

BBC earth



DYNASTIES

THE GREATEST OF THEIR KIND

BBC / BBC Studios / Stefan Christmann / Nick Lynn / Theo Webb 2018

filmed at Vundu Camp



INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

DYNASTIES
THE GREATEST OF THEIR KIND

MICHAEL GUNTON
Executive Producer



RUPERT BARRINGTON
Series Producer

Dynasties is a new kind of natural history event. Five episodes, five of the most celebrated and endangered animals on the planet. Never before have we presented a landmark series with such powerful storytelling – about families, leaders and heroes. Never before has a landmark offered the viewer the opportunity to follow the lives of animals in such detail, each fighting against overwhelming odds for their own survival and the future of their families. These are some of the most dramatic and intense stories of their kind ever told.

For each episode of *Dynasties* our crews spent many hundreds of days in a single, iconic location, each home to one of our animals. We joined those animals and their families at a critical moment in

their lives. A chimpanzee leader battling for his position and his life on the edge of the Sahara. A dynasty of thousands of emperor penguins gathering on the frozen wastes of Antarctica to face the coldest and cruellest winter on earth. A powerful lioness, abandoned by her male protectors, leading her family against the gravest dangers of the African savannah. On the floodplains of Zimbabwe, a feud between a mother and daughter painted wolf, threatening the future of one of the last great families of their kind. A tigress in the jungles of India attempting to raise her family under ever growing pressure from her rivals and humanity.

When we began filming we had no idea how each

TO GIVE OURSELVES THE BEST CHANCE, OUR TEAMS COLLABORATED CLOSELY WITH THE EXPERTS WHO HAVE STUDIED THESE ANIMALS FOR MANY YEARS.

story would play out. This made *Dynasties* a highly risky undertaking. By spending so much time with our animals we gave ourselves the opportunity to capture extraordinary stories of families and leaders, heroes and villains, triumph and tragedy - But there was always the chance we would end up with no story at all... After all, nature is notoriously unpredictable.

Making this series was a gamble - but a calculated gamble! To give ourselves the best chance, our teams collaborated closely with the experts who have studied these animals for many years. These scientists, guides and trackers were able to get our teams closer to these animals than ever before, to follow them every day, whatever the conditions,

to understand who was who in each family and to interpret the significance of their every move. By the end of filming our teams had become experts themselves. They were able to capture moments and behaviours never seen before – even the scientists do not spend as long watching these animals as intensely as the *Dynasties* team have done. Most important of all this special access into the animals' world, combined with the determination and resilience of our crews, yielded the great stories we had hoped for. The result is five stories that show us the strength and nobility of animals who never back down, even when all seems lost. The risk paid off.



AN INTERVIEW WITH THE EXECUTIVE PRODUCER



**MICHAEL
GUNTON**
Executive
Producer

Tell us about *Dynasties*.

At its most basic, *Dynasties* is about animal families, and the unique situations where the family has the ability to control and dominate the landscape. These animals live as a pride or a troop or a pack and, if you are the ruler of that family, you get everything. You get all the mating, you get all the food, you are effectively the equivalent of the king. So, it's about the power of family, but it's also about the struggle to become the most powerful within the family.

At its most extreme, as with the chimpanzee film, it's literally about other males trying to topple a king. And at the other end of the spectrum, we have emperor penguins, where a colony of families together help each other survive. It's a really interesting exploration of the power of family.

Can you explain the popularity of these big landmark BBC wildlife series'?

In general, wildlife films are popular because they open peoples' eyes to a world that they've perhaps lost touch with. These are remote, exotic, dangerous worlds and you see them from the comfort of your own home.

With *Planet Earth II* in 2016, I think the world was in strange place with a lot going on politically and environmentally, and so people were almost closing in on themselves and their lives. Then this series came along and it showed that there's a whole different side to our world. Through the intensity of the stories, and the way it was filmed, you shared other animals' trials and tribulations. This somehow put our own trials and tribulations into perspective.

On the flipside of that, they were just joyful. The shows, alongside those trials and tribulations, showed you extraordinary wonder. They made people feel good about their world, and

possibly about themselves. That's why they're so popular.

I think *Dynasties* is a different piece. *Dynasties* is a much grittier journey into the natural world, but it's an important one. The animals are extraordinary creatures in their own right and they live amazing lives. But they're also animals that have to share the world and compete with humanity. They are in trouble. There is an environmental subtext to this; all these animals are in decline because there isn't enough space for them. We tell incredibly dramatic stories of these animals living really difficult lives against their rivals, their enemies and each other, and that's hard enough. But when you superimpose them also having their space taken from them by humanity, which adds to the pressure, it almost feels unfair.

I think it will be a very thought provoking series. Hopefully, I think it's going to make people think about our relationship with nature and also what goes on in nature in a way we rarely see. The realities of these animal's

lives. Sir David Attenborough says these are important films, they're real documentaries. They tell a truth not often told.

How did the idea for *Dynasties* come about?

I came up with this idea about five years ago. With previous series like *Planet Earth* or *The Blue Planet* we normally use a God's eye view of the world. And they're incredibly popular, but I felt we'd done a lot of them. I wondered if there was another way of telling the stories of the natural world. We never really spent time with the animals or understood the real depth of their stories.

We never really focused on seeing this moment in time where the animals are at a fork in the road, where their lives will change fundamentally depending on which direction they take. Of course, it's quite a dangerous thing to embark on; if nothing of interest happens, you've got nothing to make a film. Say you're making *Planet Earth II* and you spend three months trying to film a lion hunt. If it doesn't work, it doesn't matter because you

SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH SAID HE THOUGHT WE WERE MAD.

can go and film a tiger hunt or something instead.

But if you decide you're going to spend all your efforts on just one particular chimpanzee troop, and specifically one individual, and the animal dies or nothing happens or filming permissions change, you're completely stuck. It's quite risky, and Sir David Attenborough said he thought we were mad. But while the risks were high, the potential benefits were also very high because if it works, the drama – the potential for true drama – is unprecedented.

In my pitch, I said, "If these work, you will feel like you're witnessing a true Shakespearean drama." Because often it is! Mother against daughter, sister against sister, loyal subject against king. Of course, like Shakespeare there are moments of humour too – these are, in the end, all uplifting, life-affirming films.

Without too many spoilers, what are the moments you hope will have a particularly big impact on viewers?

Every film has very moving moments, where you see heroic struggles against the odds. There are also extraordinary moments of connectivity where you absolutely empathise with the animals.

In the chimpanzee film, there's an extraordinary moment where the king's underlings gang up against him. They attack the king – he is known as David – and effectively overthrow him. In the morning, a crew came back and found David dead. Or so we thought.

I can't tell you what happens next, but what I can tell you is that it is one of the most extraordinary passages of drama I have ever seen in a wildlife documentary



Photograph: Theo Webb. Copyright: BBC/NHU 2018

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE SERIES PRODUCER



**RUPERT
BARRINGTON**
Series
Producer

What is the series, *Dynasties*, about?

Each episode of *Dynasties* is a single story. This is a very different series to the normal landmark wildlife shows which may contain 10 or 12 separate shorter stories per episode.

Dynasties is about families and their leaders; families that can dominate the landscape. The

leaders are trying to survive and ensure that their dynasty can continue through their offspring. For most animals, success in life is about producing a few offspring and leaving them to take their chances, but a lion or a painted wolf family can completely control their landscape, and their bloodline will rule that landscape for generations.

We committed to spending a huge amount of time with each animal. It's a documentary in its traditional sense; a team went out to film, not knowing what was going to happen. They just followed those animals for hundreds of days, and whatever

happened would be the story, whether it was an exciting event or a bit of a disappointment.

The last two landmark series were big state-of-the-world events. What reception are you anticipating for something as character-driven as this?

I hope that people will see these great charismatic animals in ways they've never seen them before. By spending vast amounts of time with each, our teams have been able to record what their whole lives are actually like, as opposed to just a single moment. They have watched these animals facing up to immense challenges and great change with

extraordinary resilience. What really comes through in the films is that for these animals, life is really, really hard.

There's a nobility in how they act, whatever is thrown at them. I think because often they're struggling against universal challenges so you can't help but connect with their struggle. You feel for them; sadness at moments of tragedy and joy when they triumph.

What moments are you most excited for people to see?

What's interesting about the series is that the moments with the greatest emotional impact

I HOPE THAT PEOPLE WILL SEE THESE GREAT CHARISMATIC ANIMALS IN WAYS THEY'VE NEVER SEEN THEM BEFORE.

are often not the moments of great action or spectacle. While the smaller incidents are critical points in the bigger story.

For example, in the emperor penguins film there is a lull period after the thousands of penguins in the colony have all paired off, and where each couple is now waiting and waiting for the female to lay her single egg. This can take weeks. Yet somehow one couple appears to be far ahead of schedule. The female has a bulge under a fold of her belly, which is the outward sign that she has got her egg safely on her feet, off the ice, keeping it warm.

But then she lifts up her belly and we see (as does her mate, at the same moment) that she actually has an egg-shaped snowball there. Presumably she has found it and decided to get in a bit of practise before the brutal winter hits! It's a lovely moment, quite low-key but very telling in the context of the story – about how the penguins will have to keep their egg alive through the most brutal winter on earth.

Across the series, we do have great moments of action which are really exciting, but there are also a lot of moments like this which I hope will really draw the viewer in.

Does spending so much time with the animals make it harder for the viewer to delineate between hero and villain?

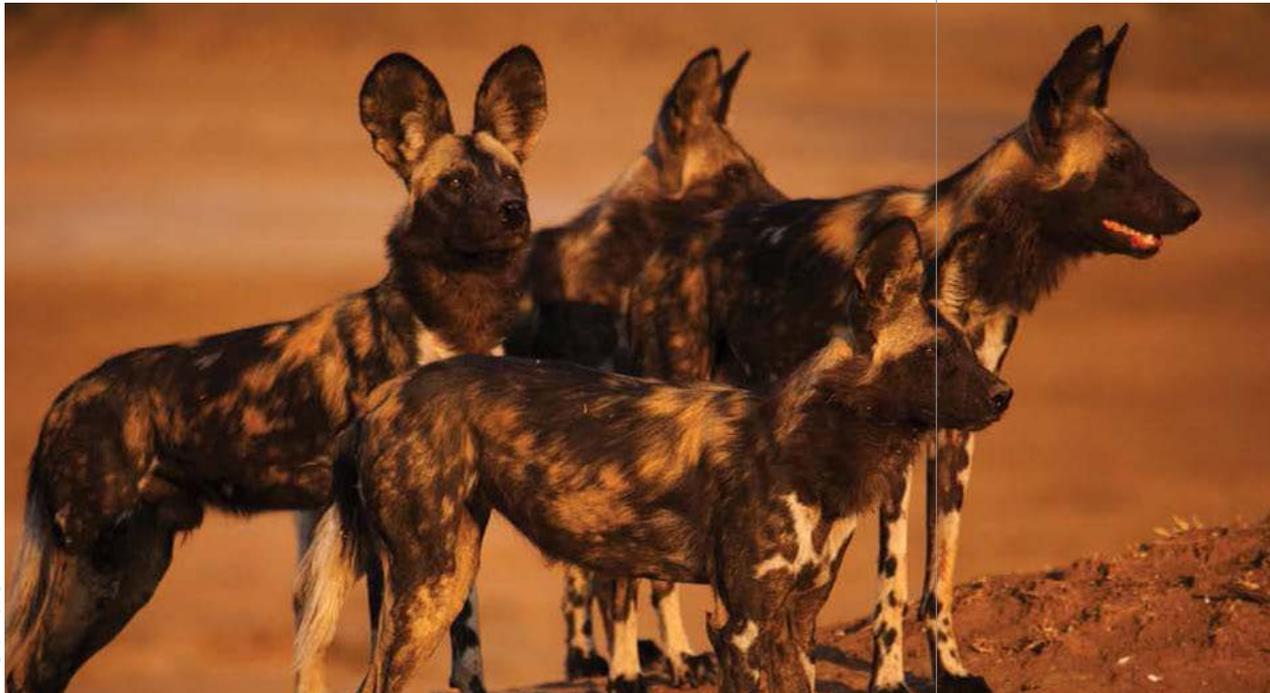
That's a really good point. In the tiger film, we focus on a mother trying to rear her four cubs. The big issue for tigers nowadays is that they live in small reserves, so there's a huge premium on

space. The mother tiger needs a certain amount of territory in which to catch enough food for her cubs. Our mother tiger is under pressure from her daughter, from a previous litter, who wants more space. The daughter is trying to take the mother's space, which puts huge pressure on the mother.

If you told this story as a short sequence, it would be hard not to see it as a good mother and a bad daughter. But of course it's not that; the daughter is in the same position as the mother. She hasn't got enough space either. By being able to get into this story in such depth, because we have a whole episode to do this, you see more shades of grey, and I think it's much more interesting.

***Blue Planet II* had a strong ecological message that spilled over into the real-life news agenda. Does *Dynasties* have a similar underlying ethos?**

It does. What comes out of these films, with these big charismatic animals, is that they're running out of space. They need large areas in which to live out their natural lives, and that space is being chipped away by our growing human population, which leads to conflict. The animals' natural stories are being changed and kicked off in new directions by interactions with humanity. This is something we see several times in this series. The end result is that the lives of these animals are becoming even more difficult than they already were. We are seeing this issue of decreasing space through the lens of the animals we feature in the series, but it is becoming a universal problem for animals across the planet.



Photograph copyright: Nick Lyon

PAINTED WOLF



Tait is a painted wolf, matriarch of one of the last great families of this endangered animal. She has ruled her dynasty for many years on the banks of Zambezi river in Zimbabwe, keeping the peace within her sprawling family.

But tensions are rising. Tait is growing old and her power is waning. One of her daughters, Blacktip, lives close by. Her own pack is growing fast and they are running out of space. She urgently needs to get more territory so that her pack can catch enough food. But she has a problem. She is hemmed in on one side by human lands. There is only one way she can go to get what she needs – her own mother's lands.

Painted wolves thrive through cooperation. It is what had made this dynasty so strong, for so long. A family feud could bring it to its knees.

FILMING LOCATION

Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe



CHARACTER PROFILE

Tait is the most successful painted wolf ever known. There are only 6600 painted wolves left in the world. To date, there are 280 from Tait's own bloodline which is a significant contribution to the future of this endangered animal. Tait has ruled her pack uncontested for five years, where she has reared eight litters of pups. Two of her daughters now rule packs of their own and live on either side of Tait's territory. All together they are a formidable dynasty. But Tait is growing old and her powers are waning.

Blacktip is one of Tait's daughters and now rules her own pack to the west of Tait's region. Blacktip is proving to be a highly successful mother herself and her pack has recently grown to a total of 30 painted wolves.

This is one of the biggest packs ever known and filmed. Blacktip and her pack are struggling to catch enough food in her current territory.

This is a species that has almost too many common names to count. Its Latin name – *Lycaon pictus* – means painted wolf and it is a misunderstood and widely persecuted species. They share a common ancestor with the wolf but are not descended from them. Painted wolves are not often the focus of natural history films because they are very hard to follow!

TECHNOLOGY USED TO FILM

- › Cameras capable of filming in colour in very lowlight levels at dawn and dusk revealed new behaviours including baboon hunting and a honey badger encounter.
- › Brand new stabilised camera technology allowed us to film in Zimbabwe, where conventional aerial Cineflex was prohibited.

- › Combining sensitive low light, Starlight and thermal technology allowed us to follow the painted wolves for 24 hours a day, in tag teams, in all weather, and moon phases.
- › Ground tracking stabilised camera allowed us to move with stalking lions and running painted wolves.
- › Working on location for two years allowed us to establish time lapse positions to show the ebb and flow of the wet and dry seasons that drive the pulse of life in Mana Pools.

NEW BEHAVIOUR FILMED

- › Baboon hunting – the science said it doesn't happen, so the team worked with a scientist to rewrite this – a new paper is being published (co-authored by Nick Lyon, the episode director).
- › First day emergence of puppies – at just three weeks old.
- › Clash of two painted wolf packs, and the subsequent territorial takeover.
- › Courtship behaviour, and group singing.
- › First to film painted wolves at night.

- › Painted wolves hunting impala and baboon at night.
- › Biggest painted wolf pack filmed for a landmark series – 30 individuals.
- › Rapid injury recovery – broken leg to full speed hunting in one week.
- › The only painted wolf to ever re-use a den site, and this becomes the focus of the inter-pack feud.
- › "Croc-watching" – an incessant need to check any water for crocodiles.

FACTS ABOUT PAINTED WOLVES

- › Packs can roam vast home ranges 400-2000 sqkm
- › These are such fantastic animals to follow because they are "the underdog" – being relatively small at around 25kg – they are at the mercy of much larger predators, such as lion, hyena and crocodile.
- › There are only 6,600 painted wolves left in the wild. The team wanted to make a film that would help people look at these wonderful and endangered animals afresh.

FILMING FACTS

669

Number of camera filming days

10

Specialist camera operators

17

Cameras used

9

Professional guides

91

Painted wolves filmed, 182 flank patterns to learn!

22

Punctures in a single wet season shoot

313 hrs 12 mins

Footage to be logged and memorized, from 16,056 hours in the field

82,000

Bumpy kilometres driven

0 mins to spare

When Sir David Attenborough met the painted wolves it was approaching the end of the day and we were many hours away from camp. Just as he delivered his line to camera, the pack stood up and went to hunt not to be seen again, but we got the take. Sir David nailed it

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PRODUCER OF PAINTED WOLF



NICK LYON
Painted Wolf
Producer

Who are the main characters in this story?

The team arrived just as the most tumultuous period in the packs 20 year known history was beginning. The specific packs filmed in this series formed the ultimate dynasty – Tait is the matriarch of the whole dynasty – strong, stable and reliable.

An aging leader who was the matriarch of three related and neighbouring packs on the Mana Pools Floodplain.

Then we have Blacktip, one of Tait's daughters. She runs a very large pack at 30 strong – unusually big today, but a standard size in the past. When our story starts, Blacktip needs more space and Tait is vulnerable. The film is very much a battle between mother and

daughter. It feels Shakespearian in its scale and in the intensity of the rivalry.

What are the big moments we should be looking out for?

We have one sequence where we see Blacktip's pack pushing Tait's into lion territory. Tait is an old, wise leader, which gives her a chance of keeping her pack alive there. But Blacktip is more naive and when she goes in after Tait, she gets it wrong and four lionesses came for her and her pack. You'll have to watch the film to find out what happens then!

But also in this film, you will see them as loving pack members, with hugely strong bonds. Bonds that mean the whole pack support the young of the alpha couple – the only two animals to breed in the pack.

Were any new behaviours discovered?

Yes. For example, all the books we used for research say that painted wolves don't hunt baboons because they're too

dangerous. A big male baboon can weigh twice what a painted wolf weighs. But Blacktip's pack had grown strong in numbers and we saw them learning to take on taking on baboons. It is amazing behaviour.

Is it hard to film painted wolves?

It was a real challenge. They range over such huge areas and a lot of that is hard to cover in a car. We drove a total of 82,000 kilometres following and filming them. The hardest time is in the wet season when the landscape

is sodden and flooded. We slogged through thick mud trying to find the animals and just as we were getting into position to film – bang! – a tyre would blow and we'd lose the pack. On just one shoot we got 22 punctures. But after all our following we got into sync with the packs, and we understood their habits and routines. This would let us get ahead of the pack, get into position in advance and make big decisions that were gambles but paid off, because we had grown to understand these packs so well.

Do you feel like you bonded with the dogs over the course of filming?

Definitely. When you follow animals for as long as we did, you get to know them and care what happens to them. It becomes an emotional experience when you see one of the characters having a bad time,

IT BECOMES AN EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE WHEN YOU SEE ONE OF THE CHARACTERS HAVING A BAD TIME

or having real success. I loved the puppies! I remember when they were out of the den for the first time at just three weeks old. They were so tiny, with over-sized heads, that would overbalance on their front legs.

The painted wolves got to recognise us too and were completely relaxed having us around. It was like they totally accepted us being there with them. Such a privilege and it allowed us to get some extraordinary insights into their lives.

How did you keep track of the painted wolves in that huge landscape?

A lot of that was down to the tracking skills of our guides. Nick Murray has spent so long tracking the painted wolves that he knew the exact routes

they needed to travel in the wet season to get around, and he could navigate us through tough terrains and mazes of streams and rivulets, to pop out next to the pack.

Another of our guides, Henry Bandure, was phenomenal. He would look at a paw print in the sand, and could tell how long ago the pack had passed by how much sand had blown into the print or by what type of tiny insect had walked through the print after it had been made. He could even tell which pack it was by the smell of its dung – he could do that while driving along in the car! That particular skill allowed us to find a pack we had lost overnight, and to get into position just in time to film one of the key moments in the whole story.

