



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

April 2005 Newsletter

Gavin Blair Safaris

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Our next guests already held the record for the greatest number of different bird species seen on a safari - and they were back for their seventh safari to improve on that tally. They are not glorified "tickers" and are definitely not "twitchers", but are a couple with a fantastic amount of enthusiasm



for everything that I can show them - from the tiniest insect to the most mundane of lion sightings. To add to that they are always game for trying out something new - and so we were challenged to find new and novel things for them to experience. This also being their fiftieth wedding anniversary safari showed that there was no stopping these two!



Being regular safari guests Marjorie and I were able to slow the pace to four nights in each of three of the four areas we visited, and so there was a very relaxed feel to the safari. We were able to spend a lot of time sitting and immersing ourselves in the surroundings, and taking in



everything that each stopping point on our wildlife viewing drives had to offer. And so it was that we saw many small details that could be both exciting and amusing - like two tiny blue waxbills mating, then afterwards sideling up to each other on the branch for a quick kiss before they flew away. You do not have to have been affectionately married for fifty years to appreciate the moment!

While filling up with water one day there was the amusing sight of a "lucky" vervet monkey who had successfully raided a nearby campsite and was enjoying the prize of a huge steak - one wondered what the hungry campers thoughts were? It was such that whether out on a drive or back in camp we were never at a loss of things to observe and marvel at. To be able and willing to spend time to pick out the different characters at a pile of elephant dung may not be your cup of tea, but it was fascinating to watch the dung beetles



constructing and packing dung into balls, carving out selected choice bits or bulldozing soil out of a hole and then stocking it with dung balls for the future generation. There were the characters that worked hard, others on the look out for easy pickings, and the bullies who tried to muscle in on someone else's hard work. I had certainly not seen dung beetles pushing, shoving and sparring in such a ferocious manner before!

Another very lucky find was when a small movement in a bush at the side of the track caught my eye. Not being in search of anything in particular I reversed back and got out of the vehicle to have a closer look. It was just as well that another movement above my eye level caught my attention, as there, draped in the branches of a thorn tree, was a huge black mamba - the most deadly of all snakes! Not wanting to miss the opportunity to see the snake our guests got out of the vehicle and came

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over to have a look - it took them some time to pick out the large snake (10 to 12 feet long) as it was moving higher up the tree, but it ended up silhouetted against the sky. Being confident that the mamba would stay at the top of the tree I went to investigate the base of the tree where I had seen the movement, and so discovered in a hole in the tree a family of tree rats with beautiful big ears. But still this tree had another surprise, and as I crawled out from under the thorny branches I disturbed another mammal from a tuft of grass - a short-snouted elephant shrew - a real bonus, as we all had a chance to have a good look at this beautiful little creature with its long twitching nose. And yes, we had forgotten about the snake! Do not be mistaken to think that we did not witness the more typical safari experiences, but it is also nice to write about some of the more unusual things we saw.



On seeing a tortoise on the road, and as seems to be my little superstition this year, I was naturally on the lookout for the cheetah - and sure enough, a few hours later there are two male cheetah sitting out in the open looking ready to hunt. When we found the cheetah again the next day they seemed to be eyeing up some impala, but perhaps the wind changed as the impala altered their course and moved off - but evidently they did not move far enough away, as the day after we followed numerous vultures that were dropping out of the sky to find these fascinating birds feasting on the remains of a male impala. Later that afternoon we found a lioness lying out in the middle of an opening with hundreds of zebra filing past. We were sure that she was biding her time and waiting for darkness before singling out a zebra. In fact it got so dark it was difficult so see her crouched low to the ground, but as the last zebra wandered on by, totally oblivious to the lionesses presence, she got up, stretched and walked on as if now



that the traffic had cleared it was safe to pass! She did show signs of suckling so perhaps the belly full of milk was what was holding her back. At Savuti we had more action, but just as much frustration, as we homed in on the calls of a lion. We found a male and female trotting purposefully in the direction of the distant sounds of someone else's kill, perhaps hyena or wild dogs, but the direction they were heading was into thick bush and trees where access was impossible. However, right next to the road a tree full of hornbills giving alarm calls alerted me to the presence of something. It took a while but finally I saw it - a baby African wild cat hiding amongst the branches!



Late one morning we were sitting at the edge of a large floodplain watching a variety of birds. A bachelor herd of lechwe were making their way along the edge of the water when the peaceful scene was suddenly shattered. The lechwe had to cross about twenty feet of shallow water that seemed to be only a few inches deep. One male went through, followed by another, and it was number three that was unlucky. None of us saw the actual moment, but the crushing of jaws against bone and the splash and commotion filled in the details not seen. A large crocodile, about 8 feet long, had

rushed out of the water and caught the lechwe by its foot. As we watched from across the water the lechwe struggled and dragged the dead weight of the crocodile (probably in the

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region of 400kg's) across the grass and through the reeds for nearly an hour and a half. The other lechwe were at first intrigued, and followed along behind or off to one side as their compatriot struggled along on three legs, and at times tried to fend off the crocodile with its horns - but as the lechwe's energy drained away so did the interest from the others. After nearly two hours the crocodile let go and lunged at the lechwe as it tried to escape. Three or



four times the crocodile's powerful jaws snapped shut on the body of the lechwe, and then surprisingly the crocodile turned and walked off back to the shoreline, swimming out to deep water where it joined with four other smaller crocodiles. We watched for another hour, witnessing the dying struggles of the lechwe. It was unable to get up onto its feet but kept struggling, until one final effort seemed too much and it flopped over onto its side and ceased to move. We watched

for some time until I was sure that the lechwe was dead and that the crocodile was not about to return - perhaps waiting for darkness - before we made our way over to where the lechwe lay. From the closer vantage point one could see the huge fresh gash across the lechwe's spine. I could only guess that the crocodile had sensed that it had achieved a paralysing blow and so had retreated to the water to recover and wait for darkness to come out to claim its prize. It would have no problem in dragging the carcass back into the water where it would need the co-operation of the other crocodiles, acting as anchors, in order to feed in the spinning action typical of the crocodiles feeding method. Sadly, due to park closing times we could not wait at this remote spot to watch the final scene of the saga.



The most amazing bird experience we had was with the European Swallows who entertained us all day, swooping in close to the vehicle as we drove along and catching tiny insects, and on occasion even flying through the frame of the vehicle. When we arrived back at camp after sunset that day we found up to thirty of these swallows had taken shelter in our dining tent, under the flysheet of the client tent and on the bars of the trailer - and once we had stopped in camp some even came to roost in the vehicle itself! The swallows were so docile that when we



opened the trailer lid the birds on the bars rode the moving lid, adjusting their balance as if on a wind blown branch. In the end I had to pick up some of the birds to move them out of our way, placing them on the lid of the trailer alongside their friends - they showed no fear or alarm at being manhandled and accepted their new roosting spot in good grace!

By the end of the safari we had topped the record with 254 different species of birds. The safari ended with a rare sighting of a striped polecat, and to boot we found some new experiences for our guests to go home and tell the grandchildren about - quad biking on the pans and walking to see white rhino! When was the last time YOU did something for the first time? We are waiting to help you achieve those safari aspirations!

Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
www.gavinblairsafaris.com