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TV REVIEW | 'MUTUAL OF OMAHA'S WILD KINGDOM'

## When a Lioness Wants a Pet, a Baby Antelope Will Do

By [NED MARTEL](#)

**A**nimal Planet bills the 1963 debut season of its revived franchise, "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom," as the earliest episodes of reality television. Marlin Perkins, the show's original guide, brought back celluloid trophies of spontaneous but patterned behavior: the flirting and mating, the fight and flight of wild beasts.

In its latest incarnation on Sunday nights, the family hour is again an elemental showcase for family dynamics. In the third season's premiere episode, a lioness is actually without a family, ostracized by three prides in her northern Kenya habitat. Weak from solo foraging, she finds companionship in someone else's offspring. Separated from its herd, a baby antelope is adopted by the lioness as a kind of pet.

This episode, "The Heart of a Lioness," carefully studies the perceptible emotions of this unusual captive-captor relationship, and its dynamic seems as intimately depicted as anything found in the group houses of "Big Brother" or "The Real World." Being shunned, or merely removed from usual sources of support, can lead to strange behavior. The lioness is watched not only by the show's narrator, Saba Douglas-Hamilton, but also by the people who share this savannah, the Samburu warriors.

Since every living thing in this wilderness is keenly aware of the food chain, the lioness is seen as more than just kind, on a scale that can almost be considered otherworldly. The Samburu name the lioness Kamunyak, or "blessed one." One tribesman suggests that a higher power must have sanctified these nuzzling acts of love, which replace what should be bloody interactions.

As in reality-TV setups, the protagonists are confused by their own impulses. Sometimes, Kamunyak lets the small calf curl up with her for naps in the grass. At other times affection seems a prelude to attack. Her nurturing licks and pats could quickly become fatal bites and clawings. It's as if the lioness can taste something that her internal chemistry says she needs, as she goes for days, then weeks without a kill. (Lions usually feed every four days, we are told.)

Ms. Douglas-Hamilton ably conveys her amazement at the unfolding drama. She asks experts what could be going on, and their befuddlement equals her own - and that of the Samburu tribe members who gather to gawk like pilgrims at Lourdes. Kamunyak, the behaviorists surmise, had a damaging break from her pride at a critically young stage. She's too early in her own adolescence to have borne and then lost cubs, so she isn't trying to replace any. But some maternal drive is altering her own survival mechanism.

Ms. Douglas-Hamilton circles her Toyota S.U.V. around the lazing, starving duo recording the commotion that this cuddling inspires in the other packs, as herds of antelope and curious lions look truly perplexed.

Ms. Douglas-Hamilton seems savvy about all creatures and demonstrates an easy rapport with elephants, indigenous tribesmen and quirky scientists alike. She is lovely, like an earthier Natascha McElhone, and her mellifluous narration aspires to Isak Dinesen. "At night, the dew settles the dust, so that tracking in the

morning is like reading a newspaper of footprints," she says. "The drama of the night unfolds before your eyes, if you can read the signs in the sand."

Her interpretive skill makes this first hour of the new season far more sophisticated than the simplistic style of Mr. Perkins, who died in 1986. That stands to reason: the wildlife documentary field has undergone its own evolution over the last half century, and the televised study of nature has gotten better in connecting millions of viewers with other mammals in the wild. As different as the human brain is from the big cat's, Kamunyak's story transmits something about loneliness and baby envy that seems useful and familiar.

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