



# Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

February 2009 Newsletter

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## Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

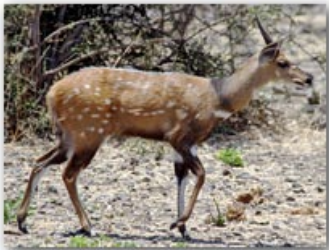
It is said that "Time fly's when you are having fun!" A true statement, if ever there was one, in my experience. What is more the pity though is how true this is when you are out watching the wonders of nature - be it herds of buffalo or elephant, graceful antelope, flocks of beautiful birds or the busy lives of insects, there just never seems to be enough time in the day to see it



all. There are a few lucky people who get to be able to spend much of their every day out in the wild, but even Marjorie and I only get to immerse ourselves into the wilds of the African bush for the days we are out on safari

with our guests, and even then we feel frustrated by park opening and closing times. Anyone who has been out on safari with us will remember how many times we head out early and have to sneak back - always late! We understand that the guests coming out on safari with us are even more limited with their time, and so strive to give them the maximum exposure and experiences of the fabulous nature that each area has to offer, and so are willing to go into "extra time" whenever we can, something we know our guests appreciate even if they leave us sleep deprived! .....but our guests keep returning and so we must be doing something right, and as with the safari in this newsletter, that took place at the end of last year, our returnee's came prepared to fit in as much wildlife viewing as we could get out of each day. The following is what we saw over just the first five days of that safari.

Our first night out in the bush was full of classic African night sounds, with the lions roaring nearby to camp on and off all night, and at times so close that even the trailing off grunts at the end of a series of roars was crisp and clear, and exercised the hairs on the back of your neck. At first light we were out of camp and tracking down the source of all the night noises, although it did not take long, nor test my tracking skills much, before we found two handsome



young male lions and their one female companion. Time passed quickly, and the warming suns rays and all night activity began to take its toll on the lions, as they headed for the deep shade of the nearby woolly caper bushes. We continued on our way to enjoy scenes of various animals making their way to and from the river to drink, and to feed on the grasses on the floodplains. Huge herds of impalas moved along as if in a hurry, the leaders pausing briefly to nibble at the sparse grasses pushing up through the hard baked earth and stone strewn ground, only to be overtaken by those

behind, eager to reach the next sprig of grass before the next impala, before they too were overtaken by the ever moving herd. A small herd of normally stately giraffe, returning from drinking at the river, skipped and pranced about playfully across the floodplain, kicking up their legs and stiffly bucking, then suddenly stopping to glance about as if embarrassed to be seen in such a carefree and playful mood. Another giraffe would take up the lead and buck this way and that, indifferent to the flocks of protesting oxpeckers that scolded and chattered whilst trying to keep a grip on the side of the giraffe's neck and body, or having to launch themselves into the air complaining loudly and heading to a more sensibly behaving giraffe, only to find their next ride soon joining in the fun, until finally the herd had made its way across the floodplain and back into the scrubby bush set back from the river. Further along a young male bushbuck made an



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unusually late foray out from the deep cover of the riverine vegetation, perhaps looking for a less busy spot to rest up for the heat of the day, while up on a rocky rise an advance party of zebras surveyed the scene for the multitude that would be following later as the day progressed and the river beckoned.

As the heat of the day waned, and the sun dipped towards the horizon, we watched groups of elephants of all sizes sip their last trunk-full of water before making their orderly retreat away from the river and back toward the teak forests. Back there in the dry Kalahari sandveld the elephants dwindling food supply was spread out over miles, and so they had to keep moving in order to be able to forage enough before the need for water once again bought them back to the river. Huge troops of baboons, some with fifty or more members, made their way to their nightly roosts in the tall trees that cling to the river bank - many of these trees have long since died and so we could see the silhouettes of the baboons propped on the bare branches as we enjoyed the setting sun and reddening sky, making us wonder if the baboons too were admiring the days end as much we were. Closer to camp black-backed jackals had a den with four tiny pups that we occasionally glimpsed as they played under the bush that overhung the entrance to the den opening. The pair of adults were just leaving to begin their nightly forage across the floodplain for beetles, rodents and insects - but very soon the pickings would be much more substantial!



As we were cleaning up our dessert dishes the sound of panicking and stampeding buffalos could be heard nearby and getting closer. We could soon hear the loud snorting and bellowing that accompanied the thundering hooves and crashing of large bodies through the vegetation, along with the rattle of horns knocking together as the tightly bunched buffalo jostled and pushed to get out of the way of danger. We listened intently in the dark until finally a loud drawn out bellow, quickly followed by the growls and snarls of the lions, heralded the demise of a buffalo - less than 100 meters from our camp. Well, what could I do other than give the signal, and so without any hesitation at all, cameras and videos at the ready, we all jumped aboard the vehicle and went to witness the

action. The lions were holding down an old friend of mine, an old buffalo cow with a huge spread of horns that had made her easily identifiable in the herd of approximately 200 animals that she had been part of. Her wide splayed horns may have been the cause of her end in that she was less able to force her way through the thick tangled vegetation, and so may have had to break away from the mass of charging buffalo bodies to go through the larger gap in the bushes, where one of the males had probably been waiting in ambush. We watched by the light of the headlamps as the two males and the one female lion began their hard earned meal. For the rest of the night we listened to the sounds of feeding and bones being crunched. The male lions patrolled back and forth, roaring to firmly establish their right to this prize and to keep other predators at bay. In the morning their huge pugmarks showed where the lions had been in and around our camp, perhaps checking up on us. As more than half of this particular safari group was vegetarian, and the meat eaters (bar myself) were not likely to have the nerve to step out of their safely zipped tents, the lions need not have bothered with us - however, the following morning the barrel shaped bellies of the lions proved that they had still found plenty of time to feed!



With the lions fat and full, with still more meat on the buffalo carcass, they were not too active over the remainder of our stay, but it was still a shame to have to leave the area and move

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on. However, move on we did, passing quite a few steenboks on the way as they were coming out on to the sandy tracks to feed on the fresh new bush shoots that always seem to appear in



the tracks first, before breaking out on the flatter and looser sand alongside the tracks. Over the next few days we had some great opportunities to photograph quite a number of different birds, both the stunning colourful ones like the lilac breasted roller and those with great characters such as the hornbills, an ostrich with six small chicks and a number of owls. We also watched for some time the antics of a family group of the largest of our hornbills - the ground hornbill

(+/- 120 centimeters long and up to 4 kilogram's in weight) - that had just found a Giant Bullfrog (150mm). The ground hornbills struggled for about forty minutes to shred the tough bullfrog into edible pieces, taking care to wipe the mucus off the outer skin on to the grass and bushes before swallowing, thus avoiding the foaming mouth side effects that this mucus can cause. The young ground hornbill chick was of course begging for tidbits, and so was finally given a part of the remains to attempt to dismember. All along the



acacia woodland that forms a rim around the dry savanna grassland of the Savuti marsh, herds of impalas joined the wildebeest, tsessebe and elephants to wait out the heat of the day in what little shade they could find, the elephants of course taking over the biggest and best shade spots. When the late afternoon heat began to dissipate the animals moved back out onto the open grasslands to begin feeding, but in the meantime there was a constant coming and going of the huge bull elephants at one of the pumped waterholes to wile away the time. We were frustrated on behalf of the visiting warthogs as they tried to sneak amongst the elephants to get a quick mouthful of moisture - but each time a warthog circled closer and closer an outburst of trumpeting, and the pushing and shoving of the elephants vying for a chance to dominate the trickle of water from the spigot outlet, would send the poor warthog dashing back from the edge of the circle of elephants. In the end I do not remember seeing even one warthog getting anything to drink, their best chance of success being early morning before the first elephants arrive as the day begins to heat up.



To be continued next month.

Gavin & Marjorie  
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