Reproduction and offspring

**Breeding Season**

Lions have no particular breeding season, and often synchronize breeding, especially after a pride takeover, raising the cubs communally. Birth peaks have been observed in Kruger (February – April) and Serengeti (March – July) National Parks related to seasonal weather patterns and prey availability

**Sexual Maturity**

Male lions become sexually mature at around 26 months old, but unlikely to breed before the age of four or five, primarily due to a lack of opportunity until they are large enough at around this age to take over a pride and therefore its breeding rights. At Phinda reserve in South Africa introduced males sired cubs at 27 months. The mean age of first conception in Kruger National Park is 48 months although 29% sired cubs at 40 months. Breeding by some males was delayed until 54 – 60 months. Males as old as 16 can produce viable sperm, but reproduction probably ceases after their pride tenure is lost.

Females at Phinda conceived for the first time at 32 – 33 months with most lionesses having given birth by the time they are four years of age [18]. Females can breed until they are c. 15-years old, but reproduction usually starts to decline at 11 years. A lioness in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park gave birth at 19 years old.

Onset of oestrus is in response to within-pride mechanisms such as oestrus in pridemates as well as loss of cubs from infanticide at pride takeovers .Lionesses are polyoestrus, oestrus lasting 4 – 7 days with intervals between periods of a few days up to more than a year (average 55.4 days). They have a post-partum oestrus but do not conceive if the litter survives. If the litter is lost a new one may be produced within four months.

When a litter is raised to maturity the mean litter interval is 601.5 ±119.8 days at Phinda . In Serengeti NP the mean was 20 months (range 11 – 25) when a litter was raised to maturity and a range of 4 – 6 months if it lost.

**Courtship**

Courtship may be initiated by either member of the pair who remain close during the oestrus period. The female usually invites copulation by lordosis. There is little competition amongst pride males during mating. Instead of fighting to be the first to mate a female in oestrus, a male will follow her around very closely at the first signs of oestrus onset. Other males keep their distance unless there is a clear size difference, in which case a larger male may fight a smaller one. This works because females have a long oestrus period and copulate many times during that period. Males may lose interest before the end of an oestrus period, giving patient males a chance. Also, due to the common synchrony of reproduction there is often more than one female in heat at any one time. A lioness mates up to 100 times per day with an average interval of 17 minutes (range 4 – 148),