



# Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

March 2009 Newsletter

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## Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Continuing on from last month's newsletter, our very early departures from camp enabled us to find the lions early enough for there still to be some life in them - though the two cubs playing, running about and jumping up to box with each other made up for any lack of activity from the two males and the three females of the pride. We got to see the third male on another morning when the trio were winding down from their night-time territorial patrolling. Out on the dry savannah late one morning we found a very weary hyena resting up under a young acacia tree. It was interesting to watch the hyena, as we proved to be only a temporary distraction before the hyena returned to the task of constantly shovelling up soil with its front paw and flicking it over its body - a way to spread cooling sand over itself and to keep the pesky flies off. On the way back to camp late one morning I drove into the dry Savuti channel to look for the elusive leopard.



At one point I stopped and got out of the vehicle to indicate the "tide mark" on one of the ancient drowned trees that remain in sections of the channel. These semi-hardwood trees are leftover from the last 100 year period that the channel dried up in, thus allowing such trees to grow here. When the channel began to flow again, between 1954 and 1989, these trees had resisted the rotting that cleared the channel of all other vegetation during the wet years, and the tidemark left by the water illustrates how deep the channel was at that time. Anyway, to get to the point, there I

am twittering on about past history when one of the guests pointed something out, at the same moment that I saw there was some movement under the bushes near by - history lesson over as we now had a pack of wild dogs to watch! By this time it was nearly mid-day and so even the pups were lethargic in the heat, paying little attention to us while they too flicked sand over themselves as the hyena had been doing. Every ten minutes or so one of the adults or a pup would become restless and get up and move a short distance back into the creeping shade or to another better and cooler looking spot. We returned in the early afternoon to see more of the same restless activity but had the patience to wait it out, as suddenly, as if the cooling temperature tripped a switch, we were rewarded with a flurry of activity - adults stretching, pups racing about whining and begging to be fed, and greetings and interactions all around - until just as suddenly the whole pack of eleven wild dogs took off at a steady trot into the thick bush. I drove around on a number of tracks to a point that I hoped the wild dogs would reappear on, which they did after about five minutes - and so we got to see another flurry of activity and interactions for another fifteen minutes or so, almost as if this had been especially put on for our benefit, before once again the adults lead the pups off through the thick bush where we could no longer follow.



The finger of water that is the Khwai River pushes through floodplains bordered by mopane woodlands and on into the Kalahari sands, and so is a



lifeline of moisture to the many creatures that live in the surrounding dry environment. As with any wildlife area one has to take what each day gives, and so we started out by enjoying the contrasting situation from Savuti. Here in the Khwai River area we watched as bull

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elephants waded into the cool water, drinking trunk full after trunk full of water without a care about the spillage, or just enjoying throwing litre after litre over their backs, pausing now and then to tear up a mouthful of lush green vegetation to chew on. Savuti was only 60 kilometers away as the crow flies, with the only feature to cross on route being the low sand ridge that marks the shoreline of an ancient lake - no great barrier to an elephant or most animals, but a world apart. We enjoyed a pleasant afternoon watching elephants, frolicking hippos, lechwe and waterbuck and some magnificent bull kudu coming down to the river to drink. With so much to see we once again ran out of daylight hours, and on creeping back to camp a little later than one is supposed to, we were rewarded with the sight of a beautiful genet that had come out of its day time hideaway to preen and prepare for its nocturnal hunting activity.



The Khwai area of the Moremi Game Reserve has a number of different habitats and scenery, and so there is always something interesting and new to see. Although tsessebe are found in various locations we safari through in Botswana it is not often that there is a chance to get near to a herd with youngsters, and so when we found a scene with zebra, wildebeest, impala, warthogs, baboons, giraffe and distant elephants all on the same floodplain, the tsessebe with a youngster was the bonus. The tsessebe mother was very protective, and was trying successfully to keep herself between her youngster and the rest of the herd and the other animals spread across the floodplain, including us - but we were happy to keep our distance and as such were rewarded with a few good opportunities to get photos of the mother and her calf.



Another surprise was to see two female impalas off on their own with the first newborn impalas of the year. This was followed by an unusual event when I saw what I first thought was a drag mark from a leopard kill - but when we got out to inspect the tracks I realized that this was in fact the track of a huge rock python, and as you can see by my shoe in the photo (12½ x 4¾ inches) this was a big snake! At first it was easy to track, but as we got into thicker bush and broken ground it became more of a challenge, and then I realized I was not the only one tracking the snake, as a honey badgers tracks had appeared



following along - after some time I came across about five foot of what remained of the python, a sad ending. We decided to find a tea stop for the mornings sustenance, and as usual I always try to find a site that has something of interest to watch during this short break (those who know me will know how picky I can be in finding exactly the right spot!). Well, this time my chosen spot was at the edge of a flooded floodplain with lots of beautiful water lilies and good birdlife. While we drank tea and ate biscuits sitting under a tree I persuaded some of the group to wade out to take photographs of the flowers and to feel the mud between their toes - then just as we were about to leave a movement in the tree above us revealed a five foot rock python, working its way down the hanging branches to finally drop into the water and swim off. It was a great opportunity to get up close to see the beautiful markings, as this snake had recently sloughed and so its new skin was in pristine condition. As we were about to leave the birdcalls in the next tree back drew my attention to a second rock python, so rounding off a snake filled morning!



The lions could be heard roaring nearby each night and the one lioness that we saw a few times had two cubs that were proving to be a handful. The lioness seemed not to be in peak

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condition, and with the rest of the pride hunting some way off she was having a lot of commuting to do. The cubs were also looking a bit thin which was probably why they were so demanding of their mother's attention, thus she displayed a few bad tempered moments towards her cubs - we chose not to add to her problems and so usually watched for just a short while before moving on to other sightings. I had been listening to some distant alarm calls and so meandered in that general direction - it was therefore a great thrill to suddenly catch a glimpse of a leopard, padding steadily along some way back from the track in an area of riverine vegetation. It was even more exciting when I realized there was a second leopard, a youngster, following along.



I suspected that this was the mother and cub I had been seeing in this general area on earlier safaris, when the male had been in unusual attendance - then once again we saw the male, still following his family! As the area the leopards were walking in was impossible to drive through, I had a job trying to position at vantage points where everyone was able to get a glimpse of the trio, and so finally resorted to walking everyone through the trees to overlook an open area where the three leopards skirted past and opposite us still just in the tree line - not the best sightings, but three leopards at once is still quite a rare treat. Heading back to camp in the twilight we happened upon two hyenas strolling along, but they were not interested in staying around to socialize with us.

Another evening, just as the sun set, more alarm calls led us to the right spot just as a cheetah strode out of the thick tree line and crossed the floodplain to drink and rest at the waters edge. It was too dark for good photography but on returning the next morning we were lucky enough to find the cheetah not too far from where we had left him the night before. The cheetah was looking very alert, and so I positioned so as not to interfere with the scene while we strained to get a sense of what held the cheetah's attention. Finally, about 200 meters away, coming through a coppice of trees from the floodplain beyond was a small herd of impala - certainly predators have unlimited patience and no obvious time constraints! The impalas had found a spot to their liking and were contently feeding and so the cheetah set out to stalk closer, disappearing and re-appearing time and time again from our view as it moved stealthily through the tall grasses. Then with the impalas still seemingly unaware of the danger the cheetah made its dash - streaking towards the feeding impalas. One loud short alarm snort from one of the impalas triggered the rest of the herd to instantly leap up and away. How the impala all knew which way to run to avoid the cheetah hurtling towards their position I just do not know, but off they all bounded, perhaps not even aware of what constituted the danger. The heavily panting cheetah rested briefly and seemed to shrug off the failure, but then it was time for him to move on again, this time giving us the chance for a few good photographic opportunities before we parted company.



Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie  
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