

Extract of the White Lions Story in Ron Hopkins book *Ingwelala: The First 30 Years*



## White Lions

The white lions first came to the attention of the public when Chris McBride's book *The White Lions of Timbavati* was published in 1975. The two cubs had been spotted by Lanice van den Heever on the farm 'Vlakgezicht' which belonged to Chris' father Cyril. They were named 'Temba' and 'Tombi' meaning hope and girl in Zulu. It is rumoured that both ended up in the Pretoria Zoo.

The world starting taking notice of these 'albinos' and soon, dozens of theories abounded as to the reason for their white coats. It has now been proven that there is a simple explanation: the colour is a condition known as leucism in which the pelt is white but the eyes and skin are pigmented. This rare occurrence (also known as a 'chinchilla mutation') is thought to represent an evolutionary stage in the progressive loss of pigmentation. The white mutation, which affects two of the pigments involved in coat colouration, only occurs when two conditions pertain:

- both parents carry the recessive 'white gene'.
- the offspring inherit the recessive gene of each parent. If a cub receives a dominant tawny gene from either parent, its pelt will be tawny. Thus prides may be comprised of both white and tawny cubs.



*Rex and Adonis. A painting by Roy Keeler*

In 1983 a pride of lions were often seen on the Sohebele River in the Timbavati Reserve. The pride consisted of two male lions called Rex and Adonis, (who were carrying the recessive gene) and four mature females, all of which were tawny.

One of the lionesses was also a gene carrier, because in a litter born to her, was a white female who later became known to the world as 'Whitey', and together with one of her sisters called 'Notch', they formed the nucleus of a pride which would dominate the lion population in the Timbavati for many years.



Their territory centred around Motswari Game Reserve, which meant they spent a considerable time on Ingwelala. One story regarding this incredible female concerns an orphaned lion cub that was captured and then dropped off near Whitey and her pride. Contrary to all studies of lion behaviour, the pride accepted the little cub, and it went on to grow to adulthood with his new family.

A couple of years later both Rex and Adonis were shot and killed on the farm 'Op Goedehoop.' Whitey and Notch were eventually hunted and killed but not before Notch had managed to seriously maul her attacker and was consequently shot by the tracker accompanying the hunt.

In May 2006, after an absence of nearly 12 years, two white cubs were sighted from Klipspringer Lookout on Ingwelala. Unfortunately this was the last time these cubs were seen and speculation was rife that they had been captured by hunters to be sold off.

At the beginning of December 2009 a new pride, which had not been seen in the area before, made a spectacular appearance. There were two fully mature females and four cubs, two of which were white. This was proof positive that the white lion gene was alive and well and living in a few select lions who called Timbavati home.