



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

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February 2010 Newsletter

Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

The couple that joined Marjorie and I on our next journey into the bush were old hands at the safari game, this being their tenth safari with us over the many years. We have had a great many and a huge variety of excellent wildlife sightings over our times together, but there's always something to keep me on my toes, and for this trip the request was for wild dogs and a porcupine! Porcupine is one of those nocturnal creatures that I see signs of on every safari -



either their dropped quills or their footprints meandering down the track as we drive out early in the mornings, but it is an animal seldom seen, even on night drives. Porcupine made the second request, and so the first request for wild dogs seemed a breeze to fulfil, even though with wild dogs being so highly mobile they are normally every bit as challenging to find as cheetah, which is why on their previous safaris these particular guests had only had a few quick glimpses of the wild dogs. So we set off for another challenging safari adventure.

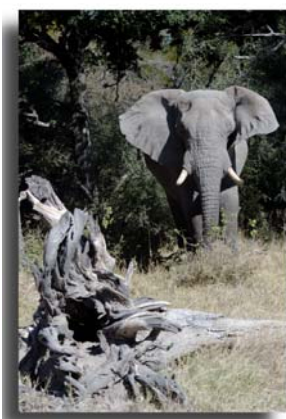
Arriving at Victoria Falls airport we drove across the border into Botswana, seeing troops of baboons and vervet monkeys playing and feeding alongside the road. We stopped briefly to admire the first elephants of the safari, as well as making a few quick stops to get the bird checklist going, but we did not dilly-dally too long as we still had to fly on into the heart



of the Okavango Delta where Marjorie was waiting with the vehicle. After a smooth flight we descended into the short bush airstrip over the glistening waterways of the Okavango, to find not only



Marjorie but a few elephants near the end of the airstrip to greet us. It did not take long to get back into the swing of wildlife viewing, and so it took what was left of the afternoon to cover the relatively short distance to the lodge, where we would be venturing out from over the next few days.



With the water levels still high we had to start and end our game-drives by crossing a flooded river valley that had created an island on which the camp was situated, thus ensuring a guaranteed adventure each end of the day. Once out of camp we spent our time pottering about the area, making the most of every daylight hour to be out in the wilds and watching the wildlife going about their daily activities, as well as enjoying the sun, the sounds, the bush smells and the company, both human and wildlife. As happens so often, we would stop for one thing and that would lead on to more sightings with new animals entering the



scene, and so we would spend quite some time in each location, meaning that we did not cover much territory over our visit, but we certainly enjoyed a lot of good quality wildlife viewing. While keeping

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company with some feeding bull elephants one afternoon some starlings and squirrels began giving their alarm calls, and so after observing them for a while I determined the location of their concern. Moving cautiously we approached the spot and found a snake sunning itself in a tuft of long grass. We were able to watch it for some time as it watched us, before it moved into a fallen hollowed out log nearby. Meanwhile some impalas had moved into view, and beyond them were some vervet monkeys gleaning through the vegetation for tit-bits to feed on – and so an hour or more passed before we moved on to another of the areas great vistas.



Though the guests are not “twitchers” they are definitely avid wildlife watchers of everything large (elephant sized) and small (ant sized), and will happily watch anything in between for as long as time allows - naturally they also appreciate the many colourful birds, and like to keep a checklist of everything we see for future reference once back home. We did therefore spend a lot of time admiring the huge variety of birdlife, some who capture your attention briefly as they fly by, others that entertain you for a while longer with their song, while one hamerkop kept us entertained for a considerable time as it prodded and probed in the muddy edges of a pan, working a section thoroughly before trying another site, all the while keeping an eye out and calling for its mate somewhere off through the trees, who was no doubt feeding in another puddle of water in much the same manner. Bird watching also typically leads to more “accidental” sightings of so many other interesting critters such as snakes, or the



nocturnal genet curled up in the fork of a branch. On this trip, searching for a scops owl lead us to a bat roosting in the shade of a clump of leaves at the top of a bush, while the owl itself took longer to “see” once we had located it from its soft purring call. One very rare owl that I had very much wanted the guests to see over their many past visits, but had not been successful, was the Pel's fishing owl - 60cm (24 inches) tall - who roosts by day in the densest leaved trees, making it difficult to find despite its great size, and so it was a great thrill early one afternoon when I spotted a youngster sunning and preening in deep shade, but in clear view on a large branch. It was a very special treat for all of us, and like most youngsters the young Pel's fishing owl was as curious about us as we were enthralled by it - so we had a great time watching each other!

After many great wildlife sightings and experiences, including lions but not wild-dogs, it was time to move on, and so after a short flight we left behind the lush Okavango habitat for more arid Kalahari sands terrain. It turned out to be a lucky choice to start out the first afternoon by exploring a seldom visited corner of Savuti, as within the hour we were watching three dwarf mongooses clambering about a hole in a big Leadwood tree, when suddenly twenty meters off to the side a huge pair of ears lifted out of the grass - a resting wild dog!



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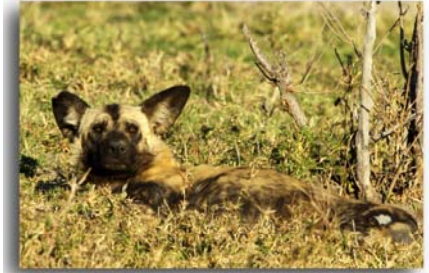
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It was still early afternoon and quite hot, so we settled down to wait while the wild dogs remained inactive, but there were the mongooses and a lilac breasted roller to keep us happy, plus there was the challenge to see how many wild dogs we could find - a none too easy task despite the scarcity of obvious cover. As the time ticked past we would spot another wild dog deeper in the scrub, or off to one side, as they rolled over or began fidgeting as the afternoon wore on, then



suddenly the dominant female got up - the signal the others had been waiting for. The individual members of the pack came running in, heads held low while emitting a weird squeaking whining sound as they performed a greeting and submission ritual, jumping and leaping over one another in an excited ball of ears, tails, teeth, black, white and tan fur - right there in front of us. As the excited greeting frenzy continued they came closer and closer to the vehicle, eventually passing right alongside us and seemingly



oblivious to our presence or the excitement from within the vehicle. Soon the pack of wild dogs were over their initial frenzied greetings, and with that the lead female and male set off trotting down the track. We followed slowly as the different individuals would peel off to do their ablutions, then later come sprinting back past us to catch up and start off another round of greetings. Every now and again the leaders would stop, and then everyone would stop as they sniffed the air and calculated their plan of action. The whole pack would



then set off again down the track, and as they loosened up and shook all the stiffness and sleep from their bodies they began to play, chasing each other and running off into the bushes and back again, to leap out and tackle another family member as they trotted on by. We chugged along with the packs playful antics going on all around us, and at times it seemed they were using the vehicle as a prop to hide and play around - but always way up ahead was a lead dog, sniffing and testing the air, looking out for danger and an opportunity to hunt, and ignoring the antics going on behind.

As the direction the wild dogs were taking led us further from camp, we eventually and reluctantly had to leave them still trotting off down the road into the orange glow of the long since set sun.

Making the usual early start the following morning, we were just topping up our travel mugs with tea and were getting ready to head out before the other guests had been woken, when I heard a muffled sound and rustle in the bushes a short way off. I rushed off to see what it might have been, and was just in time to see two wild dogs struggling with a male impala in the bushes near the viewing deck. I immediately fetched our guests who were about to board the vehicle, and so we returned to the viewing deck to begin a rewarding three hours of prime wildlife viewing from the comfort of the lodge chairs. Initially, with the aid of a spotlight, we watched as the pack of wild dogs ravishingly tore into the now dead male impala. The whole hunt, kill and subsequent devouring of the impala was accompanied by only

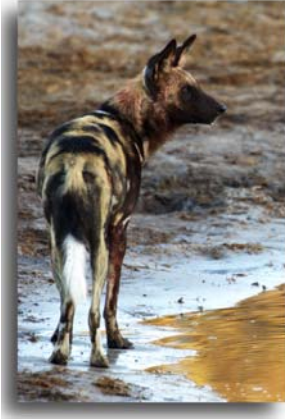


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the slightest sounds, and so we would have missed the entire episode had the impala been killed in the open instead of in the undergrowth. As the sun began to rise we could see more and more, and with the increasing light there was less and less of the impala left. Within an hour the tugging



and pulling from each and every direction meant the remains of the impala were dragged further from the viewing deck, but it was still only



50 meters away when the fullest of the wild dogs gave up the feast and began a game of chase. While some of the wild dogs cleaned up the last morsels of meat off the bones, others settled down to rest in the sand against a fallen tree, while the playful ones continued to run about and clamber on and over another huge fallen tree trunk. Occasionally one of the wild dogs would get up and walk over to the waterhole for a drink, but as the first elephants began to arrive they were no longer welcome at the pan. With the pack pretty much settled down for the time being, we decided to move on and see what else was in store for us out in the bush.

To be continued next month...

Gavin & Marjorie

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