



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

August 2009 Newsletter

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Following on from last month's newsletter, the nocturnal viewing at the Etosha camps waterholes in Namibia were once again full of great sightings, starting with hundreds of sandgrouse flying in just after sunset to drink quickly before flying back to their chicks and their territories many miles away. A good number of rhinos wandered in over the night-time periods, drinking and interacting with one another and accompanied with lots of snorting, huffing and puffing. Breeding herds of elephant seemed to glide in quietly despite the rocky and scrub terrain, drinking and then leaving without making the daytime fuss and commotion. The



bull elephants tended to be less keen to leave, standing around as if they were as interested in seeing who would come and visit as we were. Flitting in and out of the lights were bats feeding on the moths and insects, while a number of jackals patrolled the shadows around the waterhole without seeming to achieve much. One night a few hyenas came down to drink and they too hung about, drifting in and out of the shadows until some distant sounds attracted their attention, following which they took off with a purpose and never

returned. The lions, however, announced their approach with a lot of roaring, unconcerned about announcing their presence although they took their time actually arriving at the floodlit waterhole, finally putting in an appearance just after 2am in the morning.

At first light one morning we saw big male lion tracks leading from another waterhole, and so tracked the big pug marks as they weaved back and forth across the dirt tracks, cutting corners and making short excursions off the road to sniff out suspicious scent or to scent mark themselves. Eventually the tracks led off down a game trail and out of the accessible area, but we were lucky enough to see two lionesses way off in the distance across a huge grassy plain, on which a few hundred springbok and zebra were grazing, unaware of the distant predators eying them up. It was 11:30am and we had the scene to ourselves, but now we had to wait. By 12:10 the two lionesses had stalked to what seemed like 200 meters from a lone feeding male springbok, and so all the cameras and video were focused in waiting for the moment. One lioness melted into the grass, lost to us, and then the second lioness blended into the grassy background. The springbok, perhaps sensing something, began to feed less and started to look around warily, hesitant as to which direction to go. At 12:50 the springbok had not moved for the previous ten minutes and none of us could see the lionesses - shutter fingers were getting cramp, and in the strain of staring at one spot where we thought one of the lionesses was leading to wild shapes formed in the heat haze! At



12:52 the lions broke cover and in a pincer movement closed in on the springbok, who had already reacted and was making a dash to our left, leaving the two lionesses in his dust - they did not even get close! As if to offer us a conciliation prize for our patience the two lionesses, after a brief pause to catch their breath and assess the clouds of dust that marked the herds of zebra and springbok running off into the ever increasing distance, walked towards us and eventually crossed the track without much of a pause, then headed on to the distant glimmering white shoreline of the Etosha pan. Just before sunset we

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passed by the same spot again to see the two lionesses way off at the edge of the pan still resting, and so we wished them better luck for their nocturnal hunting and returned to camp for some more night-time rhino viewing.

Our final hours in Etosha began with an early morning drive to watch a stunning sunrise before returning to spend a short time at the camp waterhole where lines of animals were heading in to the already crowded waterhole to drink - there were already about 200 zebra with more on the way, as well as herds of wildebeest, springbok and a few impala mixed in. No wonder it is always so hard to leave this wonderful place and the thousands of animals, but it was time to move on to new terrain and finally the chance for some exercise.

The scenic drive through some of the off the beaten paths provided the chance to add to the ever increasing bird list, with new records for me to boot. Our journey took us through areas of rural Namibia where traffic is rare, and what traffic we did see was mostly the odd scotch cart drawn by a couple of donkeys. Evidence of the exceptional rains earlier in the year appeared in the odd thread of water flowing in ancient rocky river beds, with greenery that showed up through the otherwise barren stony ground. The final few kilometers of our journey took us nearly vertically up, as we crawled in 4x4 low range to the top of the Etendeka mountain range and the location of our next adventure. Setting out early the following morning we bounced and bumped along stony tracks and through scrubby thorny landscapes, until reaching a gate in the veterinary fence



that cuts the northern portion of Namibia off from the southern section, protecting one area from foot and mouth disease and the other from the advancement of civilization! We continued down a narrow rocky boulder strewn valley, until it opened out and a stream emerged from the rocks to flow through stands of palm trees - the contrast of harsh rocky desert and the green oasis was quite stunning. Continuing on we finally arrived at our destination, a settlement of the nomadic Himba tribe people. Our luck was in as there was a small family group in residence, thus giving our guests the change to visit and interact with one of the last traditionally living native peoples of Southern Africa. Only the women and young boys still live the full traditional life, shunning western



trappings and continuing on in their traditional lifestyles - the men have been forced to integrate more with the outside world, and while they still carry on with their traditional cattle raising lifestyles they are assimilating more to western ways. I do not think a brief visit can fully enlighten one to the ways of these hardy nomads, but it was certainly a chance to glimpse at a very different lifestyle, and perhaps make one more aware of ones own advantages. On our return journey we sighted in the distance some of the so called "desert elephants" that have returned to these areas since conservation efforts began to include the

local communities and involve them in the tourism sector - definitely a conservation success story. Returning to the lodge we set out on the top of the plateau for a sunset view overlooking a huge herd of gemsbok, springbok and a few shy mountain zebra, before returning to our stone bungalows, hot showers and a great dinner.



Over the next few days we visited a number of the stunning scenic outlooks in the region, and glanced back in history via the areas geology that was laid out for us to see in spectacular form. More recent history was hinted at with our visit to the rock engravings at Twyfelfontein, where ancient people had etched into the sandstone rocks animals that must have wandered the surrounding countryside - some of these animals have returned in more recent times, and with the conservation efforts currently underway might conceivably become numerous once again, as already some of the wildlife is

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more prolific now than it was during the early days of my visiting these areas. The small critters had also thrived and we saw a great variety of bugs and beetles, lizards and agamas, scurrying about and displaying an amazing range of shapes and colours. Once again evidence of the earlier good rains was seen in the amount of grass cover and the flush of leaves on the few hardy trees. The desert dwellers that feed on the grass seeds were certainly doing well, and we saw many dassie rats out sunning themselves in the early morning sun as well as plentiful numbers of rock dassie, who happen to be the preferred food of the black eagles that we saw on a number of occasions soaring overhead.



Travelling from high mountains, through passes and across the gravel plains, we passed one spectacular scene after another, but the horizon eventually became a grey smudge and the stony ground gave way to sand as we arrived at the sand dunes of the Skeleton coast, where the blue sky shone above but the warmth of the sun was eroded by the chill in the wind that was blowing in from over the icy cold ocean. We stopped at the first line of dunes, but it was only on making the pilgrimage to the top that their enormous height became apparent - from the top of the dunes the vehicle was a tiny object, and those who didn't climb became mere specks of dark against the white glare of the featureless sand below. Looking west, and leaning into the stiff breeze, the line of waves breaking against the shore hinted at a rough cold sea, and one could see the fog bank hovering offshore, grey and uninviting. Turning south we drove through low dunes, occasionally glimpsing the shore to the west and the distant mountains far off through the shimmering haze to the east, and one could only wonder how anything survives in this landscape, aptly named the "Skeleton Coast".



A twist and turn in the salt road and we arrived at a point where, on leaving the vehicle and walking a few feet over a rise, we were met with the spectacle of the Cape Cross seal colony - hundreds and hundreds of Cape fur seals basking on the rocks, splashing through the surf and claiming this corner of the harsh landscape as their home. Trotting about the fringes of the colony were a number of black backed jackals, who eke out their survival by preying on the weak and abandoned. By night the brown hyenas visit, but to this day I have yet to see one here, although we always see their tracks in the sand along the beach every morning after visiting this site. Heading further south towards civilization we were privy to the latest ship to end its seafaring days on this treacherous coastline.



Our few days spent in the Swakopmund and Walvis Bay areas were not for shopping, historical tours or architectural appreciation, although aspects of all these were touched on. Instead, our visit here was for the unique chance to hug a wild Cape fur seal, feed a pelican, race through the waves with dolphins, try out the local delicacy of oysters (you either love them or hate them!), and dice with the tide and waves as we entered an area of spectacular dunescapes, ending with a wild ride over the "roaring" dunes while the sun set over the crashing waves on the most desolate spot you can imagine. It may sound a bit touristy, but believe me - and our past guests! - it's actually a fun filled action packed day of adventure, thrills and great wildlife. After letting ones hair down



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briefly we returned, on leaving the coast and heading back inland, to the more normal activities of a safari - well not quite, otherwise it would not be a Gavin Blair Safari!

Sossusvlei is an area of incredible red dunes, where the sands have blown steadily up the coast and inland to form line after line of towering barriers to the flow of the water coming down from the mountains in the east. Entering the park well before sunrise we were able to drive into the heart of the dunes to capture the golden hour of light as the sun rose, lighting up the dunes and reflecting back the light in ever changing hues of orange, reds, yellows and gold. There was also the chance to see some of the interesting insects and lizards that survive on the slip face of the dunes, feeding on tiny morsels blown in by the wind, or uncovered as the grains of sand shift in the constant breeze. The only source of moisture for the creatures of the desert is on the occasion that mist from the ocean extends this far inland, forming dew drops on the few plants and grasses, but on



this occasion the only source of water arrived when we had a picnic in the shade of a huge acacia tree, and I dug a cut open container into the ground and filled it with water. The sociable weavers, chats and sparrows are always quick to find the water, and so it provided a mini wildlife spectacle just for our table. After lunch some of us walked over the dunes to see if we could find a gemsbok that had walked by earlier on, hoping to get a good scenic photograph of the gemsbok and the dunes behind. We were given a bonus, as there was in fact more than one gemsbok hiding out behind the dunes, and so we were able to watch a small family herd picking their way along the line of vegetation, and then making their way up one of the steep slopes to disappear over to the other side. It was comforting to see that the gemsbok (as we ourselves had experienced earlier) struggled through the loose sand and up the steep slopes - it being quite a challenge, going forward three steps to slide back two! With the sun setting the dunes began another kaleidoscope of colour change, backed by a magnificent orange sky and giving a great show to end the day, along with the calls of barking geckos to round off the day's wildlife sounds and sightings. We enjoyed a dinner under the desert sky lit by thousands of stars while listening to jackals howling nearby. The last activity to bring this great safari adventure to a close was a dawn balloon flight over the desert, ending with a traditional Champagne breakfast - and so cheers until the next safari adventure (which one of the members of this particular group has already booked for 2010 - thank you for your support!).



Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
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