

Lion Around

Close encounter with an upside-down cat

by Mattias Klum, as told to Catherine D. Hughes

Suddenly screams echo through the forest as alarmed animals such as spotted deer warn each other of a predator's approach. Lying on my stomach with my camera in front of me, I've been watching a nearby stream for hours, waiting. This may be it.

Yes! A 380-pound lioness steps from the trees and heads toward the stream. She crouches down to drink. She's close to me—no more than 50 yards away. She stands up and begins to walk toward me, not knowing I'm there.

When she is just about 20 yards away, I move my camera slightly so that she notices me. I don't want to shock or panic her. She freezes for a moment, then takes a crouching position and continues toward me—which was not really the reaction I wanted! I'm thinking, "Uh-oh, I'm about to become cat food!" I've approached lions before, but this is a first. The lion approaches *me*.

If I stand up and yell, will she leave? Maybe, maybe not. If I stand up and run, will she chase me? Probably. So I decide to stay put.

The lioness comes closer and closer until she's only about four yards from me—which is now only a couple of pounces away and the closest distance that still allows me to focus my camera lens.

Surprisingly, she lies down, posing like a sphinx statue in front of me. This makes me feel very small and humble. Then she rolls over and looks at me upside down! She seems a little puzzled and appears to be trying to figure me out—*Hmm, are you edible? You don't look dangerous. I think you're OK.*

Breathe slowly, I remind myself, even though my heart is pounding. I carefully back up my tripod just a bit to where I can focus and shoot the picture.

Suddenly—so fast that it startles me—she leaps up. In a flash, she bounds away. I'm left overwhelmed with emotion—the encounter felt like a gift from the forest. Getting this photograph took a long time. I spent two years waiting for a permit to track the extremely rare Asiatic lions in the Gir Forest of India. Then I spent three months on foot searching for them. There are only about 300 of these endangered lions left.

Perhaps all the waiting in the forest gave the lioness time to get used to me. I tried not to intrude on her life. My reward? A moment I'll never forget.

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