



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

July 2011 Newsletter

Gavin Blair Safaris

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

For this newsletter some very regular guests joined up with us for their 7th safari adventure with Gavin Blair Safaris, this time starting in the 14,620 km² Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe. The few days spent in this park marked the end of an era, being our very last self-contained camping trip, but even this was not our full mobile camp being as we were on the move daily. At the end of the safari we gave the last of our camping equipment to another operator who was just starting out. All camping in the future will take place in Zimbabwe only and will be fully serviced and supported camps in conjunction with another operator. The time was right for this move, being ahead of changing regulations and circumstances. As with all change some aspects will be missed and others not but, like the many guests who camped with us over a good number of years, we will always remember the great experiences and fun times we had out there in the wilds of Africa - the many nights with lions playing in camp,



elephants feeding on the tree above your tent, the hyena running off with the guests steaks or my kettle, and for the guests those adrenalin rushes that went with their midnight adventures of getting between ones tent and the distant loo, surrounded by so many unusual and unfamiliar sounds. However, do not fret - with Marjorie and I still around we will ensure that we continue to seek out and give our guests some of those extra special experiences that other lodge guests would like to talk about but will never get to experience via the lodge staff!

Throughout Hwange National Park a network of artificial water points exist that are fed by water pumped from deep boreholes via diesel pumps, and while at most there are no structures or facilities, at some waterholes there are viewing platforms or campsites. The many years of low tourist numbers has made the upkeep of these remote and far flung sites difficult, especially considering that for many years it was difficult to get diesel even in the main city centres, never mind way out in the bush where vast distances are involved. Amazingly there are however a good number of waterholes still in operation, supported by charitable organisations and local fundraising efforts. More waterholes are being brought back on line as tourism returns, while renovation work has begun on some of the major tourist facilities within the park. We travelled through the park staying at a different waterhole each night, and mostly having the entire place to ourselves. Apart from the main tourist area around the National Park Headquarters in the eastern sector the majority of the park has been left to fend for itself, and as such only a handful of game viewing tracks exist, some of which have become overgrown, with bridges having fallen into a bad state of disrepair to the extent that many of the loop roads have been closed off - a great pity, as even in the best times for a park of this size there were never that many tracks criss-crossing the landscape. And so on to Hwange we travelled, with no expectations other than to enjoy a great few days in a remote wilderness and to enjoy whatever wildlife we encountered.



Meeting our guests off their flight from London via Johannesburg, we left Victoria Falls airport

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and drove directly to the entrance hut that is about a third of the way along the roughly 250 kilometre length of the Hwange National Park. The drive from the entrance to Sinamatella Camp is about 30 kilometres, and by now being late afternoon it was not long before we encountered our first animals moving through the bush feeding. Impalas were garzing in grassy vleis at the fringes of the mopane woodland, while kudu browsed on overhanging leaves in the numerous dry riverbeds. At first we only found tell-tale signs of the elephants - heaps of droppings on the road and lots of their large pad marks in the dirt - but we

were soon catching glimpses of the herds as they moved swiftly from the track into the thick woodland, their trunks held high to catch our scent while giving their deep throated grumble and occasional trumpet, so as to let us know they were not too pleased by our noisy invasion of their park. We spent the first night in the National Parks cottages, set high on a ridge that marks the end of the hills and rocky terrain, with the outlook from the rooms being across a wide river course and vlei area and on into a hazy infinity of dry bush and a huge sky. We were welcomed by an old bull elephant who was indifferent to our arrival, although he did wander over to keep an eye on us as we unpacked, while reaching up into the high green foliage of the trees near our large spacious cottages. We quickly



dropped off our bags then followed the winding dirt track until we were far below the camp and looking down the floodplain to where breeding herds of elephants were making their way to and from the few seepage points that still held water in the dry river bed. Hundreds of guineafowl trotted by in long lines like the bush equivalent of rush hour traffic at a multilane traffic intersection. Returning to camp as darkness enveloped the hill top, the first of millions of bright stars began to twinkle in the sky, and later while sitting around the campfire we heard the first of the drawn out whooping calls of the hyenas that would continue on and off throughout the night, accompanied by the regular prrrrip calls of the African scops-owls from various trees within the camp grounds.



We were up and about well before a lovely ball of orange rose rapidly over the vast landscape out the front door of the cottages. After a quick snack we were on our way down the dirt and gravel track, where the nocturnal animals had left their spoor for us to read as to whom had been out and about in the night. Honey badger, jackal, porcupine, scrub hare, elephants and a few old buffalo bulls had passed along the track before us. After we had driven some way we came upon a huge flock of helmeted guineafowl spread out across the track, trotting along and getting flustered by our arrival on the scene. Driving along behind them for some fifty meters they showed no inclination to vacate the track but instead picked up the pace a little, with all those bird feet kicking up a small cloud of dust while at the same time obliterating any chance of reading more of the night's activities from the dirt! After a further fifty metres or so the track entered a more open bare patch of landscape, so allowing the guineafowl to detour off the track. While most of the guineafowl followed the leaders, some of the bird brains peeled off in the opposite direction, and as the vehicle came level with them still trotting along parallel to the track we inevitably cut off their contact with their buddies on the opposite side. Panic ensued, resulting in the handful of misfits braking into a frantic run before launching themselves into the air, squawking and complaining as they cut across in front of us to fly on then land in a chaotic manner amongst their brethren, causing yet more



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panic, confusion and noise. The track we had taken wound through some thick mopane woodland and was clearly seldom used, to the extent that we had the feeling that at each encounter with the wildlife the animals appeared to freeze in astonishment at our arrival. After a long moment of having their full attention most of the animals would turn and move off, disappearing into the dense vegetation and leaving us with short tantalising views of them. We arrived at a picnic site set on the top of a ridge that overlooked a large man-made dam, in which there were a number of pods of hippos and the odd crocodile lying out sunbathing. All along the shoreline were a good number of geese, herons, egrets

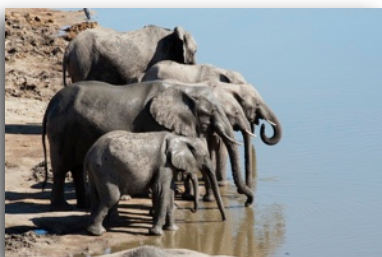


and storks, while within the grounds of the picnic site brightly coloured sunbirds, starlings and weavers, plus a good number of other characterful birds provided us with some good bird watching. We stopped for a tea break while watching a few waterbuck, warthogs and a huge herd of impala working their way along the shoreline whilst feeding. A short while later several kudu emerged from the tree line and sauntered down to the water's edge for a drink - then into the scene came a small family herd of eight zebra, followed by three more zebra family herds and some more kudu. On the opposite ridge a lone male

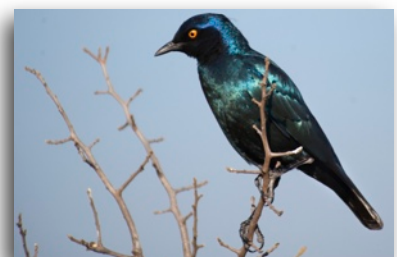
giraffe could be seen pacing back and forth seemingly unsure of where to go, which along with the descending vultures in the distance made me think that just beyond the ridge were the lions! However, more interesting than the lions was the large family of rock dassies that had come out to sun themselves on the rocks and an old rotting tree stump just below where we were sitting. Dassie are unusual in that they are said to be the closest living relative to the elephant and the dugong, based on their skeletal structure and dental work - and with large males weighing in at around 3kg's they are intriguing little critters!



Winter had departed early, which meant that the evenings and mornings were not as cold as anticipated. Being as one of the areas we passed through is often reported as being the coldest place in Zimbabwe, with temperatures known to fall to well below zero centigrade, we got off lightly, with each day starting out noticeably warmer - as such each day was hotter than the last, but without getting uncomfortably hot. With rising daily temperatures the draw of the waterholes was a big factor in our great wildlife viewings. Both on our drives from one site to another, as well as at the various waterholes, elephants far outnumbered any other wildlife sightings we had. Often we would arrive at a waterhole to see very little activity, and so would concentrate on identifying, enjoying and, where possible, photographing the birdlife that was always plentiful at each stop. It often seemed as though ones focus directed through a camera



lens or peering through binoculars was the signal for a herd of elephants to glide silently out of the surrounding bush, so that the next time you put down the camera or binoculars there they were on the way to the water. We spent a good number of hours enthralled by the comings and goings and various antics and interactions of the many herds of elephant we saw. Our favourite lunch spot was at a large waterhole with three resident hippos lying semi-submerged in the middle, far out of the way of the herds of buffalo and elephant splashing and drinking at the water's edge. We also



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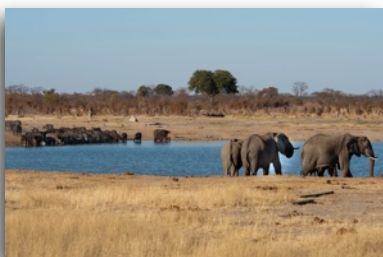
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witnessed an interesting and amusing battle taking place over basking territory on the prime real estate of the backs of the hippos. Of the three hippos one appeared to be oblivious of the terrapins scrambling up onto its back for a place to sun themselves, while the second hippo would only tolerate the terrapins up to a point, with the third hippo clearly being the grouch of the group and the least tolerant of the terrapins. The record number of terrapins we saw spaced out on the hippos' backs at one time was thirteen, until the platform beneath them inconveniently heaved about and shifted into a new sleeping position, the result of which was the unceremonious dumping of its contingent of terrapins back into the water. Inevitably, once one hippo wrestled itself into a new sleeping position the other two would be forced to adjust their own snoozing arrangements, until they too got too hot and dunked down into the water to cool off or just needed to shift their weight around a bit. After each reorganisation the terrapins would once again appear one after the other to haul themselves up onto the sleeping hippos backs. As well as the many kudu, zebra and impala that came down to drink we also watched a fabulous scene of approximately 150 buffalo streaming down to the water, then spreading out in a long line across the opposite edge of the waterhole to drink their fill before turning and wandering off back into the surrounding bush.



We arrived at our next overnight stop late in the afternoon, just in time to see another large herd of around 160 buffalo making their way towards the waterhole, where there was already a good number of elephants splashing and drinking. We climbed the stairs into the platform hide in order to watch from a height the scene around the waterhole about 100 meters in front of us, with the sun setting beyond and highlighting the dust that was being kicked up by the hundreds of buffalo hooves. The lone hippo in the pan was getting ready for his nightly foray out to the surrounding grassy plains by rolling over to get thoroughly wet, and in the process exposing his pale belly and waving his four short stout legs in the air - a comical sight. Off to the one side a lone lioness lay crouched in the scrubby bush contemplating her next move to secure dinner. We left the guests to enjoy the scene while we quickly set up camp at the adjacent picnic site where a family of dwarf mongooses watched our progress. Returning to join the guests for the last orange glow of the sunset we had a quick look for the lioness through our binoculars. It turned out that earlier on some elephants had departed the scene by the way of the lioness's hiding place and as a result she had disappeared from view, so now as we watched the last of the buffalo



trudging off into the enveloping darkness we listened intently in the hope of hearing sounds of the lioness attempt to hunt the buffalo - but as the stars lit up the sky one by one it was soon clear that buffalo was not on the menu tonight! After dinner we returned to see what was happening at the waterhole, and on the way there surprised a honey badger out of the long grass adjacent to the track. The honey badger was not willing to stay around for us to admire him, disappearing across the track and into more long grass. Back at the platform the following morning there were lots of guinea fowl and doves coming and going at the water's edge, while



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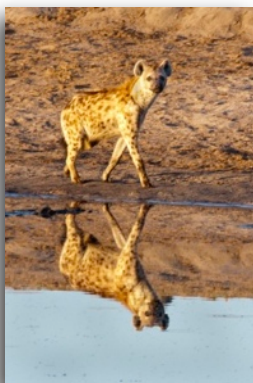
over in the bushes where we had last seen the lioness we spotted her once again, this time clearly chewing on something. Two black-backed jackals trotted about the clump of bushes nearby and later we saw them go directly to where the lioness had been laying, but she must have had her fill and moved on while we had been distracted by an African hawk-eagle swooping in to try and catch one of the doves.

We drove steadily between waterholes, mile after mile crunching under the wheels with the wind blowing through our hair, the smells of the bush constantly tweaking at our smell receptors, blue skies above and warm sunshine on our skin - ah, what a joy to be out in this vast wilderness. We passed two other vehicles in three days and literally 100's of elephants, loads of kudu, zebra, warthogs, the odd steenbok and a variety of small critters such as baboons, mongooses and squirrels as well as many interesting insects and lots of birds. At some waterholes there may have been just a heron catching frogs or Egyptian geese exerting their claim of the shoreline, an odd elephant, roan antelope or giraffe, but at others we would find large numbers of elephants or another huge herd of buffalo,



but whatever we found we mostly had all to ourselves. Arriving at another overnight spot we found a few zebra, giraffe and some elephants just leaving the waterhole, so we set up camp next to the platform to the accompaniment of the monotonous chug, chug of the Lister pump bringing up water from deep below the ground. Some more elephants came unhurriedly in to drink the fresh water pumping out of the borehole, and as these great intelligent creatures are smart

enough to link the far carrying sound of the pump to the water it was delivering I was sure there would be a steady procession of elephants all night long. We sat out under the stars watching the grey shapes drift past where we sat, and with the aid of a night vision monocular we could make out buffalo, zebra, kudu and roan antelope all coming for their sustenance at the waterhole. We lost count of how many elephants came in to drink, but we could hear the rumbles and trumpeting of the herds as they vied amongst themselves for the best drinking spots. Occasionally a bull elephant would wander by close to the edge of our camp light, while during dinner the deep rasping call of a male leopard came out of the darkness way off in the distance. Throughout the early part of the night the regular territory calls of the leopard progressively got closer, arriving at last to just behind our camp but then moving on again into the distance until finally out of our hearing. We had earlier caught glimpses of a few hyenas, but late in the night a clan of



hyenas began to call loudly with their whooping calls, each hyena with its own variation and pitch while making the night echo with their calls - then just as suddenly they all went quite. Sometime very early in the morning we were all awakened by the unmistakable cackling, laughing, whooping cacophony of sounds from just beyond the waterhole, a sure sign that the hyenas had made a kill and were now squabbling amongst themselves, all manners abandoned as they pulled and tore for their share of the kill. At the first glimmer of light on the horizon we could make out first one hyena and then another, until we counted six hyenas in total moving back and forth on the far side of the pan along with two jackals. By the time the sun had risen and we could see clearly, there was no evidence of any kill and I could see no sign of what may have been caught, but the hyenas appeared reluctant to leave the waterhole, wandering off some way then returning and milling around until around 8:30am, by which time impala,

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zebra, roan and kudu had started to arrive at the waterhole. After the hyenas made their final curtain call we too left to explore further afield.

The site of our last camping spot in Hwange, in the far east of the park, is where there are a series of waterholes surrounded by large open grasslands and mopani woodlands beyond, and so the plains were dotted with impala and zebra, while coming from the woodland were kudu and many giraffe. We had a late lunch at the picnic site where various birds were enjoying splashing about in the birdbaths, probably glad they did not have to share the murky water of the waterhole beyond where we could see a number of elephants enjoying a bath of their own. We ventured out onto the plains to mingle with the zebras and impala, and also spent time with a very handsome male ostrich before moving on to a spot where we could watch the breeding herds of elephant making their way along the elephant highways (the well worn trails) from the woodland to the waterholes. The old females moved steadily along while the young teenagers were in a more boisterous and playful mood. There were a number of



bare patches of ground with shallow holes and depressions along the various trails, where the elephants would pause to kick the edges of the holes to break loose some of the soil before scooping up the white dirt in the crook of their trunks to then toss the dirt over their heads and backs. Before long the many elephants had created a fine fog of dust from their dust bathing, and so as the sun sunk lower in the sky the dust shone like a halo over the whole scene. I moved ahead of one family herd of elephants to allow them to walk towards us at their own pace. So intently had we all been watching the behaviour of the many

different elephants about us that it was a few minutes before the flick of a tail caught my attention. There, about fifty meters from us, lying out on the slope of a termite mound was a male cheetah, who was also keeping an eye on the approaching elephants. While the elephants walked by without sensing or seeing the cheetah it remained lying calmly where it was, but once the last elephant had passed the cheetah rolled over to watch them walking off, then after some time gazing around the cheetah got up, stretched and began to walk off in the direction the elephants had come from. We followed for a while until it seemed as though the cheetah had decided to gain some elevation in order to best take in the setting sun and the scene of herds of elephants spread out across the plains. Walking over to a huge ebony tree, with a large termite mound at its base, the cheetah nimbly leapt up to balance on top of the termite mound for an uninterrupted



grandstand view of the wonderful scene beyond. Leaving the cheetah to its royal box position overlooking the surrounding grasslands we headed for home, mindful of all the elephants we had to pass to get there, while taking time to watch two black-backed jackals setting out on their nightly rounds. Once again we could hear hyenas calling on and off throughout the night and at times, by the sounds of their cackling calls and the accompanying trumpeting of the elephants at the waterhole, they were clearly getting underfoot of the elephants. The lions also called during the night, but nothing appeared to be bothered by their calls so we all slept soundly.



So began our last morning in Hwange, visiting various waterholes along the way as we reluctantly made our way out of the park - with steenbok, kudu, zebra, wildebeest, impala,

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mongoose, and many varied birds from the snowy white pied babbler to the brilliantly coloured crimson-breasted shrike trying desperately to delay our departure - but on we travelled. A sad scene greeted us at one waterhole where an old bull elephant had died, collapsing onto his knees at the edge of the waterhole. Some vultures were perched on top of the elephant carcass and were looking on as a hyena tugged and pulled to tear off morsels of flesh. Two jackals arrived to scout out the scene but appeared reluctant to walk into the water to feed, while standing about in small groups were other vultures who had been able to get their fill earlier. We did not feel inclined to stay long and so were soon on our way back to Victoria Falls, where we had a rendezvous with the flight arriving from Johannesburg that was bringing another guest who would be joining the next section of this safari. By evening our happy group had visited the Victoria Falls and dined at a great restaurant overlooking a floodlit waterhole where yet another herd of buffalo came down to drink and enthral us, bringing to a close another great day of adventures.



Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
www.gavinblairsafaris.com