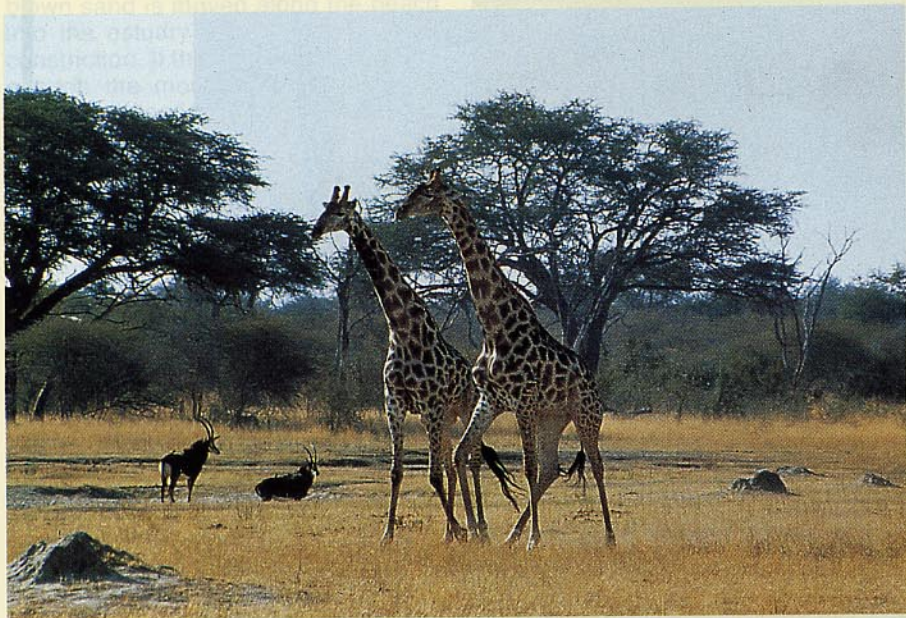




WILDLIFE IN ACTION

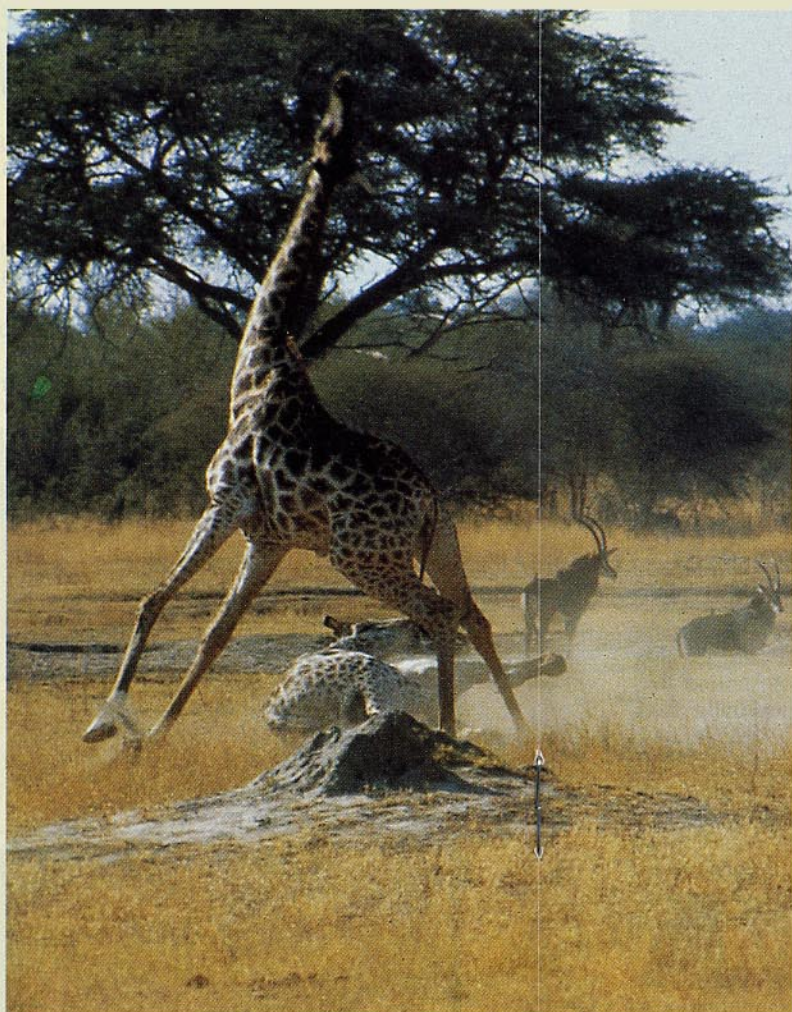
In the winter of 1991 I had the good fortune to witness and photograph an incredible fight between two male giraffe at Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe. At the time I was involved in a research project on oxpeckers, and my colleague, Ngoni Chiweshe, and I were spending our days observing the feeding behaviour of these birds at various locations in Hwange.

One day we arrived at a pan where, among the many other animals there, a lone male giraffe was roaming around. This male had a large flock of oxpeckers foraging through his fur, so we kept ourselves busy by watching them. Not long after our arrival at the pan, however, another male giraffe arrived on the scene. He headed straight for the first male and they quickly lined up side by side, facing in the same direction, and began walking forward slowly in time with each other. We watched the two giraffe pace about together for some time, curious as to what they were up to.

Nothing happened though, and we soon began watching oxpeckers on the other animals at the pan.

Suddenly there was a tremendous crash, and our eyes shot back to the two giraffe, in time to see a small cloud of oxpeckers rising above them in fright. Then we saw what had made the noise: the giraffe were swinging at each other with their necks! Alternating their blows, each giraffe would crash his neck and head into the base of his opponent's neck, producing a resounding *whack* on impact. They each struck at the other about five times and then, as suddenly as they had started, they stopped, and once again began pacing about in perfect synchrony.

After a few minutes, they started hitting each other, or "necking", again. This time, however, things got quite nasty; the giraffe that had been at the pan from the beginning hit the invading male so punishingly that his victim toppled over on to the ground. I'm not sure if it was from the blow from his opponent, or from the



actual fall, but the invading male was knocked completely unconscious. With his opponent collapsed and motionless, the victorious male giraffe slowly walked about nearby while keeping a wary eye on his fallen adversary. After being out cold for about three minutes the giraffe regained consciousness, moving his head about a little before quickly staggering to his feet. His opponent was right there beside him, apparently willing to fight some more. The loser had had enough, however, and at a quick pace left the way he had come. The victor watched him until he was out of sight, and then resumed his vigil around the pan.

Such fighting obviously will have very high costs to the males involved. The risk of injury is high and the energy required to fight effectively is enormous. In addition, any giraffe that is toppled over during a fight will be vulnerable to predators. If a pride of lions were to come across an unconscious giraffe they would not hesitate to attack.

Why do male giraffes put themselves through such dangerous and costly activity? This question has yet to be answered satisfactorily by scientists, but it certainly centres around mating. Male giraffes fight because the victors get the opportunity to mate with more females and so will father more offspring. Since new generations of giraffe will mostly be descendants of good fighters they will have inherited the will to do battle. Fighting in giraffe is a ritual, necessary for males to participate in if they want to mate, a dangerous risk that they must take if they are going to successfully leave descendants in the next generation. ■

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