



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

October 2006 Newsletter

Gavin Blair Safaris

Private Bag K19

Kasane

Botswana

Fax +44 (0) 870 831 0552

info@gavinblairsafaris.com

Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

We are still behind in writing the newsletters, but here are some of the highlights of the safari to Botswana and Zimbabwe that we enjoyed with guests on their second safari with us. On the light side, one night while eating dinner at one of the lodges, a waiter reported to the manager - "the moon, it has a problem!" Knowing how superstitious the local people are we went out to investigate - to find a partial lunar eclipse!



The safari started by flying into the Moremi Game reserve, from where we set out straight out from the airstrip on our first wildlife viewing adventure. A male waterbuck feeding close by the track briefly looked up as we approached, but deciding that we were no threat continued to search through the tall grasses for the shorter, sweeter shoots hidden below. Nearby a male kudu browsed while a family of banded mongooses scratched through the leaf litter in search of tasty morsels - from the big city to paradise in one easy step! Talking of heavy traffic - on one drive we



rounded a corner in the track to find a group of bull elephants enjoying an early morning drink and wallow at a roadside pan, before passing so close to us that we could get to see every detail of their textured skins before they nonchalantly wandered off down the track, ignoring us driving along behind.

It was just a short flight over the waters of the Delta to our next stop, where we set out in a canoe to soak up the ambiance of the Okavango - gliding along lily lined channels and lagoons while birds flitted about in the tall reeds or chattered away in the trees on the islands and along the channels edge. Every year a natural phenomena occurs whereby thousands of air breathing barbel - a type of catfish - begin a migration from far up in the main channel of the



Okavango River known as the "pan handle", and move in large shoals downstream into the ever branching channels that make up the Delta area of the Okavango. Many predators feast on the "barbel run", and as the waterways divide so do the shoals, thus getting less concentrated as they continue,

until they find new territories in which to feed and breed. While out in the canoes we encountered a small part of the "barbel run", but there was not much to see apart from the bubbles released from the mud as the barbel fed, and the swirls of water as they maneuvered in the shallows and came up to gulp air. We watched a breeding herd of elephant splashing across the shallow lagoon and onto the island, then across the runway before disappearing off in the direction of camp.

Aside from the general wildlife and birds, and great elephant viewing at the waterholes, Savuti once again provided some good predator viewing. A leopard lounging on a low termite mound

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in the late afternoon glow of the sun was quite a find, but as we enjoyed watching this female washing herself a movement in the grasses nearby caught her attention. Quickly the leopard changed position and went into a crouch, and then slowly and stealthily began to stalk. From our position we could not see what the focus of her attention was, but I suspected a family of francolins. You could hardly see the movement, but with great care and skill the leopard moved forward, and as we watched through binoculars she sprang through a clump of grasses and sage bushes. Francolins flew up into the air squawking in alarm and departed the scene - except for one! We could only just make out the beautiful markings on the leopard's body through the vegetation, but we could hear the crunching of bones as she fed on her catch. The snack was soon over and the leopard briefly returned to the termite mound before walking directly towards us, then passing close to the vehicle before disappearing into the thicker vegetation.



Lion spoor was everywhere but it seemed as if the lions were playing games, walking up and down on every track and then disappearing into thin air! - but finally there they were. Three

cubs were sitting halfway up Bushman paintings hill. The cubs seemed to be enjoying the view from up on the rocks, but looking down on the tourists for a change soon lost its appeal and they



decided it was time to start exploring. Of course there is always one daring cub, one able and one that just does not have the confidence in itself. It did not take long for two of the cubs to scramble and climb down into another part of the hill, leaving the cautious cub agonizing about how to negotiate a section of steep rock face that the others had easily scrambled down. After much encouragement from us the slope was finally conquered and we all went our separate ways. After much tracking we found the rest of the big pride lying along the top of the dried channel at its deepest point, so we were again looking up at them, until one lioness came down to stalk some kudu that were way too alert to be potential prey. The next "high" sighting was in the literal sense - 2 male lions feeding on an old bull elephant that had died naturally some days earlier and was in the late stages of decay!

We moved on to the Chobe River, where an afternoon boat cruise once again gave us the opportunity to see the wildlife from a different perspective



- elephants, buffalo, kudu, baboons and impala came down towards us to drink, and we enjoyed close up and personal encounters with a few crocodiles and pods of hippos. On the



drives we encountered many more elephants in all shapes and sizes and involved in all kinds of activities, while out on the floodplains there was the usual variety of animals making the most

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of the greener grasses. Aside from some good close up views of puku, we had an unusually good viewing of several groups of the normally shy roan antelope. There were also many giraffe about, and occasionally they would have to shake their heads and long necks, and even kick up their heels and dance around, in order to try and chase away family groups of oxpeckers who noisily fought over their feeding rights by running up and down on the giraffes necks and over their bodies. Early one morning we watched as two hippos snorted, groaned and roared at each other across the channel from where we sat - it appeared that the younger hippo had been sparring with another and things had got out of hand, as the smaller hippo had a big cut across his head near one eye and blood was coming out from his mouth and around his tusk - the sound he made was either that of being in agony or just really angry at the other hippo!

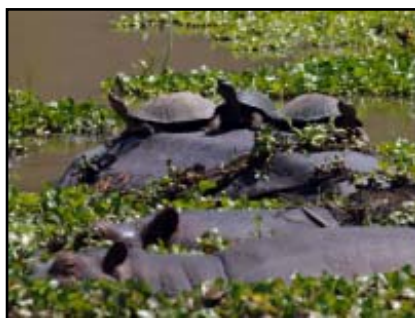


After two nights in Victoria Falls (to see this natural wonder among other activities) we flew on to the Matusadona National Park, where we enjoyed a great walk encountering three black rhino. It appeared that the female rhino was in season, and the two males were trying to win her attention while being very wary of each other. As all this was taking place in really thick bush it was difficult to find a good vantage point to see the rhinos clearly, while at the same time staying out of the way of the testy males - and with the wind shifting about it had our adrenalin pumping! However, we were able to follow the rhinos for almost an hour, and we did get a few unobstructed views before we decided to leave the threesome to work things out



on their own. In the afternoons we potted about on a boat along the shoreline of Lake Kariba, enjoying the small groups of elephants that were feeding on the grasses, and disturbing a few sunning crocodiles - some of which just kept a beady eye on us while others slipped into the water. We also came across a puff adder that had taken to the water to swim towards the island where the camp is situated - we left him for the next visitors!

Our final adventure of the safari was walking and canoeing down the Zambezi River in the Mana Pools National Park. From the airstrip we enjoyed a game drive to camp, passing a pool with some sleeping hippos - one of which had four terrapins on its back. As we approached



one terrapin slid off, but the other three stayed put as the hippo slowly turned around and waded out into the middle of the pool - only as the hippo started to submerge did the terrapins abandon their ride! Out in the canoes we encountered many pods of hippos, both in the water and

resting on the shoreline, as well as numerous bull elephants feeding on the shoreline vegetation or, having waded out into the river, feeding on the sedges and grasses that grow on the small islands that form when the vegetation colonizes the sandbanks. One memorable experience took place where we had stopped for a picnic lunch, and a post lunch rest. While we sat quietly three young bull elephants appeared, coming down to drink and unaware of our

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presence - it was only when they turned to leave that they realized we were there. One of the guests had been dozing off a short way from the rest of us - flicking a few pebbles to gain her attention she woke up and, listening to my reassurances that the elephants were curious rather than aggressive, stayed where she was and enjoyed the close encounter, which the couple can proudly add to their tales to tell friends back home!

Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
www.gavinblairsafaris.com