

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Wildlife comes in all sizes and forms, and some memorable sightings can be had right in camp – sometimes without you even leaving your room!

BY SUE WATT

On my first trip to Kenya, I was enjoying a beer in our campsite bar near Lake Naivasha when my friend unexpectedly asked: “How do you feel about bugs?”

Her eyes were focused keenly on the top of my head. “I think I’m ok with them,” I replied, bemused. “Good,” she said. “Because there’s a strange, long green thing crawling in your hair...”

That strange green thing was a praying mantis. I later discovered that these are voracious predators – albeit harmless to humans – with the female of the species even known to eat her partner after mating. To me, it was simply a bizarre yet beautiful creature, about 10cm in length and resplendent in colour with a heart-shaped head, skinny legs and strong, almost muscular forearms, like a tiny bodybuilder on steroids.

Thus began my fascination with Africa’s critters, those small creatures so often

overshadowed in our quest to spot the bigger beasts, yet whose lives are equally as dramatic and as captivating.

Wander around any camp and you’ll discover a world of wonderful creepy crawlies. Perhaps you’ll find antlions digging their pits to trap their prey. Or an army of Matabele ants meticulously and mercilessly attacking a termite’s nest or collectively hissing as you stamp the ground nearby. Then there are the shimmering flashes of colour and elegance from butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies, and the singing of cicadas in the heat of the day. And at night, you’ll see myriad moths, spiders, beetles, and bugs drawn to lamps left on, their shadows dancing patterns in the light.

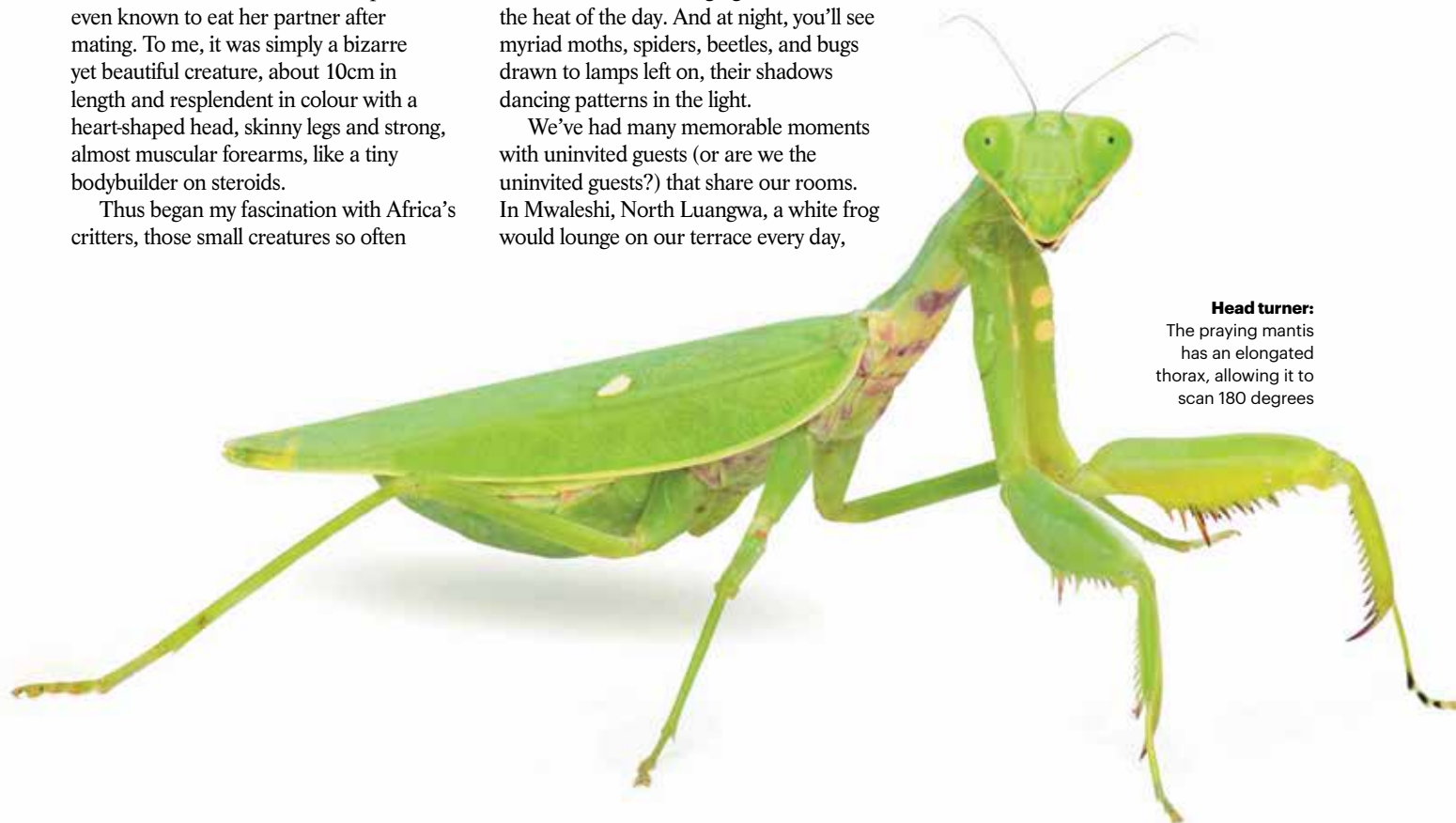
We’ve had many memorable moments with uninvited guests (or are we the uninvited guests?) that share our rooms. In Mwaleshi, North Luangwa, a white frog would lounge on our terrace every day,

lying motionless like an ornament basking in the sun. We called it Chalky.

And at Mkumuladzi Lodge, Malawi, a cheeky bushbaby stunned us by jumping from the rafters above our bed, dashing over to the table, picking up my glass and swiftly stealing a sip of G&T.

The following evening, a gecko showed its true colours. Normally seen as loveable little creatures wary of noise and light, their timidity belies a surprisingly violent streak. We watched in horror as the tiny reptile clamped a moth between its jaws and whacked it unrelentingly against the wall. When the gossamer-like wings, all gold and brown, had stopped their feeble fluttering, the gecko and its prey disappeared.

My favourite moment with little creatures was far more tranquil. It happened on our balcony in Congo’s Odzala National Park, when a tiny tree frog jumped onto my lap. Together, we sat in the darkness listening to elephants trumpeting from the forest and watching whimsical fireflies glowing in the dark, twinkling surreally like tiny stars. 



Head turner:

The praying mantis has an elongated thorax, allowing it to scan 180 degrees