



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

January 2009 Newsletter

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Continuing on from last months newsletter Savuti proved to be another predator highlight spot, and the buildup of near sightings of leopard and wild dogs earlier in the safari made the sightings here all the more special. Our first evening started out with two honey badgers and an African wild cat, with another honey badger cooling off in the waterhole right in front of the guests' room. However, the highlight came when having just got back to the room in the lodge from the afternoon drive, a few members of a pack of wild dogs chased down an impala and made their kill right outside the guests room - we had the best seats in the house! As only part of the pack of had been at the kill the wild dogs fed first before leaving the carcass to head out into the night to find the rest of the pack (an interval for us to have our own dinner in), returning later with



other pack members to finish off the impala. Sometime in the night the hyenas dragged off what remains there had been. Amazingly the rest of the guests in the lodge were totally uninterested in the whole wild dog action, and not one, nor any of their guides, even bothered to come and look!

Out early the next morning, and before the other guests had been woken, we set out from camp and found a young female leopard walking through the bush. Perhaps surprised to have such an early audience the leopard trotted off ahead of us, spooking a flock of guineafowl that were just coming back down to the ground from their night time roost, and thus setting off their extremely loud cackling alarm calls. Leaving the noisily alarmed guineafowl behind we followed the leopard, until the track veered off away from her direction and we could follow no further. We found another leopard late in the afternoon and so again were able to follow its progress as it moved through the bush. The leopard was obviously looking out for a potential meal, as it would suddenly stop and listen intently before hurrying forward while homing in on some distant sound - perhaps it had been trying to get into an ambush spot for a herd of impala that had been heading our way?



Whilst following the leopard literally 1000's of tiny red-billed quelea had been flying overhead on their way to a waterhole to drink, which led us to our next stop - watching the huge flocks of quelea come rolling over the waters surface to drink. Nearby the lions had begun to roar, and so homing in on the sound we found the male lion, until he too walked off following the tracks of the lionesses and cubs and into an area with no game driving roads. This gave us the opportunity to head on to the Savuti

marsh, where I soon found fresh cheetah spoor going along the track in the direction we were heading - great! A few kilometers further on we came across the remains of an impala that a jackal was feeding off, although undoubtedly this was the remains of a cheetah kill. After the jackal had his fill he trotted off across the open plain, and the next scavenger dropped in - a bateleur eagle.



A tawny eagle followed the bateleur before the first of the vultures arrived. The vultures subsequently mobbed the carcass, devouring every last edible morsel, so that within a remarkably short period of time we had seen the impala reduced to a pile of ribs, spinal

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column, head and horns. The cheetah in the meanwhile was some distance away resting up in the shade, fat and content.



We were back at the main waterhole early the next morning to watch the sun rise, while thousands of red-billed quelea again flocked down to drink. We were once again fortunate to see, when the waves of quelea parted, a lioness drinking at the other end of the waterhole. Soon the lioness was joined by two boisterous young cubs, who then spent the next half an hour running about and playing with each other. The cubs would ambush one another, and do fantastic jumps and twisting leaps as they boxed each other and generally had good fun. In the bushes nearby the rest of the lionesses and the male lion rested, seldom paying much attention to the antics of the cubs, unless their playfulness had them climbing over the adults as though they were some sort of soft obstacle. Finally exhausted the one lion cub climbed up onto a fallen branch, to lay draped over the limb in imitation of a leopard and to rest while keeping an eye on us. The other cub went to try and play with the male who gave little attention back, and so the cub finally went and lay down next to the females to snooze. By 7:30am the temperature was already rising and the pride was forced to move deeper into the thick scrub by the first elephant arrivals, who came trudging in along their well worn elephant highways. The focus of the scene soon centered on the elephants at the waterhole and the lions were left to sleep in peace.



We moved on to the Chobe River area where our luck with leopards continued, as while watching out over the floodplain towards the sunset a leopard appeared out from the bushes nearby and strolled down to the river for a drink. The leopard followed along the shoreline for a while and then finally came back to the treeline to rest up and wait for total darkness. The elephants, however, are always the highlight of any day spent in the Chobe River area, and the continuous stream of breeding herd after breeding herd of elephants of all ages and sizes was an awe inspiring scene. With so many elephants about it was difficult to know where to look, as there were elephants drinking, elephants wallowing in the mud, elephants feeding on the floodplain grasses, and baby elephants playing with their trunks as if they were a separate plaything rather than a part of their anatomy. The birdlife along the Chobe River was as always plentiful and varied with many interesting species, such as the fast flying red winged pratincoles that fly from late afternoon into the night and early morning, hawking insects and mosquitoes from the air as they rise up off the water and out of the rank floodplain grasses. Out on one of the islands we saw a number of old buffalo bulls, safely out of reach of the lions and enjoying a good wallow in the black sticky mud that helps rid them of biting insects. On this occasion the buffalo were also providing a convenient perch for a large number of wattled starlings that sometimes act like cattle egrets, feeding around the buffalo's feet as the buffalo moved through the long grasses disturbing insects.



I saw the black rhino on our walking safari in the Matusadona National Park in Zimbabwe, although unfortunately the guests themselves did not get to see one. We found numerous signs of the rhino - where they had slept, middens, browsed trees, fresh green leaves on the trail and crisp clear footprints - and so we walked many kilometers over the undulating stony ground tracking them, but we were always a good hour or so behind the big lumbering beasts.

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As it was very hot the rhinos had left the floodplain early and moved into the very dense and at times thorny bush that grows along the top of the ridges - once in this thick bush the rhino meander about feeding, first this way and then that, with little pattern or clear direction. As the mid morning temperatures rise the rhino head deeper into the bush cover to rest up for the day. Not only is it very difficult to follow tracks in these areas, but it can also be quite dangerous, as the "bad tempered" rhino do not see well, and so charge at anything out of the ordinary. With the winds drifting aimlessly back and forth, combined with the rhino's erratic feeding behaviour, it was often a challenge to stay downwind, and once alarmed the rhinos quickly exit the area. After a couple of hours of heavy going the guests were in need of a rest, and so I left them in Marjorie's care to rest in the shade of a tree near a spring before setting off to do a small circuit of the area to



re-locate the tracks we had been following and had just lost. Within 50 meters I found the tracks again, cutting diagonally back past where I had left Marjorie and the guests, and so I hurried along. After a few more minutes walking a sudden movement further up the ridge caught my attention, and hoping it might be the rhino I carefully worked my way in that direction. Having covered about 50 meters in the direction of the movement a baboon suddenly appeared, climbed up into a small tree and on spotting me gave the alarm bark, which was immediately taken up by the rest of the small troop of baboons who were also now climbing any tree, bush or shrub to get a better view of this sudden appearance of a potential enemy. Convinced that I was now on a false lead I turned to

head back to the last rhino tracks, but had only gone ten or more paces when a huffing, puffing, snorting 880kg (1,900lb) female black rhino came crashing through the bushes just off to my left, heading right in my direction! Three giant bounds over some fallen branches and I was behind a thin sapling about 15 inches wide. The rhino passed by within four meters of me and onto a well worn game trail, continuing its run and heading away from the area. It is probable that the rhino had been resting up in a thicket nearby when the baboons sudden alarm calls spooked her into charging out of the thick bush, downhill and out of the area. I returned the short distance back to the guests as fast as I could and within a few minutes we were back on the spoor following the fleeing rhino - but alas its four legs carried it along faster than we could travel, and we eventually had to give up when it was clear that the rhino was heading to a new neighborhood. It was quite a walk back to where we had left the boat, even though we went the shortest and quickest route, but once aboard we sipped our ice cold drinks while watching a big tusked bull elephant cooling his feet off in the water as we drifted.



Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
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