



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

June 2009 Newsletter

Gavin Blair Safaris

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Our next adventure with four guests - two returning on their sixth safari with us along with their two friends - had us flying around Botswana before motoring on through Namibia for a total of four weeks, and so this newsletter is about just the first week of that safari.



Regardless of how long a safari may be time is of essence, and so without any delay we set off on our first adventure shortly after the guests landed at Victoria Falls airport. The trek along the edge of the Victoria Falls offered grand views of this impressive landmark, and with water levels still high for the time of the year there was a fair amount of spray to add to the spectacle, not to mention the added bonus of the bushbuck, baboons and birds seen as we strolled along the pathways. The following day was spent visiting the vibrant local curio market, witnessing a feeding frenzy of

feeding vultures, and undertaking some of the areas speciality activities such as the "Flight of the Angels" - the helicopter ride above the Falls - for breathtaking aerial views of the kilometre long gorge into which the mighty Zambezi falls, followed by a short walk in the late afternoon for some close encounters of the elephant kind!

On our drive across to Botswana, before flying on to the Okavango Delta, we were treated to a good sighting of a large herd of sable antelope standing a short way off the road. The dominant male sable looked splendid, with his huge curved horns arching back to almost touch the satin black fur on his shoulders - the large harem of dark tan females and youngsters spread out around him watched us cautiously, before cantering away through the dappled light shrouding the woodland. On arriving in the Moremi area of the Okavango Delta one of our first interesting sightings was of a puff adder making the most of the warmth of the afternoon to bask in. The squirrels had given away the snakes presence and were probably glad of our arrival, as they saw this as an opportunity to exit the scene, having seemingly handed over to us responsibility of alerting the surrounding community of the snake's presence! Further along the way we stopped to watch a troop of baboons rousing themselves from their afternoon siesta. The male baboons were mostly still dozing in the sun, while the females and youngsters fanned out across the edge of the floodplain to feed on the sedges and grasses. At first the smallest baboons were content to ride along on their mothers backs, but soon the temptation to play with their older siblings on the termite mounds, and climbing frames created by the knurled and stunted branches of the mopane trees, proved too tempting, and so they slipped off and away to play and provided us with some good entertainment. A few days later a similar scenario played out in front of us again, but this time with different actors - vervet monkeys - but they too were just as much fun to spend time with and to watch their antics.



The sound of a large herd of buffalo moving slowly through the bush feeding is not as loud as you might think - the occasional bellow and drawn out moaning call, the clicking of their hooves against branches and obstacles, and the clonking of the horns as they push past one another are sounds that are absorbed by the surrounding vegetation - and so as we sat enjoying a scenic outlook the buffalo herd closed in on us, until the subtle distant sounds rang a bell in my head and we moved on slightly to see the buffalo emerging through the bush and slowly grazing their way forward. Where there are buffalo there will often be lions - and so

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skirting the buffalo, and rounding a large stand of reeds, we came to where the advancing floodwaters of the Okavango River system had flooded one of the temporary floodplains that are locally known as malapu's - and there across the water were twelve hungry looking lions!



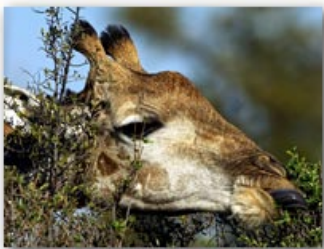
With the afternoon getting on I theorized that the night, especially as there would be no moon, would be full of action as the lion pride took on the buffalo herd. As such we were out even earlier than usual the next morning, which is to say that we were out there long before the next door neighbours back in camp had stirred, and with fresh tracks to follow, albeit by torchlight, we began to home in on the buffalo herd hoping to find the lions on a kill along the way. Our first reassuring sign that there may be a kill ahead was when we spotted two side striped jackals trotting along near the direction of the buffalo and lion spoor. However, the building anticipation was soon dashed when a few hundred meters further on a very weary looking lion raised its head momentarily from the grassy covered termite mound, giving us a brief glimpse before thudding down again to slumber on. A second male sat up and surveyed the surrounding grassland, while I scanned the nearby

woodland for signs of the rest of the pride and the herd of buffalo. Leaving the male lions we continued on to where I had seen the lionesses and cubs stirring in the distant trees, and ahead of them were the buffalo, still moving along feeding and seemingly totally unaware of the shadowing lion pride. We positioned in front of the buffalo's line of travel and so had the thrill of having these huge animals with their impressive horns pass by on either side of us as they lumbered on, snatching a mouthful of dry grass before moving on in search of the next undiscovered tuft.

By now the sun was rising and the golden light was coming over our shoulders for the perfect photographic lighting, and as the rear guard of the herd of buffalo passed us we could see the lionesses stirring into action, and soon the whole pride (less the lazy males!) came towards us, each one as oblivious to our presence as the buffalo seemed to be to the lions existence. By now the buffalo had moved into a thick forest of mopane that still had good grazing, and so they had virtually come to a standstill. The lions appeared undecided and soon settled down to wait perhaps for a better lay of the land from which to launch their attack. It got very difficult to see anything much of the lions, and the buffalo seemed content to stand around chewing the cud, and so as the request had been made not to sit around waiting for the lions to do something we left - prematurely as it turns out, as the patience of the lions paid off when an opportunity presented itself in the form of a buffalo calf wandering too far from the protective ring of adults, and thus became the meal for the hungry lions.



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The area we were driving in comprised of lots of floodplains, malapu's, lagoons, woodlands of tall mature ebonies and other riverine species, as well as areas of mature mopane woodland - all giving us varied and beautiful scenery to meander through while following the many tracks criss-crossing the area. With the water rising there were a few interesting river crossings required to visit the many varied habitats, and with each area supporting a

wealth of birdlife it did not take long for the checklist of bird species seen to reach the hundred mark. Seeing the birds on this safari was only half the challenge, as getting a good photographic record of them was the other half, and indeed there were many opportunities to take photographs, not only of the brightly coloured species, but also the interesting ones such as the prehistoric hamerkop sitting on its gigantic nest built out of sticks,



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mud, grass and any other materials that the bird might find. The various antelope species were also just as interesting to observe as to photograph, especially the graceful and sleek impala, the heavily coated shaggy waterbuck, and the kudu with their spectacularly twisted horns. Just as challenging to capture on camera was the out of proportion giraffe, or the difficult to get close to species such as the red lechwe - but all presented a challenge that enhanced the enjoyable aspects of this photographic safari.



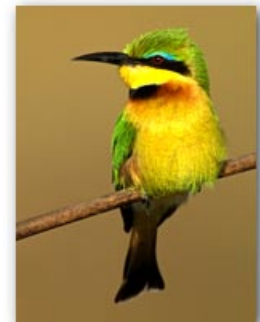
As we potted about photographing this and that, bird watching or observing the different animal behaviour, the goal of finding a leopard was always there - looking around every bend, under every bush and up every tree – and so every alarm call was a herald to a potential sighting of the elusive one! After an hour of homing in on alarm calls the hint of a sighting led us to a track through thick sand and thick riverine vegetation, where we found the dominant male leopard of the area striding out intent on marking his territory. I had heard his rasping call from camp early in the morning, and again just before we set out at first light - his tracks went past the camp and on towards the scenic area of pools, malapu's, and tangled woodland. I had soon lost his spoor but we

continued to criss-cross the game driving tracks that passed through this particular leopard's territory, and we had at last struck lucky - or at least luck in that we now had a sighting. For the next hour I tried to anticipate the leopards direction and speed, positioning the vehicle in the hope of getting a good line of view as the male leopard passed by - then just after leaving the elephant highway the leopard had been briefly following, and crossing some open ground to an area of rank grasses and less treed cover, the leopard suddenly disappeared - at least to us! The squirrel alarm calls continued in earnest, pointing towards a particular clump of grass and sparse shrub cover, but no matter where we parked up or climbed about in the vehicle, we could not even catch a glimpse of him. After some time we left, but we returned a few times over the next hour to sit with the chirping squirrels but had no further sighting of the leopard - and so in contrast to the steady stealth of stalking the leopard, we undertook a wild ride over the rough terrain and narrow tracks, changing direction, backtracking and turning back again as we followed a pack of five wild dogs out hunting on our last evening in the area. We had a few brief moments to enjoy the wild dogs without moving, when the wild dogs themselves paused to orientate themselves, before they were up and bounding off again into the dark in pursuit of an unseen quarry.



Our last morning in the area presented many beautiful nature scenes with zebras, impalas, a bachelor herd of six male waterbuck of varying ages sparring, and lots more baboons feasting on sausages - time had run out but several breeding herds of elephants were on, around and at the end of the dirt airstrip to see us off as we flew on deeper into the Okavango, where we changed our mode of transport. The water levels on the floodplains were higher than I had ever experienced, so making the canoeing easy as we glided along the channels and across fields of submerged water lilies. There may

not have been as many birds about as one would have hoped for, but we did see more than our fair share of painted and long nosed reed frogs, and we enjoyed a wonderful sunset. The following day, as most of the islands around the area were too flooded to offer up much of an opportunity for walking on, we drifted and boated down one of the numerous channels - as we proceeded along the many twists and turns and took in the scenery, we kept an eye out for crocodiles, snakes and



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monitor lizards, and of course the many birds that inhabit these papyrus and reed lined waterways. At one spot a family of little bee-eaters challenged our fingers on the buttons, and the manufacturers of the auto-focus lenses, as they darted back and forth hawking insects out of the air, returning to perch on swaying bobbing reeds to consume their meals. Later we enjoyed an hours walk across one of the islands where a few giraffe, baboons, impalas and a wildebeest were all content in each others company.

Above average flooding was the situation once again when we arrived in the next area to continue our wildlife viewing adventure, which was no problem for the hippos, elephants and a myriad of birdlife - everything else adapted as did we, and there was no shortage of fascinating events to observe and photograph. Bull elephants, either individually or in small groups, waded into the water to feed on the lush vegetation at various points along the now



flooded river, and late in the afternoons young bulls would put on a good show, frolicking and playing in the water, splashing, dunking and just having a great time. The resident hippos did not seem to be too happy with their larger neighbours, even though we had seen the hippos too, both young and old, having a good old time as well - grunting, yawning and chasing each other about before the elephants arrived. With the river having expanded their domain, the hippos could at least just up and move elsewhere for the duration of the elephant's playtime. The expanded territory had

also reduced conflict between individual hippos themselves and so there was less fighting, and for the odd guy that everyone seemed to want to pick on the chance to just up and move out of harms way must have been a relief. With more water there were more water lilies, and that in turn had attracted more pygmy geese into the area - something I was pleased about, as this is one of my favourite water birds and always a challenging one to photograph. One small animal that had probably benefited from the flooding, in that it would have increased her food source at a time of need, was a female slender mongoose - she was undoubtedly having an easier time raising her single offspring, and as such was enjoying a session of grooming out in the sun on a termite mound, when one would normally have expected her to have been out hunting. We watched for a long time as the slender mongoose youngster played, suckled and received a good grooming from its mother - quality time all around!



To be continued next month...

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