



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

July 2009 Newsletter

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Continuing on with the adventures of last month's newsletter we were returning to camp late one evening, and while scanning about with my torch as we drove along I picked up the eyes of an African wild cat out hunting - the following evening the light fell on a female leopard walking along with her young cub in tow. The leopard cub looked about six months old and was quite playful, but the mother was more focused on looking for her next meal. After a while the female must have given a signal to the cub, as it began exploring the area around the junction in the track while its mother disappeared. We hoped she would have good luck in soon finding some food, but after a while the cub lost interest in exploring and disappeared into a thicket alongside the track, and so we moved on. The next morning we returned to the same junction hoping to



pick up the leopards tracks, but the tall grasses and thick riverine bush made it difficult, so we ended up weaving back and forth along the various tracks, picking up an odd paw print here and there as well as many hyena tracks. After a couple of hours of searching, as well as taking time to enjoy the many other animals and birds along the way, distant baboon alarm calls gave us the hint that a predator was about. Homing in towards the alarm calls we were lucky to see the female leopard moving off through the long grasses and away from an impala carcass - she was on her way to go and fetch her cub, and being in an area that we could drive off-road, we were able to follow the leopard as she travelled in a direct route through the thick bush and across grassy vleis, back to the junction we had all parted company at the previous evening. Driving ahead of the leopard's direction of travel, and then waiting for her to pass by, we were able to get many excellent sightings of her as she walked along. When the scrub and tangle of thorn bushes became too dense we would often have to track her travel by the alarm calls of the francolins, squirrels and vervet monkeys. After a brief re-union with lots of interaction between the mother and cub, the female then retraced her route back towards the impala kill. Knowing the terrain I was able to position at some of the more open areas to get good views of the mother and cub, but not wanting to interfere with their progress we chose to skip following the pair through the thickest section of their return route and went ahead to wait for them at the impala carcass. The leopard had dragged the impala into a tangle of thick bush and huge fallen trees, limiting the angles from which one could get a



chance to clearly photograph from, although when the mother and cub finally arrived we had good views of them as they settled down to feed, and a great view of the mother when she eventually climbed up on a huge fallen tree and briefly into the open. Time passed and the mother leopard dragged the carcass further into the tangle of trees and into the deep shade, and so having spent nearly three and a half hours with the female and her cub it was time to leave and fly on to Savuti.

In Savuti the lion spoor criss-crossed the bush but always ended up disappearing into areas we could not follow, and even the buffalo tracks led us from one side of Savuti to the other, until we at last got a sighting of the 122 strong herd. I was not the only one left confused as the vultures also seemed to be flying this way and that, starting to descend and circle briefly before having to head off in search of a thermal to gain back the height to continue their search for remains of a kill. Don't think that we were not having a great time however, as along the way there were always



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distractions in the form of elephant, jackal, impala, giraffe, kudu, zebra, wildebeest, warthog, mongoose, and of course plentiful eagles and other interesting birdlife as well as the African landscapes. My Savuti highlight has to be the sighting of the very seldom seen klipspringer - this highly specialised little antelope is superbly adapted for life on the rocky hills and cliffs of the African bush and so is somewhat of an anomaly here in Savuti, with just a few rocky outcrops in the middle of a Kalahari sand landscape - how did they get here and how have they survived?



Our last stop in Botswana was along the Chobe River, where on the first afternoon we once again took to the water for the opportunity to photograph some of the great birdlife along the banks of the river. Spectacularly coloured white-fronted bee-eaters darted off their perches and out of their nesting holes to hawk insects



from above the water, and numerous kingfishers displayed and fought over the prime fishing spots, while overhead the strikingly handsome fish eagles soared or called out their haunting cry from their perches atop of the grand old ebony trees. Crocodiles and large pods of hippo sunbathed along the banks of the river, and on the big island buffalo, elephant and red lechwe fed on the rich grasses, while huge flocks of geese along with storks, ibises and other waders prodded the undergrowth and floating vegetation for insects and other tasty titbits. From the boat we also had the different perspective of the breeding herds of elephants, coming down to the river to drink and mud bath while the youngsters played and splashed about - then we had front row seats as we watched the

matriarch lead her siblings and the other elephants in her care carefully into the river, wading and swimming across the narrow stretch of waterway to the bonanza of tall edible grasses on the islands.

Back in our open wildlife viewing vehicle the following day we were again able to spend a lot of quality time with the large variety of animals and birds we had been seeing - whether watching two male giraffe battling it out in slow motion (with pauses in between to check they still had us as an audience), or following the lumbering herds of buffalo as they made their twice daily trek to and from the river to drink, feed and chew the cud, there are not many idle moments. Watching the banded mongoose contingent digging away in the sand for insects and beetles while chattering constantly to each other was, in any case, more entertaining and photogenic than watching the rhythmic rise and fall of a sleeping lioness's belly! - but even the lions must have exerted



some energy, as returning to the same site the following morning we watched as two jackals and a pied crow squabbled over the remains of a male impala skull, and later saw the troublesome crows mobbing a giant eagle owl that was trying to catch up on some sleep near the top of a mahogany tree. At one point we arrived as a herd of sable made a dash across the sandy track, as they moved from drinking along the river back into the forest and to their feeding area, while at another time down at the river we sat for a few hours as breeding herd after breeding herd of elephants,

and later a herd of buffalo, came out of the riverine trees across the sandy shore to drink, splash and interact, with some then crossing to the bigger floodplain area to feed on the grasses growing out there.

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From Chobe the safaris adventures continued on into Namibia. Namibia had received record rains in many areas this last rainy season, transforming desert areas into near lush landscapes, with rivers flowing and grassy plains gently waving in the wind, resulting in scenes more stunning than I had previously experienced. Standing on the Ngoma bridge, which marks the border between Botswana and Namibia, the water, even at this late time of the year, was gushing under the bridge and stirring up morsels of food that were attracting a great variety of birdlife from gulls, terns and hamerkop's to other waders and waterfowl. Our first nights stop was just below Popa Falls on the banks of the Okavango River, a few kilometres upstream from where the river begins to widen into the famous panhandle prior to branching out into the Okavango Delta. Flocks of spurwinged geese, whitefaced ducks and numerous egrets and herons gave us an aerial fly by on their way to roost for the night, all backlit with the wonderful orange glow of a typical African sunset.



The landscape gradually changed as we travelled from Kalahari sands in the northeast, through lightly wooded grasslands, past the odd stand of baobabs and on south-westward. We finally arrived in a more rugged calcrete landscape, glaringly bright as the sunshine reflected off its white surfaces between the mixture of thick thornveld, mopane and the odd stands of palm trees of the Etosha region. Eagerly we entered the Etosha National Park, where the wildlife spectacles we experienced over the following days kept our camera shutters clicking and the videos rolling. We started with the normally shy common duiker, that were more numerous and less flighty than usual, and so we got to see more than their fleeing shapes and instead had the chance to admire their strong facial



features, which contrast with the dainty features of the tiniest antelope in the region, the Damara dik-dik. Etosha's prime wildlife viewing takes place at its numerous pumped and natural waterholes, and due to a second year of excellent rainfall the Etosha pan itself was once again brim full of water - but the high salinity of the water, sitting on this more typically hard baked and bone dry salt pan, ensured the necessity for most animals to still have to visit the various waterholes that are spread throughout the park, even if it meant wading through the great Etosha "lake" to get there! Action at the waterholes was guaranteed, as this year there seemed to be a never ending stream



of giraffe coming to drink, while some of the male giraffe would spend literally hours circling each other, jostling and swinging their long necks as they sparred with each other. The younger giraffe would spend time running back and forth kicking up their legs and stirring up



the dust in a comical way - imagine a giraffe leaping through the air in an animal imitation of a ballerina, all four legs off the ground! Then there were the multiple herds of elephants arriving to drink - young bulls jostled and the youngest calves rushed about trumpeting excitedly, their tails held stiffly out and their trunks whipping this way and that as they got lost amongst the legs, trunks and tails of the crowds of elephants. We witnessed the occasional youngster falling into the water trough at one well frequented water point - the immediate response and change in the

calls of the female elephants as they rushed to the aid of the panicking youngster was something to see. The matriarch, who had clearly experienced this same situation before, immediately went down on her knees, reaching in and guiding the calf to the edge, from where other elephants pulled with their trunks under the youngsters' front and back legs, helping to lift the youngster out of the hole. When a particularly panicked youngster floundered an older

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female entered the water trough herself, and lifted with her tusks and trunk from behind - a fascinating scene that showed the intelligence of the elephants as they coordinated and co-operated with each other to rescue their young. Another group of youngsters we were treated with seeing had been left to their own devices near to another waterhole - I have been watching generations of hyena pups at this particular den sight for nearly 20 years now, but it's always a great thrill to see the next generation of inquisitive pups.

There was usually so much happening at each waterhole that it was difficult to tear ourselves away from the scene of multiple animals interacting, as they worked their way down to the waterholes and moved on again with their thirst slaked. We also had the chance to see how the progression of the spiral in the horns of the various kudu bulls enables one to roughly age them, as there were always a number of males or small bachelor groups coming to the waterhole along with family groups of female kudus. Gemsbok, with their long straight horns reflecting in the water, would take a few quick sips before heading back to the drier areas of the park, almost as if they were embarrassed to be seen drinking in case it tarnished their reputation of being such hardy desert animals. Springbok, on the other hand, lingered longer at the waters edge, causing temporary



traffic jams as the long lines of their herd mates kept streaming in from behind also eager to get to the water. Warthogs trotted purposefully in, studiously ignoring all the goings on about them and after a quick wallow would head back out to the surrounding bush. Lines of zebra trailed in, the males honking and calling and laying claim to their herds turn to drink, while bachelors stood back, calling to entice females to defect to them. Young zebra ran about excitedly, with their mothers adding their honking calls to the cacophony of sound as they tried to round up straying foals. After drinking the zebra herds would move a short way back from the waters edge, allowing the next wave of animals to come in and drink, and then once the families were regrouped they would start the trek back out to the vast grassy plains. It really was one spectacular scene after another, and many times we would have five or six different animal species at and around a waterhole. At times the two way traffic would peak, and there could be up to ten different species at a waterhole before a lull would occur and then just two species of animals would be left at the waters edge, but even then that would comprise of eighty springbok and eight kudu females and a big kudu bull, or a dozen giraffe along with a bachelor group of gemsbok.



The ultimate wildlife gathering on this particular safari came when one of the group pointed out the unmistakable bulky shape of a black rhino coming out of the opposite tree line, heading directly in to the waterhole - this was an exciting moment for me as well and the setting was fantastic. The black rhino advanced at a steady pace, making no noise or displaying any outward signs that this was anything more than another routine day, but the atmosphere around the waterhole was electric - the giraffe had stopped to stare, the zebra stopped their own advances towards the waterhole to gage the rhino's mood and intention, the gemsbok stopped drinking and turned to watch the rhino's entrance, while the impala and springbok held back from the edge of the water to stare at the advancing beast - it was almost as if animal royalty was making a grand entrance, or was it the bad tempered grumpy reputation of the black rhino that had put all the animals on alert?



Whatever the reason the way cleared and the rhino continued his steady progress down to the waters edge, paused briefly to gaze nonchalantly around and then started to drink long and deep from the waterhole - even then it took a few brief moments

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before the spell was broken, when perhaps the other animals finally realized that today the rhino was just a regular beast like all the others and was not there with an attitude, and so the movement to the waterhole restarted as if there had been no pause, and soon we had ten different animal species drinking happily at the water, or going about their ways in the immediate vicinity. Having finally drunk his full the rhino retreated from the waters edge, then turned and slowly strolled out of the picture. One other small noteworthy sighting of the day was the chance to watch a giraffe sucking on a stout leg bone, probably that of a zebra. Mainly giraffe, tortoises and porcupines, but many other animals as well, will also pick up and suck or chew on old bones as a way to supplement their calcium intake - this was the best example of a giraffe doing this that I had seen, and so we watched as she manipulated the bone around in her mouth, sucking away until finally dropping the bone and moving on.



Until next month...

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