



Gavin Blair Safaris

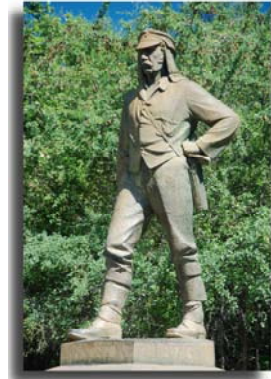
Adventures Through Africa

June 2010 Newsletter

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

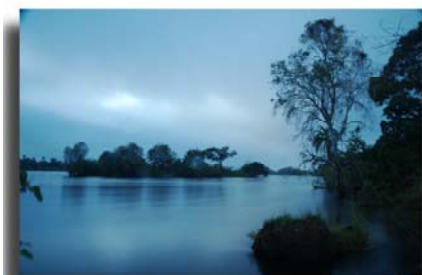
Our next guests were travelling companions we had met on a holiday break that Marjorie and I took at the end of 2008, and like myself are very keen photographers. Where I have tended to be more wildlife orientated (both large and small) in my photography, our two guests were landscape and small critter orientated, so we had all aspects covered and were looking forward to setting out and starting to find great subjects to photograph and to share our skills. Arriving in time to spend a few extra days in Victoria Falls gave us the opportunity to spend almost a full day at the Victoria Falls themselves, biding our time and making the most of the changing light, to get some excellent landscapes of the mighty Zambezi River cascading over the top of the gorge and crashing into the depths of the chasm below, throwing up curtains of spray that were crowned with brilliant rainbows. This was the first opportunity in all these many years of visiting the Falls that I was able to dedicate so much time attempting to capture their magic, and despite the river being in record flood and thus throwing up incredible amounts of spray, I have a few photos to show for the time spent - but even so I can see that I need to do a re-run at some other time in order to master the challenge of this "Natural Wonder of the World". I also got to photograph Livingstone's statue,



something I've always seemed to overlook on previous visits! Rising early on another morning we set out to catch the sunrise over the Falls, only to have an unseasonable weather front blow in banks of cloud to block out the sun. However, from our limited vantage point, due to the exceptionally high river levels, we were able to get some rather different landscape shots. Unperturbed we continued on and soon found a small herd of buffalo moving through the nearby bush, and so made a start on our wildlife portfolios. With the extra time we were also able to make an excursion along the top of the gorges just downstream from the Falls themselves, where we could get some impressive views of the zigzag course the Zambezi takes as it flows through the deep gorges, as well as being able to see numerous previous sites of the river's path going back thousands of years. With the river levels at near record highs, we had

to confine our walk to the tops of the gorges, although in later months it will be possible to scramble down some of the steep valleys, to get right down into the gorges and to the water level for stunning views from the bottom up.

Just to prove that there is no longer any certainties as regarding the weather conditions, we departed Victoria Falls for the journey across to Botswana early in the morning with the sky overcast, and when asked if there would be any need to keep a raincoat handy I replied with a confident "No" - after all the rainy season was over. Well, we all got drenched 60 kilometers out of Victoria Falls and had to delay our take off from Kasane airport to the Okavango Delta by over an hour due to a tropical thunderstorm! Finally we landed at an airstrip on the eastern edge of the Delta (the camps own airstrip having been flooded) and were met with a friendly smile from the boat driver who ferried us the 45 minutes to camp. However, we did not just motor through the Okavango Delta, but took the opportunity to stop and photograph the unique scenery along the way - after all, missing lunch would not matter since dinner would still be a feast! In the afternoon we set off gliding through the reeds and sedges in our canoe, looking out for birdlife as well as



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the beautifully coloured painted reed frogs that are a specialty here. With the typical Okavango Delta scenery of lily pad filled waterways lined with reeds, and distant treed islands with cobalt blue skies and the odd puffy white cloud, the landscape photographers had their work cut out. The next day we took a short boat ride to a nearby island from where we set out to track down a herd of buffalo. Our luck was in as, after having to wade through some water to get ashore, we soon

found ourselves within a short distance of a herd of about 40 buffalo that were moving out across a floodplain. From our vantage point on the edge of the tree line we had good views of the buffalo, but decided to move to a fallen tree just a few feet out onto the floodplain. While one of the guests was climbing up onto the fallen tree, to get a different perspective of the buffalo, a loud bellow and snorting came from a group of bulls bringing up the rear of the herd - then suddenly a female buffalo broke from the tightly



bunched group and proceeded to race towards us, closely followed by four big bulls, snorting and bellowing. Confident in the security of our position behind the fallen tree I encouraged the others to keep taking photos of the rapidly advancing tightly grouped buffalo. With thundering hooves and lots of bellowing the males chased the cow buffalo, and finally she was mated just 10 feet from the end of our protective tree - quite an adrenalin rush for all, including the buffalo I imagine! With the mating over the buffalo turned to stare at us for a second or two before trotting back to rejoin the rest of the herd, that had by now crossed a flooded malapu to the next island and were soon too far off to photograph. We turned our attention to the many other interesting photographic subjects in the immediate area, such as the bright green and



yellow little bee-eaters that were swooping out over the grasses, hawking flies and insects before returning to the same exposed perch. The challenge was to get the backlight shining through the birds wings as they took off or came back to land - and as there were several pairs about we had many chances to get the perfect shot. We were also lucky enough to have the opportunity to photograph the less common bluecheeked bee-eater sitting in the papyrus along the edge of the waterway. Other challenging winged subjects were the many coloured dragonflies and damselflies that were out and about, while a pair of giant eagle owls peered down at us from a tall acacia tree nearby. There were also a number of different coloured fungi and delicate mushrooms that challenged the artistic side of our photography, while at the same time helping to stimulate an appetite for the brunch waiting for us back at camp!



Our first wildlife drive in the Xakanaxa region of the Moremi Game Reserve was greeted by the unusual and seemingly out of character harsh, loud, belching-come-rasping barking calls of the many impala rams that were rushing about chasing rivals and trying to herd in females - and so we spent a good length of time observing this period of intense activity by the impala males. Small harems of female impalas, under the escort of a high ranking male, would try and go about their business of feeding on the short grasses

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and moving from one enticing clump to the next, but unfortunately that would often lead them close to the invisible boundary of their current suitors territory - hence that particular males best efforts to herd the females back into the center of his world, with soft grunts and lots of head bobbing. Occasionally a stubborn female would insist on straying further afield, whereby the male would grunt more frantically and run to try and herd the female back. Every now and then a chase would ensue, as a female pushed her luck too much and the male would launch into a loud raucous bellowing routine, with the couple racing this way and that, scattering the other conforming females as they tried to stay out of the way. Two or three minutes of back and forth chasing would typically see the female back in the center of the safe area, whereupon the male would then increase the intensity and volume of his snorts as if to give the female one last piece of his mind about having been such a troublesome member of his harem! Meanwhile, if the high ranking male was unlucky, a nearby group of bachelors



would enter the scene and try to encourage another one of the females to defect and run off with them instead. So with one calamity over, the high ranking male would now have to confront the interlopers, and with much vocalization the whole group of males would end up running about in a small area, heads down, white tails up, chasing each other and thereby further scattering the females, and disrupting the previously calm, peaceful setting. With his rivals finally although only temporarily seen off, the high ranking male would then return to the task of re-grouping his harem and

trying to keep them from straying too far. Amidst all the commotion the odd group of kudu or small herd of zebra continued feeding in the surrounding bush, ignoring the antics of the impalas, or perhaps just secure in the knowledge that with all the noise and activity by the impalas, any predators about would be more likely to target one of the distracted impalas rather themselves. However, out in the next seasonally flooded valley there were a number of waterbuck who would occasionally all suddenly look up in the direction of the noisy impalas off through the trees - perhaps as they could not see the impalas they were a bit more skittish, reacting to the outbursts in case the impalas snorting might signal potential danger. Over the next few days we spent time with these same waterbuck, as well as with the many other interesting animals in the area - photographing, watching and enjoying, while learning about their habits and different behaviours. Our sightings also included the shy and elusive bushbuck, a honey badger out feeding, an African wildcat, three hyenas and some great views of a genet with its spotted coat and ringed tail.



With the high water levels, there was a lot more floodwater about than usual, which gave many more great landscape photographic opportunities, but it also meant there were many more interesting birds about for the time of year. One of my favourite water birds is particularly fond of shallow waterways where there are many water lilies growing, the seeds found within the water lily flower buds and other emergent water plants being its favourite food - and so for once there were many of the tiny and highly coloured male pygmy geese and their dowdy females paddling about in the more accessible bodies of water, and hence we were able to get some great photos of

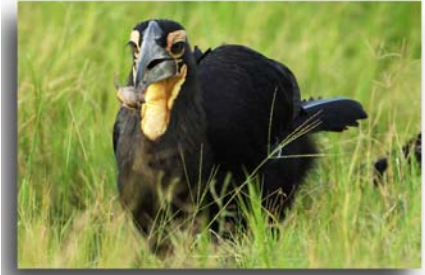


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these beautiful birds. Another interesting and photographically productive time was spent following a family of large ground hornbills, as they slowly and methodically plodded through the grasses snatching up various insects, grasshoppers and beetles that were in their path. The youngster, with its yellow facial skin, would hop and waddle after one of the parents or the previous offspring (now full grown and enlisted to assist with feeding junior) to beg for handouts. When an adult bird found an easy prey to catch it would give a soft oomph call and the youngster would rush over to make the kill and gulp down the parcel of food. We had been watching for some time



when one adult became very intent on digging with its long bill in a patch of sand. After a short time the hornbill gave the oomph call summoning the youngster over, whereupon it continued to dig in the same spot, then after three or four stabs with its beak came up with the prize - a plump round frog which, after tossing it about in the air a few times, it swallowed in one gulp! We also had great sightings and good photographic opportunities with some of the members of the colourful kingfisher family. Incidentally, it should be remembered that not all species of kingfisher are fish eaters, but are in fact generalised insect eaters, with the largest member of the kingfisher family being the Australian Kookaburra. With the rising floodwaters forcing lots of insects to vacate their flooding burrows and



hideaways beneath the sand, there was certainly a bumper availability of food for any insect eater. On another occasion we watched two plain brown hamerkop's preen and interact with each other, and as with so many instances out on safari about which I write of, this may not seem all that exciting or significant to someone reading about the account, but for those who have been out on safari, or as anyone who has spent quality time out in nature will know, every such scene has a unique atmosphere. It is the total scene - the lighting, the background sounds,



the smells, and the whole setting and situation that swells each experience, with so many stimulating signals that go together, to make a moment such as watching something as simple as two preening birds such a fulfilling and enjoyable experience - something that perhaps most of us are too out of touch with, and seem not to have enough time to notice or take in with our normal hectic day to day routines. It is after all the many moments like these, such as a bush coming out in bloom that is attracting a number of butterfly species, that go together to make a complete African safari

experience - and although the excitement of being in close proximity to huge herds of elephants, or watching lions setting out to hunt, are also part of the safari experience, I like to ensure that we stop every now and then to take in the smaller scenes as well.

To be continued next month...

Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
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