



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

September 2009 Newsletter

Gavin Blair Safaris

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Our next guests, a family of five from Switzerland, came out on a quick introduction to the joys and rewards of an African safari. With so much to see in just a short period of time, I allowed them a generous ten minutes to check in at their hotel, before taking them off to visit the Victoria Falls. There was still an impressive amount of water tumbling and cascading over the kilometer long lip of the Falls - the spray was drifting skyward and lit up by the sun, so forming vivid rainbows at most of the viewpoints. The walk along the width of the Falls was one stunning spectacle after another, while the ambiance of the mini rainforest with the cheerful calling of the varied birdlife, somehow coming through clearly over the roar of the water as it tumbled down into the gorge, added to the atmosphere. We were lucky enough



to see one of the shy bushbuck that feed on the lush growth that is watered by the spray. The bushbuck gingerly pick their way through the tall grasses to seek out the newest shoots, and are overlooked by most of the tourists that wander the paths around the Falls. Our scenic drive back to the hotel turned up a few bonuses as well. First there was a reasonable sized herd of buffalo, spread out over a kilometer and intent on their feeding, while two male waterbuck, a troop of vervet monkeys, lots of impala, a troop of baboons and some warthogs were making the most of the last of the daylight to get to wherever they were heading for the night. We had also got our bird count underway with the always spectacularly coloured lilacbreasted roller. We ended the first day watching elephants coming to the lodge waterhole to drink while enjoying dinner.

The following morning we drove directly to Kasane in Botswana, leaving the bags with Marjorie to check in so that we could immediately head on into the Chobe National Park for some more great wildlife experiences. Within minutes we found ourselves surrounded by a herd of beautiful female kudu, the detail of the markings in their huge ears and big eyes easily seen, being as they were so close. The stately male kudu with his huge spiral horns moved amongst the females, trying to chivvy them on while keeping a wary eye on us. However the shaving brush flowers of the combretum bush were breaking out in bud on the bushes alongside the track, and were proving to be too irresistible to the female kudu, and so they tolerated the harassment from the male while reaching up



through the tangle of vegetation to deftly pluck the green buds and white tasseled flowers with their agile lips. While watching the kudu a bachelor herd of impala made their way over towards us, pausing in their advance every now and then to turn and challenge a male beside them. The impalas amusing prancing and jousting with one another gave plenty of time for me to explain the reason

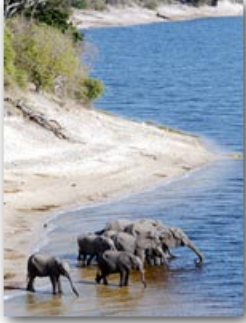
behind their feisty behaviour, as well as to describe the other unusual habits that comprise the day to day life of an impala. When one male gave a sharp alarm call, we saw how all the action and feeding stopping immediately, and all heads - impala and kudu - turned instantly to look in the same direction, looking out for danger. This time it was only a big old warthog that came lumbering out of the bush, but it was a good example of how the different animals work together, and react to one another's alarm calls, in order to try and stay off the menu of the predators! This incident also prepared the way for our guests to have a more interactive wildlife viewing experience, as now they too could react to alarm calls we might hear - not to

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avoid being on the menu, but to help read their surroundings and increase the chances of seeing a predator.



Our boat outing on the Chobe River provided good views of a number of huge crocodiles that were hauled out on the banks to sun themselves, and as they stared back at us with their huge toothy grins, we could imagine them saying in a low growly voice "go on, I dare you to take a swim!!!" The elephants and buffalo have to take the gamble, regularly swimming across to the islands to feed on the grasses growing there, and so on occasion a young elephant or buffalo falls prey to these big crocodiles. Thankfully the breeding herd of elephants, that we watched come down to the river to drink and splash about before wading across to the islands, made the transit to the other side without an incident. We also got to see a

huge variety of birds, including the first arrivals of the year of some red winged pratincoles - aerial feeders of insects that come to breed on the floodplains. Another interesting sighting was of a large water monitor lizard skulking along the shoreline searching out eggs and chicks to eat. Having wandered into the vicinity of an African skimmers nest, the adult birds began to dive in at the large lizard, and on occasions we saw the brave birds stab the monitor lizard with their long brightly coloured bills. The skimmers kept up their attack, and made such a noise, that the monitor lizard eventually changed direction and headed for cover - much to the relief of the adult skimmers and myself, the skimmer being one of my favourite shoreline birds.



We had very good elephant viewings on our last morning by the Chobe River, and on arriving at Savuti later in the day a huge bull elephant greeted us on the road into camp. After watching each other for a while, the bull elephant strolled across the track in front of us to a natural pan of water - there he began to noisily suck up trunkfuls of water, releasing each load of water into his mouth with a loud gushing sound, although what seemed like half the contents of his trunk sprayed and splashed out of his mouth and down his front legs! The elephant sucked up one trunkful after another in a slow and steady rhythm, until he had had his fill, and then he turned and lumbered off away from us. Elephants were to become a major part of each wildlife outing, as we encountered them as individuals, bachelor groups, breeding herds and all combinations of the above, either gathering at the waterhole out in front of the rooms in the camp or while out driving around in the area.



Each sighting offered up different behavioural habits and interesting interactions, so one

was never left with anything other than the greatest of awe for these magnificent animals. At one point on one of our morning outings I heard elephants trumpeting in the distance, and something in the tone of their trumpet made me turn the vehicle and head in the general direction of the sounds to investigate.

Soon we came upon the very fresh spoor of a big male lion that was also heading in the same direction of the trumpeting and, knowing there is no love lost between the elephants and the lions in this area, I suspected the two animals paths had crossed and the elephants were letting the lion know he was not welcome. Quickening the pace we arrived in the dry Savuti Channel just in time to see the male lion crossing down into the channel and up the other side, before disappearing into the thick riverine vegetation. A bit of nifty driving, and some guesswork, put us right in the spot where ten minutes later the male lion re-appeared, still walking along purposefully, although he soon disappeared once again



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into a thick tangle of bushes and long grass. The elephants in the meantime had used the distraction of the approach of the vehicle to head silently off in the opposite direction, leaving us with a few quick snapshots and another great memory.

It has only been on very rare occasions over the last few years that we have been lucky enough to see the elegant serval, a long legged cat (between two and two and a half feet at the shoulder and weighing about 10kgs) that has a beautiful light golden yellow, spotted and barred coat - and so it was a special sighting when, rounding a bend in the track, we saw a serval as it stepped out of the long grass, onto the track and continued walking in the track away from us. After a short distance the serval moved back into the long grass and continued to search for something to hunt - a francolin, small birds or rodents. We spent a good half an hour watching as the serval poked about in the clumps of grasses, explored the depths of the bushes and prowled through the savanna trying to flush out something to eat. Eventually the servals unsuccessful hunting forays took it beyond where we could follow, and it was soon lost in the surrounding bush



- but it had been a unique opportunity to see this seldom seen cat going about its daily routine. We continued our search for interesting things to stop and observe, from spiny cucumbers hanging on their thin vines suspended from bushes, to colourful hornbills and other birds. Wildebeest, steenbok, kudu, giraffe, warthogs and jackals all put in appearances, as well as many big bull elephants and the occasional breeding herd, ensuring that each day was a non stop wildlife adventure. One late afternoon, when all seemed quiet, we decided to stop and stretch our legs, but as I got out of the vehicle I saw the faint but fresh tracks of not one but two leopards passing that exact spot. Jumping back into the vehicle we set off following the tracks and soon were rewarded with the sighting of a male and female leopard moving through the bush and heading towards a distant tree line. We were able to follow and eventually get fairly close to the leopards as they moved along steadily and purposefully, although as the leopards seemed to have a set destination in mind they were clearly not about to stop and pose for us! - but once again we had been lucky to have the chance to observe such magnificent wildlife in action.



Our regular elephant sightings continued throughout the stay at our next destination, the Xakanaxa region of the Moremi Game reserve. There was herd after herd of mothers, youngsters and an assortment of bulls in attendance with each elephant herd. One afternoon we were sitting at a very scenic spot overlooking a lagoon, while all about us the many elephants went about their business - crossing the water right next to us, stripping bark off the mopane trees to chew, reaching up overhead to get to the leaves hanging from the leafy canopy above, feeding on the twigs and leaves of the bushes, or gathering up trunkfuls of food from the ground. Young elephants played and interacted with each other, and as one herd mixed and mingled in passing with others, the adults greeted old acquaintances or perhaps distant relatives by placing their trunks into each others mouths and blowing their scent to each other, in a ritual similar to humans shaking hands or giving each other a kiss on the cheek as a friendly greeting. All around us there were interesting things happening, and scenes like this repeated themselves at different locations, so there were hippos in the lagoon to distract us at one time, while at another location there was a giraffe



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wandering along, or a herd of waterbuck and impala feeding nearby, while there was always the constant chatter of the various birdlife all about us. All these scenes were fantastic, but the adrenalin rush came when the peaceful setting was thrown into disarray with a pack of wild dogs rushing into the middle of the tranquil scene. From sitting stationary we started a bouncy rough ride, as we travelled at what seemed a fair old pace (the terrain being such that one could seldom reach fourth gear) in pursuit of the hunting wild dogs. The rough terrain and thick woodland restricted our progress, but we still had good sightings of the wild dogs before the hunt moved on and out of our immediate area - but it was another thrilling wildlife experience that marked the end of this short safari adventure, which we hope provided a teaser for a future safari for the family who were with us, or perhaps for some of you reading about this adventure?

Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
www.gavinblairsafaris.com