



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

April 2004 Newsletter

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

What a way to start! Within minutes of entering the Nxai Pan National Park we spotted a cheetah sitting up out of a patch of long grass, staring intently into the middle distance where there were a number of springbok grazing. We watched a while until the cheetah stood and moved off towards the cover of some nearby scrubby acacia trees. Perhaps it was moving to a less exposed hiding place to wait for the springbok to get closer? After some while we continued on to our campsite just a short drive further on, passing three different family groups of bat eared foxes, numbering fifteen in all, on the way. We ended the day with hot showers, a tasty meal and a cup of steaming tea (my personal choice) while sitting at the fireside. The only sounds were those of crickets, the crackling of the fire and the distant calling of jackals - just what was needed to ease one down out of the modern stressful, hurried lifestyle of the cities and into the calmness and serenity of nature. Our guest, on her eight safari with us, now makes the transition seamlessly!!



Although there has been a lot of rain this year the predominate grass that grows on the pan never gets long but instead grows in short tufts, and so there is always a near "horizon to horizon" vista. The few kilometres of game driving roads that criss-cross the pan enable one to easily find good vantage points to sit and gaze out over the herds of animals. It was good for the soul as well as being very gratifying to spend an entire morning sitting in one spot - surrounded by hundreds of springbok and groups of zebra, while also within sight there were wildebeest, gemsbok, giraffe and about a dozen adult ostriches and a number of ostrich chicks. On one such occasion the conversation brought up the fact that considering the sheer number of animals within sight, and that it was a peak period of birthing, it was surprising that we had never seen any animal giving birth. We had in particular seen many very newly born zebra as well as springbok and

gemsbok babies, but had not seen any part or sign of the event itself. In the nearly twenty years of leading wildlife safaris I have never seen an actual birth. Calving mostly takes place very early in the mornings, thus giving the newborn the day to get grounded before the predators begin moving about in earnest. In any event most births are over quickly, with the mother and baby being up and mobile almost immediately, and so are easily missed. It was therefore quite a coincidence that within ten minutes of that conversation I drove on less than fifty meters and spotted a zebra mare behaving strangely. Within minutes it became clear that the zebra was about to give birth. Suddenly she stood up and we could see the foal's legs sticking out. We were able to watch and photograph the whole birth, including those first uncertain steps and then the first suckling. What appeared to be the mare's previous offspring came over but the female, almost knocking the baby off its still wobbly legs at the same time, aggressively chased off the yearling. The mother and baby soon walked off to become lost amongst the mass of other zebra and springbok who had continued their slow amble on as they continued to feed. The time lapse from our first stopping to when the mother and foal walked off was just 25 minutes!



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We had been seeing the Nxai Pan pride of lions on most outings. Sometimes the males, females and cubs were all together, and at other times they were scattered about the pan, but always looking full and in peak health. Three of the females were with four cubs, while a fourth lioness, who we saw coming out of a stand of acacia trees not far from where we had witnessed the zebra birth in the morning, showed signs that she was suckling new born cubs - no wonder the two males seemed to always be looking so proud of themselves! On one occasion one of the males was sitting out in the open in the sun surrounded by wildebeest, zebra and springbok - master of all he surveyed - until the suckling female came walking through the parting herds and unceremoniously swatted him across the nose before continuing on her way. If only one could speak lion language! Was the swat a "Don't look so smug you lazy male"



and was the expression on the males face, as he sat even more bolt upright and watched the female walking off, saying "What did I do wrong this time?" The second male was about four kilometres away, also sitting out in the open, and wasn't he lucky that the female wasn't heading in *his* direction!

Apart from the single cheetah we had seen on our arrival we also saw a male and female together, suggesting that the female was coming into season - and so there will possibly be some cheetah cubs around in three months time. We continued on to see the three different family groups of bat eared foxes that we had seen on the first day, as well as others fox families and a number of jackals - but no honey badgers, which seemed unusual. The honey badgers were probably spread out further afield in the thicker scrub that surrounds the pan area, and indeed on the drive out of the National Park on the last day we did see one honey badger trotting down the road for a short distance before disappearing into the bush.



Our next group of guests arrived in the Khwai area of the Moremi Game Reserve, where the Okavango floodwaters were still rising and where there was still the odd heavy afternoon rain shower. Our first find, in the mopane woodland along the edge of the floodplain, was a leopard tortoise who seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere. We watched him for a while before moving on about 600 metres to look out across the floodplain. While sitting talking about the area I noticed the tortoise "overtaking" us through the grass and disappearing out onto the floodplain - I didn't see the hare anywhere though! The next day, not much further on from that spot, I turned onto a flooded sidetrack to get a better view of a group of lechwe out on the floodplain - and sunk into a mud hole! As we were quite close to camp and it was about the time we were due to return I radioed Marjorie to come and pull us out. I knew that



if I was to get out on my own it would take quite some time, whereas Marjorie would be able to pull me out in less than a minute - which she did. Here was the hare we missed yesterday - whooom in she drives, hooks on the tow rope, pulls us out and whooom she has gone again! Another interesting critter we found was an unusual praying mantid - definitely a slower mover!

With the floodplains and a lot of the game driving roads under water we spent much of the time driving through water with lechwe, hippos, frogs and wading birds staring at us, and at

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Adventures Through Africa

April 2004 Newsletter

one point a hyena. The only dry roads were through the mopane woodland and this is where we found impala, kudu, wildebeest and zebra. We also found a tiny nest (made from spider webs) of the paradise flycatcher. The male and female were taking turns sitting on the nest - both have grey fronts, blue wattles around their eyes and bright rusty orange coloured backs, but while they are both about 16cm long the male has a tail that is a further 18cm long.



As some of the group were interested in medicinal plants we spent time looking at the plants and grasses that were flourishing with all the rains, and everyone marvelled at the size of the huge baobab tree that I estimated to be well over 800 years old. We found five lions, but they were not very active compared to the pack of wild dogs that we found one morning. The wild dogs came trotting down the road towards us, and at the point where we passed they decided to rest up. Not being as lazy as the lions they

soon began to play and interact with each other. Over the course of time we spent with the wild dogs they attempted to chase down some impala, but none of the chases were successful and each time they would come back and rest by the road. When they eventually disappeared into the mopane we returned to camp for lunch.

I then flew the group into the Delta for an Okavango experience before returning to Khwai to help Marjorie ferry the vehicles and camp to Xakanaxa. On the drive we came across a freshly killed but not eaten otter at the side of the road. By the spoor I would guess that the male lion had surprised the otter or visa versa, but this rare animal certainly came off second best. We seldom see otters and this one must have been exploring new territories with the rising floods. Just a short way down the road we found the male lion (in a bad mood!)



with a female obviously not quite receptive yet and therefore not happy with the male's attentions. I guess the poor otter was at the wrong place at the wrong time!



Reunited with the group in Xakanaxa we continued to have more lion sightings within an area of just a few kilometres around our camp. At night we could hear the lions calling along with jackals and hyenas. One hyena wandered through camp, but finding nothing to his liking left again. We

found out the next day that the lions had killed a zebra not that far away and so the hyena had probably headed in that direction to see if the pickings would be any better. On the last morning we again found the lions. The male was fast asleep and the five females were lying around cleaning themselves while some of the cubs chewed on the bone splinters from the impala they had been feeding on - there was a competition for the horns, and although there was not much meat to be had off them it was entertaining to watch.



The safari reached its end, and although there was still rain about we mostly managed to avoid it. The rising water had a more limiting effect as many

Gavin Blair Safaris

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April 2004 Newsletter

roads became impassable, but there were still many scenes with general game including one touching scene where a mother hippo was playing with its baby. We watched from a distance as the tiny hippo tried to out "yawn" its mother as they "pushed" each other back and forth with their mouths open for about twenty minutes.

Flying into Kasane for the road transfer to Victoria Falls we could see that the Chobe floodplains were flooded for as far as one could see. On the ground we heard that they had been evacuating villagers on the Namibian side of the river, and at the point where the Okavango River enters Botswana the water levels were at the highest they have been since the big floods of the early 1980's. All we can do is hope that the waters do not get too much higher as some of the Delta camps are already at risk of being flooded out. The areas we use tend not to get totally flooded, although it does get a bit tricky getting about! Only time will tell.



Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
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