

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBMLM0ypgbc>

<http://www.deeblestone.com/>

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/episodes/the-queen-of-trees/additional-web-and-print-resources/1355/>

Film **The Queen of Trees** 2005-2006

Mark Deeble e Victoria Stone

DURATION: 50 MINUTES

Ian Holm narrates the extraordinary story of the African sycamore fig tree and its symbiotic relationship with a tiny insect partner, the fig wasp. Neither could exist without the other, and in turn they support hundreds of other animals from ants to elephants. Each fig is a world in miniature, a stage for birth, sex and death as the tiny players battle against predators and parasites.

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The Queen of Trees takes top award at United Nations Forest Film Festival. Kenyan Film wins United Nations 'Year of the Forest' International Film Festival. The 'THE QUEEN OF TREES' has been announced the winner, out of 160 entries, of the United Nations Forest Film Festival, to inaugurate 2011 as 'The Year of the Forest'. The film was a collaboration between Kenya-based filmmakers Mark Deeble and Victoria Stone and Kenya Wildlife Service.

Filmed in Tsavo West National Park over a period of two years, the film tells the extraordinary story of the African Sycomore Fig and the myriad animals and insects it supports.

Director Victoria Stone said, “This most recent award is the ‘jewel in the crown’ of more than thirty international awards for the film. It shows that people are truly moved by the intricate web of life that a single tree can support. We must cherish our forests, particularly in Kenya, and support those who are tasked with their protection”.

Mark Deeble commented, ‘We are thrilled that this accolade goes to a film about an iconic Kenyan tree filmed in a Kenyan National Park. Trees are often overlooked in the pursuit of the ‘big five’ - let’s hope that in this ‘Year of the Forest’, Kenya’s ‘big five trees’ get the attention they deserve’.

The film was recently voted one of the ten ‘best wildlife films of all time’ in a ‘REALSCREEN’ survey. The UK’s David Attenborough described the film as ‘a masterpiece’

Filmmakers Mark Deeble and Victoria Stone who first came to East Africa twenty years ago, to work with world-acclaimed wildlife filmmaker Alan Root, have worked in association with KWS for over fifteen years to produce award-winning films about Kenyan wildlife: ‘The Queen of Trees’, ‘Mzima: Haunt of the Riverhorse’ and ‘Tale of the Tides’.

Behind the Scenes with the Filmmakers



Wildlife filmmakers often go to great lengths to get that perfect shot. But not many end up installing a picture window in a ripe fig the size of a grape, just to watch what’s going on inside. That’s just one of the creative — and painstaking — steps that filmmakers Victoria Stone and Mark Deeble took to film the almost microscopic fig wasps that are the stars of NATURE’s The Queen of Trees. Using specialized, custom-built equipment, the pair spent two years in the Kenyan bush waiting for just the right moments to film these minuscule insects.

For viewers, it was worth the wait: Deeble and Stone present a remarkably detailed portrait of the fig wasp’s complex relationship with the sycomore fig, a tree that is a billion times bigger. Yet wasp and fig are forever entwined, dependent on each other for survival.

“It is an amazing relationship,” says Stone, who credits Climbing Mount Improbable, a 1997 book by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, with sparking the idea for the film. But the couple, who have been making award-winning documentaries for several decades, knew it

wouldn't be an easy story to tell. The wasps are so small they can fly through the eye of a needle. Much of their most interesting behavior takes place inside a fig tree's small fruit, hidden from view. And to top it all off, it can be hard to predict when key moments in the wasp-fig life cycle will occur, meaning the filmmakers would literally have to camp out near a tree and wait.

"We knew there'd be massive complications," recalls Stone. "The most basic challenge was to film the behavior of the wasps inside the fig [without ending up with blurry or out-of-focus images]. And it couldn't just look okay. It had to be beautiful and enticing."

Deeble says technological advances — and a bit of ingenuity and patience — made it possible to overcome the complications. One key advance was the arrival of high-definition cameras that capture sharp, crisp images with a good depth of field at low light levels. Another was the team's construction of a specialized, vibration-free work table that could be taken out into the field and used to film extreme close-ups of very small actors. "We'd set it up on a concrete platform in our camp, bolt down the camera, and then go get a fig from the tree," recalls Deeble, who studied marine biology before becoming a filmmaker. To capture a particular scene of female wasps collecting pollen from tiny "gardens" inside the figs, the team even cut tiny windows into the fruit and covered them with strips of glass. When all went well, the wasps carried on, unaware of the peeping camera. "That was probably one of the most difficult 10-second scenes to get," Deeble reveals. "It took weeks to get everything just right."

Other weeks were spent erecting and moving around specialized towers and platforms that allowed the filmmakers to get up into the treetops, where showy birds called hornbills built their distinctive, prisonlike nests, and monkeys and birds feasted on fresh fruit. "Using towers takes a long time," explains Deeble. "Even if you want to move just a few feet to get a new angle, you've got take the whole thing down again... ropes, pegs, everything. You can be lucky to get one or two shots a day." The filmmakers had to be careful not to damage the trees as they worked, Stone adds.

Overall, the couple, their two young children, and a small team spent two years camped out near the magnificent, gnarled sycamore fig that is featured in the film. The filmmakers had discovered during a previous project on hippos that things could be slow at times; when there was nothing to film at the home tree, the team searched far and wide for other fig trees where interesting things were happening. It took them another six months to sift through all the film and assemble it into a compelling story.

The team is now working to make sure that *The Queen of Trees* is seen in Kenya. "One thing we do is translate our films into Swahili, so that they can become resources for educating [Kenyans] about their environment," says Stone. "Not everyone knows the story of the wasp and the fig, or understands that the trees are such a rich source of habitat. It's a keystone species that has a huge impact on the entire ecosystem."

On a riverbank in Kenya, Africa, a seemingly ordinary giant fig tree and the tiny fig wasp differ in size a billion times over, but neither could exist without the other. Their extraordinary relationship is a marvel of co-evolution, a marriage which has lasted for millennia. It forms the basis of a complex web of dependency that supports entire ecosystems, providing food for thousands of creatures, from elephants, giraffes, and fruit bats, to forest hornbills, monkeys, insects, and fish. Each individual fig is a infinitesimal microcosm of life: a stage set for birth, sex

and death, in which the tiny fig wasp players battle against predators and parasites to fulfill their mission, which is to pollinate a tree whose flowers bloom inside its fruit.

An intimate and unbelievably detailed portrait of the fig wasps and their world is made possible by the patience and skill of two remarkable filmmakers, who employ the magic of ultra-macro photography and high definition cameras to tell a wildlife story which has never been told before. It is one of the most amazing stories in the natural world – a tale of intrigue and drama, set against grand Africa and its' wildlife.

Queen of trees: Shelter for many.



This film is about the relationship between the fig tree and the wasp.

In the banks of a silently flowing river stands an ancient tree — the Sycamore fig, also known as the Queen of Trees in Africa.

The film “The Queen of Trees” by Mark Deeble and Victoria Stone captures a unique relationship between the fig tree and the fig wasp. The fig tree and fig wasp differ in size, but they cannot exist without each other. (This is a symbiotic relationship.)

“One can withstand a river in flood, the other can drown in a dew drop,” so goes the script that is beautifully crafted, along with stunning shots and haunting music.

The dependency to grow, thrive and spread is seen from ants to elephants, predators and parasites with the fig tree as the central character. It is indeed a dramatic tale.

V. Arun, the resource person at the screening of the film at Nizhal's (an NGO, that focuses on urban greening) fifth anniversary celebrations, pointed out that nature was far too complex to understand in neat and easy terms. The film highlights a benefiting relationship. There are about 600 types of fig trees and they cannot propagate without the help of the fig wasps, so tiny that they can pass through the eye of a needle. And for each type of fig, there is a different fig wasp to do the job.

The male wasp is born inside the fig, lives there only to help the female wasp to come inside and lay eggs and then freeing the females from the secret garden inside the fig, they die. The female wasp continues the important work, to pollinate the seeds of the Queen of the trees.

The fig is also home to a Hornbill couple who have their nursery in the tree. Their lifecycle too is intertwined with the trees and the film captures happy and sad moments of this bird's life.

Around the tree unfolds a tale of drama and danger too. There are parasitic wasps that lay eggs on top of the wasps and another group that lays its eggs on top of those eggs. Defensive strategies too are highlighted. The ripening of the fruits attract other visitors too the monkeys, elephants, butterflies and green pigeons that fill their beaks with fig juice that is carried to be fed to their chicks. The figs drop into the river, food for the hundreds of fish, which in turn are food for the crocodiles lurking in the water. We see the food chain in action.

The Masai tribe depend on the fig tree for honey, for beehives thrive in the tree. They are smoked out carefully and the honey is taken. The nightlife surrounding the tree, with the attack of bats — one of the best seed dispersers — is seen. And the seeds of the fig tree are carried throughout Africa, through the travel of animals, birds and other creatures who have eaten of the fruit. Therefore it will be common to see a fig tree especially near a water body or a water hole where they have had a drink of water or perched for a breather. This and the fertilisation of the figs by the wasps are indeed a fitting tribute to the tree that nourished, nurtured and been a surrogate mother to these living creatures.



The Queen of Trees reveals Africa's sycomore fig to be a major player in local ecosystems. A single sycomore can produce tons of fruit each year, providing food for everything from insects and fish to birds and monkeys.

But filmmakers Mark Deeble and Victoria Stone say that land use changes and other problems are threatening the sycomore's future in Kenya.

"Traditionally, the figs did fairly well [in Kenya], because they have a rather light wood and it's not a kind of timber most people want to use," says Deeble. The bigger threat, Stone believes, is agriculture or land clearing for other purposes. "One of the valleys we worked in used to be full of fig trees," she recalls. "But they've all been cut down and people are growing tomatoes now."



Honey hunters in Kenya

Another problem for figs — and people — is a growing lack of water in some regions due to deforestation and diversion for irrigation. Figs are particularly partial to riverbanks, but "when you cut down the trees, you not only lose the shade, but there is more evaporation, so you lose water too," explains Stone. "If you are lucky, the river may flow only a few weeks a year." Just a few miles down the same valley, an entire groundwater fig forest is threatened by the actions of a few farmers upstream.

In some parts of Kenya, it is still traditional to leave fig trees standing even when land is cleared. That's because the trees are a valuable source of honey from bees that build their hives in holes in the trunks. Honey hunters use small, smoky fires to pacify the bees so that they can take the honey without being stung. But sometimes, Deeble says, the fires are not put out and end up damaging or killing the sycomore fig. "Sometimes the wood can smolder for days, unnoticed, before it bursts into flame. So you see trees with burn scars or limbs burned off. Sometimes the tree dies."

The filmmakers explain that how figs are treated in Kenya can vary greatly from region to region. One tribe, the Kikuyu, considers the trees to be sacred, and maintains them carefully. Deeble and Stone hope that their film, which will be shown in Kenya, will help make that kind of reverence for the amazing sycomore fig even more widespread.