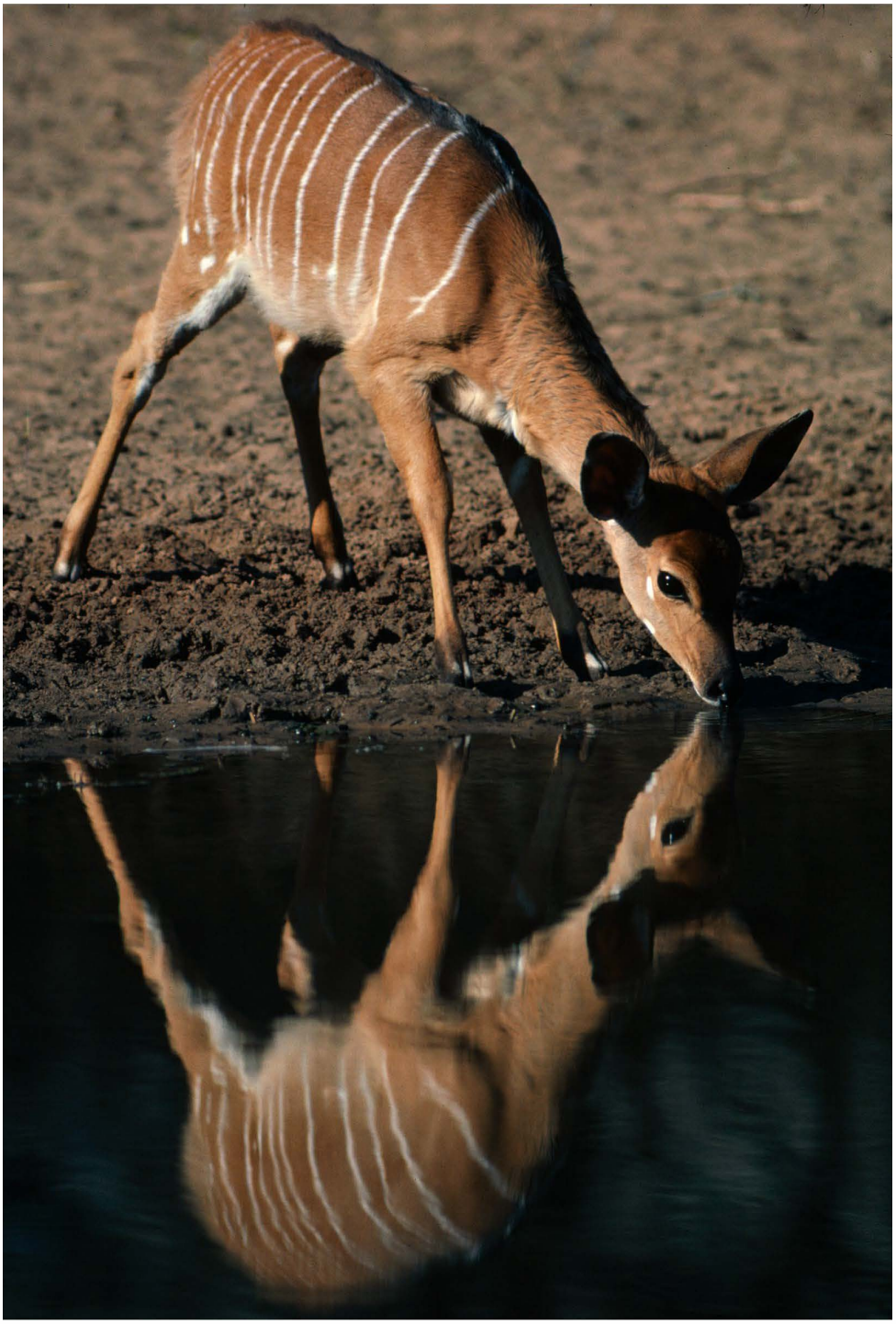
REFLECTIONS ON AFRICA

Stories and Images from Do-It-Yourself Safaris in Eastern and Southern Africa
(1971 - 1990)

John Hart





Greater Flamingo reflection. Amboseli swamp.

Front Cover: Female Nyala at sunrise.

REFLECTIONS ON AFRICA

This photographic journal contains images taken on several safaris I was fortunate enough to undertake in the 1970's and early 1980's when I traveled, primarily solo or with my wife Judy, to wildlife reserves and national parks in eastern and southern Africa. Destinations included Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. In the late 1980's and 1990 I visited the Okavango Delta. Except for the very last trip to the Okavango, most of the safaris were done in a do-it-yourself mode. We would rent a vehicle as near to an accessible airport as possible, and briefly brave the chaos and look-over-your-shoulder city life to stock up on canned and dried food. In the early days not too many people camped in the bush, so we often had a little corner of the African wilderness pretty much to ourselves while in camp. Nowadays, many park campgrounds are bit more formal. Some are fitted with security fences and can be packed with all manner of safari enthusiasts and overland trekkers. While interesting and exciting events may still arise (a couple are recounted in the text), I look fondly back at those times in the 70's when one could perhaps be slightly more in touch with nature than is possible today. This is especially so at night in an open camping area, when animals like lions and elephants might approach within a couple feet of our tent. Although my stories of DIY'ing through Africa are certainly not as heart stopping as reading about solo mountaineering or underwater caving and the like, they are hopefully informative and a little amusing.

I became very interested in wildlife photography after our first safari in 1971. The images in this book were all taken with SLR cameras using 35mm Kodachrome 25 and 200 film. An Olympus OM1 was my primary tool. I made attachments for a 300mm Nikon EDIF and a Leica 560mm slide-focus lens. Later, the 560 was replaced with an unwieldy but very high-contrast Takahashi APO-fluorite telescope used as a 800mm f8 or 600mm f6 lens. Slides were digitized using a Minolta Dimage 5400 scanner and printed at 300dpi.

Now, looking back, I would be the first to say that although I think I got some nice pictures and enjoyed the process of wildlife photography, the best things about DIY travels are the closeness with nature and the act of traveling singly or as a couple in a very foreign and sometimes dangerous environment. Being essentially alone can also lead to deep discoveries about oneself. To get really great images one has to either be very lucky to see something unique, or to actually live for an extended period of time with a particular species in order to learn and document some never observed or unusual and rare behavior. I wouldn't say I was particularly fortunate in the sense of witnessing some spectacular happening, like a hippo rescuing an impala from a croc. So, photographically, the images shown here might be said to be of an artistic portrait variety. More than the photography, though, I will most remember the events of the adventure: like being in a canoe gliding by elephants drinking, tracking lions on foot through the thorn-bush only to be suddenly surprised at the end of the trail, being chased up a tree (almost) by a rhino, or generally having intense experiences that are now the strongest memories of my trips. The stories of close encounters with wildlife, as well as vehicular and camping mishaps, are perhaps as interesting as the photography, so I have included several tales about the journeys that may entertain and perhaps even inspire a safari with some similar elements. Brief descriptions of where the pictures were taken are given for each of four sections: East Africa, South Africa and Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana.

John Hart
Boulder, Colorado
November, 2015

REFLECTIONS ON AFRICA

Safaris to Game Reserves and National Parks (1971 - 1990)




Mt. Kilimanjaro through the palms at our first tent-site in Amboseli.

THE FIRST SAFARI: 1971

My wife Judy and I were living outside London. I had just graduated from MIT and was doing research at Cambridge University. An opportunity for an inexpensive student flight to Nairobi came up and we decided to do a camping trip, DIY style, into the wilds of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. We had no real camping experience, but "how hard could it be". We'll rent a cheap car from some local agent. We'll take a cloth 2-person pup tent with a window in the back to see any animals coming at night (really?), and live on the lam in the bush while dining not so elegantly, but simply and cheaply enough, on Lipton dried dinners and the like. We also had very limited experience in photography, but went armed with a Minolta SLR, a Vivitar zoom lens, and twenty rolls of film. We were lucky the VW beetle we rented did not break down (except for a couple of flats) because I neglected to pack even a rudimentary toolkit. There were other problems though.



First safari car. Air intake in the back collects dust.

We arrived at 2am in Nairobi. The next morning we picked up the rented VW beetle and loaded it up with our gear. Immediately we headed south on a long (200 mile) mostly dirt 2-lane road towards Amboseli. Making good time on dirt means hitting just the right speed to carry you over the endless corrugations. Too slow and you shake to bits, too fast and it's easy to spin out. You just want to glide over the tops letting the suspension take the abuse. Of course this plan only serves to make the ripples deeper and further apart, so future drivers will have to go faster. Meanwhile this fly-over procedure is accompanied by generous clouds of dust behind the vehicle, and, if stuck behind a lorry, inhaling or swallowing the same. Fortunately, after having no flats or spinouts on this long drive, we arrived at the game reserve gate just before closing time. Asking the one ranger there, who didn't speak or understand English very well, where we might camp, a finger pointed to some acacia trees down a dusty track. In love with finally being in the wilderness, we headed off with wide eyes, and were happy when we ended up in a beautiful grove of acacia trees. We picked one for shade and set up our tent. We were alone with the VW bug, a water bag, and some dried dinners. No one else was around. But it felt great, watching the peak of Kilimanjaro fade with the evening light.

From our research we knew that the Masai Amboseli Game Reserve was a park set aside 1948 for the protection of its wildlife and scenery. The beauty of the open plains (the meaning of the word Amboseli), tucked up against the slopes of Kilimanjaro, make it a stunning place. It is small park, roughly 60 x 20 miles, with a large fraction taken up by the dry Lake Amboseli, which only becomes flooded, to a depth of several inches, in a very heavy monsoonal wet season, typically in March - May. Otherwise the fine powdery soil,

laid down in ancient eruptions of Kilimanjaro and Mawenzi, is just crust, which is easily disturbed by strong down-slope winds, leading to dust-devils in the heated surface layer air. Most of the year the park is extremely dry, being in the rain shadow of the 19,340 foot peak. However, in a marvelous turn of fortune, glacial melt from the mountain, and the prodigious rainfall soaking in on its slopes, percolates through the porous ground and rises up in several majestic swamps (Enkongo Narok, Ol Tukai, ...) located within the park. These are magnets for birds (400+ species) and for thousands of mammals that can be observed at close distances from the many dirt tracks circumventing the wetlands.



Enkongo Narok with dust devils in distance. Camping under the snows of Kilimanjaro.



Lake Amboseli.



Elephant and Jacana, Amboseli Swamp.

We arose on our first real day in Africa with nervous anticipation. We planned to take our limited camera gear and head out to see what we could. Throwing some water in the back of the VW, and having a rough map of the tracks, we started following some tread-marks across the dusty plains. We crossed the Sinet Causeway dirt berm getting us north of the swamps, and with open views leading up to the mountain I was really surprised to see, off in the distance, four black rhinos just lying in a patch of shallow mud. Rhinos were once somewhat common in E. Africa, with 100's present in Amboseli in the old days. In 1971 poaching had already reduced their numbers substantially. Later in the 1980's and 90's they would become nearly extinct in the park. Thus, we were very excited to see them.



Black Rhino wallowing.

Enthralled by the possibility of getting quite close to these magnificent prehistoric beasts, I eagerly started to follow a pair of tire-tracks going in their direction. They crossed some crusted-over soil, but it looked dry and caked, so I proceeded. We *almost* made it! Unfortunately the crust hid a layer of goopy mud that hadn't dried out yet. The back-end of the VW (i.e. the heavy end) sank and the wheels started to spin. Shit. Fortunately the front wheels just made it out, but the back was badly mired. I knew not to try to power out of the muck, as the back end would just dig in deeper. Getting out to survey the situation, it appeared we were in a little trouble. Way out from the tourist areas like the acacia woodlands and swamp boundaries near the central lodge, nobody was in sight. But we were near some bushes and the only solution seemed to be to get some logs and sticks and put them under the rear wheels to get some traction. So Judy and I spent the next half hour shuttling between the car and the shrubs. With our heads down low, concentrating on our escape efforts, we failed to see or hear the quiet approach of two huge bull elephants, who, when I looked up, were standing watching our comedic human activities from a distance of about 10 yards. I yelled at Judy something like "OMG, Elephants, get in the car!!". Judy was close to the driver's door. I was behind the rear end. She jumped in the car and promptly locked the doors and rolled up the windows. A little shocked that I was left locked out, vulnerable and exposed, I hunkered down behind the car on the opposite side from the elephants and hoped for the best. Fortunately her fast movement sort of spooked the two bulls who trumpeted, shook their heads, and ambled off.

That was our first experience with African wildlife. Wow. Little did we know, at the time, that Amboseli elephants are famously tolerant of cars, and to a certain extent people. There is now an African Elephant Project based in the park that was started by Cynthia Moss and Harvey Croze in 1972. Anyway, after the two bulls wandered off, we returned to the process of getting the VW unglued. And wouldn't you know, a bit later a whole cow herd approached us with little calves in tow. They didn't get as close as the bulls had been, but they were also curious, and we stood behind the car observing their antics.



Just out of the muck.

Even knowing now that the Amboseli elephants are usually docile, it doesn't mean any elephants are to be taken lightly or played with. Not that we ever did the latter, but I did hear one story and see a picture of an elephant with his trunk through the window of a VW beetle like ours, lifting it entirely off the ground and bouncing it around, with several people in it! Apparently the occupants had been feeding oranges to the wild elephants. An orange to an elephant is like an M&M to a human. They are great, and tasty, and you can't just stop at one. But the unfortunate folks in the VW had run out of oranges, and of course the elephant thought he could extract a few more by picking up the vehicle and shaking it. Lessons, as in "do not feed the wildlife", are sometimes learned the hard way.

Only once (in many trips to Africa) did I have a real problem with elephants. It was on the same Sinet Causeway, the one lane track across the Enkongo Narok swamp. It has sloping edges leading about 6 feet down into the swamp on both sides. The causeway is a about a hundred yards long, but sees little traffic, so if you are driving it you hardly ever have a problem. Except one day I started across when there was a very large bull elephant standing right in the middle of the track about two thirds of the way down. He was in musth. This is a condition where the testosterone levels can be 50 times greater than normal, and other reproductive hormones are high too, potentially leading to very aggressive behavior. Of course in this first trip to Kenya I didn't know enough about elephants and I thought I might be able to drive down a ways (within 10 - 20 yards, like in the just described mud-flat episode) to get a better look. Bad choice. At about 20 yards of separation the huge bull full out charged straight down the track, right at me. Facing forward I got a great view of its head down, its ears out, and the dust flying. Only one hope. I threw the car into reverse and floored it. Full speed in reverse is really tricky, but at least the track was straight and not too rutted. I dreaded the possibility of veering off to one side or the other, sliding (or worse, rolling over) down the slope and ending up the car and all in the unknown depths of the swamp. After about 50 yards of chase, the elephant decided I was not another bull threatening his territory and pulled up, thank god. Heart racing and panting for breath, I stopped at the end of the bridge and counted my blessings.



A large tusker on the Amboseli plains. Not so common today after losses to poaching.

Most of my encounters were more mellow. For example, one day while working my way down a little used track through the remote bush, I came across a single elephant sampling the remains of a dead friend. Although this behavior has become well documented and oft observed and filmed, it was a first for me in 1971 and very moving.



Elephant graveyard.

On another occasion I set up my tent right next to the trunk of a gigantic 6 foot diameter acacia tree. Beautiful shade, wonderful spot, and with a view of the Kibo peak. After a sundowner and a Lipton dinner, I settled into the pup tent for a little rest. Getting to sleep was often difficult, and I was always pretty restless, somewhat nervously listening to the sounds of the bush. This particular night I heard a group of elephants off in the distance. The low frequency rumblings, how elephants communicate over long distances using infrasound, were apparent. I also noted the sounds of ripping branches. The big beasts were obviously sampling the delicacies of acacia foliage, and having fun doing it. What un-nerved me a bit was that the sources of the sounds seemed to be approaching.

Sure enough, in about 45 minutes, one elephant started eating the very tree I was camped under. She (as I later discovered) was on the opposite side of the huge trunk, but appeared to be slowly circling the tree,

tearing off shoots and branches as she went. Holy moly! I asked myself; would she sweetly go around my little 2-man pup-tent, or maybe step over it, or maybe step ON IT? Yikes! I grabbed my flashlight, yanked the zipper down, and ran for the car, which was parked about 15 yards away. When I got to the other side of the car, I peered over the hood and put the relatively low power flash beam right on the elephant (sex thus determined). She couldn't have cared less. She kept right on eating and working her way around the circumference of the tree. She gracefully stepped around my little tent without disturbing it, and after finishing off a few more mouthfuls of leaves and thorns, she ambled off to the next acacia, which had no tent under it.

Not all camping nights end as well. One another occasion, I was peaceful sitting in the Amboseli camp, all by myself, when a "Rotel" rolled up. This seems to be a German invention wherein a safari group of like 20 or more people travel around in a bus that has a honeycomb like grouping of little ports stationed below an upper passenger sitting- compartment. Being high up can be good for spotting game in the bush, so maybe this was a plus. A truck followed along carrying tables and food for lavish (I guessed) evening picnics. After dinner there was a campfire, and then each guest crawled horizontally into his or her cell of the honeycomb bedroom-matrix for an evening of airless sleep. Only this night the operators had left the rear door of the food truck unlocked and slightly open. The elephants arrived around midnight, but this time they weren't interested in the acacia trees and their long thorns. They gathered around the back and completely gutted the truck. Reaching in with their trunks they pulled out boxes of vegetables and fruits and satiated themselves. The people inside the honeycomb hotel put their little lights on, but none came out to confront the dinner guests. What a treat for the elephants.

Every once in a while I would hire a local guide when driving around by myself. The guides knew of recent sightings and could often find things I might otherwise miss. Besides, it was a nice way of supporting the people living in and near the reserve. I happened to tell one fellow about my elephant in the night tree-eating story. He, in turn, recanted the following somewhat scary tale:

Driving in a small car past the campground with another client he saw a single Meru style tent with a car parked nearby. Back in the early days there were often few if any campers in the park, and those that came with families of any size usually used one of those big heavy green canvas stand-up-inside tents that are famous in old films and stories of Africa. These tents often feature two sections; a front sitting room and a rear sleeping area separated by a canvas wall with a door in it. Since we come from bear country in the U.S., I am always careful with food, locking it in the car located far from the tent. It's possible that people sometimes store, cook, and eat food in the front section of such large tents.

Being about 9 in the morning, the guide thought it a bit odd that the car was still parked at the tent, because most visitors to the park go out and do a game drive in the early to mid-morning time frame. But as he looked closer he saw two lions laying in the tent's main doorway with their heads sticking out of the opening. Whoa! He didn't see any other activity, but the car was still there. He yelled, but there was no response. Very worried, he drove the 4km back to the main ranger station to get help. Two rangers returned with a land rover, and the lions were still there. They honked to no avail, and finally resorted to driving the big 4x4 truck into the side of the tent in order to force the lions to leave, which fortunately they did. Turned out there was a father, a mother, and two kids hunkered down in the back of the tent, scared out of their minds. They had forgotten to seal up the main door after going to bed and closing the inner wall's flaps. The lions had come in the night and entered the front room. Finding the venue to their liking they simply settled in for the evening. The family was afraid to move, to make a sound, to breathe, or anything else. They had no knife to cut a hole in the back of the tent to escape (to where, perhaps one might ask). When they heard the first car, they were afraid to yell out because the lions were just inches away. They left for Nairobi later that day, and probably didn't go bush camping again for a long while. Zip up, no food anywhere near the sleeping area.....

My own experiences with lions were somewhat tamer. One night I was camping outside the Tsavo East headquarters. As often happened back in the early 1970's, just my one tent graced the nice open campground area. At night, as always, I listened to the sounds of the wild while trying to get to sleep, or during the restless roll-overs required when resting on a miniscule foam pad. Around 2am I heard the tell tale "eee-u eee-u" calls of small lion cubs locating their pride during nocturnal ramblings. Lions mostly move around and hunt at night, often preferring to rest in the shade of a tree during the hot mid-day sun. Anyway, over time I could hear the little "eee-u's" getting closer, and now I had no interest in going back to sleep at all. It sounded like the cubs were just outside my tent when all of sudden the whole pride just opened up with full-

bore adult roars. I swear that the low frequency components of these call made the sides of my flimsy nylon tent shake. There was nothing I could do but pull my sleeping bag up over my head and pray for salvation. Run for the car, didn't think so. Climb a tree in the dark, no way. Turned out the ruckus woke up most of the park personnel living in bandas and small houses over two or three hundred yards away from my camp. "Did you hear that?", they asked me the next day. Well, YES! In retrospect I hadn't had the time to reason through the worry that these were TSAVO lions, perhaps descended from the infamous Man Eaters of Tsavo, who had terrorized and eaten railway workers in the vicinity of the Tsavo Bridge on the Nairobi to Mombassa rail line in 1898. Some estimates are that as many as 135 of the Asian Indian workers were taken. I am glad I had this as an afterthought rather than to have been reading the Man Eaters of Tsavo book around the campfire just before going to bed that night.

In 1971 we were determined to go to Uganda. People in Nairobi told us not to go because Idi Amin had just staged a coup and it was purportedly very dangerous. Nonetheless, being young and foolish, we pointed our VW northwest and started down the paved but potholed 400 mile road from Nairobi to Kampala. About 100 miles west of Nairobi we hit a police roadblock where it was determined that our car didn't have a proper license. The magic words "what can we do about this" led to a modest bribe and a return to Nairobi to confront the charlatan who had rented us the vehicle without good papers. And we were going to try to cross borders with it. Still wanting to see Murchison Falls and QE park we got a flight to Entebbe on the now defunct East African Airways. There was a curfew in Kampala, but many people were hanging out in the hotel bar, wildly celebrating the Amin coup. He had ousted a bad buy named Milton Obote. Little did the celebrants know that Idi Amin would soon turn into one of the world's worst tyrants ever.

Terribly sad, because Uganda is such a beautiful country with such warm friendly people. During the eventual 1979 war with Tanzania, which finally removed Amin from power, much of the wildlife was exterminated and has only slowly recovered. When we went to turn in our rental car in 1971 the Asian agents pleaded with us to cancel our flight and drive the car back to Kenya for a generous fee. We declined. I was sure the tires and door panels would be loaded with money and jewels, which would be a real problem if we were stopped and searched. In august of 1972 Amin persecuted and expelled all the Asians. The ensuing history was awful. Wanton executions, tribal warfare, and horrible atrocities. Fortunately, Amin was eventually expelled by the Tanzanian army, and today Uganda seems much better off.

Other safaris to East Africa



A large male lion guards a reticulated giraffe kill, Samburu.

After falling in love with the experience of the African bush, and slowly learning how to take decent pictures, I was lucky enough to return to East Africa several times. The routine was always the same: get out of the city as quickly as possible and into the bush, where most pickpockets and robbers didn't go (at the time) because many had relatives who had experienced very bad encounters with wildlife such as hippos, elephants, and snakes. I got to spend more time in all the other parks we had originally camped in and greatly enjoyed: Masai Mara, Samburu, Ngorongoro, Serengeti, etc. There came to be problems driving a car rented in Nairobi across the border into Tanzania. The latter legitimately wanted people to spend money in their country and pay for services (like guides, game drives, vehicle rentals) there. This made it difficult for the DIY traveler, so I spent most of my time in subsequent years in Kenya, particularly camping in the Mara, East and West Tsavo, and in my favorite park, the previously discussed Amboseli.

For whatever reason, vehicle reliability was always a problem for me in East Africa. The rental cars, even from a sort of reputable company like Avis or Hertz, seemed very poorly maintained. In my first trips (1971, 73, 75) I opted for low small cars like a VW bug or a Datsun sedan. Not only was such a smaller vehicle cheaper, since rentals were charged by both the day and the mile, but the relatively low perspective, when pointing a camera out the window, often led to a more natural view, as in an animal looking eye-to-eye at another animal. Higher vehicles, like the minibuses used in the mass market tourist industry, where clients can stand up through the roof, offer a better chance of seeing things when the grass is high or the bush is thick. But in my opinion images made looking down on an animal are not as natural. In later years, particularly when going into the Masai Mara, I opted for a small 4x4 like an Isuzu or Suzuki sport utility vehicle. In Masai Mara the soil is notoriously referred to as "black cotton". When wet, it turns to a thick glue- like paste that totally fills in the treads of your tires. Four wheel drive helps, but one still has to stay very aware and alert for patches of black cotton, especially after a rain shower.

On our first trip I had quickly realized that a basic set of car repair tools would be a good idea. So on all subsequent adventures to Africa I carried a set of metric spanners, screw drivers, wire, wire-nuts, and a few other tools. This saved me on several occasions, one of which occurred in the Mara. I had rented an Isuzu, whose engine oil was black as tar. But I would only have the vehicle for a couple of weeks, and the rest of it looked pretty decent (as far as a non-mechanic could tell). So I took it and left Nairobi. Things went very well on the road down to Narok, so I decided to take a "scenic track" from there into the center of the game reserve.

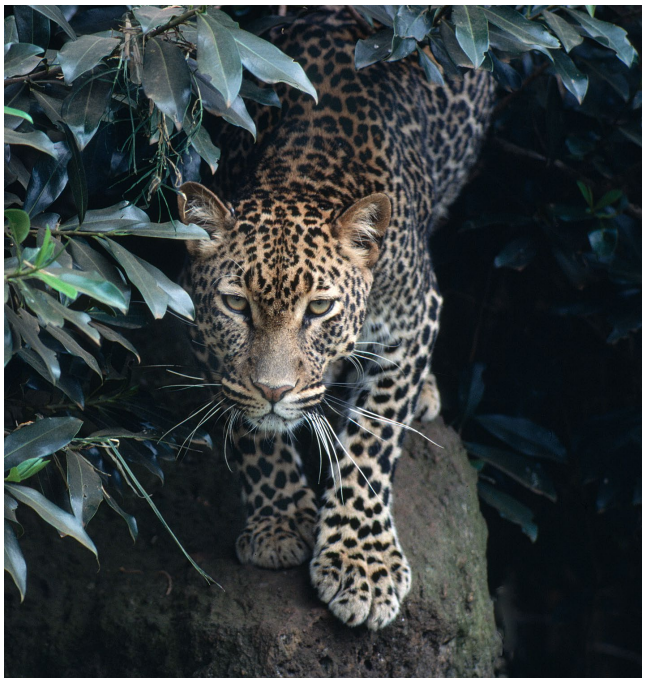


Four lion cubs nursing. Masai Mara.

This track was well to the east of the main tourist dirt road from Narok to Keekorok, and the absence of all but the slightest evidence of tire marks suggested that only rarely did anyone travel this route. In those days, only professional outfits had mobile radios. Not me. Who would I call? I should have known better.

The scenery was spectacular with green rolling hills, dotted with antelopes. The occasional Kori Bustard stalked the grass for rodents or snakes. About 50 km in things were going great. Then all of a sudden the engine lost power, coughed, and died. The starter turned it over, but no motor. Ugh. Middle of nowhere. Real bad. With my limited repair experience I got out and tried to diagnose the problem. Battery OK, but don't drain it with futile tests! Flooded, don't think so. Carb smells dry. Attach a wire to a spark plug lead and go in the car. Turn it over and use the finger test. Got a pretty good shock, so yes, there is spark. What about fuel? Maybe its an airlock? When I started to undo the fuel line at the carburetor, I noticed seven Masai women approaching. Where did they came from? No villages were in sight. We acknowledged each other but communication was only by hand signals. Even if they spoke Swahili, I didn't know more than a few words. They were obviously amused by what I was doing under the hood, and were especially enthralled looking at themselves, each in turn, in the side mirrors. I gave them some Cokes and snacks. They seemed quite friendly but I had fleeting thoughts of being abducted, tortured, and left to the hyenas. It was all fine though, as they stood around watching while I got the fuel line disconnected and turned over the starter. Gas gushed from the end of the pipe, all over the engine. Many laughs, and a hooray from me. After cleaning up with an old shirt, I re-hooked the fuel line to the carburetor, and turned it over. Vroom, vroom. Airlock fixed! Smiles all around, and I was on my way again, waving to my new-found-friends as I rolled down the track.

Two more airlock events happened while I was in the Masai Mara reserve. Fortunately, the locations were decent (i.e. not in the middle of herd of elephants or buffalo), and a similar fix worked out. The wildlife was great. I watched lions mating, observed a pride with cubs nursing, saw several cheetah, and a leopard in the trees. My plan was to head back to Nairobi the next day, starting the 6 hour drive in the morning with plenty of time to get to the airport for my evening flight to London. However, it rained like crazy with huge thunderstorms that night. I lay in the tent listening to the torrential downfalls raking the nylon sidewalls. I knew the road up to Narok would be tough. But hey, I did have a 4x4 Isuzu. Yahoo.



Leopard. Nairobi National Park.



Mother Black Rhino and 'baby'. Mara plains.

The next morning I am off, slipping and sliding in the slick muddy track. Just keep going and hope there are no deep holes hidden beneath the cover of standing water. Whap, bang. Yup, there's one. I'm making slow but steady progress within about 50km of the provincial capital of Narok, when the engine cuts out and I glide to a dead stop. Oh great. I'm going to miss my international flight. I do the airlock fix thing to no avail. Working backwards, I check the spark. Nothing. This could be really really bad. Out in the middle of nowhere, with no phone, no ride. Where to walk to with all my stuff? Keep calm dude. Let's see if we can fix this.

Hmmm. First I check the battery for shorts. Then I pull off the distributor cap and note the position of the rotor. Turning the motor over for a second or so, I then get out to look where the rotor has moved to. It is in the same exact place. This is not at all good. It is just exactly where I had first observed it. After all, my observation couldn't be real accurate, right? So I try several more short 'turnovers'. Each time, the shaft hasn't moved. It's the end for me. Somewhere deep in the bowels, the distributor shaft is severed. No way to fix this in the field. I am dead stuck. Nothing to do but wait. An hour, then two, then three pass. Nobody comes, even though it's tourist route from the Mara to the Masai capitol of Narok.

Finally, about 2 in the after-noon, I hear a vehicle bouncing up from the south. What luck!. It is a big 4x4 Toyota truck from the tour operator Abercrombie and Kent. And there are NO tourists in it, just the driver and an assistant. They kindly stop and I ask: "please, can you give me a lift back to Nairobi so I can catch my flight"? My plan was to tell the rental company to go and get the useless Isuzu themselves. The A&K folks were really nice and agreed to take me back to the capitol, but they said if I left the vehicle here it would be totally stripped by the time it would take somebody to come down from Nairobi to get it. So they got out a tow rope, and I ate dust for 50km as they dragged me to the Narok police station where I said goodbye to the shit 4x4. The rental agency at the airport was flabbergasted, and insisted I pay the mileage rate from Narok. No way in hell. I had given a huge tip as a thank you to the A&K guys who had rescued me and saved the vehicle from getting chopped. Oh the joys of Africa.



Acacia trees and clouds. The essence of Africa.

SOUTH AFRICA and NAMIBIA



Simple map showing reserves and parks visited.

Southern Africa has a diverse panoply of wildlife experiences on offer. There are riverine paradises like the Okavango and Chobe in Botswana, and Mana Pools in Zimbabwe. There are dry waterhole based parks like Etosha Pan in Namibia, and unique small enclaves that are rich in birds and smaller mammals (and even few large ones) like Umkhuze and Ndumo in South Africa. This whole area oscillates yearly between dry periods in June - November (typically) and wet rainy periods between December and May. In some areas, like the Kalahari, rainfall can be quite minimal. During 'the dry', foliage is thin, leaves are yellow, and grass is low. This can make it easier to see animals in the bush and brings large numbers of mammals and birds into high concentrations at places where there still is available water. During the wet or 'green season' the terrain is undeniably prettier, but with the thicker vegetation it may be more difficult spotting game, and the animals scatter as water is more widely available. Walking in the wet can be more dangerous because sight lines are shorter and the possibility of surprising a buffalo, rhino, lion, or elephant is higher. All my trips to this region were done in the dry, between July and early October.

During the 1970's and 80's many countries in this region were involved in racially based political struggles. Apartheid in South Africa would not end until 1994. Southwest Africa would become a free Namibia in 1988 when accords with South Africa, who previously occupied the country, were signed. Zimbabwe attained its independence in 1980. Although we first went to Zimbabwe during some turbulent post-election trauma in 1982, I now feel bad about having visited South Africa and Namibia prior to their

independence. One mitigating fact is that we did always try to support the local population by renting cars from small agencies, buying food and supplies at small black-owned shops, and hiring local blacks as guides when hiking the thorn-bush. One motivation for visiting in the first place was to observe the incredible dry-season concentrations of elephants at waterholes in places like Etosha and Hwange, where herds at one drinking spot can number in the hundreds. One tourist advertisement poster I had seen had a picture that for me expressed hope for the region. Two elephants drank side by side. One was completely encased in mud and the other was dry, giving the impression of a black and a white animal peacefully drinking together at a waterhole. My own image of such behavior was obtained at a shallow pond (or pan) in Namibia.



Two elephants, one coated with black mud, the other with white chalk soil, Etosha Pan.

The infrastructure in southern Africa to this day remains somewhat superior to that in eastern Africa. Most of the roads connecting between cities and the parks are well maintained. Campgrounds inside the reserves in Namibia and S. Africa are often fenced. Vehicles seemed better maintained. At least I had only one issue with cars here, versus the 'every vehicle fails' scenario in Kenya. The single problem I had was with a small sedan I took into Kruger. This is a large park with several well-developed little villages having clusters of bandas, high end lodges, and campgrounds grouped together. Their different locations are connected by paved 2-lane roads. The typical game viewing experience can be similar to a bear-jam in Yellowstone Park in the US where lines of cars form in the vicinity of any wildlife sighting (from deer, to elk or bison, to grizzlies). Unlike in Yellowstone, people in Kruger are required to stay in their cars. To get a more wilderness feel in Kruger you had to find some lesser traveled dirt tracks, side-roads if you like, and see what could be found. I was doing precisely this one morning when, in pretty thick bush, I came across two male lions resting under a thorn-bush, not very far from the track. I stopped the car, turned off the engine, and took a few pictures, even though resting lion pictures are not inherently of great interest. After waiting for an hour or so, and even though the day was getting hotter, to my surprise the two lions got up and ambled a couple hundred yards out and settled under another shade tree. I switched on the ignition to follow. Nothing. No engine turn over, no solenoid chatter, no lights on the dash. The position of the two males seemed sufficiently distant, and they were just resting, so I deemed it safe to get out of the car and look into the engine compartment to try and figure out the problem. I stuck my head under the hood to first inspect the battery connections. They seemed OK, but when I wiggled the plus-side the whole terminal moved. It looked like somehow the plates had come loose and were shorting internally or something. I turned on the headlight switch and noticed that in certain positions the lights would come on, but in others they were dead. I took some rope and managed to tie the terminal to the car body, pulling it in a direction that kept the lights on. Feeling a little better, I got back in and started to drive off in the direction the two males had gone. It was then that I noticed, upon moving a bit so I could see into the bush at a different angle, that there were 5 female lions watching me from a location less than 10 yards from where I had been running around the car with my head down or under the hood. If they had wanted

me, they could have had me, no problem. Another lesson learned. Use all your senses to carefully assess before going out on foot!

I had spent some time hiking in grizzly country in Alaska, doing photography and such. On one occasion near the McNeil river, I was walking down a trail back to camp, singing along and making noise, when a brown bear cub ran out from under a bush and crossed the path right in front of me. Then, WOOF! A giant brown bear mother stood up from behind the bush, except now her cub was on the other side of me from her. In a brief moment I thought it was over. Fortunately the cub responded to her vocalization by running back to her, right in front of me, and they ambled off. I know people carry guns, like a short barrel 44 magnum, into the bush in Alaska. I feel that I am a visitor to the natural territory of these magnificent beasts, and there is no way I should presume to inject my presence in such a way as to require the killing of any of these animals. So I never went armed in any wildlife situation. That being said, it is common for parks to require an armed guide when walking into the African bush. We were happy to employ local rangers to lead us through the dense bush, where it is easy to get turned around and lost because there are game trails running everywhere and deep in the bush it is hard to spot landmarks. The guides carried a simple weapon, which did not make me feel much safer as I would rather rely on their knowledge of behavior and safe routes than to ever enter a situation where a gun would need to be used. Fortunately it never got to that.



Judy with our hiking guide at Shokwe Pan,Ndumo

My closest and probably scariest experience, where my philosophy about treading into an animal's territory would be tested, came on a hike down to the Pongolo river in Ndumo Reserve in northeastern S. Africa. This extremely pretty little park is located right up on the border with Mozambique and features several substantial natural pans and floodplains with beautiful fever trees lining the banks. The Pongolo river sits in a slight valley and has a notable concentration of hippos and crocs that I thought I might photograph from a simple hide made of brush along the raised banks. My guide carried an old single shot bolt action rifle (at least that's what it looked like) and I carried a heavy tripod and a camera with the 560mm lens. As we crossed the grass flats leading to the river, I led the way through the four to five foot high shoots of grass.

Rounding a tuft I was startled to see a baby black rhinoceros and its mother grazing just a few yards away. I turned back to my guide to indicate, using hand signals, that we had come up on a rhino. Except he was already running, in a direction towards where the grassy plain intersected a woodland. I took the cue and sprinted just as fast as I could while carrying the big tripod and lens. Luckily,I used to run the 100 and 200 meter dashes in high school and was still in pretty decent shape. The guide was about 10 yards ahead of me and all the commotion had induced the rhino mother into a full out charge directly after us. We managed to hit the tree line ahead of her and my guide started climbing a tree. I picked out what looked to be, in my instant appraisal, a climbable and substantially stout trunk that the rhino might have a hard time pushing over with me hanging on for dear life up in the tree. However, when I dropped the camera and got ready to actually shimmy up the thing, I noticed that it had wicked looking two inch long thorns sticking directly perpendicular out of the bark. No way in hell could I even attempt to climb this thing. All I could do was make myself as skinny-looking as possible and hide behind the deadly shaft, praying for the best.

Fortunately rhinos have notoriously bad eyesight. When the enraged mother hit the edge of the forest, she could not distinguish us from the network of trees. Being perfectly still and trusting that the lack of any wind would help prevent our odors from reaching her, I peeked around the tree to watch her spin around a

couple of times while pawing up dust and snorting like an enraged bull. She lost interest when she couldn't see us hiding in the forest, and after a few more snorts she trotted back to her baby who had followed her part of the way to the tree line. Feeling spared from a potential disaster I gathered my gear and proceeded again down to the Pongolo River, where the sleeping crocs, although huge, didn't come close to comparing with the action we had just experienced. In the end I thanked my running partner for doing just the right thing.



Canoeing/Kayaking by hippos on a bank of the St. Lucia estuary.

Being a sports oriented country with emphasis on soccer and rugby and cricket, South Africa has perhaps more ways to commune with nature than most other countries. From climbing, canyoning, and hang-gliding in the Drakensberg (dragon) Mountains, to scuba diving and surfing in shark infested waters off Durban, there has always been a bent toward high adventure. Thus it is not surprising that wilderness experiences should include things like paddling small craft through waters inhabited by crocs and hippos, or along banks oft-visited by elephants. These provide a different perspective than looking down from the roof hatch of a crowded minivan, and are highly recommended.

Another thing that S. Africa had early on was some well placed observation hides. In the 1970's some of the best of these were in the uMkhuze (previously Mkuzi) Game Reserve, just south of Ndumo in Natal. Several large wood structures have been built out into three of the waterholes there, and in the dry season one can sit and watch, at close range, numerous birds and mammals approaching to drink. There can be both humorous and deathly serious interactions as the animals spar for a safe sip. Again, it's a different experience than just peering out the window in a vehicle, and something to be included in any varied safari. The best time to do hide viewing is at the end of the dry season, when the animals are concentrated around the last available water. Now, in 2015, several more-exotic hides have been built in both private and national reserves in the vicinity of uMkhuze and to the north of Kruger in the Tuli block of Botswana at the Mashatu Game Reserve. One famous one is at the Zimanga private game reserve near uMkhuze. These latter two feature low angle water-level views so you look across the reflecting water surface up at the animals' faces. Sighting straight up at an elephant some 10 yards away from the level of its foot is a most interesting point of view. Some quite remarkable photographs have been made recently at these places using modern digital equipment by people such as Bence Mate (www.zimanga.com). Nonetheless, even images taken 40 years ago from the simpler hides at uMkhuze have impact.



Zebra drinking, uMkhuze Reserve, kuMasingu pan.

Camping in these small reserves, while probably safer than open bush tenting in a park like Amboseli in Kenya or in northern Botswana with their heavy densities of big mammals like elephants, lions, and buffalo, can still have its moments. I've never been particularly fond of baboons and monkeys, especially in areas like campgrounds, where they have been habituated to browse for food in vehicles and tents. For instance, I once was sitting at a picnic table in Naivasha in Kenya sorting out some rolls of 120 medium format film when a Vervet swooped down and grabbed a couple of the yellow foil-encased rolls and ran up a fever tree. I threw rocks to try and get the monkey to drop its prey, but that was very ineffective. Instead, the monkey simply went ahead and unwrapped the foil, thinking some food was inside, and proceeded to unroll the film spools. Oh well, another day in the bush where "if it can go wrong, it will" holds again.



Big warthog, with tusks to fend off a lion.

In that vein, I was once out in the uMkuze park when an unusual thunderstorm struck. There was a brief period of heavy rain in the late afternoon. When I got back to the campground at sunset, I was surprised to see that my little pup tent had been flattened. Really, by the weather? Sure, the ground was soaked, but why had my beautiful tent been leveled. On closer inspection, "somebody" had taken the two tent poles and bent them into frazzles. The whole thing had collapsed, and worse, water had run down the slight slope and into the ripped-open door of the tent and pretty much filled the inside, soaking bedding and all. As darkness comes quickly in Africa after the sun sinks below the horizon, I quickly ran out with my pocketknife to try and fashion a couple tent poles out of some green branches.

Who had done this dastardly deed? I saw some tracks that looked like baboons. Oh well, best to have a Lipton dried dinner and just go to bed. I had some dry stuff in the car.

That was all fine until about 2am when I woke up having a sensation that something was crawling up my legs. I grabbed my flashlight and to my horror dozens of red ticks were creeping up and starting to dig into my skin. Upper thighs, scrotum, well you get the picture. The flood waters must have swept them in

when my baboon-dismantled tent encountered the rainstorm. It took almost two hours to tweeze the litter buggers off me and to clean up the sleeping gear to the point where I felt comfortable enough to close my eyes and actually sleep. Although I appreciate them as wildlife, Baboons have never looked quite the same to me since that event.



Young Impala sampling the water. uMkhuze.

Etosha Pan National Park

When traveling around northern Natal, visiting the unique small reserves like uMkhuze, Ndumo, St. Lucia and the like, I was impressed by the numbers of birds and smaller mammals, and with the many ways in which one can observe the wildlife; on foot, in a canoe, in a photographic hide, and less importantly from a vehicle. On the other hand I missed the big game, like large herds of elephants and huge prides of lions. Well- traveled people in Natal all told me "you must to go to Etosha". So being a free-spirit on a DIY trip, I found a payphone in Mkuzi town and somehow actually managed to reschedule my flight home and also booked a connection between Johannesburg and Windhoek, the capitol of what was then Southwest Africa. Getting another Volkswagen bug was easy in Windhoek since Southwest (renamed Namibia since 1990) was once a German protectorate. Driving north on remarkably good gravel roads, the countryside was so very different than anywhere else in Africa; a dry open desert-like space with canyons and mountains somewhat similar to the barren rock hills to be found in Nevada. In addition, Namibia is a country with a very low population density. It's made up of several different tribes that have functioned well as a political whole. The miniscule density of 2.4 persons per square kilometer in 2015 (1.2 in 1980) means that there is relatively low human pressure on the wilderness environments and indeed nearly half the land in the country has been set aside as natural habitat. Namibia today is a success story in Africa in terms of stability, infrastructure, and conservation.

Etosha means "great white place" in the Oshondonga Bantu language. The Etosha Pan is a huge 2000 square mile floor of an erstwhile inland lake that has evaporated after its source river, the Kunene flowing down from Angola, changed course 16,000 years ago due to tectonic plate movement, cutting off the lake from its supply of water. During evaporation the floor of the lake became brackish and nothing could grow on it. With no plants to root the soil, winds eroded the lake bed into the shallow depression or "pan" that it is today. The pan can partially fill during a heavy rainy season (Dec. - May), but evaporation rates are high in the winter dry phase causing the pan to dry out quickly. The surrounding rocky soils are primarily limestone, which is quite porous to water. The rainfall over these areas soaks in slowly and then percolates through the rock to emerge as springs on the edges of the pan. This delayed seepage provides



Okerfontein spring with Etosha Pan in background. Below: Big Male with broken tusks from digging.



drinking spots that attract large numbers of animals at the peak of the dry season (~august) when water on the surrounding grasslands is scarce. There are a couple dozen waterholes around the edge of the pan. They are made up of a) artesian (ground water pressure) springs, b) places where the topography intersects the water table, and c) contact springs, where water percolates through calcrete and emerges where the calcrete ends on an underlying layer of impermeable clay. It is a most unusual place, with a surprisingly high density of birds (300+ species) and mammals, including large concentrations of elephants, giraffes, and somewhat unusual antelopes such as the Kudu and Oryx. Although there are over 100 mammal species, the Cape Buffalo is extinct in the region. Very few large-tusked elephants live in Etosha. On the other hand, the elephants themselves can be very big, indeed among the tallest in all of Africa. The elephants dig for water, salts, and roots in the calcrete at the edges of contact springs. Calcrete is a hard natural cement that binds together other salts and gravel. It is sometimes called hardpan. In digging, elephant tusks are worn down or broken off. They are also slow growing because of mineral deficiencies. The elephants are also notorious for ripping branches off the mopane and other tree species. It is somewhat remarkable that even with elephant migrations being restricted by fencing around the perimeter of the park, there is still a quasi equilibrium.

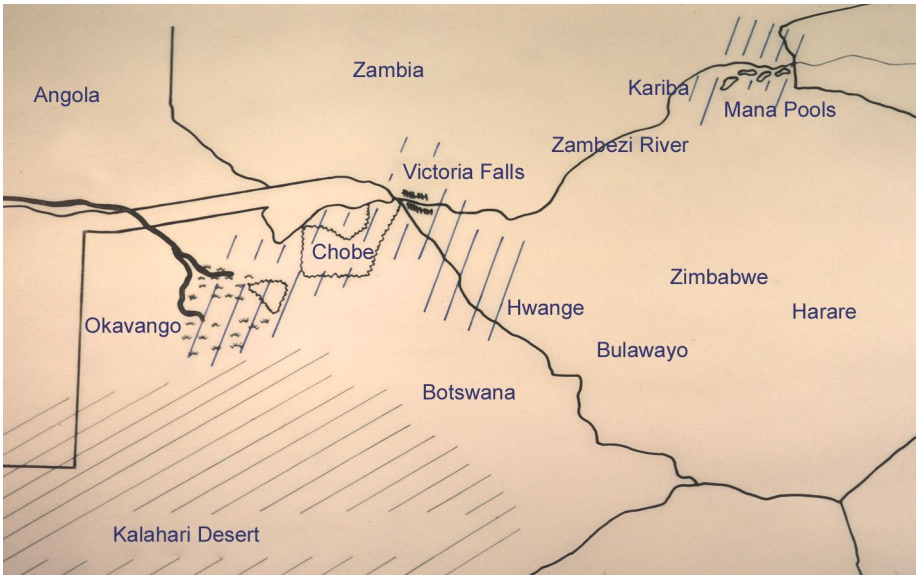
Taken as a whole the Etosha experience is different because of the surprising sight of so much nature in such a high and arid place. However, there are no foot safaris inside the park so viewing is from vehicles that must remain on established tracks. Crowds of cars sounds like a recipe for disaster, but I would park and enjoy a whole day at an isolated waterhole. Patience and a good telephoto are rewarded. DIY camping is available in small areas inside the rest camps that have their own bandas and supply shops. These rest camps were functional and surrounded by a secondary safety fence that keeps out most wild visitors except birds and monkeys. There have been times when elephants have torn down parts of these fences, and warthogs have been known to dig under them, leaving possible openings for lions. When I was there Okaukuejo and Namutoni were good, but they can be crowded. Recently new camps have been built and might be worth a look. For a truly wild experience other places are better, but Etosha is unique.



Fort Namutoni, a colonial outpost converted into a rest camp.

ZIMBABWE - Mana Pools

I had always wanted to visit and try a (mostly) DIY safari in Zimbabwe. However, during the war for independence in Rhodesia (the pre-Zim country name), traveling around solo and camping in the bush didn't seem like such a good idea. But after the protracted guerilla war came to an end in April of 1980, Judy and I starting thinking about going. We eventually planned a trip for August 1982 and booked airfares and made some arrangements for a rental car in Victoria Falls (the location of both the falls and the Zambezi National Park). We also planned to do some boating on Lake Kariba and to visit Mana Pools. In order to do the latter gig, which would require a 4x4, we decided to hire a guide named Rob Shattock to take us down to his camp located on the lower Zambezi river right next to Mana Pools. The camp has changed hands several times since 1982 and is now known as a somewhat upscale place called Ruckomechi.



The main wilderness areas in northern Zimbabwe and Botswana.

After getting everything in order, at least as much as one could when dealing overseas long before the internet, we were becoming very excited. Then on July 23, 1982, just a week before we planned to leave, 6 tourists (2 aussies, 2 Americans and 2 Brits) traveling on the road from Vic Falls to Bulawayo were kidnapped and then murdered by rebels suspected to be aligned with Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU political party. The kidnappers demanded release of several ZAPU prisoners held by Robert Mugabe's ZANU party.

Mugabe declined to negotiate. He had won a disputed election in 1980, and of course later became a single party tyrant who has held on to power ever since. Between 1980 and 1982 there were several skirmishes between supporters of ZAPU and Mubgabe's North Korean trained armed forces. Needless to say the kidnapping and the subsequent murder of innocent tourists traveling in a safari truck down the same road that we had planned to use to travel from Victoria Falls to Hwange put a serious dent in our plans. We called the US state department who said, in essence, 'be very wary, and traveling there is not recommended'. Nonetheless, having been hooked on the idea of walking amongst elephants and lions at Mana Pools, a thing you couldn't do at the time in other parks except in Zambia and to a lesser degree in Botswana, we boarded our plane for Harare, via London, right on schedule.

I still remember getting on the British Airways 747 from Heathrow to Harare and being quite relieved to see that the plane was totally full. Wow, everyone was still going to Zimbabwe in spite of the hairy political situation and the recent kidnappings and murder of white tourists. Feeling much more at ease I actually was able to sleep a little bit on the long 10 hour flight. We arrived into the capitol Harare in the early morning after watching a spectacular sunrise over the bush-land. After touching down and rolling to the gate, our arrival was announced but only myself, Judy, and two or three other people (in the whole plane) stood up to debark. Really? Well, yes. It turned out the plane was only making a brief stop in Harare while on the way to its main destination of Durban, South Africa, where everyone else was going. My good feelings evaporated, but it was easy to get through passport control and customs since there were no lines at all.

It turned out that the situation was a great boon for us. We flew up to Kariba on a DC3-type plane and were met by Rob Shattock. He explained he was very glad but surprised to see us. His camp, on a concession just west of Mana Pools park, normally had room for 12 guests, but everyone else except Judy and I had cancelled. Thus for a week we would have the whole camp just to ourselves. It would turn into the most memorable time we experienced in all the visits I had made or eventually would make to Africa.



Lying on the ground, amongst Matusadona (elephant dung) for a low angle shot.

We loaded our gear into Rob's ancient Land Rover, and he added supplies for the camp. Then off we went heading, in late afternoon, down the long track to Mana Pools. We wouldn't get there until after dark, but of course Rob knew the way and wouldn't do what I would have done. Like take the wrong track in waning light and drive off into oblivion as I once did in northern Uganda - ending up briefly somewhere in the Congo. But, of course, as things go in Africa, little is straightforward. About 20km from the camp, and at dusk, the Land Rover died. Rob made an inspection with a flashlight and ultimately proclaimed that the engine needed some critical part. But not to worry, he knew of a hunting camp a few kilometers away, where they had several similar vehicles with spares and that he could borrow the part from them. So he took the flashlight, the gun, and much to my surprise just headed off into the bush, AT NIGHT. We hunkered down under the Land Rover, and tried to pull a tarp over us to keep the mosquitoes off. About an hour later we heard lions roaring like crazy from the same exact direction as Rob gone. Would he ever return? Or would we be dangerously stranded? A very uncomfortable no-sleep night was followed by a nice sunrise and his smiling face walking out of the thorn-bush with the required part. Amazing. He had

indeed encountered the lions and had himself spent the better part of the evening up in a tree. I should have known then and there that this was going to be a most interesting time.

The thing about walking in Africa is that you can really feel the heat, the dust, sense the smells, and see things from a unique perspective, eye to eye at ground level. There is an investment in the small things that are easily passed by or missed when sitting high up in a vehicle. Although a car, when used as a hide, can be an easier platform for photography, exploring the bush on foot is the ultimate communion withthe wild. For a week we would spend the better part of each day from sunrise to sunset on the various game trails, or just bushwacking on the periphery or within the boundaries of Mana Pools. To this day, free (even guideless) walking is still permitted.



Mana Pools is a mix of open grasslands, woodlands, and riverine habitats.



An observation post on the Mana Pools plains.

Always sensitive to the wind direction, we would often take advantage of a rise in the terrain, or perhaps use a termite mound as a vantage point to scan the surrounding territory for wild animals. On one occasion we spotted two male lions way in the distance, but approaching in our direction. Rob suggested we climb a tree and wait up in it to see what would happen. So up we scrambled and the three of us tried to get reasonably comfortable in the various forks available. We were as quiet as possible and 15 minutes later the two big males walked right under us. I mean just 8 feet directly beneath us! We didn't dare move. I didn't even think about clicking a picture as the shutter on my film camera would surely be noticed. On they went, not even sniffing at us. Wow. When they got about 50 yards away Rob sampled the wind, and determined that it was weak and coming from the lions towards us. He said "let's follow them". OK, sure. Judy looked at me a little askance. So we carefully climbed down out of the tree and started after them. We went for a few hundred yards.

As we neared the Zambezi River, there was a line where the vegetation became a lot taller. The terrain went from open scrub to deep grassland in a sudden jump. It was about 100 yards away and the two male lions were headed right for it. Just as they were about to enter the grass, and we were within 50 yards of them, the head of a female lion poked out from the blur of grass blades. Then another and another and another. The males had obviously returned to their pride and it was a huge one. All in all we counted 17 additional lions and since they were looking in the direction of the males, they saw us clear as day. They started snorting and running around with obvious agitation. Between us we had one single-shot bolt action rifle that would be only useful to try and scare them if they charged. I was loath to even think that, and we all immediately started to slowly back step with care as Rob, incredibly, started to talk to the lions. "It's OK my beauties, no worries, we're leaving, easy easy, It's OK...". And so it was.

When walking in the bush you have to step carefully. You can twist an ankle in a hole, or step on a snake. There was a story, I don't know if it's true or not, where a group was purportedly hiking somewhere in southern Africa and the guide had an automatic weapon. They encountered some lions in the bush and immediately started to back up, continuing to face the animals (you never want to turn and run from a cat). The armed guide tripped on a log while retreating backwards. As he fell his finger slapped the trigger on his automatic rifle and bullets started to fly everywhere, one hitting an unfortunate member of the tour party. So yeah, watch your step.

The corollary to being aware of your footing is that you see small things you might ordinarily miss. One time we came across a Pangolin, or scaly anteater. These are rare, and are highly prized as trophies by local chiefs, who have been known to pay large sums of cash to have one as a pet. The anteaters are slow and easy to catch. When this one saw us, it rolled up into a defensive ball. Its scales are razor sharp on the edges and you don't want to have your hand inside when it curls, because your fingers might get sliced to bits. Being worried that this fellow was exposed to possible poaching way out in the open where we found him, we picked him up like a volley ball and carried him to a more secure bushy area. In a few minutes he unwrapped himself and ambled on his way.



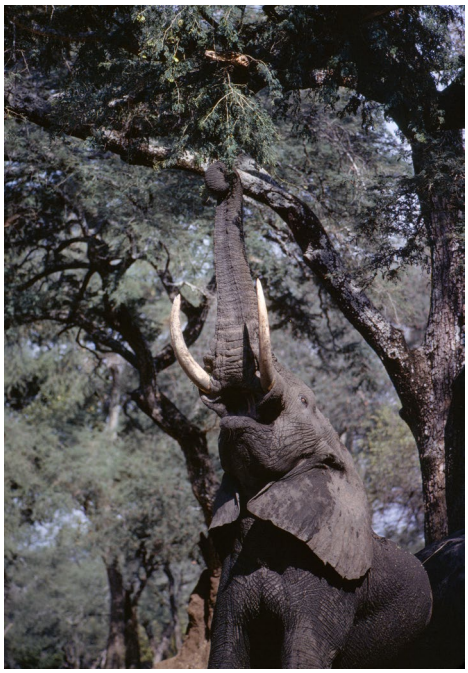
The next day we took a track closer to the huge Zambezi river. Some of the largest crocodiles I have ever seen were basking on sand flats out in the water, so swimming was certainly out of the question. There were also a large number of hippos. You could sneak up to the edge of the bank by crawling on your belly and 8 feet below you might find a big pod of hippo cooling off in the pool, diving and coming up for air every few minutes. The banks are eroded and steep, but the hippo have found or forged out small cuts in the sides to serve as routes from the river up to the grasslands where they feed, primarily at night. This day one lone hippo, probably a bull, was still out on the grass about 200 yards from the river when we emerged through some reeds along the bank. Fortunately, we had not left the cover to find ourselves directly between the hippo and the water. That would have been an extremely bad position to be in!

Judy with Pangolin, Mana Pools. Pangolins are endangered. So we placed him in some deep cover.

When a hippo feels threatened its first instinct is to get back to water, and if you are in the way, prepare for the absolute worst. Indeed among all the animals of Africa that are dangerous, hippos cause the most deaths to humans. In any case this daytime browser, out enjoying a nice morning buffet, spotted us and immediately charged for the water. I couldn't believe how fast he covered the distance to the water with such a big blimp-like body and stubby little legs. But more amazing than that was the swan dive he took off the 8 foot embankment into the river. No time to look for a cut or channel in the bank. Just go for it off the lip overlooking the water. With a snort and a humongous splash, he was gone. Surely the biggest belly flop ever!

After a couple days Rob decided we kind of knew what we were doing, so he opted to leave us in a tree overlooking a small enclave where a side-channel to the river still contained some water. He said he would be back to get us before sundown, and that antelopes and maybe some elephants would come down to drink. So he took his gun and disappeared into the bush. It was just after noon, and we had water and snacks. But we were a couple miles away from, and out of site of, the camp. In addition, I wasn't really sure we could make it back on our own without getting lost. But Rob's track record was good so far, especially after hiking through the bush at night in search of a car part. So we settled in for an alone experience in the wilderness. Perfectly quiet. No cars, no people, just us and the smells and sounds of the bush. Yeah, Africa!

Some kudu showed up, followed by a few Buffalo. Cape Buffalo are extremely dangerous, so we stuck to our perch in the big acacia. They eventually left after a drink and a wallow, and for an hour nobody else showed. We couldn't see anything on the horizon, though admittedly our sight lines weren't terribly long going into the thick bush. After a while I decided to climb down and have a look around. Not much happening, but it was nice to get out of the relatively uncomfortable tree for a while. I poked about and then started to follow the tributary down towards the main river. The flitting of insects and calls of birds filled the air. I was about 100 yards from the tree when Judy yelled out "Elephants coming".





Elephants reaching for new shoots. Photographs taken on foot safari in Mana Pools.

At least I wasn't stranded, with the elephants between me and the tree. So I jogged back and got up into a stable position, and we both watched as a small group of six came down to within 20 yards and enjoyed an afternoon drink and a happy mud-fest. So intimate, just the two of us and the elephants.

When we eventually got back to camp and told Rob of our afternoon, he smiled and said that most of the elephants in Mana were accustomed to people on foot and are tolerant if not even accepting that we are just harmless artifacts of the bush. This was quite surprising since in areas with recently active warfare, where elephants are often killed for their ivory to get money for weapons, they usually either become very shy or, alternatively, aggressive and belligerent. For example, as of 2014 people are no longer allowed to drive their cars around Gorongosa Park in Mozambique because of elephant attacks on vehicles. This behavior followed a 15 year civil war there. Zimbabwe's battle for independence went from 1964 to 1979, and the Zambezi area was a front line as it formed the border between Zambia, a liberation stronghold, and Rhodesia.

In any case, the next day we went in search of close-up pictures of elephants to be taken while on foot. Crossing into the Mana Pools park from the conservation easement where the camp sits, we looked for

some accepting and tolerant faces. Mana Pools is named after four large depressions that hold water after the rainy season floods subside. These remaining pools attract a large number of animals during the dry season, so we had high expectations and were not disappointed. We approached several big elephants on foot, slowly moving closer from tree to tree. Finally, when just standing behind the very tree that was being eaten by a large tusker, I leaned out to take a few pictures from a unique low-angle position as the big elephant contentedly continued his lunch. We had several such encounters. Quite a treat.



Our camp on the edge of the Zambezi, looking across to the mountains in Zambia.

From what I gather, 33 years later Mana Pools is still going strong as a hiking and canoeing paradise. Rob Shattock is apparently still guiding there too, though at Kanga Camp. It would be fun to reconnect and hear some of his stories of the happenings out there between 1982 and now. Hopefully, most of the good things have not changed.

Upper Zambezi and Vic Falls

Following Mana Pools we spent a few days on Lake Kariba boating and canoeing. Paddling near to elephant family groups drinking on the shore's edge, the elephants appeared so tall and huge from the low down position of the boat. After several wonderful days we flew from Kariba to Victoria Falls. The falls itself is an interesting place, though a bit touristy. The highlight of our camp-stay there was when I crawled under the park fence at night in order to catch the full moon rising over the huge cascades. No other people were out there at night, just the awesome power of the water and the spray and the noise that drowned out the sounds of the bush. The locals call the mist that fills the gorge the Mosi-oa-Tunya or the "smoke that thunders".

In the early morning and late afternoon, when not walking to the viewpoints at the falls, we took our rented VW beetle (again) into the Zambezi National Park, which is just west of the falls and fronts the upper Zambezi river (above the falls). This small park is not to be confused with Zambia's Lower Zambezi N.P. that is way below the falls and directly north of the river across from Mana Pools. There were several nice drives in Zimbabwe's Zambezi Park and we saw some fairly large herds of the somewhat rare Sable Antelope. The park lies between Vic Falls township and the Botswana border. As you get closer to Botswana, the sand becomes finer and deeper and the single-lane tracks can be a bit difficult to get through in a saloon car, at least back in 1982.

So sure enough, we hit one of those deep sandy sections. Judy was driving and although I yelled at her to gun it, we ground to a halt, the rear wheels bogged. Deja Vu, just like our very first game drive in Amboseli! So we knew what to do, get out and find some sticks to build up an au-naturale sand ladder. There was pretty open bush on both sides so we would have to walk a ways to find sticks. It was then that I noticed the little signs on both sides of the road, set back about 10 yards and spaced out every 50 yards or

so. They spelled out "Danger, Unexploded Land Mines". Oh, wonderful. We had to take these warnings at face value. After all, the war for independence had concluded here just two years ago, and liberation fighters had been crossing the river from Zambia, so it made sense that the area might have been mined.

It was then that I noticed an elephant emerging from the tree-line where we were going to go for sticks. The elephant appeared un-perturbed and was going to walk right through the mine-field. I had visions of Vietnam-era bouncing betties, which popped up and blew shrapnel sideways. It was one of those moments where the adrenaline pumps and you can do things you wouldn't think possible. I quickly let a little air out of the rear tires and as Judy edged forwards I heaved and pushed the back end with all my might. It moved and gained some traction, pulling free of the gratefully short sand-drift. We drove down the road past the point where the warning signs ended and got out to watch the elephant meander peacefully through the "minefield" area. Probably a false alarm, but without any other information, who is going to completely ignore the warning signs. I was most grateful the magnificent elephant made it through alive.

Hwange National Park

Hwange (formally the Wankie Game Reserve in Rhodesia) is a specatular 5,000 square mile national park in Zimbabwe. It has varied scenery, from forests and granite hills to the north, to desert scrub where it edges onto the Kalahari in the south west. It has more than 100 types of mammals and over 400 species of birds. The areas I visited and camped at are mostly flat landscapes made up of grassy depressions which feature over 60 semi-permanent waterholes or pans. Most of these have formed naturally and are filled seasonally with rainwater during the wet season. Others are fed by groundwater seeps, while several are maintained by relatively shallow boreholes and diesel pumps. The waterholes all suffer from evaporation, water consumption by some very large herds of elephant and buffalo, and by being filled with sand during the numerous windstorms that occur during the dry winter months May - September. Towards the end of a natural un-pumped waterhole's usefulness for drinking, buffalo often wallow in the last remaining shallow pools, turning them into a thick black goo and making them rather unsuitable for the smaller antelope and birds to drink from.



Borehole pump at a Hwange waterhole.



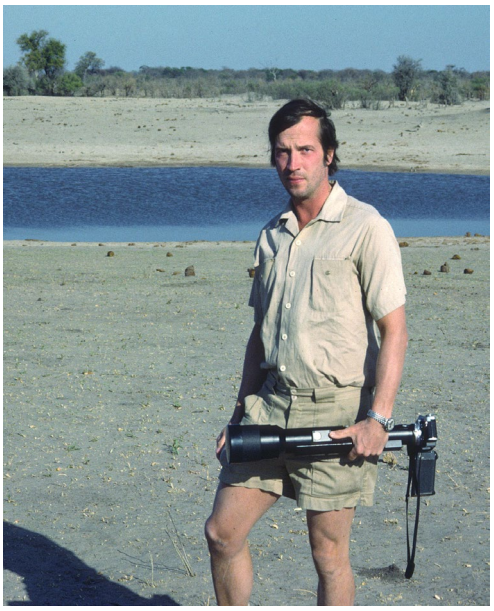
Buffalo ruining the last water in a pan.

Although one can do guided walks in the park, mine were not quite as wild and up-close as those we did in Mana Pools. On the other hand, several tragic encounters have occurred in or around Hwange, such as the killing of a walking guide in 2014 by a lion.

There is so much to see at the waterholes in the dry season that I was often content to park my vehicle near a productive one, get out the binoculars and telephoto lens, and wait. Birds of all varieties, along with other small mammals graced the edges at mid-day when all the tourist vehicles had vanished back to camp. In 1982 my favorite hangouts were Dom Pan, near the camp, and Dopi Pan, along a fossil river in a shallow depression called the Dopi Vlei. One afternoon, overlooking this pan, I was munching a can of tuna and generally relaxing in the heat when I noticed a group of elephants approaching from the bush across the water. Then I saw some more exiting the trees from my side of the pan. They walked within a yard of my old VW bus and broke into a run for the water. I started counting as lines of elephants leaving encountered long lines coming in. The number of elephants visiting that waterhole in those two awesome hours was over 400! Incredible!!



Elephants in a sandstorm, Hwange N.P.



At Dom Pan, 1982.

BOTSWANA - Chobe and Savuti

Just west of Vic Falls is the border with Botswana. The soil turns rapidly into the sands of the Kalahari, specifically a fine deep powdery variety that is prone to blowing around easily and that forces one to have a 4x4 with soft tires (or normal ones with some air let out) to avoid continuously getting stuck. There was a funny sign just before Kasane, the only sizeable town in the far north of Botswana. It read simply "Beware Dust". No kidding. We were headed for Chobe National Park, a reserve bordered by the Chobe river to the north and extending south into the Mababe Depression. In 1982 it had limited development and we were headed for the open camp area along the river at Serondella, about 15 km from the east gate just outside of Kasane.



Judy alongside the Chobe River, Botswana

Botswana, was, and still is, a pretty wide open country with a low human population density (only slightly higher than Namibia), and a huge number elephants, over 150,000. Roughly one third of the surviving elephants of Africa live in Botswana. In fact the highest elephant densities anywhere (over 300 per 100 square kilometers) are found in northern Botswana and in western Zimbabwe (e.g. the Hwange area). Poaching continent-wide has led to an estimated loss of 100,000 of these magnificent animals between 2010 and 2012. Although there is certainly some poaching in Botswana and Zimbabwe, Botswana has outlawed all hunting and culling, choosing rather to let nature take its course. In addition, both these countries have used their military forces to track and capture poachers. While the situation is much better than in eastern Africa or the Congo, there are occasional setbacks, such as in 2014 when poachers poisoned some of the small waterholes much frequented by elephants in Zimbabwe with cyanide. Dozens of elephants died in a single event.



With only a scarce few human interactions and somewhat limited poaching, northern Botswana is inherently an ideal environment for elephants to thrive. There are wild grasslands and mopane forests in abundance, and most importantly there are many rivers and drainages that provide year-round sources of water. Even if the big herds do have to migrate some large distances between the wet (November - April) and dry (May - October) seasons, most of the migration routes are still open and not blocked by towns and farms. Elephants love water, and between the Chobe, Linyanti, and Selinda rivers, along with the great Okavango swamp, there is much to be had. One resource that is in short supply are salts and minerals that the elephants need. They will march miles to a salt lick, but in general the relative paucity of chemicals needed for tusk growth means that elephants here have smaller tusks than their cousins in other parts of Africa. This is not to say there are no huge tuskers, but they are rare. In fact, most herds now have some tusk-less cows (who then are pre-disposed to bear tusk-less youngsters). Whether this is a result of diet or perhaps a Darwinian reaction to poaching is under research study.

A big tusker shakes a tree to make it drop its seed pods, a favorite.

A genetic mutation yielding a tusk-less cow has always existed but is a small chance event. Then, when poachers leave tusk free elephants undisturbed, they survive to breed and perhaps enhance their like numbers. Indeed, in areas where elephants are unstressed the percentage of tusk-less adults is much smaller than it is in highly poached high-stress populations. On the other hand, tusks are used for digging for minerals, for roots, and for water, as well as for mating displays and dominance struggles. Thus, in several practical ways the development of tusk-less herds that do not have these useful tools will put their members at a disadvantage.

After a proceeding from Kasane towards Chobe, we finally grind our way through the deep sand into Serondella and begin to set up camp. There are a few shade trees and all have long thorns to discourage browsers. Of course some elephants are content to eat the branches, thorns and all. Others may strip the bark, especially on the beautiful fever trees, which can kill them. Or they may just be content to bash the tree trunk periodically in order to shake off the tree's seed pods. These are then vacuumed up off the ground. Based on my previous experiences with elephants, we choose to place our tent a ways away from any lush herbivore's temptations.

As we are getting ready for a late afternoon siesta, to be followed by a sun-downer, another land rover approaches. It has two fold-boat type kayaks on the top. These have canvas covered metal frames, and the banks of the Chobe looking for birds and maybe a mammal or two coming down to drink. Two guys in the rover pick the nicest largest thorniest tree, and back their truck under its seductive shade. It looks like the canoes scrape some branches but it's too far away to be sure. We invite the two guys over for a gin and tonic, and they are more than happy to oblige. It appears they already have been tippling a bit, and we rapidly learn that they are park rangers from the Kariba area in Zimbabwe. They tell tall tales, suitably embellished, about the park there, and generally appear to be the type of chaps who enjoy opening beer bottles by removing the caps with their teeth. Anyway, after a couple of G&T's, they say they want to unpack and head out on the water to bask in the beautiful late afternoon light and to catch the sunset. We watch as they paddle off with great confidence and enthusiasm. After a while I notice the draft of the crafts is slowly decreasing, and sure enough I hear some loud chortles and laughter as the two boats proceed to sink, well offshore in the middle of the Chobe River. The thorns had indeed ripped small slices

in the hulls' fabric when they had backed into their camp spot. The two somewhat intoxicated boatmen managed to half-paddle and swim-push the flooded hulks back to shore and quickly chalked it up as another experiential high in the African bush. Given the numbers of hippos and crocs we saw the next morning, not to mention the possible presence of a water-borne parasitic disease called bilharzia, the event had a potentially dark side, but fortunately worked itself out with much hilarity.

Some 100km to the southwest down a long dirt track is the Savuti marsh. Inland from the Linyanti river to the north, the marsh attracts wildlife from all over during the dry season. The Savuti Marsh is intermittently fed by the Savuti Channel, which flows for many years, then suddenly stops flowing for a decade or more. The marsh is thought to be a relic of a huge lake covering most of northern Botswana but whose water supply was stopped eons ago when tectonic plate movements diverted or cut off its flow. The whole landscape of northern Botswana is extremely flat, so perhaps it is possible that a small geologic shift could cause such a diversion. The Savuti Channel ceased flowing just after we visited there in the early 1980's. As a result of changes in the rainfall distribution in the larger area including the Angola highlands, and perhaps augmented by geologic tilts, it remained dry from 1983 until 2009, when it started flowing again and eventually began to refill the marsh. The area was explored by David Livingstone in 1851, and it was known to be dry from 1888 until 1957 as well. The floods that came in 1957 drowned the trees that had grown in the riverbed over those 70 dry years. For us, in 1980, the dead tree-trunks provided a playground for hippos, who, shortly after we saw them there, became mired in the mud as the Savuti dried up once again.



Hippos and dead trees in the Savuti Channel 1980.

I returned once to Savuti in the late 1980's when the channel was dry. Such a different place it had become. What once was an impenetrable marsh was now a grass flat. But we were able to do some walking safaris, which are possible here but not generally in Chobe. Indeed, as the Chobe N.P. guide-map says "walking without an armed guard can be dangerous, as wild animals invariably see you before you see them". And of course that is exactly what happened as a group of 6 of us, with a guide, rounded some thick bush to encounter five female lions at close range. They were obviously extremely perturbed that we had invaded their territory, and were on their feet weaving around, staring at and smelling us. There were no stout trees to climb, and some in our group, including my 80 year old father to whom I had given this particular trip as a birthday celebration, would not have been adept at getting up even a well-placed ladder, had there been one. So we faced the cats and slowly retreated, walking backwards while I hoped that no one would trip and fall, thus startling or antagonizing the beasts. These particular cats had a habit of walking through camp, though I missed that event the next morning while out on a sunrise photo shoot. Fortunately, my dad, who had early dementia and a bit of a tendency to get up and wander about, slept right through it.



Savuti Channel, when full, photographed from a nearby sand ridge.

The whole area around Savuti seemed a little more wild than the Chobe riverfront, having fewer commercial and private safari vehicles. And a contrast with the wildebeest river-crossings in the Masai Mara of Kenya (or the northern Serengeti of Tanzania), where two-way radios call all manner of drivers to any sighting of this action photo-op so that everyone, who all desperately want to photograph it, can do so. The benefit here in Botswana is to experience the real nature of the wilderness, especially, once again, on foot where you can feel the soil texture, wilt in the heat, and smell the dust.





Elephant digs for water (left)

Zebra wounded by a lion attack (right).

You never know what you will see while on safari. One day we walked up to a cobra eating a puff adder. Both are extremely poisonous snakes. I had left my camera in the tent (naturally), and ran back to get it. In the meantime some other photographer without a telephoto tried to get close enough for a shot. Too close, and the cobra gave up its swallowing act and took off. The puff adder went in a different direction. Another time we were sitting at a campfire when a pack of wild dogs attacked an impala. No time to grab a camera. I often dream about such lost photo ops, but I always try to remember that just having the experiences is priceless.

BOTSWANA: OKAVANGO - the jewel of Africa



Aerial view of the Okavango Delta

Botswana is a land-locked country that sits on the southern African plateau. The elevation averages out to about 3000 feet, and the land is incredibly flat. In the north, the Okavango river flows onto the Kalahari sands. It's source is in the highlands of Angola. Since the land is so flat, the river flows slowly and spreads out into the 5000 square mile Okavango Delta, the largest such feature in the world. It is made up of lagoons with depths up to a few feet, swamps with channels cut by animals such as hippos, and tree-covered islands that range in size from a few square yards up to several hundred square miles in the case of Chief's Island. In a remarkable twist of fate, the rainfall that falls in Angola during 'the wet' flows ever so slowly into the Delta. Currents, if you want to call them that, move at a couple feet per minute or so. The water from the Angolan wet season rains thus arrives at the Delta during the Okavango's dry season. Coupled with Botswana's own rains, which are somewhat sparse since the whole region is semi-arid, this dry-period filling of the Delta provides year-round water. It is therefore ideal habitat for thirsty elephants and buffalo, as well as good fishing and feeding grounds for upwards of 500 resident and migrant bird species.

Botswana has taken a different path towards conservation than other countries like Kenya and Tanzania. There mass-market tourism plays a large role, with huge hotels and the associated scores of mini-buses that clutter parks like Amboseli, Ngorongoro, and Serengeti. In Botswana there is one formally established national park in the Okavango, the Moremi Game Reserve. It is named after the wife of the chief of the Batawana tribe that inhabits the region. Rinderpest epidemics swept the area in 1896. As a result, Tsetse flies, which are hosted by wild game, disappeared along with the animals. The Delta then became of interest to cattle ranchers so that trails and grazing areas were established. However, as wildlife eventually returned to the more remote places, tsetse flies once again invaded and cattle operations became unprofitable. The Batawana tribe realized the incompatibility of ranching and wildlife and in 1963 the



Reflections of a palms on a tree island.

Moremi Game Reserve was founded. It is accessible by road from Maun or by a long tough drive from Kasane via the Chobe National Park. It has DIY camping areas and viewing tracks suitable for 4x4 vehicles. Walking and night drives are not allowed. There are a few small commercial camps on the edges of the reserve, typically hosting a dozen or so guests in Meru style tents. Moremi is a wonderful spot and one can get a good feel for the Okavango there. However, one does encounter a few other vehicles and people. On the other hand, the areas of the Delta that surround Moremi, and parts of Chiefs Island that are well away from established tourist roads, are very isolated.

In fact, what Botswana has done is to establish concessions for private companies to run photographic and nature safaris (no hunting!) in the lands and swamps adjacent to Moremi and extending out to the main and secondary roads running both northeast and northwest from Maun and all the way up to the border with Namibia. High end safari camps catering to a dozen or fewer guests have been built in these concessions. Each concession is isolated in the sense that drivers from one camp cannot cross into another. The result is very personal outings featuring day and night game drives as well as foot and boat excursions, for the lucky people who get to visit. The extremely low density of visitors, something like one person per several square miles of each concession, leads to a minimal disturbance of the wildlife. Yet the presence of professional guides with radios means that poaching is deterred (with the help of the army). The down side is that visiting this pristine wilderness is not a DIY experience since independent camping is not allowed. From an economic point of view, the lack of visitors is made up for by the enormous cost of staying at one or more of these luxury camps. In 1990 I sucked it up and spent three days at each of four at a cost of a couple hundred (inflation adjusted 2015) dollars per person per night. Now, the top camps, like Mombo or Abu, charge $4000 pppn or more. One redeeming factor is that a fair portion of this money goes back to the reserve and to the government for other conservation projects. The camps could probably charge as much as they want, as the experience is so unique that demand is over the top. Luckily I was able to catch it when it was still sort of reasonable.



Canoeing from island to island. .



A lion snarls at crocs before swimming

Seeing birds and mammals from the water is fantastic. Some lagoons and their inter-connecting waterways are deep enough to be negotiated by a small craft with an outboard motor. The boat ride from Shinde camp to the Gcodikwe heronry takes about 45 minutes. It involves negotiating floating reed beds and twisting amongst the channels in a crazy zigzag pattern while powering up to 15 or 20mph when the propeller is not fowled by grass and weeds. I gained a real respect for each guide's navigational and obstacle-avoidance skills. This is certainly not a DIY rent-a-boat excursion.

Game drives take on a similar adventurous flair. Most of the tracks have places that are flooded. One has to know in advance which crossings are possible, where the underlying sand is firm and has no deep holes, and which of the long and submerged tracks (some up to several hundred yards in length) have water levels that won't flood the motor. All the 4x4's have snorkel breather tubes and are fitted with water resistant electronics high up in the engine compartment. But I still became a little nervous when we got into water that was up to the base of the seats. I was glad it wasn't me driving.





Mokoro'ing through the swamp.
Yellow Billed Stork at Gcodikwe (right)
African Wild Dog, sited on a Delta island.
(lower right)



The most peaceful and romantic way to see the Delta is by a pole-boat Mokoro. The water is only six inches to a couple of feet in depth over wide expanses, and moves so slowly that you do not have to fight any currents. Since the dominant dry season weather pattern is a high pressure sitting over the entire region, fast winds are also rare, so the Mokoro makes an ideal way to silently glide through the swamp grass to catch an evening sunset while pulled up on a deserted tree island. Magical is a word that almost describes it.

Some say the Okavango is monotonous. There are no hills to break up the hemispherical skies bounded below by flat terrain containing some of the most wonderful birdlife and mammal concen-trations to be found in Africa. With the near total absence of humanity, it felt, to me, like a land lost in the past. For that, it truly is a jewel that hopefully will persist in the decades and eons to come.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who supported my quixotic quest for the wild experience in Africa. Especially to my wife Judy who tolerated long absences and held down the fort at home on a mountaintop in Colorado. Fortunately she was able to join me on 4 trips and learned first hand the joys and hardships of DIY camping. She is not a fan of hot weather, and February in E. Africa is very toasty so she suffered a bit. And to all the people over there not mentioned by name in the text who contributed in various ways such as helping to find subjects for my pictures, suggesting places to visit, guiding walks and boating adventures, rescuing me from vehicle disasters, and generally providing much needed stories and companionship, thank you. *John*









Black Rhino wallowing in Amboseli (above), Bull Elephant in musth (left).
Wide lipped White Rhino (upper right).
Elephants have used their tusks to destroy a fever tree (center)
Black Rhino with baby (lower right, Etosha).



Hippos at Shokwe Pan, taken while on a foot safari.



Giraffes and Kilimanjaro, Amboseli.



Elephant herd grazing under a storm on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro (Amboseli Nat. Park).

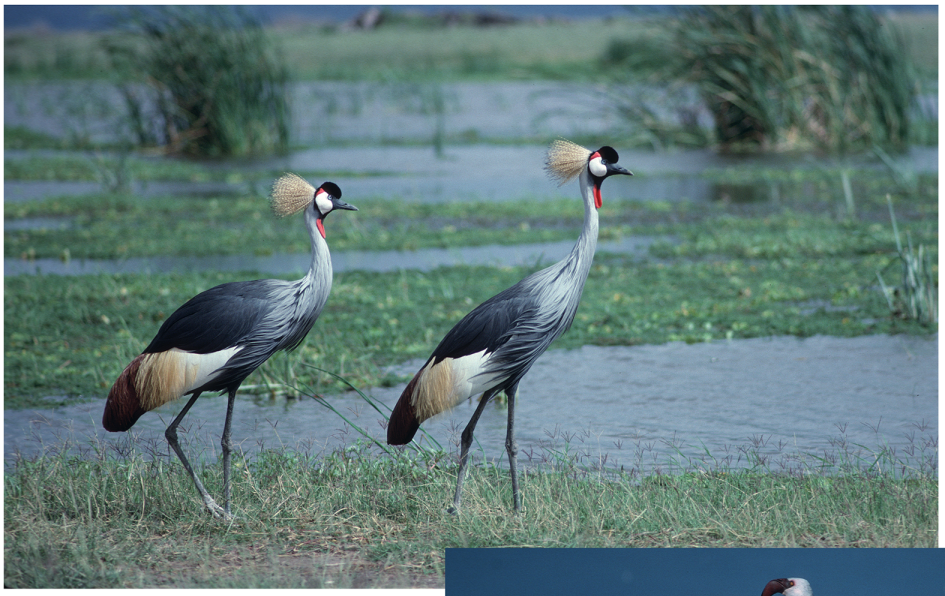


Elephant mother and baby on the Amboseli plains.





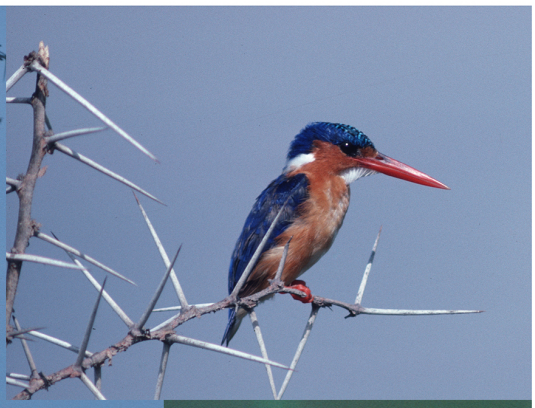
Elephants are curious. Smelling what mom is eating, and (right) investigating a cattle egret. Edge of Enkongo Narok swamp, Amboseli.

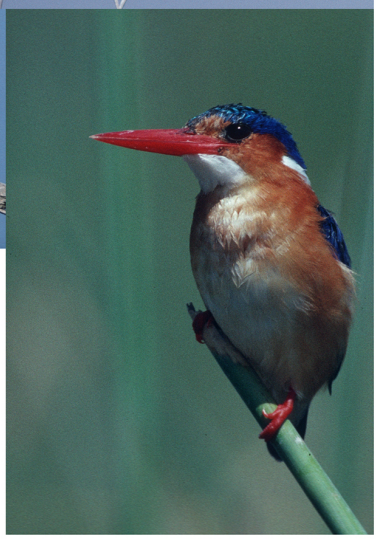




Crowned Cranes and Greater Flamingos
patrol the edges of the Amboseli swamps.







Birdlife abounds in the vicinity of the Amboseli swamps. A Fish Eagle calls out over its
domain and the tiny Malachite Kingfisher watches from various perches.



Old male Cape Buffaloes wallow in the Longinye Swamp, Amboseli.



Curious as to what the photographer has in mind, a herd of Cape Buffalo gather up to stare me down (Amboseli).



Previous page: Lions on the Amboseli flats. Lions were fairly abundant back in the 1970's, but due to poaching in the park and wandering off onto surrounding farms where they are often killed, their numbers have been much reduced in Amboseli.

Below: A Lion scavanges a dead baby impala.
Right: The Hyena, Jackal, and Hooded Vultures make sure that nothing remains after a kill.











Certain places in Africa are famous for their tree climbing lions, like Lake Manyara in Tanzania. The one on the left here was found in Masai Mara Game Reserve in Kenya. We parked the land rover right under the tree and took a few medium format pictures while standing up through the roof hatch. The loud crash of the Pentax 6x7 shutter got her attention, but fortunately she didn't jump on us. In other places we climbed trees to get away from lions, hoping that they didn't have the somewhat unique ability to climb like this one did.

Lions mating, Masai Mara.

Many copulations over a period of days can occur. In between there are rest periods, mating displays, and a dominant male must often defend his mating activities against intrusions by other lions who can be very eager to take over and displace the lucky fellow.















Male lions are rarely tolerant of even their own children. They often kill the offspring of other males if they can. Here a brave cub rides the back of a big male and gets a talking to afterwards. (Masai Mara Game Reserve).





Little needle sharp teeth get the mother lion's attention (above, Amboseli).

Attentive cubs. Is that just a lens pointing at me, or perhaps something to eat? (left, Masai Mara)



There used to be a fair number of cheetah in Amboseli, but in part due to harassment by large numbers of tourist vehicles trying to position for photographs during daytime hunts, the ability to successfully provide food for young became problematic and numbers decreased substantially. Amboseli is a small park with an overabundance of lodges and often overrun with vehicles that are supposed to stay on established tracks, but don't. Sad.



Death grip. After a long run, a Cheetah suffocates a Thompson's Gazelle it has brought down. (Amboseli flats).





Happiness is a thick-mud waterhole, perhaps mixed up by buffalo wallowing. Such features are magnets for playful elephants who sometimes just splash around for the fun of it (above).

Elephants sparring on the edge of the Longinye Swamp, Amboseli (left).



The yearning look of acacia trees in front of a darkening sky is a signature feel for Africa. Elephants, when over abundant, can take a toll of these beauties, stripping the bark and ripping off branches (Amboseli). The inset shows a baobab that has been bored though by elephant tusks (Tsavo Nat. Park).



Another signature event in E. Africa is the bi-annual Serengeti wildebeeste migration. We came across a large group cueing up to cross the Mara river into Kenya. As we sat in our jeep waiting for a few brave gnus to initiate the crossing, very quickly we were joined on the bank by at least 30 other tourist vehicles loaded with photographers. I urged people to stay in their cars, but as soon as the wildebeeste started crossing one idiot with a tripod and a huge lens jumped out and ran to the lip of the cliff that the wildbeeste would eventually have to crawl up. Then, not to be outdone, dozens of others followed. The wildebeeste were spooked by this idiocy and frantically tried to swim back, meeting the onslaught of gnus coming forward, head on. In the ensuing chaos many drowned and ended up floating slowly down the Mara. Needlessly tragic and a disgusting display by inconsiderate “nature photographers”.



Last light on the plains of the Masai Mara.



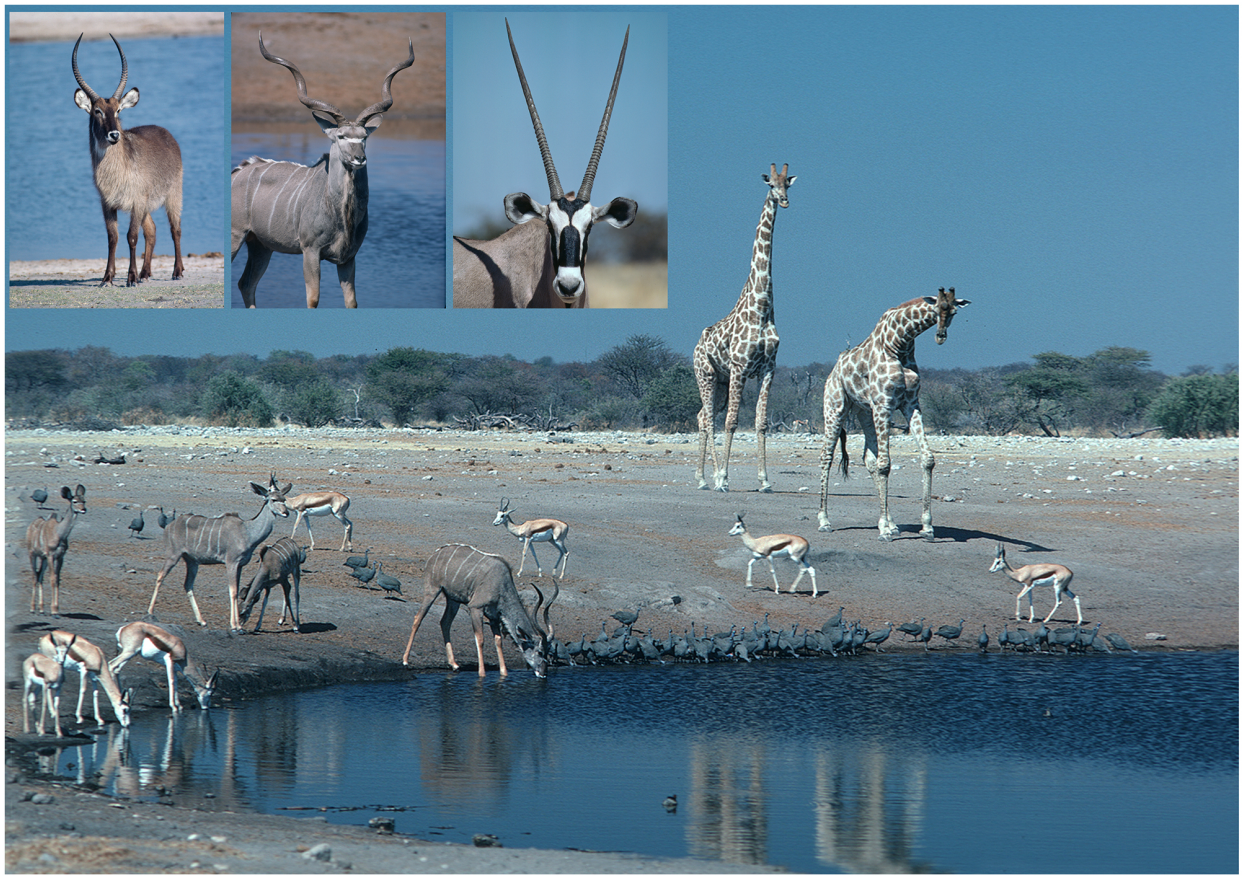
A herd of Orxy (or Gemsbok) cross the dry Etosha pan, while some blue Gnus rest on the edge. Good sight lines provide a better opportunity to spot approaching predators than would a siesta spot within the thornbush.



Zebra and Gnus drink at Salvadora waterhole at the edge of the Etosha Pan. Rainwater falling on the pan and on the surrounding thornbush country percolates into the soil and rises in several natural springs along the edge of the Pan. In the dry season these waterholes, along with some that are maintained by pumping groundwater, attract huge numbers of plains game and good groups of predators as well.



Lions drink at an Etosha waterhole. Dominant over most species at the drinking spots, except elephants and perhaps rhinos (which are rare).



A typical menagerie at Chudop, a deep artesiian spring in Etosha Pan National Park. Kudu, Springbok, Giraffes, Guinea Fowl, and a number of other birds taste the precious liquid. Insets: Portraits of southern Africa ungulates: Waterbuck, Male Kudu, Oryx.



Oxpeckers go after insects in the Giraffe's eyes and ears while it enjoys a drink at Chudob. Giraffe drink nervously because with their heads down they cannot as easily spot any approaching predators.



A group of Giraffe and a Zebra cautiously approach the waters edge. Lions in the surrounding thornbush and crocodiles in the water are a real worry.



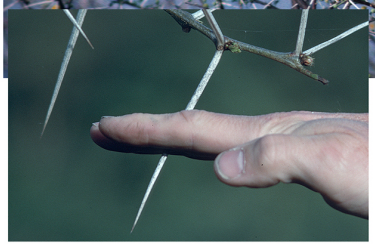
A pair of bulls use their horns to batter each other in a ritual dominance contest while a larger and unapproachable bull drinks at peace (Klein Namutoni waterhole, Etosha Pan National Park).



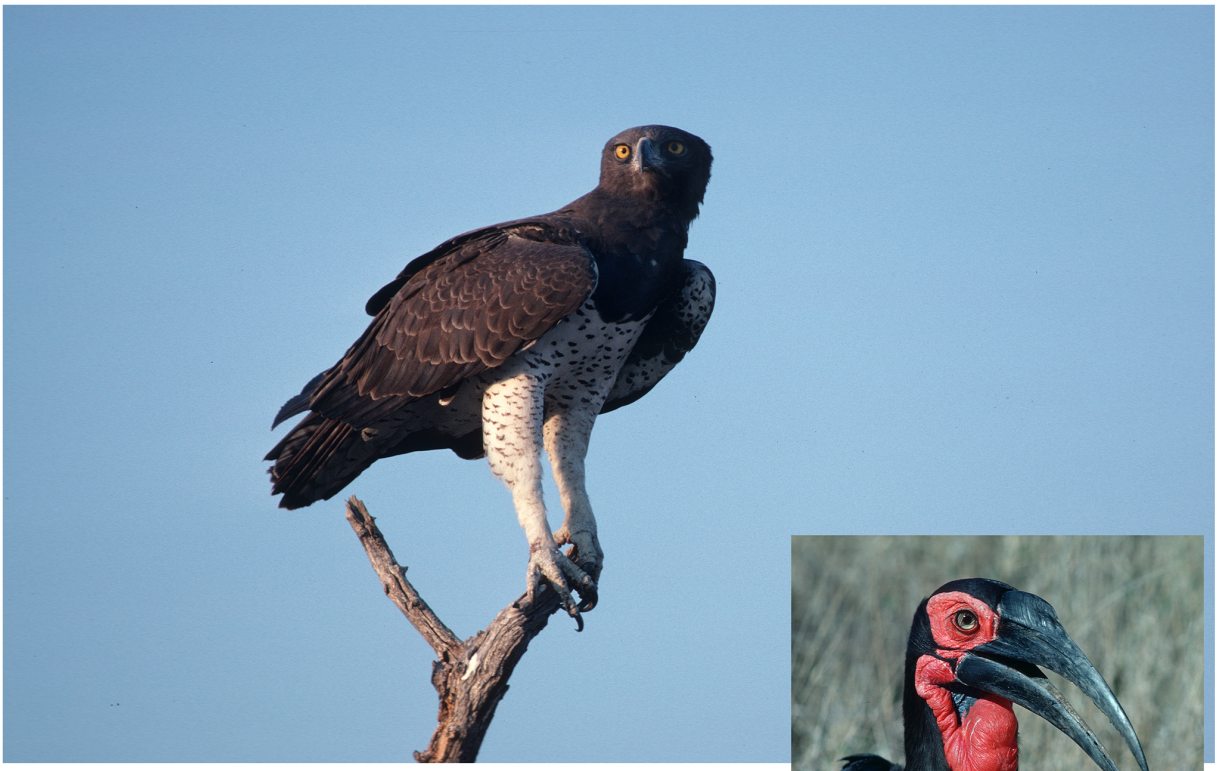


Large herds of zebra roam the grasslands surrounding the Etosha Pan. Spirited fights between stallions erupt from time to time, with kicking and biting, to establish the hierarchy of males.





Thornbush country. Hard to see through except in the peak of the dry season when most of the leaves have fallen. Harder to walk through except on game trails. But with all the animals there are too many game trails. With few visible landmarks, when deep in the bush it is oh so easy to get lost. The thorns are also brutal, though a Giraffe finds a way to extract a few tasty buds growing amidst the needle sharp prickers.



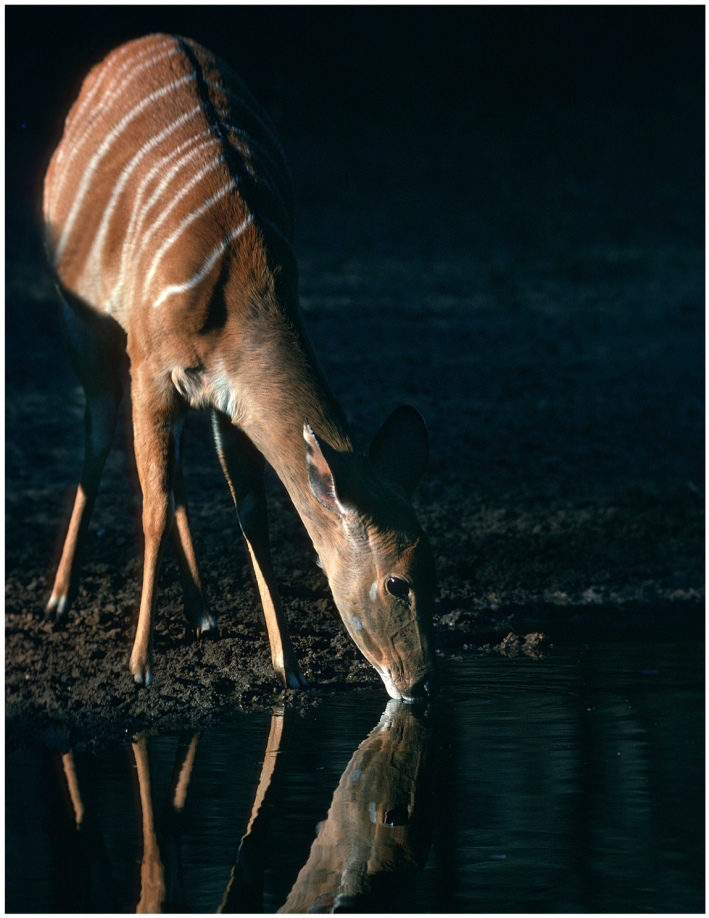
High in the trees one might spot the spectacular Martial Eagle, while at soil level a Ground Hornbill stalks for insects and perhaps a small rodent or snake.

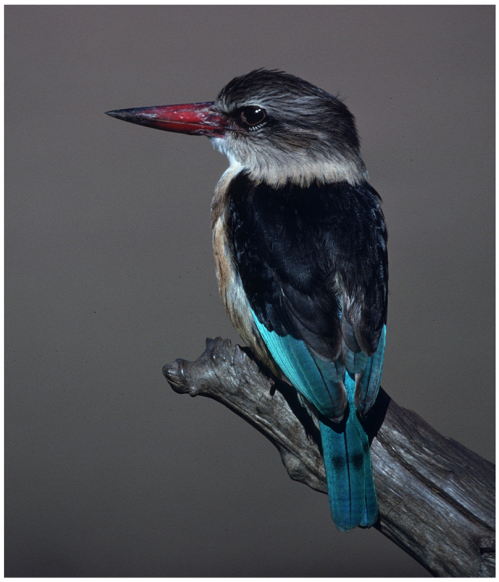


Elephants are tough. Eating acacia branches, three inch long thorns and all.



Elephants dominate at the water hole. Others wait their turn. Gemsbokvlakte pan (Etosha National Park).







Nyala (above) and Hooded Kingfisher, (Mkuzi Reserve SA). Jackals Fighting (Etosha Pan).



Blue Gnu drinking at Mkuzi waterhole. Warthog enjoying a peaceful mud-soak.



Hippo yawn (often as a threat display), and Jackal reflection (Mkuzi Reserve).



Nyala nursing (Mkuzi Reserve).

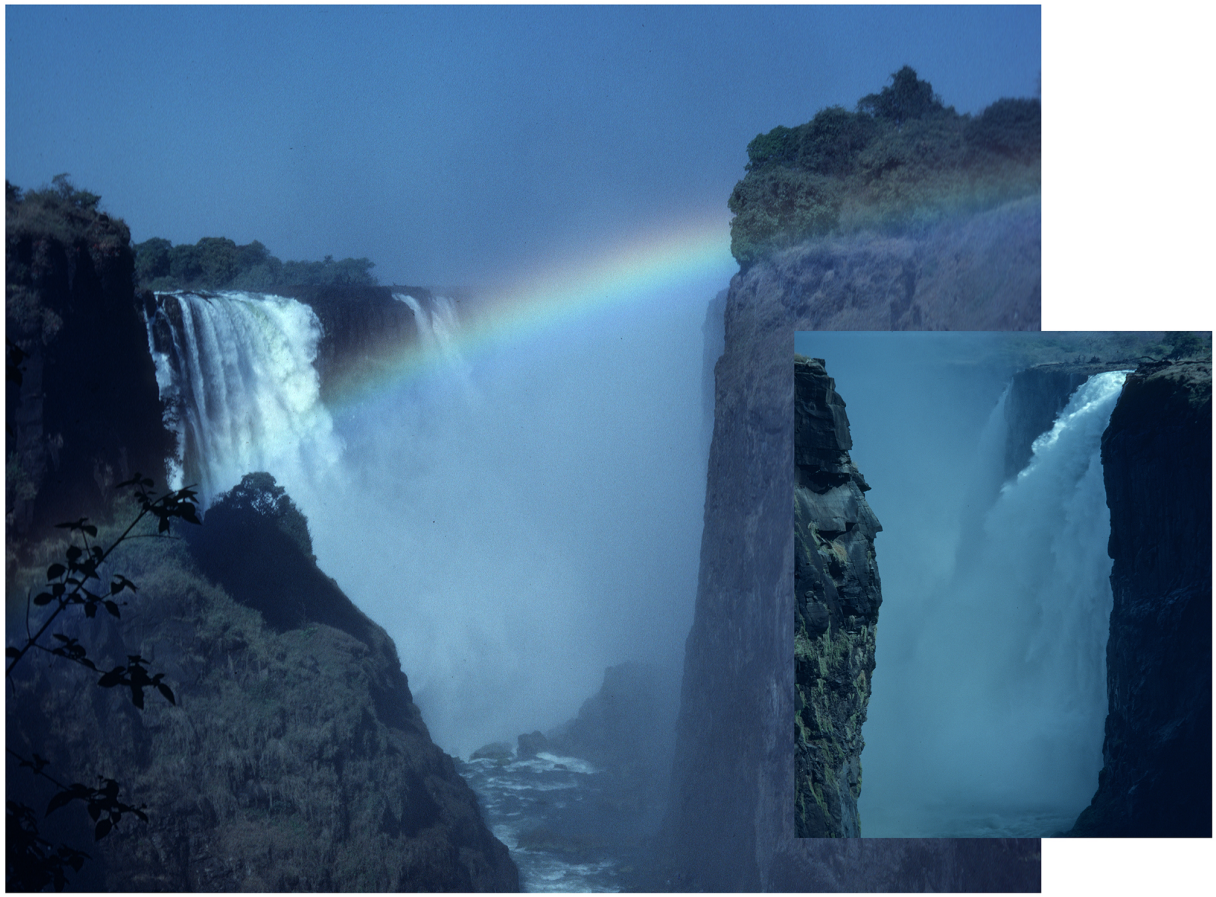


Faces in the grass (Etosha Pan).



Sunset at Ndumo Game Reserve in northern Natal on the border with Mozambique. Valley of the Pongolo River filled with mist. Inset: Zebras, Mkuzi Reserve.

Z
I
M
B
A
B
W
E



Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe Side.



African sunrises are spectacular but do not last long. Here over Dom Pan (Hwange National Park) and over Victoria Falls (from Zimbabwe side).

Giraffes drinking at sunrise and young Sables charging through the water at Dom Pan, Hwange Park.







Oxpeckers groom a big male Sable Antelope. Dom Pan, Hwange National Park.

Two large bull Sables fighting.



Cape Buffalo and Zebra, Dom Pan, Hwange.



Female Kudu tentatively approaches the water and a substantial Nile Crocodile hauls out (inset).



Wild Dogs and Giraffe at Dom Pan.



African Painted Dog (a.k.a. Wild Dog).

White Rhino with tick birds.



Roan antelope. Little Bee Eater.



Impala fighting at the edge of Dom Pan. Inset: Lilac Breasted Rollers in the surrounding thornbush.



Huge calving herds of over 100 animals are common in Hwange and nearby wilderness areas of Botswana. Bulls are most often solitary or in small groups.





After a long evening and an early day of feeding in the hot thornbush, the elephant herd rushes Dopi Pan (Hwange) in late afternoon. They crowd in to drink first, then churn up the mud and coat themselves in it to relieve insect annoyances. Often the waterhole is left a thick quagmire barely fit for other animals to drink. The dirt does settle out and the water becomes tenable by morning. In addition, the dirt that is hauled away on the elephants' bodies serves to deepen the pan, so it can hold more water when filling during the next rainy season.





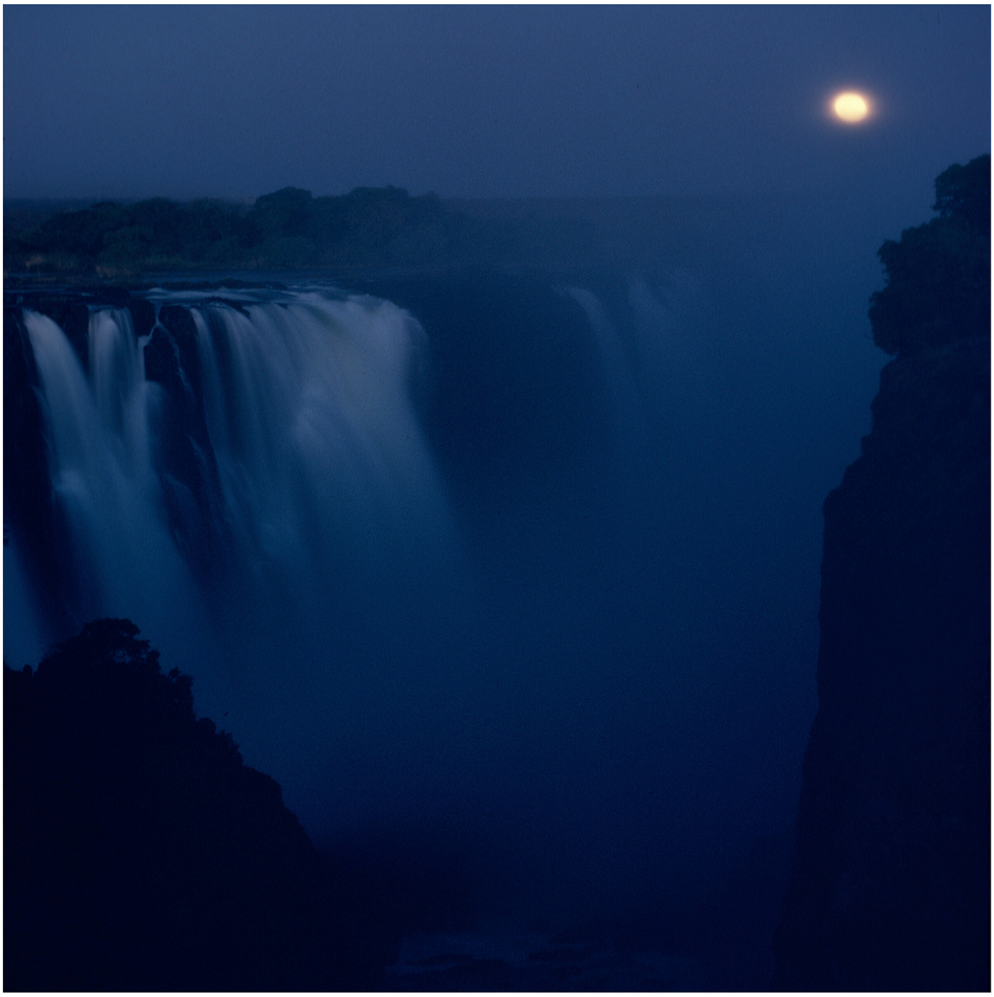
Happiness.



Dopi Pan, Hwange. Late afternoon.



The elephant cools itself by circulating blood near the surface of its huge ears.



Full-Moon rise.
Victoria Falls.



Hippos in a flood plain pool near the Kwai River.





A big male hippo charges an interloper in a shallow pool, making quite a ruckus with tusks flashing and water flying.



An African Spoonbill patrols the edges of the Okavango swamp.



Saddle Bill Stork.





A Carmine Bee Eater roost, and closeups.

Some say this is the most beautiful bird in Africa.





An Open Bill Stork meets a Cormorant on a perch overlooking the Okavango Swamp. Two Little Bee Eaters, known for catching insects on the fly (inset).



Cape Buffalo are prime prey for lions on the various tree islands of the Okavango. Gladatorial battles where a herd will protect a youngster are not uncommon.



A good perch.









Elephant antics. Watersports and a greeting (lower right).



Yellow Billed Stork and Squacco Heron.



Fish Eagles' calls and the bellowing of Hippos resonate across the Okavango.



It's not wise to get between hippo on land and water. When startled they make a mad dash for the river (upper right, Savuti Channel, Botswana). A mother and baby enjoy last light at Gcodikwe Heronry, Okavango.



Last light. Swamp grass and a tree island. Okavango.



A final sunset through the trees lining the Chobe river, Botswana. Ahh Africa!!