



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

May 2010 Newsletter

Gavin Blair Safaris

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie



On route to the Etosha National Park we detoured to fit in an overnight near the rock engravings at Twyfelfontein, timing our actual visit to the site with the cool of the early morning, so that we could wander amongst these interesting examples of ancient artwork before the heat of the day set in. We speculated as to the purpose and meaning behind the individual walls of engravings of neatly chiseled, clearly recognizable animal shapes, but one can never know for sure what the true thoughts and purpose of the craftsmen were. There certainly may have been early art critics, but they were fortunate not to have lived in a "wired" world of blogs, facebook, twitter and whatever the latest gizmo, invention or fad is! As the brightly coloured rock agamas came out to sunbathe, we drove on towards Etosha to find some bigger critters. The tough road conditions took their toll on the tires causing a slight delay,

and so we arrived at the entrance to the Etosha National park just as the peak of the afternoon heat had passed - thus animals were already stirring and beginning to feed, or starting to make their way to the various waterholes in the area. Impala, giraffe, wildebeest, zebra, ground squirrel and a good variety of birds delayed our eventual arrival at our overnight stop in the park, but the scene of a breeding herd of elephants running to a waterhole, backlit by the orange glow of the setting sun, was for me the most memorable part of the day - and we still had the night viewing to go!



Over the next few nights the nocturnal activity at the camps waterholes was seemingly non-stop. Breeding herd after breeding herd of elephants would come silently out of the dark from all directions early on in the evenings. Each herd would arrive and hurriedly move down to the water to drink, with the youngsters excitedly running ahead, then after a reasonable period

drinking their fill they would calmly wander off as the next breeding herd ran in for their turn. Even the giraffe seemed to come in shifts - a few in one session, ten in another - and so it would go on until just before the mystical midnight hour arrived. The rhinos also arrived in dribs and drabs, but at one point there were five rhinos at the waterhole at the same time - a white rhino with her very small calf, a young male black rhino, and a mother and calf black rhino. The young male black rhino was being pushy and causing grief with all the other rhinos, snorting and generally harassing



the females and bullying the smaller calves. At one stage the same rhino looked as if he was about to head over to try his mischief with a small breeding herd of elephants, but he changed his mind when some big bull elephants arrived to drink, so separating the rhino and the breeding herd without realizing their fortunate part in deterring a confrontation in the making.

On another night a big male black rhino arrived and proceeded to chase off a male lion that had also arrived just minutes before, having hardly had a chance to get more than a few laps of water. Not long after another equally sized male black rhino arrived and caught the first one off guard, coming up from behind and startling the first one as it was drinking. After trotting off a short distance the first rhino gathered his wits about him and came back to tussle with the newcomer - after all, who had just chased off the King of the Beasts! The two rhino did not get into a serious fight, but



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they created a lot of dust and were making their unusual squealing and grunting sounds, so after a while the two retired to either end of the waterhole and thereafter ignored each other. The female with her calf that had lost both ears also came in on the last night, but with so many lions about they were nervous to come and drink - just as they would move down to the waters edge another herd of elephants would arrive, causing the mother and her calf to move a short distance off to the side and wait their turn. At

one point we had thirty six elephants of all sizes drinking with one black rhino, with three other black rhino holding back out of the rush, as well as two black-backed jackals and a hyena skulking about, while just at the edge of the bushes there was the pride of lions. Honey badgers also put in periodic visits, while a giant eagle owl and a pearl-spotted owl flew about hunting rodents and moths - and then there was all the day time activity!



On this particular safari we had our best predator count of all my years of taking guests to Etosha. We started with two male lions shattering the early morning (04:15) silence as they came into the camp waterhole for a very quick drink, before keeping up their roaring as they continued their territorial patrol. That sighting was followed with finding



a pride of eighteen lions lying out on the flat white expanse of the salt pan near a natural spring - it was still very early but two sub-adults were already just wandering off to the one lone clump of acacia bushes that would represent the only shade for miles around as the day heated up. I positioned at a point where I predicted that, in time, the rest of the pride would follow. Beyond the lions, and at other parts of this wide spreading seep, were gemsbok, wildebeest and a number of springbok, plus hundreds of sandgrouse flying in to drink - all keeping a casual watch on the fat sleeping lions nearby. Further out on the salt pan more animals were making their way in for a drink, and off to one side in the distance we could see a hyena resting up, while three more hyenas fed off a large set of ribs - no doubt finishing off

the lion kills remains. One by one the lions eventually got up and began making their way in our general direction - some paused to rub cheeks with one of the three male members of the pride, while some of the sub-adults briefly chased each other about. The lions had to jump a narrow stretch of water and mud on their way over towards us, but that was still too far off for a photo - then as one lioness reached the edge of the pan she gave a soft call, resulting in three small cubs



appearing out of the grass to follow her towards that one shady tree. Another female further back in the line gave her low call as she reached the same spot, following on from which five larger cubs came bounding over full of bounce and eager to play. The three smallest cubs, a few females and one of the male lions passed right by the vehicle and on towards the shade, while the antics of the five larger cubs led the remainder of the pride to pass behind us. Within an hour there were no lions to be seen!

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Other day time lion sightings included one male sleeping at a waterhole, with three more barely visible males at another waterhole, even though they were all less than fifty meters from the track. At another waterhole a female lioness had crawled into an ambush point - a first wave of zebras had just drunk, while literally hundreds more zebra were heading in to the water, many still in the far distance. Further away three more lionesses lounged around showing no interest in the proceedings,

as they were presumably on baby sitting duty being as we could see at least one small cub. We watched countless drinking zebra and the stalking lioness for a long time. The lioness remained alert and seemed ready to burst forth at a moments notice, but it seemed as though she realized that the set up was not ideal - the distance was too great and she was also on the wrong side of the muddy waterhole, and I think she knew it!



The pride of ten lions, including the five large cubs that were hanging out at the busy waterhole by night, must have all eaten a large meal, as none showed any interest in hunting any of the other wildlife coming to drink - but it was comical to see the male lion being chased off by the rhino and then later by some elephants, and then by the sounds of thrashing about in the bushes when another round of rhino and elephants decided to make sure that the lions didn't get too comfortable at this particular waterhole. Over the next few hours we got to see most of the lions come to the water to drink, with one female drinking non stop for about 40 minutes! One lioness did get her own back as she got to chase off a hyena that had been drinking, but she did not put much effort into the chase and the hyena readily departed the scene. Another lioness stooped to chasing off one of the two jackals that had been hanging around, but



there was even less effort involved in that chase. We also got to see a number of hyenas out in the day, either walking in the distance or snoozing in the sun fairly close to the track. We had just about reached the furthestmost distance we would be travelling on our last morning out wildlife watching when we got our last lucky break - a cheetah sat up out of the grasses under a small acacia tree about 100 meters off the track. The cheetah seemed indecisive as to whether to get up and move to another tree or to just go back to sleep. We were too far away to have been the cause for making the cheetah sit up, but we were grateful to whatever it was, as we all got to have a good look at him before the decision was made and the cheetah lay back down and out of sight. We slowly made our way back to the lodge for brunch before the guests boarded the charter flight back to Windhoek to connect with their onward flights back to Switzerland - and so ended another successful Gavin Blair Safari.



Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
www.gavinblairsafaris.com