



# Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

June 2006 Newsletter

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## Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

We are a bit late in getting this newsletter out, but here is another episode of our adventures and sightings from the bush. We have been seeing some great things and packing in so many adventures that I have just not been able to keep up with the newsletter writings - the days are just not long enough! This newsletter combines some of the experiences of our two June safaris. Each and every safari has its highlights and no two are ever the same, which is why I am always ready and raring to get out there to see what is around the next bend of the road.



Victoria Falls was still enjoying a good volume of water that



was crashing over the various sections along its one kilometre lip, and so it continues to thrill and awe all who see this beautiful natural wonder. There was still enough spray to have drenched us through by the time we got to "danger point" where the spray makes it wet and slippery - and so it is only the adventurous ones who brave getting right up to the edge to peer down into the foaming waters 1,000 meters below. Known as the "boiling pot" this is the point where the Zambezi waters from the two ends of the Falls convene, before entering the first

gorge and spilling over rapid number one and then on to Lake Kariba and eventually the Indian Ocean.

This year the interior of the Chobe National Park received some good rains, and as a result there were still many waterholes holding water and there was still plenty for the animals to eat. This meant that the big herds of elephant and buffalo had not begun concentrating in



large numbers along the Chobe river floodplains, but there were still enough to keep any safari goer enthralled. Along with the elephants and buffalo wading out into the shallows to feed on the emerging grasses, we saw a few big male kudu with their spiral horns and their sleeker looking females coming down to drink. The baboons scouring the shoreline caused the plovers and geese to protest loudly and defend their patch, where they may have had eggs or small chicks hiding, while the young baboons kept us entertained with their playful antics. By

watching the feeding behaviour of a pair of chestnut backed finchlarks I was alerted to the fact that they were feeding chicks. The nest was in an area of almost bare open ground with very sparse patches of short grass, but I had to look through binoculars to pinpoint the nest site. Closing in until the binoculars could focus no longer I still could not see the nest. Only on getting to within two feet of the spot was I then, after further carefully studying the ground, able to finally locate the nest and the three chicks. The chicks may have been the equivalent of a grape to a human in respect of their size and food content to a baboon, but in nature no opportunity for food is wasted - but it would of course represent a large loss to the birds who had invested time and energy to produce these chicks had the baboons found them, so being



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well hidden is very important. This was just another example of the every day trials and tribulations of the bush which we are seldom exposed to.

Out on the Chobe floodplain we found a female and three male lions, all sub adults. The lions were seemingly hanging about waiting for their parents, and in the meantime were showing mild interest in a male impala that came wandering by - but inexperience, or perhaps a lack of enthusiasm, meant they stood no chance of catching the alert impala. Meanwhile, not that far away, the big male and three adult female lions were dining on a buffalo, with about fifty vultures looking on in the hope that there might be something left for them. In Savuti we were again lucky to come across more lions, basking in the late afternoon light that broke through the thin veil of cloud that had just sprinkled a light shower of rain across the land - not enough rain to make anything wet, but enough to cut the dust! Another lion sighting came after we homed in on the roaring to find the spoor, which we then followed until we tracked down one of the Savuti male lions out on patrol, scent marking and roaring. While on the marsh another male lion strode out across the open savannah, leaving his companion with a female that had come into season. The lion sightings, and the safari, ended with two females and a sub adult male sitting up on a large grass covered termite mound, enjoying the early morning sun in Xakanaxa as we headed to the airstrip to fly out.



We watched a family of jackals trotting purposefully about, stopping once in a while to focus in on the sound of something moving in the grass, and on one occasion successfully pounced and caught a rodent. When walking back to camp, after a peaceful afternoon of canoeing along the waterways of the Okavango, we came across two African wild cats just setting out for their nights hunting, but our best predator sighting (other than the lions) was to find the two Savuti cheetah brothers out on the edge of the open savannah. The one cheetah still had a badly injured front leg, that he seemed unwilling to put any weight on but was otherwise looking sleek and healthy - his brother was obviously doing a good job of providing enough food for the two of them, although I suspect the day will come when one of the lions or a hyena will catch them at a kill, and the injury will prevent him getting out of the way before the other predator can cause even more injury or even kill him. As if to prove how easily this could



happen the two cheetah suddenly sat up and became very alert, as out of the bushes some meters behind us came a male lion. Fortunately the lion was heading obliquely past and did not seem to have seen the cheetah, which he surely would have challenged.

Each area we visited provided the usual staple of animal sightings in their various settings and in their many different shapes, sizes and colours - all providing many hours of interesting wildlife viewing opportunities, and allowing us to observe and learn about the animals habits and behaviours, while surrounded by the unique bush ambiance. Zebra, giraffe, warthog, hippo, impala, mongoose and many others helped fill out the day's sightings, along with the many varied and diverse birds and plants that are also part of a typical day on safari. Fifty elephants, two rock pythons, nine wattled cranes and a flat tyre added to the experience!



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We immediately moved on to the next safari with a group of very keen photographers. On our first afternoon drive we encountered, among other creatures, two sleeping male lions and a hyena - not bad! The next morning we began by homing in on a series of alarm calls that were strung out and rising and tailing off in such a way as to indicate a predator on the move - but some nearby lion roars had us detouring from these alarm calls, until we eventually intercepted two lionesses walking along in the golden early morning light across a field of short grasses. Positioning ourselves so as to have the lions walk past in front of us we were able to get some good photos - the beauty of being digital providing instant gratification! Following the females were the two males who also provided some photo opportunities. We followed the lions for a short while until they



settled down in the warming sun to rest, and after some time photographing their many yawns and sleepy faces we moved on to a small breeding herd of elephants that were nearby. On the off chance that there had been some sustenance to the earlier alarm calls I wound my way along the various bush tracks to a spot I calculated was in the line of travel of the mysterious predator. Arriving at a likely spot I began to explain to the guests my thinking when, from a thick clump of bushes nearby, a francolin burst into frantic alarm calls - so once again on the track we proceeded. Bingo! - a beautiful male leopard resting out in the sun, grooming himself and tending to a small wound on one hind leg - probably there courtesy of a close encounter with a larger predator. For the next few hours we photographed and followed as the leopard rested, preened, stretched, had a drink and sauntered along on his own mission, until eventually slipping off through the long grass and bushes where we could not follow. This was certainly a wonderful sighting and a good few GB's of memory card were used up! We headed home for a fresh tasty lunch, where we were joined by 60 or so elephants who came to drink at the small rainwater pan in front of our camp.



While we are out enjoying the wildlife in the surrounding wilderness Marjorie stays back in camp to attend to the camp chores, and that done then fires up the computer and satellite phone to try and stay on top of the paperwork and e-mail. She is usually visited by dozens of naughty squirrels, who feel they have the right to venture anywhere and at times climb up Marjorie, or onto the table where she is working to inspect the strange setup - and they all but sprint across the keyboard! There are often zebra and impala feeding nearby and the occasional bull elephant or breeding herd wander past - and surprisingly often the wild dogs also come bounding past and sometimes through camp to keep things more interesting. Such was the occasion while we were leopard watching, so when the wild dogs came through again the next morning Marjorie radioed us and we headed back towards camp. We intersected the pack of twelve wild dogs as they emerged from the mopane forest near camp - they were all very bloody and seemed to be heading purposefully towards what I assumed to be their den site. This is the time of the year that the wild dogs pup, and the dominant female would remain at the den with the small pups while the rest of the pack hunted - and if successful would return to regurgitate some of the spoils for



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her and the pups. Following behind and hoping for an easy meal was a hyena. The wild dogs were on the move and so we had close but only relatively brief views of these animals. Right in the middle of all this was a family of dwarf mongooses, and so they became the attention of the big lenses in between the passing wild dogs. Marjorie scored lucky again on moving day, seeing the wild dogs on the road as she went ahead to the next camp, but by the time we arrived the wild dogs had disappeared into the mopane forest. However, we had seen an African wild cat, a striped bellied sand snake, and after much tracking we had found another bigger male leopard walking along patrolling his territory and scent marking, and at one point even making a half hearted attempt to catch a squirrel - so all in all a very successful stay in the area.



Moving on we encountered a young bull elephant that was in musth, but as there were no female elephants about he seemed a bit frustrated and so began putting on a show of his displeasure at our presence, which culminated in his showing off how strong he was by pushing over a dead tree - and so suitably impressed we moved on out of his way. Elsewhere in the mopane forest and along the floodplains were small herds of tsessebe, wildebeest, zebra and impala. It was one group of impala snorting back in the mopane woodland that alerted us to the presence of another predator. Moving between the forest and the floodplain we eventually sighted a cheetah striding along and heading out to the vast floodplain. Using the vantage points of the tops of termite mounds the male cheetah was clearly scanning around in search of a meal. In the far distance a portion of the floodplain was still under water, and a herd of lechwe were feeding along the waters edge. Positioning for a good overall view of the hunting ground I pointed out that should the cheetah appear and a chase result we would have the lechwe running towards us and bounding through the water - and with the sun low on the horizon the water splashes would be highlighted, so creating a great photo opportunity. Our patience paid off as I spotted the head and ears of the cheetah stalking through the grass 200 meters out in front and about 50 meters from the unsuspecting lechwe. The wind was in the cheetah's favour, the distance was right and ..... the lechwe were off! The chase came straight towards us. There were lechwe fleeing in every direction, water spraying all about and homing in for the kill was the cheetah in a full run. The lechwe veered off to one side and the cheetah lunged, sprays of water sparkling in the sun and more lechwe bounding through deeper water just in front of us. The hunt was over, but the effort had been in vain for the cheetah - however, the fantastic photo taken by one of our guests revealed that it was a close call for the lechwe! What a thrill it was to see all that action. To top it all, at sunset a wattled crane flew in and began an elaborate dance, and then proceeded to chase off the spurwinged geese that had been sitting there throughout the entire show. The cheetah shook off the water and returned to the top of a termite mound to contemplate the day's failures, but in doing so gave us another great photo



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opportunity before we too had to return to camp, passing a large breeding herd of elephants on the way.



There is so much to tell - ground hornbills with half swallowed snakes, giant eagle owls catching whitefaced ducks, pelicans in a feeding frenzy, a spotted thick-knee (dikkop) with a mouse, a serval tracked down due to impala alarm calls, a lioness with an impala kill that a hyena took over, and - the icing on the cake - a female leopard with a kill and a beautiful playful cub! It's too much to tell, and if I was to tell it all you would not believe that you could see so much on one safari. I still find it hard to believe myself that we saw such non stop wonderful sightings! Was I using up all my luck for years to come I wonder? Well, that's for the next guests to find out, and the rest is for the next newsletter!

Until next month...

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