

Kenya male lions seen in intimate act; bonding, experts say

7 November 2017, by Christopher Torchia

Recent photos taken in a Kenyan wildlife area show a rare sight: a male lion mounting another male lion in what resembles a sexual act but is possibly a way of showing dominance.

The spectacle of two wild male lions in such intimacy was also observed in Botswana last year and has sometimes been interpreted as homosexual behavior, though lion experts say it is a relatively uncommon form of bonding or social interaction.

Paul Goldstein, the photographer who captured the images in Kenya's Maasai Mara reserve in August, said many other species are known to engage in such behavior and that, for example, he had seen giraffes doing it.

"It was just a dramatic thing to see," Goldstein said of the male lions. He said he was astonished by a Kenyan media report in which Ezekiel Mutua, a Kenyan official, said the lion behavior was "not normal" and made remarks critical of homosexuality.

Wild male lions have only mounted each other for a day or two in past cases that were observed, and the activity happens "during periods of social stress or a realignment of their dominance relationship," said Craig Packer, director of a lion research center at the University of Minnesota.

"There have been several observations of male lions mounting each other without intromission, and the males subsequently resumed their normal patterns of mating with receptive females," Packer wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

"Male lions form stable coalitions and they are very affectionate with each other, but this affection is expressed by rubbing their heads together, licking each other's faces and flopping on top of each other," he wrote.

Another lion expert said cases of male lions mounting each other are "typically infrequent" and that he interprets it as a form of social bonding.

"Male lions have to commit to supporting each other when a territory is challenged, so maybe at times of territory take-over males are stressed and more likely to" engage in such an act, said Paul Funston, senior director of [lion](#) and cheetah programs at the Panthera conservation group.

In a blog post last year, Funston noted that a photographer documented similar behavior by two male lions that had traveled from Namibia to Botswana, and he described it as "remarkable but not unheard of [behavior](#) that was misunderstood by many."

Ian Michler, maker of a documentary film called "Blood Lions," said lions "have been known to 'mate' as a way of showing dominance of other males" in a group, particularly a new one.

While the lions photographed in Kenya and Botswana were confirmed to be male, Michler also remarked that some female lions with high testosterone levels grow manes, often don't produce offspring and might be mistaken for males.

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