Paul O’Grady’s
Animal Orphans

Pic: Paul with Rocky, one of the penguins from SANCCOB

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Paul O’Grady’s Animal Orphans

“A young animal learns everything from its parents about how to survive in the world so if it loses its mum it’s got no chance, unless we step in.” Paul O’Grady

Episode one (3 x60)

Animal lover Paul O’Grady travels to South Africa and Zambia to meet animals that have been orphaned in the wild in this new factual series.

He encounters lions, cheetahs, hippos, elephants, baboons and rhinos amongst others who are being hand-reared by humans. Most of the animals he meets have ended up as orphans because of humans, either their parents have been killed by poachers or their natural habitat has been destroyed or encroached upon. Paul gets hands-on helping to care for and rehabilitate the animals and of course makes some new friends along the way.

His first stop is SANCCOB on the South West tip of South Africa. The sanctuary looks after a variety of different seabirds including penguins, which Paul discovers are an endangered species in Africa. The number of penguins has fallen from 200,000 to 50,000 due to oil spills and humans intruding on their natural habitats. Without places like SANCCOB, it is estimated that penguins could be extinct in South Africa in 15 years.

Paul helps to feed the penguins and bonds with one called Stevie whose health hangs in the balance after it is discovered he could be blind. Workers at the centre first noticed something was wrong with Stevie as he was walking and swimming in circles. He was so disorientated he would bump into the other penguins who then pick on him. Paul stays with Stevie while a vet comes to check his eyes and work out how best to treat him. If he is found to be completely blind then he’ll never be able to be released back into the wild.
Next Paul visits the Lilayi Elephant Nursery where a very excited Paul meets a group of baby elephants whose parents have been killed by poachers. Paul helps take the elephants for a walk in the bush and falls head over heels for a six month old calf called Nkala. Nkala was found wandering through a Zambian village alone when he was just three months old and would not have survived if he’d not been brought to the nursery. Paul takes Nkala under his wing and helps to bottle feed him, wash him and put him to bed. He also meets two year old Suni who is still recovering after being attacked by the poachers who killed her parents.

From elephants to lion cubs, Paul travels to Kruger to an animal rehabilitation centre called Moholoholo. The centre has been run for the last 23 years by owner Brian, who has rehabilitated almost every type of African animal. He introduces Paul to eight-month-old lion cubs, brought to the centre at just a week old after being rejected by their mother. Rather than cuddly little animals, the cubs are now on their way to being full-grown. Paul bravely helps takes the lions for a walk by holding the tip of their tails.

After meeting the lion cubs, Paul says: “That was amazing, absolutely amazing. I mean to get the chance to walk with lions. I mean they are not scary at all you are aware that they are powerful beasts and that they could turn at any minute, you’ve got to constantly have your wits about you.”

“But they’re magnificent. Just to walk with them is, man, it’s very, very special it really is. And I’m not going to say my three famous words...oh go on I’ll say it I want one.”

Next Paul travels to Durban to CROW, the centre for rehabilitation of wildlife. Here they don’t just look after endangered species, they care for all kinds of animals who have been injured or orphaned in the wild from tortoises to baboons. Paul meets a very cute creature called Lily, a four-month-old blue dyker antelope and also a slightly less cute, grumpy porcupine called Mr Rattles.

Finally Paul travels back to SANCCOB where he helps release a group of rehabilitated penguins back into the wild.
Paul O’Grady Interview

In the series you travel to Africa to meet animals who have been orphaned in the wild. Why have they been orphaned?

“It’s basically the result of what happens with poachers. You know so with the elephant sanctuary, for instance, the mothers of all those elephants have all been slaughtered by poachers. And the poachers are doing this for the ivory with the elephants and for the rhinos, the rhino horn and this is being used for this nonsense medicine.

“So there is still a real issue with poaching in Africa?

“In 10 years time there are going to be no elephants or rhinos in Africa that’s what they’re saying now. Everyone said that to me, everybody I met said in 10 years time they will be extinct because even on the big parks the poachers are getting in. And all this is to make bangles and those carvings from the tusks. It’s wanton destruction. And the same with vultures they are being wiped out because there’s a belief in some cultures that if you eat their liver and another organ you get the vision of a prophecy. So it’s all bound up in superstition and witchcraft and then the medicine market of course.”

It must have been really hard for you to see the orphaned baby elephants?

“God it’s really upsetting, I got really angry all the time. At one point in the series you’ll see me, I was with a dying elephant and it’s heartbreaking. They say to me they are filming me, and they ask ‘so how are you feeling?’ and I couldn’t speak, you know you get that knot in your throat and you think you desperately don’t want to cry on the telly. Even the vet was crying. It was so heartbreaking to see a beast like that dying.”

Did you get close to any of the elephants?

“I fell in love with little Nkala and him with me. We literally fell in love with each other. He used to wrap his trunk around my wrist when we went for a walk and you know he’d lean on me and stuff and he’d suckle on my coat, you have to wear this
coat that the keepers wear, and he’d suckle on me. And I helped to put him to bed, and give him a wash and tell him a bedtime story and he’s listening to me and I say to him, it’s like he’s trained, I say ‘now go to sleep, there’s a good lad’ and he lies down and goes to sleep. It’s like Dumbo it’s unbearable.”

**Was it hard for you to leave Nkala?**
“Seriously it was up for debate whether I was coming back honestly, honestly. Because I did contemplate it, I thought I’ll stay till Christmas with him and see how he’s doing. Because you have to look after them 24/7. You have to sleep with them and everything and you get so involved and when you see them cry and things like that... I used to have to wash his bum and everything and he was like a kid he hated it and I’d be there saying ‘it happens to us all, it comes to us all, come here’.”

**Do the keepers become very close to the orphaned animals?**
“Yes and the volunteers who go over to look after the baby baboons, now that’s not like a human baby when you can say ‘mind the baby for me while I go to the shop’. They go hysterical. So the volunteers are with them 24/7 they can’t have a shower without them on them, they can’t go to bed, they can’t go to the toilet, they can’t do anything. They have this little thing on them 24/7 for months and they have to wear the same t-shirt because if you take it off and put a clean one on the monkey will freak and say ‘you don’t smell like my mother’. They won’t go near anyone else. It’s heartbreaking, it’s just heartbreaking.”

**Why do the baboons end up being orphaned?**
“The baboons go in and encroach on the land because agriculture is getting bigger and bigger, it’s taking over more and more of the wild space so there’s nowhere for these wild animals to go so of course they roam on to the crops and they are shot.”

**How are the orphaned animals helped?**
“What they do in these places is they teach them how to be a wild elephant and put them in with the herd and then they are introduced to the wild but they still have a keeper who keeps an eye on them. The same with the baboons when they are released to the wild they have a keeper that stays in the bush with them for six months. It’s real devotion what they are doing over there. All the volunteers they are all from England they are all over there. It’s amazing. You say how are you getting on and they are covered in Baboon shit and they say ‘ah I love it, I love it’

**You also meet a lot of penguins in South Africa.**
“Robben Island where Mandela was, there was a huge colony. They are endangered as well, everything is endangered over there. It’s heartbreaking all this wildlife is being diminished and for what reason - nonsense.”

**One of the penguins you met was blind wasn’t he?**
“Stevie, it was sad to watch him because he would just go round in circles in his pen, and then if he did move he would bang into a wall and it would freak him out and the others were picking on him. It was heartbreaking.”
You got on really well with the penguins, which one was your favourite?
“Winston – I loved him, I loved the bones of him. He followed me everywhere. He was just gorgeous; you know when you just bond with something especially a wild animal. Winston used to come up to me and sit on my knee and I said ‘give us a kiss then’ and he rubbed his beak on me lips. He’s a wild penguin but he was lovely and they said ‘don’t pick him up’ but I picked him up and there was no problem, he was really sweet. I was lucky I got on with all of them, like the hippo. There was a baby hippo who I’m with, it wouldn’t leave me alone this thing. And vultures, there was a baby vulture I got very fond of. And the Cheetah cubs, they were magnificent as I’d just lie on the grass and they would pile on top of me and just go to sleep.”

Was it an uplifting experience releasing the penguins back into the wild?
“On one hand it’s lovely they are going back into the wild but on the other hand you worry about them because you get to know them and you get to know the personalities and you think ‘I hope you’re going to be ok’. It’s quite upsetting. They are like your kids you think ‘oh no I hope you’re going to be alright’”

You also meet three lion cubs and take them for a walk, what was that like?
“They said to me they’ve grown a bit and they’re on solids and I said ‘who’s the solid one?’ I get in and I see these like beasts and he said to me, Brian the keeper, grab hold of his tail and I thought ‘no you’re all right!’ But one swipe and they’d finish me off. But it was a great experience to go walking with them. They smell fear on you and if you’re weak they go for you. Luckily I wasn’t scared like the cheetah cubs I wasn’t scared I was straight in and they were big, and they were so lovely, once they got to know you and trust you.”

In Durban you visit the Centre for Rehabilitation of Wildlife where you meet a porcupine called Mr Rattles, what was he like?
“Rattles is the word for him he was a mean bugger. He give me a nip and he came out and backed up on me with his spines and they are lethal. They are like razor sharp knitting needles. He was a nark, the keeper said, who was running the place - ‘he is a nark that Mr Rattles’. I get on with most animals and there was a bit of mutual respect for each other but I kept him at arms length, I thought I don’t fancy a load of them spines in my leg!”

If you hadn’t become a TV presenter would you like to have had your own animal sanctuary?
“I’d love it. It would be fabulous. Can you imagine it? I’d have all manner of cheetahs, lion cubs, vultures, penguins. It’s a nice job – I mean they work really hard and it’s very upsetting what they have to deal with but it’s so worthwhile as well you get a real kick out of it you really do.”

Out of all the animals you met in Africa, who was your favourite?
“My elephant definitely Nkala. I was tempted to keep him. I was saying, in all honesty because I got so involved, ‘I’ve got a massive field I could have a baby elephant’ but everyone was saying ‘yeah but it will grow’. You know you will have a fully-grown male elephant and it might go rogue on you and rampage through the village. Imagine DEFRA – you know explaining that - ‘have you got a tag on your elephant’s ear?’ ‘No you put a tag on it and see what happens’. But they never forget you, the keepers said. They said he’ll never forget you Nkala. When he’s a grown elephant he will look at me and say ‘I know him he’s that daft one who used to give me the bottle and read me fairy tales’. So when they say an elephant never forgets they mean it it’s true. I got a get-well card off him. They sent me a photo saying ‘Oh dear’ from Nkala ‘get well soon’ and that upset me. Out of all the cards and letters seeing this elephant I was like ‘oh my baby’. He was lovely I really grew very fond of him.”

Overall what was it like going to Africa and meeting all these animals?

“It was a great job, you know, it was smashing. We did lots of travelling, it was tiring you know because days off we travelled and we had huge distances to go and we went on some very dicey forms of transport, some of these little planes and stuff and helicopters doing mad whirly things in the sky. But I was allowed to get so close to the animals and I was allowed access to places you would never normally get. I am now patron of god knows how many animal charities since I got back but I’m happy to be because they all do such great work.

“When I came back it’s like it never happened it was like a dream - really bizarre because it was all so quick and we travelled so much and in so many different places. It became second nature that I’d be out with an elephant or a tiger or a lion cub. I loved it. The work they are doing out there to ensure the survival of all these creatures is fantastic.”

Credits

Paul O’Grady’s Animal Orphans was produced by Shiver. Executive producer is Mark Scantlebury and director is Jill Worsley.