



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

April 2009 Newsletter

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Progress eventually comes even to the remotest locations, but progress has many faces and means different things to different people. The upgrading of the entrance gates, along with the huge expansion in staff quarters and administrative buildings deep within what were once remote, desolate and undeveloped areas of the various National Parks, had begun. This, I



fear, will only bring more "controls" and more disruption to my life out in the bush. Although I can see the reasoning and need for the progress it is just another sign that I am getting long in the tooth, as I pine for the old care free days of no controls, no paperwork and no restrictions. However, I doubt there are many places left in the world where the "old days" still exist, and so that's my gripe for the month over - had we not

got horribly stuck in the thick sand in the hottest part of the day, due to the heavy construction traffic tearing up the track, I would probably not have had anything to gripe about in the first place!

Despite the delay we made camp in time for lunch, with plenty of time for the afternoon introduction to the Nxai Pan area. Just as we began to reverse out of camp I turned to wave goodbye to Marjorie, and at the same time caught a glimpse of a tawny hide moving through the thicket of trees surrounding the camp. Without much hesitation a lioness walked on into camp, the focus of her attention being the fire bucket we used for heating the washing and shower water that I had moments before filled, ready for heating once the fire was made and lit.



The lioness must have been resting nearby and the sound of the water splashing into the bucket would have sounded good to her, as the area had no natural surface water available for a thirsty lioness, with the nearest source being at the man made waterhole about 5 kilometers away. After drinking the bucket almost dry the lioness moved a short distance away to rest near one of the tents, and so we set off to see what animals we would find at the regular drinking spot at the pumped waterhole. Marjorie remained behind as usual to carry on with her chores, mindful but unconcerned

about the visitor, who came back for a final drink later that same afternoon before moving on into the surrounding bush. The lioness, having found a new source of water, called back several times over the next few days and nights, never giving any sign of a threat - but we in turn gave her the respect she deserved and enjoyed each experience thoroughly. Having started with such a great lion experience, we ended with an equally entertaining one. On our last morning while out looking for the lionesses and their tiny cubs, we found the male lion and some of his females near to the old waterhole - between them they had managed to bring down a large male kudu and were lying about looking stuffed to the gunnels! All around jackals trotted busily about, moving in closer to the kill in gradual arcs, until their nerve would break under the glare of a watching lioness. Retreating to an invisible distant start line the jackals would once again begin the back and forth, trotting an inch closer with each pass. As the morning sun warmed up the scene the male lion was the first to head for some nearby shade, soon followed by the lionesses, leaving only one lioness to guard against the jackals and gathering vultures. It was not long before the heat caused the lioness to pant rapidly as she glanced longingly at the distant shady bushes - but with cubs to feed this kudu still had too much meat on it to give it up, and so finally the lioness took hold of the neck and began dragging the remains of the



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kudu towards the distant shade, stopping regularly to rest, gauge her progress and check on the circling jackals. With the nearest shade still being about another 100 meters behind our position, and knowing we had to leave the scene shortly anyway, we moved on when it became clear that the lioness had the false hope that the shade created by the vehicle was to be the destination of all her efforts!

We once again had luck with cheetah, although I can claim no points for finding this lone female the first time we saw her. I had been driving clockwise around a large stand of low acacia trees busily pointing out other wildlife off to the left, when the movement of something suddenly sitting up in the middle of the track caught my eye. I stopped without unduly alarming or disturbing the female cheetah that had been lying flat out on the ground, and as such we were able to sit with her for some time and get some very good views of her beautiful face, long tail and her impressive set of claws that, not being a true cat, cannot retract, although the built in "running spikes" assist in enabling cheetah to obtain their impressive sprinting speeds! After half an hour or so the cheetah got up and slowly walked off towards the dense bush. Driving on a short distance we came to a spot where we could watch the descending vultures join the squabble for the now un-recognizable remains of what I suspect had been the cheetah's breakfast. We found the cheetah again on another occasion resting up in deep shade under a small acacia tree, showing no interest in the impala and springbok feeding a short way off.



Another highlight was finding a bat-eared fox den in a hole under a termite mound. The first time we spotted the foxes some of the pups were playing out in the open, just in front of an adult who was lying half out of the hole under the termite mound. Perhaps surprised by our sudden stopping the adult bat-eared fox came out of the hole, and after a minute or two picked up one of the pups by the scruff of its neck and ran off with it. The second adult bolted from behind the termite mound where it had been resting having been suddenly alarmed by its fleeing partner, then stopped a way

off to look back at us. So as to not cause any more stress we opted to leave, so allowing the adults to quickly return and look after their tiny pups. On subsequent visits, now knowing the location of the den and the lay of the land, we were able to approach in a less threatening manner, and as such were rewarded with some splendid views of the mother, often lying with just her head out of the hole, while her six pups clambered all over her to explore the immediate vicinity of the den site.



Once again it was time for the mid morning tea stop, and as always my most favourite stops are where there is a great scene with wild animals to watch while we enjoy our tea and biscuits - and so to sit out at a waterhole with an elephant looking on and eyeing us up was a real thrill, and to have a herd of 300 or so springbok graze steadily right up to where we were sitting, then parting to move past on either side of us barely ten feet away, made it even



more of a special moment. We could hear the springboks tiny hooves striking the hard parched earth, listen to the swish of their short stubby tails, and become engulfed with the musky scent of the many wild bodies so close to us that we could eavesdrop on their faint grunting and snorting sounds as the individuals communicated back and forth with one another. Sunsets are also a part of the great safari atmosphere, and on a few occasions

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the dusty sky provided us with an orange red backdrop for some low down silhouette photos of the elephants. The horizon to horizon views were full of wonders by day, and by night gave unrivalled stargazing, and so as always there was something going on to occupy every last moment.

A few weeks before our visit the Central Kalahari had experienced a massive fire, whereby 80% of the park had been burnt - not to mention the 1,000's of kilometers outside of the park, and so we set off to the area wondering what would greet us. Considering the extent of the fires we found that many of the areas we drove through while out wildlife viewing had escaped the burning, and so we were fortunate to still be able to enjoy some very good wildlife viewing. We also enjoyed some great birdlife, including a number of ostrich pairs with their tiny chicks running along the tracks or feeding out on the valley floor. Male Kori bustards strutted about displaying with their necks puffed out, their tails splayed and the crest on their heads erect, while emitting their deep slow drumming mating calls. The noisy black korhaans were also very vocal, and we saw a few of their "parachute" displays where the



male, after flying about to gain height while making his incredibly loud raucous croaking call, suddenly goes quiet and descends almost vertically back to the ground with his wings back-pedalling and his "landing gear" dropped down ready for the return to earth. Secretary birds strode purposefully about searching for insects and lizards, while in the scrubby bushes the LBJ's (little brown jobs) flitted about while keeping up a constant chatter of bird chirps and tweeting. One of my favourite little birds is the scaly-feathered finch with its drooping moustachial stripes, and due to the burned out bushes and undergrowth, I was finally able to get a photograph of one after all these years.



There were not as many springbok or gemsbok about as usual, although all in all we still saw over a 100 gemsbok and a considerable number more of springbok. We had a few good sightings of meerkats but the ground squirrels were also less conspicuous, and so I wondered if that may have been due to the unusually strong winds that were blowing along the valley floor, a result of the increased solar heating from the bare surfaces where the fires had destroyed all the grass and brush undercover, leaving bare baked earth or Kalahari sand. One advantage of the bare twigs and earth was to provide the large male ground agamas, in their striking breeding colouration, vantage points from which to perch, survey their territory and display to their females - of course the downside of these exposed vantage points was the possibility of



becoming a meal for one of the many small through to large raptors, such as the pale chanting goshawks that are ever present in the Kalahari - one of which we were at the right place at the right time to see it make such a kill. The danger did not end when the agamas returned to the ground, as that was where on a number of occasions we saw the industrious honey badgers digging away frantically and sending clods of earth flying as they pursued agamas, geckos, small rodents and the various beetles and insects that had retreated into the numerous cracks or burrows in the hard earth. Where there was a digging honey badger there was usually a black backed jackal or two hanging about nearby, in the hope of catching a fleeing rodent or agama that may have slipped past the claws and jaws of the honey badger.



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On our nocturnal outing to hopefully glimpse part of a meteorite shower we got to see an aardwolf trotting down the road, before it moved out of the glare of the headlights and disappeared into the darkness, and on another occasion a leopard put in a brief appearance. We also had a number of different lion sightings - one male and female with two sub-adult females were not very active when we found them, and nor was the female with her four scrawny looking cubs that we found elsewhere resting up at the end of one of the islands of acacia trees that dot the valley floor.



At the next small clump of trees to the lions were a few old gemsbok, some laying down and presumably feeling safe by virtue of it being mid-day, as the heat was such as to deter any strenuous activity. We returned later in the cool of the late afternoon to find the lioness just waking up and the cubs a little more active, but by the time the lioness set out in the direction of the gemsbok, followed by the cubs, the gemsbok had long since made their exit

from the area. Driving along the sandy track and over some of the dunes we came across a lot of fresh lion spoor, while up ahead the vultures were flocking down to the ground. Knowing that the squabbling vultures meant the lions had vacated their kill we set about tracking the pride. We did not have to go very far before spotting some ears sticking up above the grasses a short way off the track, and on climbing up onto the roof of the vehicle we found a large pride of females, sub-adult cubs and two males staring back at us. Some of the females and younger cubs slunk off to find shade under some trees further back from our position, while the elder cubs watched us in interest.



The distant male did not stir - probably due to his having just completed a big meal - while the second male kept a wary eye on us. Once again the day was heating up, and so not wanting to disturb the lions out from under scarce shade we left to find some shade of our own.

As an extension to this safari we flew on to spend a few days at the Chimpanzee sanctuary in Zambia. I do not think there are many places left where one still has the opportunity to personally spend time roaming about in the bush and interacting directly with semi-wild chimpanzees - it is a thrilling experience and a real privilege. Even in this little corner of Zambia "progress" has arrived, as this family run refuge was in the process of being morphed into a more traditionally run and organized sanctuary. The task of looking after and providing for the 120 plus chimpanzees has been a lifelong dedication for Sheila Siddle, and her daughter Silvia who has followed on in that dedication. The project has grown way beyond what anyone could have imagined, and so the trustees of the wildlife orphanage have moved to plan for the future security and benefit of the chimps in their care. However, nothing can replace the dedication and commitment that the Siddle family have given to the chimps, and so we hope that the powers to be come to appreciate the Siddle's lifelong commitment and find a way forward that retains the Siddle's invaluable input as well as giving dignity, respect and paying a tribute to the achievements



and dedication that David, Sheila and Silvia have given to all the chimpanzees that have arrived at Chimfunshi, from its humble beginnings, through the hard times and on to the present day. What cannot be denied, and anyone who has had the good fortune to have been to Chimfunshi will testify to, is the thrill and enjoyment of having had the opportunity to play and interact with the chimps - it's a wonderful experience that will remain with you forever.

Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
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