



# Gavin Blair Safaris

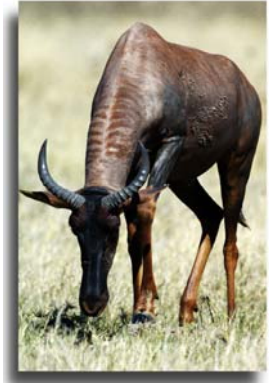
Adventures Through Africa

March 2010 Newsletter

Gavin Blair Safaris  
Private Bag K19  
Kasane  
Botswana  
info@gavinblairsafaris.com

## Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Once again we took our time at each wildlife sighting, enjoying every scene for all it had to offer, such as the two male tsessebe engaged in a battle of wills. From afar I had seen the two tsessebe sizing each up, standing a short distance apart and nodding their heads up and down in an exaggerated gesture, and so we moved in closer to observe. The tsessebe came together at a spot about 20 meters from where we sat, only giving us a cursory glance but watchful of each others moves. For over half an hour the two tsessebe, now only a few feet apart, circled each other slowly whilst bobbing their heads. Occasionally one feigned an attack, to which the other would brace to meet the others charge while we tensed for the clash of horns, but time and time again it proved to be just an intimidating manoeuvre which the other tsessebe was not too troubled by. Every now and then one of the tsessebe would take a brief break to nibble at a clump of grass here or there, with the other tsessebe never taking advantage at the others distracting snacking. Eventually the two obviously made some silent non-aggression pact, as they finally turned in unison and strode off like two best mates taking a stroll.

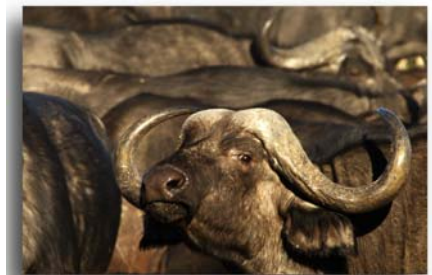


We did well on seeing the different mongooses, with three dwarf mongooses on the first drive and a few more scurrying about on another, followed by a comical scene where the usually bold and brazen slender mongoose was challenged by a squirrel, who then pushed home his sudden surge of courage and chased off the slender mongoose into the long grass. Not far from a waterhole we watched as a family of banded mongooses excavated numerous holes in search of beetles, while a short time later we were entertained by two yellow mongooses who were digging away here and there for grubs and other tasty morsels, and occasionally standing up on their hind legs to peer about for danger.



Another thrill was coming across a huge herd of buffalo - we had seen the herd a few times in the distance, and on one morning had hung around where I predicted they might cross the road to head to some nearby pans of water to drink, and as such were rewarded when after about half an hour the herd of about 150 buffalo bulls, cows and calves

thundered across the track near to us and on towards the pans. We repositioned at the pans, and after a short time were able to watch as the whole herd came nervously down to drink, before returning to the thick tree line and out of sight. Perhaps the most satisfying sighting of the few days in the area was the porcupine. OK it's cheating, as there are a number of animals that I know of that are living in and about various lodges and camps, some of which I share with guests and some I usually don't, it being a fine line between these sightings being seen as "tame" or "staged", as opposed to being exciting and fascinating no matter what the setting. This once I deemed it worthwhile to show the guests the porcupines that live under one of the lodges. It may not have been the wild free ranging image of a porcupine that one imagines, but regardless they are truly wild and are actually seen by relatively few people - even the majority of the camp



# Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

## March 2010 Newsletter

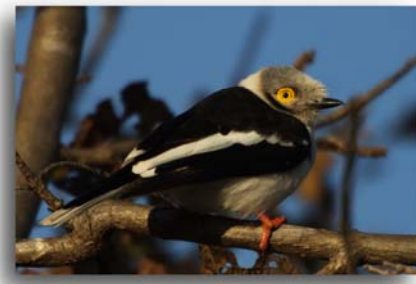
staff have never seen them, and in fact have no idea that some of these animals are living in such close proximity to them. Anyhow, that's what the first picture was about in the last newsletter in case you were wondering! What I unfortunately did not get a photo of was the genet with her kittens up on the roof of one of the rooms.



The bird sightings were just too good to pass up on mentioning - after all we all know what a sleeping lion looks like! Anyhow, on another early morning out we stopped to watch a Verreaux's eagle owl, formally known as a giant eagle owl (around 60+ cm), calling to its mate in another tree nearby, the owl's deep UNNh-UNNh -WHOOhoo carrying clearly across the savannah. We also spent some time watching the methodical plod, plod, plod, stab of the large (100cm) turkey like ground hornbills with their large de-curved bills, as they moved about in a family group looking for grasshoppers, beetles, snakes, frogs, and in fact anything that might have some flesh on it.



The satin black feathers of the adults contrast with their crimson red facial and throat patches and pouch. The young ground hornbill chick - almost as big as the adults, with a dull black plumage and black skin patches that turn yellow to orange before finally attaining the red of the adults - was being fed by the previous years offspring, who stays around to help raise the next chick in return for the added protection of the adults for another year until it reaches full maturity itself. The ground hornbills also have a deep booming call that we heard echoing across the veld in the early mornings. A smaller chap with a varied and bubbly call, the white-browed scrub-robin (14cm) sat right above us and kept the guests company as I changed a tyre that had punctured on a sharp rock when I had reversed back to get a better view of him - thanks! We also had an excellent view of one of a pair of African hawk eagles (62cm) sitting in a dead tree - the pair usually hunt as a team, one flying high to alarm the birds and squirrels into giving their position away, while the other swoops in at tree top level to surprise the alarm giver. Another hunter of



small insects that is communal is the white-crested helmet-shrike (18cm) that is often referred to as "the seven sisters" due to there more often than not being seven birds in the family group that hunt together. When helmet-shrikes are alarmed they click their bills together loudly and fly in as a group to get a closer

look at the threat. The best way to get them in close for observing is therefore is to imitate a diurnal bird hunting predator - the pearl spotted owlet (18cm), a fierce little bird with a loud piercing whistle call, who is quick to fly in to see who is trying to muscle in on its hunting ground when you mimic its call!



We had been watching the ground hornbills late one evening when two black backed jackals came trotting into the scene, also looking out for grasshoppers, beetles, small birds and mice to hunt. The jackals were probably being opportunistic and hoping to snatch at prey escaping the hornbills, but as it was already late the hornbills hurried off to the nearby tree line, not about to do anyone else any favours. We followed the jackals for a short distance before they turned away from our homeward bound direction. Already it was getting late and so I began

# Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

## March 2010 Newsletter

to accelerate away when there was an excited cry - leopard! There, just a few feet off the track was a leopard crouched in the long grass, intent on something off in the distance. We watched as the leopard raised itself into a sitting position then into a standing position - all the time focusing on something far ahead of it in the sage bushes. A short run, then stop, followed by another short run before it stopped and sat down - then the leopard lowered itself into a crouch, tensed and focused. I scanned and scanned with my binoculars but could not see through the low sage bushes to see what was there, then suddenly the leopard was up and running again heading in towards the bushes, then



through and out of sight. We listened for the sound of a kill or an alarm, but there was nothing other than silence, and so we had to head for the gate with haste, never knowing what was the prey or the outcome - such is the way of the bush. Another area and another leopard sighting was where an old elephant had died - the vultures were still up in the trees, a sign that a predator was in attendance. After looking around for lions we spotted the leopard, sitting just a short distance away slightly obscured by some branches. We got to see more glimpses of the leopard as it got up to feed on the elephant's trunk, but it was not our favourite

scene and so we did not spend too much time there. The third leopard was spotted during the last minutes of the final game drive of the safari, as we were once again making a dash for the gate - this particular leopard had climbed up into a dead tree and appeared to be enjoying the sunset. Oh yes, we did also see sleeping lions on a number of occasions, and although we spent time watching and enjoying them they never made much effort to do anything, so I mention them here just for the record.



Our time in Chobe was dominated by the elephants, and so we spent most of each drive, as well as while out on the boat, watching these magnificent animals, especially the small family herds with their tiny youngsters. As always it was a real treat to be able to enjoy scenes with great numbers of elephants all about, and a special thrill to have mothers and calves walking close by us in as we sat in an open vehicle, totally accepting us and not in any way threatening or feeling

threatened by us. We also saw a number of large herds of buffalo, several great looking warthogs snuffling and rooting about, many hippos, crocodiles and a few sable antelope, but there were always elephants somewhere in the scene - not that anyone was complaining! The sad sightings were of the one old dead bull elephant, and at another site the remains of a very young elephant that had



died of unknown causes and had been fed upon by the hyenas and a great number of vultures. There was a pan of water near the remains of the youngster where many vultures had been washing after their feast, and so were standing around drying their wings giving the whole scene an eerie atmosphere. Watching the huge lappet-faced vultures (115cm) posturing and swaggering about while trying to intimidate one another was quite something to see.



# Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

## March 2010 Newsletter



There were of course many more colourful and interesting birds that we did not pass up on the chance to watch. One really interesting scene, that took place alongside the track, was where a huge group of about 100 or more banded mongooses had come to dig and scratch in and around a characterful log. There must have been grubs in the nooks and crannies and beetles burrowing all about, as the whole band of mongooses scratched, dug and poked about for ages, accompanied by lots of squabbles with fights breaking out, and lots of chasing one another around while they all kept up a constant little chitter chatter with each other. One mongoose found an old leathery bit of skin and proceeded to gnaw on it with relish, which immediately attracted attention from

others who also wanted a taste, so resulting in even more hilarious antics to watch. Eventually the whole band moved off leaving just the one mongoose still chewing and pulling on the tough skin. When the mongoose got up on a low limb, trying to balance while gripping the skin with one paw and pulling with his teeth, something gave and the mongoose did a backward flip, dropping the skin and landing in a heap. Leaping up, looking around indignantly and hoping that no one had seen his misadventure, the mongoose realised he was now alone, and so gave up on the tough leathery skin and scampered off to join the others.



Sadly every safari must end, but with the last night in Victoria Falls there was time to squeeze in a quick visit to this most spectacular of natural phenomenon. We had a good sunny afternoon and so there were some great rainbows. The warthogs were out enjoying the grazing along the top of the Falls as were some monkeys and mongooses. We even managed to fit in a quick visit to the vulture "restaurant" before ending another pleasurable and memorable safari adventure.



Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie  
[www.gavinblairsafaris.com](http://www.gavinblairsafaris.com)