



# Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

November 2009 Newsletter

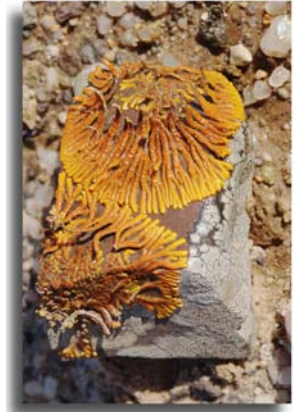
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## Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Continuing on from last months newsletter, we left our overnight stop on the Skeleton Coast and travelled a few hundred meters inland, leaving the ocean and miles of sandy beaches behind to enter the vast gravel plains that extend gently upwards and far off to the distant horizon, eventually meeting the base of the rugged mountains that parallel the coastline. In this area, the thick coastal fog that blows in from off the ocean is responsible for bringing life giving moisture to sustain the hints of vegetation, and to allow the insects, along with a few other hardy mammals and birds, to survive. Many species of



lichen, some unique to this region, cling to every stony surface. At this time of day the lichen are typically bright and colourful from the moisture drenching morning fog - but in the unusual absence of fog (for the entire duration of our coastal tour) we instead unlocked the vibrant colours with a splash of bottled water. We watched as the dull shrivelled scraps of dead looking lichens morphed miraculously out of their



hibernation state in seconds, swelling and changing colour, and rewarding us for the splash of moisture we had given them. We could have worked our way through a few litres of water, one splash at a time, but the road ahead was long and hot, and held many more interesting tidings. Our route was to take us into a vast ancient volcanic caldera where some of the best specimens of the endemic Welwitschia plant are found, some estimated to be up to 1,500 years old - as well as being remote and very desolate the area has its own special scenic beauty, which we had entirely to ourselves.



From the Messum Crater we began to work our way on to our next overnight stop, passing around the base of the Brandberg massif, Namibia's highest point at 2,573 meters. Along the way we were lucky enough to find not one, but two desert chameleons, one of only a few sightings we have had of this great looking creature in the wild. We travelled far inland, where although rain is still scarce the groundwater is more abundant, and so with the vegetation less sparse we began to see more birdlife, reptiles and mammals. We stopped at

sunset to enjoy the landscape, as well as to watch the emergence from a bottomless cavern of hundreds of tiny brown bats and one barn owl - a great spectacle. The next day we walked around to view the many examples of rock engravings at Twyfelfontein - the trees were buzzing with insects and sunbirds were flitting about, while high above a black eagle soared in search of dassie rats, and perhaps some of the brightly coloured rock agamas that were out sunning themselves or displaying to females. Moving on into the Grootberg mountain range we saw our first black faced impalas, having been recently re-located from the Etosha National Park (previous populations having long since been wiped out prior to the area having being zoned for conservation, with the local peoples being incorporated into the conservation movement). Hiking up on the Grootberg Plateau we encountered large herds of springbok and



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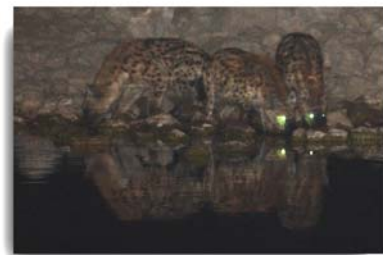
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gemsbok as well as a few mountain zebra. We spent a second day hiking down through the steep rocky valleys and along a permanent stream. Had it not been for the previous seasons rains having been so exceptionally good, there may have been the chance to have encountered a desert rhino or some desert adapted elephants, but on this visit they had moved out of the valley to new and fresher feeding grounds. With our next stop being the Etosha National Park we were not overly concerned about the missing residents, and so enjoyed the hike and scenery regardless.



On our way to Etosha we found a giant bullfrog hopping down the road and heading towards a dry riverbed some distance up ahead. Being frog friendly people we rescued the bullfrog from the road and the searing mid-day heat and gave him a lift to the riverbed, releasing him after providing a splash of water to cool him off. We decided to take a quick break ourselves and so broke out the tea-box. The birdlife in this tiny riverbed was incredible, and so thanks to the bullfrog we recorded 28 species in that one spot, including one new species for me, and also

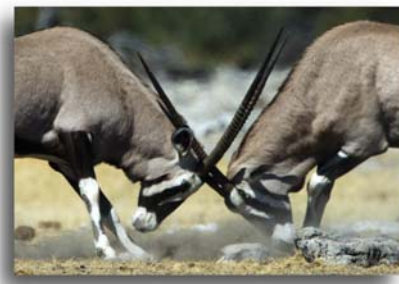


had the chance to get some good photographs of some of the birds. We arrived at the Etosha entrance gate by mid-day, and took a slow wildlife viewing drive the 18 kilometres to Okaukuejo camp where we would be spending the night, not arriving until mid afternoon due to the many animals encountered on the way. The late afternoon wildlife viewing at the camp's waterhole proved too good to leave, with streams of zebra, wildebeest and impalas plus a number of giraffe coming to drink. Breeding herds of elephant began to arrive as

the sky faded into a pink glow, and as the sky turned coal black the activity at the now spot-lit waterhole kept on well into the night, with many elephants, zebra, giraffe, six hyenas and - best of all - twelve black rhinos as well as a mother and calf white rhino coming down to drink. There was a non-stop parade of wildlife, as well as plenty of interaction and activity between all the animals. At one time we had in one viewing 9 rhinos, jackals, giraffe, and a couple of young bull elephants all circling the waterhole and each other, while in the tree above us a pair of pearl spotted owls called as one fed on a frog it had flown down and caught just in front of us. The activity was so enthralling we missed the last orders for dinner, but when we eventually retired for the night there were no regrets.



Etosha wildlife viewing is feast or famine - you drive for miles, passing stark scenery with a smattering of springbok, zebras or a lone gemsbok staring back at you from across the grassy plain, before happening on to an area where, for one reason or another, literally hundreds of animals have gathered. As such it is hard to cover the short distance between the overnight stops, as there is so much to see on the way - but without a doubt it is the waterhole scenes that are the most rewarding points to spend time at, even if only to watch the antics of the playful young elephants when a breeding herd comes to drink. The animals are at their most active at the waterholes, coming



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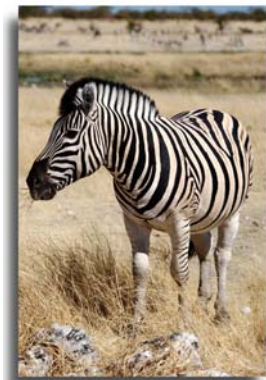


down for a few quick sips of water before plodding away into the surrounding bush, the length of time spent drinking seemingly way too short for the effort required to walk the miles and miles to and from the best feeding areas. The waterholes are also where it is easiest to observe the interactions between mother and young or rival males. The competition for females and water no doubt accounted for some of the clashes of horns we often saw, with males of various species battling it out over some point of dispute. One very touching interaction occurred late one morning when we were watching an incredible number of animals coming to drink at one large waterhole. There were many family groups mixing in and around the waterhole, with over 500 zebra around the waterhole at one time.

As the different family groups moved off, lead by their dominant females, they were accompanied by lots of honking calls from the stallions in their attempts to gather the stragglers up. A number of young zebra were running about playfully chasing one another, but one at a time the youngsters would peel off from their game to depart with their mothers. Once most of the zebras had left the scene our attention was drawn to two youngsters of about 4 and 6 months old, still having great fun running about. Eventually it must have dawned on the smallest zebra that he had lost contact with his mother, and so he began calling in order to regain contact with her. The older zebra had also begun contact calling and so the two then split up, going from one family group of zebras to another, trying to find a familiar set of stripes. We watched as the young zebras became more panicked, being rejected time and again by the various family groups, until once again the two joined together to console each other. Suddenly the older zebra foal appeared to have seen a familiar adult, and so trotted over to a family herd that was leaving the waterhole. The younger foal, not wanting to



be abandoned, tagged along with his newfound friend, and so they joined the line of zebras that were disappearing off through the trees some 400 meters away. About five minutes after the last member of that particular family group had disappeared from view, the two foals came galloping back to the waterhole, honking and calling, seemingly desperate having now realised that they had not found their mothers after all. After more racing about and calling the younger foal came running around the waterhole, passing close by us to be reunited with his mother just a few feet from where we sat watching. After a few minutes of re-bonding the mother led her foal off with the rest of the herd, being watched from across the length of the waterhole by the remaining and very sad looking foal. With the reunited family now out of sight the remaining foal wandered about with his head hanging low, stopping occasionally to give contact calls. A foal making obviously distressed calls could potentially alert a predator, and being alone it would be venerable - added to this already sorry state of affairs a zebra will generally only ever suckle its own young, and so this young foal's future was beginning to look grim. About 30 minutes later we watched as another herd of zebras came walking in from the distant tree line. Instead of this new herd heading directly to the waters edge the lead female veered off towards the lone foal, that was now standing some distance off to the side of the waterhole, looking very forlorn and in the other



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direction. When the lead female, followed by three other zebras with a stallion bringing up the rear, got to within 50 meters of the foal she began calling - this elicited an immediate response from the lost foal, and in a flurry of flying hooves he ran to be re-united with his mother. The other family members all stopped dead in their tracks, and watched as the excited foal nuzzled up against its mother who returned its affection. After this brief interaction the female turned 180 degrees, leading the foal past the other herd members who nodded their heads as the foal passed by, before turning back themselves - and so one after another the reunited family set off once again into the distant tree line. A very happy ending!

Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie  
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