protective of their young and will lead them out of danger, stand down slope from them to prevent falls and stand up to any would be predators.

Mount Evans in Colorado is one of the best places in the United States to view mountain goats. This mother and her kid weren't far from the side of the road — the highest paved road in North America.



ELEPHANTS — KENYA

Elephant moms deliver their babies after a twenty-two month pregnancy. Newborn calves generally weight about 250 pounds but only stand about two and a half feet tall. The babies are born blind and must rely on their trunks to find their way.

Male and female elephants don't live together after reaching maturity. The males head off on their own, or sometimes join bachelor herds, while the females form closely knit family units. Shortly after giving birth, the new mother will choose several baby sitters amongst the other females in the herd to help raise her calves. These baby sitters will take on many responsibilities, including walking with the calves and protecting them as the herd travels.

This mother and baby were photographed in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya.



OLIVE BABOONS — KENYA

For the first couple months of their lives, baboons are dependent upon their mothers for food and traveling. At this stage, it is common to see them riding upon their mother's backs. As a species, they do not engage in cooperative upbringing of their young, but females who have not yet had a baby of their own will often groom infants of other mothers.

This mother and baby were photographed in Laikipia, Kenya.



GIANT RIVER OTTERS – BRAZIL



Giant otter mothers give birth to blind cubs in underground dens in riverbanks. Fathers play an active role in the rearing of the cubs, as do older siblings who haven't yet had cubs of their own. All members of the group are very protective of the young and will aggressively charge at potential danger. In the wild, giant otters are usually born in August and September when river levels are at their lowest, and fish concentrations are at their highest. This not only ensures that there are enough fish to feed the young, but also offers the perfect opportunity for cubs to learn to fish themselves.

This mom and her cubs were running along a riverbank in the Pantanal of Brazil.

HANUMAN LANGURS – INDIA

Langurs usually give birth to a single infant, although twins are possible. At first the young langurs don't move around much, preferring to just cling to their mothers and suckle. By the sixth week, however, langurs begin to vocalize more and start running and jumping around. At the age of two, langurs practice what is known as alloparenting. What this means is that a young langur is given to other females in the group that aren't the biological mother.

Hanuman langurs are very common in the National Parks of Madhya Pradesh, India. In this photo a mother holds her baby near the entrance to Kanha National Park.

MEERKATS – BOTSWANA

The most common litter size for meerkats (or suricates) is three pups, and a reproductive female may have as many as four litters per year. Meerkats are very social within their clan and a female that has not had pups of her own can lactate and nurse another female's young.

The pups aren't allowed to leave the burrow until they are three weeks old. At this time, the entire clan will stand around the burrow to watch and protect the new members.

Although allowed out of the burrow, the young meerkats must stay nearby with a baby sitter, and aren't yet invited on foraging excursions. It's not until another week or so, that they are finally deemed ready to join the clan on a hunt.

This young meerkat and (perhaps) its baby sitter were sitting on top of a burrow in the Makgadikgadi Pan region of Botswana. It was late in the afternoon and they watched as the rest of the clan returned from a day of foraging.

