



# Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

January 2006 Newsletter

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## Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Welcome to another year of news and views from the bush. By the time you receive this newsletter the year will no doubt have already begun to settle into a fairly familiar routine - but for us out here things change by the day, and once again I am left with the feeling that somehow we are always chasing the clock but not winning the race - something we are definitely not supposed to be doing in laid back "manyana - pole-pole" (tomorrow - slowly, slowly) Africa! It's a bit of a "hare and tortoise" syndrome - but once we get out on safari and leave the bureaucracy and officialdom behind it's GREAT! So on safari we go.



As has become a tradition our first guest of the year is a regular from New York, this year marking her tenth anniversary of safaris with

us. Nxai Pan was our destination, and with the rest of Botswana flooded we expected to arrive to find a mini lake - instead the rain had fallen but not deluged, and in fact there was less water about than there had been in the previous three years. Right from the start Nxai Pan came into its own. On the way in we had seen a bachelor group of nine bull elephants, meandering along and feeding on the tall green grasses and scrubby acacia bushes that grow on the sand dunes leading up to the official park entrance. Eighteen ostriches danced a welcoming jig before sprinting away, and as we drove over the crest of the dune that encircles the "Pan" the zebras could be seen dotting the grassy plains as far as you could see.



Our first very close encounter with the wildlife came in the early morning when I detected a commotion going on in the long grass near to the tents. As I approached an immature gabar goshawk came struggling out of the patch of long grasses, and stumbled away across a small opening and into the cover of some bushes. Its whole posture was wrong, and so I gave chase and easily caught the bird. It seemed that when plunging into the long grass after a grasshopper or other insect, which is its normal prey, the goshawk had the misfortune of finding that the grass it had dived into was the type with large clumps of incredibly clingy, Velcro like seed heads. The seed heads had literally stuck the goshawk's wings, tail and body together so that it could barely walk, never mind fly! Luckily helping hands were willing to endure those razor sharp talons and beak as we undertook the task of getting the worst of the grass burs out to enable



the bird to at least unfold its wings and straighten its tail out. It was like pulling extremely strong and sticky plasters off a hairy body - I know, it hurts! - but after some ohh's and ahh's and grimaces in sympathy for the goshawk we were thrilled to be able to release it and see it fly off to tend to some of the smaller but more persistent burs in its own time and way. Incidents like this makes one more aware of the many unimagined perils that can befall the critters out there, and attested to by the fact that over the week I came across other insects also trapped by the same burs.

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Although we heard the lions calling during the early mornings and at night we did not make it a priority to head out to find them, as for this guest the small interesting critters and bugs, and just being out in the wilderness of Africa, held just as much appeal - and so while we were



aware of the lions presence from their calls, the circling vultures and their tracks on the road, we left them to their own activities, observing them on occasion in the distance as they strode boldly across the grassy plains or rested in the shade of an island of trees. Closer to hand there were several family groups of jackals where most of the pups looked ready to head out on their own. We watched one family where the two adults came together in the late afternoon from their midday siestas, greeting each other affectionately. A pup had warily followed the one adult and had even been chastised and chased, but it still came along. Thinking that the adult reunion was a sign of family bonding the pup - well more sub-adult - came in submissively, only to get a less than friendly welcome from both parents, sending the dust flying as they nipped and goaded the youngster to leave

home. We retreated a little distance to watch the adults set off for their evenings foraging, followed by the hanger on who may still have got a handout if he was lucky. We also saw several bat eared foxes but no youngsters - perhaps they were still too young to come out of their dens? Early one morning we saw a friendly interaction between two jackals and three bat eared foxes who were seemingly playing tag with each other. When we continued down the road they all ran off together, and then stopped and looked back at us as if scolding us for disturbing their fun! A honey badger on the other hand barely gave us the time of the day, pausing briefly only once from its foraging to look up at us and give us a warning stare to leave him alone, before continuing to trundle along.



The numerous passing rain showers provided only temporary puddles from which the small birds and creatures could drink, while the larger animals had to visit the few natural pans that dot the area and which were all holding a good amount of water. It would be



these bigger waterholes that would finally become the home of the giant bullfrogs, the young of which we would find swimming in the temporary puddles in the roads as we drove along. We took great care to avoid running over these serious looking youngsters, who were only 3 or 4 centimetres in size now but who will grow to an enormous 20 centimetres in a few months time, when they will then be able



to let out a loud, deep bellowing call that will be audible for a considerable distance. As the large pans dry up the adults bury themselves in the mud, where they are able to survive as the mud sets to concrete until the next year's rains release them from their crypt. Meanwhile the waterholes provided a great place to watch the hundreds of zebra coming to drink one family group at a time - and there were always the elephants that came and put on a grand show of drinking and mud bathing.

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We seemed to be having the best of both worlds - beautiful sunny days and breezy cool nights, with the occasional spectacular storm clouds billowing off in the near distance and thunder and lightning displays to awe anyone, but no rain where we were. It would rain on one part of the



pan or between our game drives, instantly turning the roads into rivers. We would slip and slide about for a while until the sun burnt off the water, but no rain in camp - perfect. The herds of zebra and springbok would zigzag back and forth across the pan, heading to the area of the last rain to capitalize on the new grass shoots that the rain would stimulate out of the ground. Thus each game drive would find us criss-crossing the



area to best position ourselves in the ideal spot so as to have the meandering herds feed towards and around us, as we would sit out on chairs drinking tea and taking in the magnificent spectacle about us. However, the odds were building up against us and on the second to last day we raced home ahead of a darkening and threatening sky, only to get a last minute reprieve as the racing rain clouds passed us by.

But after seven days and during the last hour of the last afternoon the rain, bought on by a huge wind, came with a vengeance! Within minutes we were sitting in the middle of a lake, and the road into camp became the river feeding this growing lake! Within half an hour the storm had moved over us, and as it disappeared off in the distance - backlit by the setting sun



- we splashed about putting the camp back together. Past experience had helped in planning the layout of camp, so at least the dining tent, the guests tent, toilets and shower all stood safe and dry on little islands surrounded by flood waters. By the next morning most of the water had drained away from our camp, but it made the drive out very interesting, with the vehicle slipping, sliding and going along sideways, and the trailer on occasion seemingly wanting to overtake the vehicle! For all the mud and water we made it out of the pan only to get stuck on a hard gravelled section of the road where it turned out the elephants had dug a massive

hole since our arrival as their mud bathing spot. The inconspicuous puddle turned out to be a huge trap that held us for almost an hour, and challenged my skills at extracting a one tonne vehicle from a hole that we subsequently discovered had been of such a shape and size that it had sheared the vehicles chassis into two! We made it out, and so now look forward to the next adventure!

Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie  
[www.gavinblairsafaris.com](http://www.gavinblairsafaris.com)