

Upscale Baboons

Tracking a baboon's rise from tiny infant to strapping young adult can be a weighty matter

by Jeanne Altmann and Amy Samuels

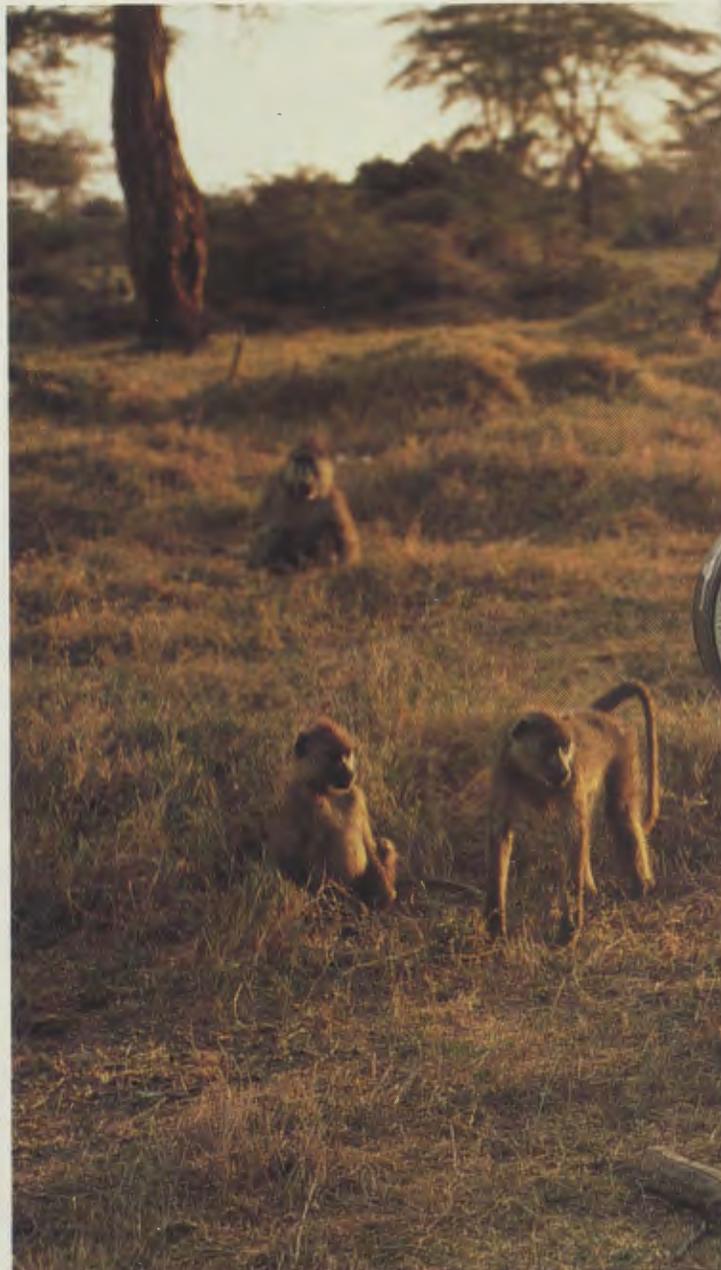
For nearly twenty years, baboons in Kenya's Amboseli National Park have been the object of intensive study. As young baboons have been followed from birth, we have learned much about the progression from helpless infant to competent young adult. We have observed precocious juveniles and "late bloomers" learn the complexities of baboon social life and develop the ability to obtain enough food for themselves each day. In 1984, the time had come to refine our measurement of the physical growth of young baboons. We wanted to weigh these free-living youngsters for comparison with other aspects of their development.

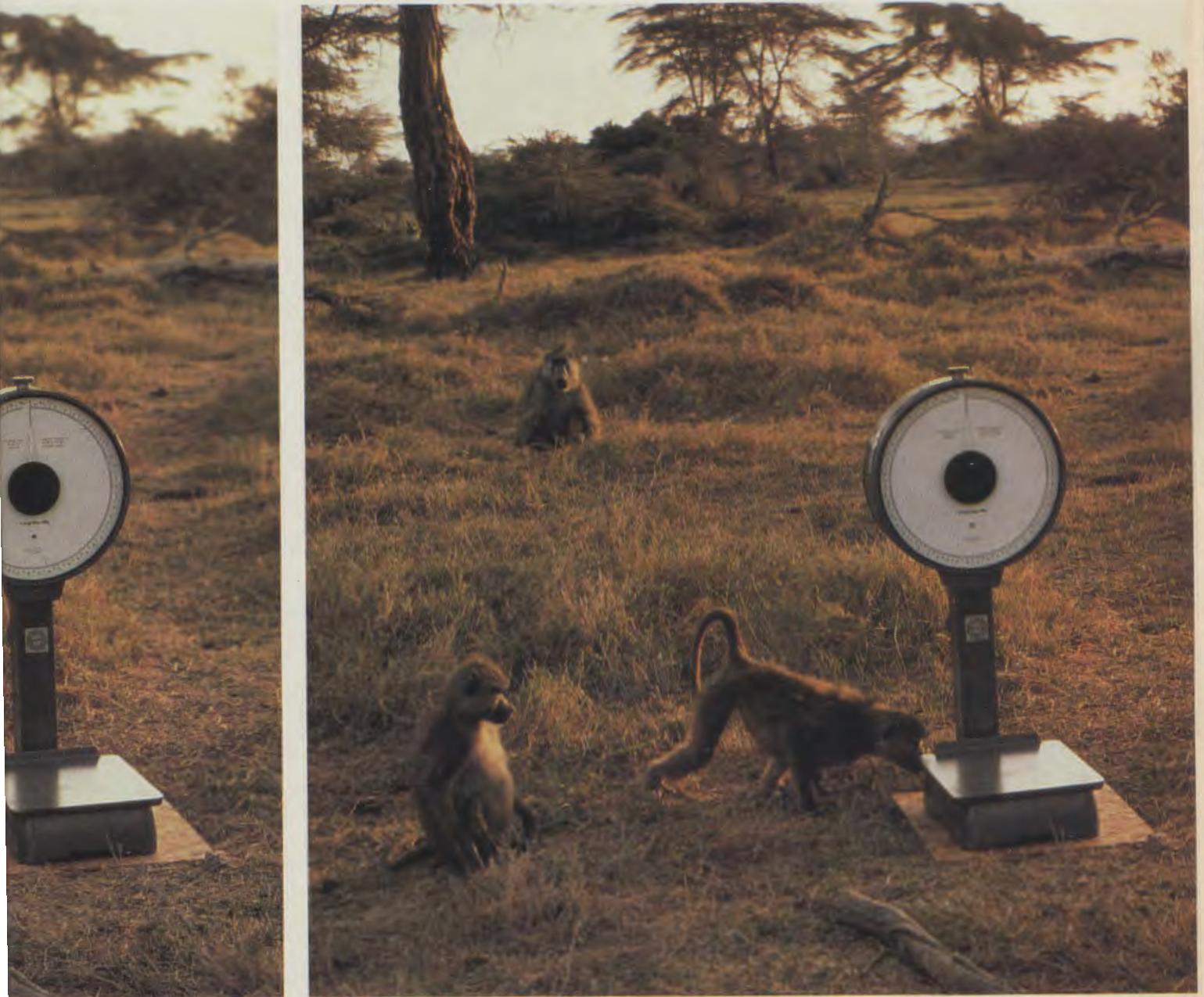
But how could we get baboons on a scale? We have never trapped or fed our animals; in fact, we have always done our best to intrude as little as possible on their lives. And a single weight for each youngster wasn't what we wanted; we wanted to follow closely the growth of infants as they matured into juveniles and young adults. Such data had rarely been obtained even for captive animals, and conventional wisdom dictated that repeated weighings would require capturing the animals or at least baiting the scale with food. But we had hopes that the baboons' natural behavior would work in our favor. Young primates—both human and nonhuman—cannot resist climbing on a log or a pile of stones, so we offered our baboons a novel climbing opportunity: a large platform scale.

We placed the scale near the grove of fever trees where the baboons would sleep that night. Curiosity soon overcame fear as inquisitive youngsters formed a circle around the weighing device. Two-year-old Wema sniffed, licked, then tentatively touched the smooth metal with her fingertips. Finally she climbed gingerly on board. Within moments young baboons were clambering all over the scale, from top to bottom, playing king of the mountain and trying to catch the jiggling needle behind the dial's glass face.

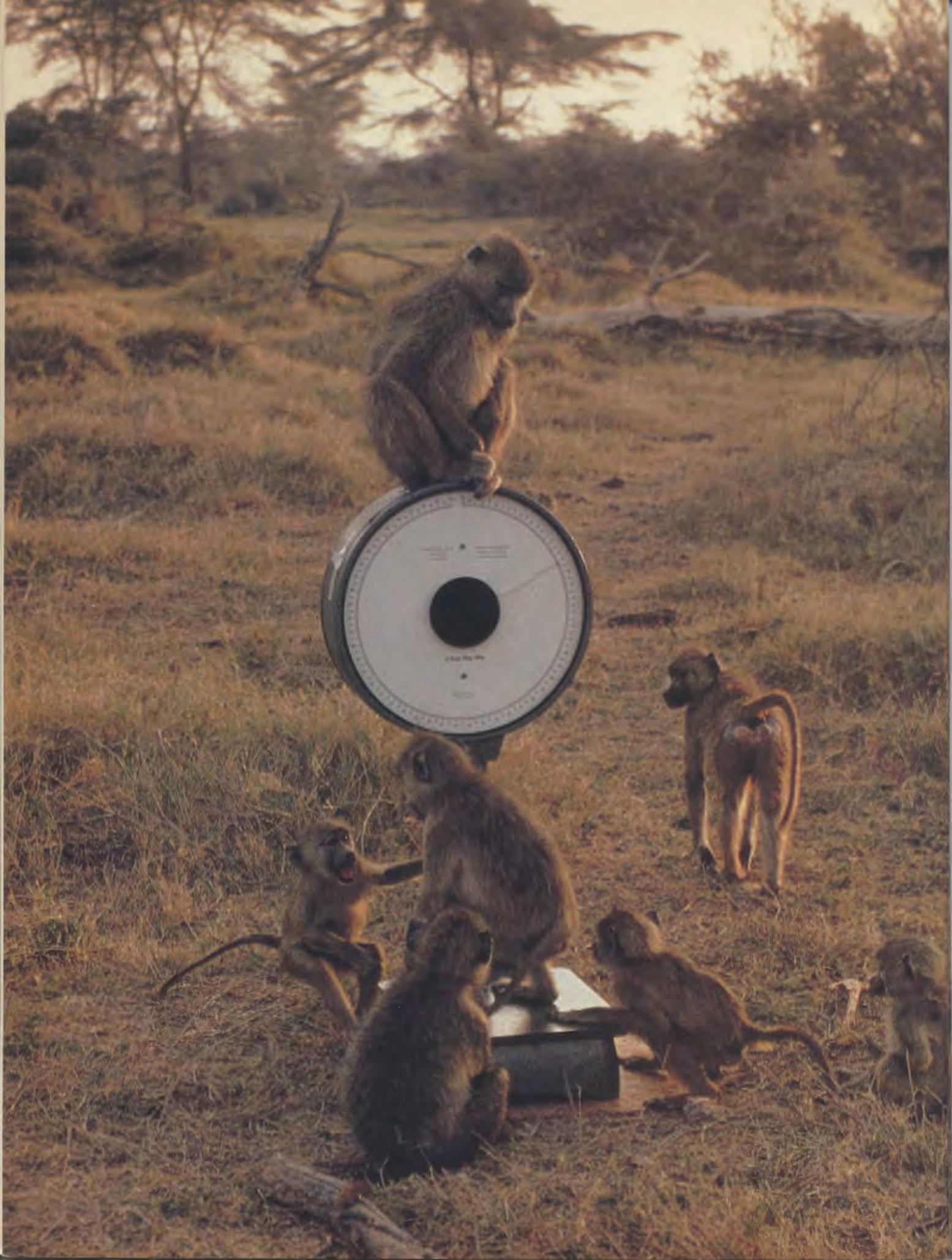
Success! Standing several yards away, we peered through binoculars and read weights as youngsters took turns climbing briefly onto the weighing platform. Little Wacha barely tipped the scale at four pounds; subadult Rasta logged in at a hefty twenty-eight pounds.

That first day, with its instant success, was easier than the days that followed, but the subsequent complications told their own story. We had almost weekly weights for regular customers, such as the older juvenile males, but we didn't do as well with





Photographs by Amy Samuels





females and younger animals. The difference seemed to be not in curiosity but in power. By their mere presence, the “young toughs” Rasta and Nami discouraged the approach of other youngsters and monopolized access to the scale.

Matters developed differently when we presented the scale to another baboon group. Although well habituated to human observers walking among them, the animals in this group proved surprisingly reluctant to accept the strange metallic object. For weeks, our co-workers Susan Alberts and Raphael Mututua lugged the heavy scale into the field, only to have youngsters avoid it, changing their direction of travel, pretending to ignore the scale, or peering nervously at it.

Finally, two yearling females, who were inseparable playmates, cautiously explored the scale, all the while glancing at each other for reassurance. Eventually they climbed on the platform together. Other group members gradually followed suit, but for weeks it was the discoverers who remained most comfortable with the scale. Only later did older juvenile males take over and displace the young females.

Although we had originally planned the weighings with youngsters in mind, the scale turned out to be more exclusively kids' stuff than we had anticipated. Adults rarely showed the slightest interest; sixty-six-pound Leonard was the only adult to weigh himself. We joked that we could use “termination of scale use” to mark a baboon's transition into adulthood. Even regular customers like Wema and Rasta abruptly stopped using the scale when they reached sexual maturity. Infants, too, seldom used the scale, although a few learned to follow older siblings onto the platform.

As we continue to use the scale and it becomes a familiar object in the everyday lives of the baboons, we may eventually be fortunate enough to obtain weights from animals of all ages. A few young adults who grew up with the scale do occasionally return to “check their weight,” and one female who weighed herself throughout her first pregnancy brought her newborn baby to be weighed.

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