Botswana Wildlife Spectacular Photography Tour Report 2022

17 December 2022

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“Wow! That was all a bit intense,” came the voice from behind me in the safari Land Cruiser, after two adult male lions had torn into each other just by us, fighting tooth and claw while strands of mane hair rose like a dust-cloud above them.

There are few things as raw and elemental as witnessing a battle for dominance by Africa’s apex predator – and the sheer power of it can make the air feel charged.

Welcome to the wildlife-rich reaches of northern Botswana, where each corner-turn can reveal a different plot twist in the continually unfolding drama of nature.

We had some wonderful wildlife encounters in this year’s Wild Images Botswana tour, as we wound our way from the pristine wetlands of the Okavango Delta – where the land begins to blur with the water – through endlessly changing landscapes before reaching the Chobe River.

Among some favourite mammal sightings were the female leopard who suddenly powered up a sapling tree on a bird hunt, the adorable lion cub who made exhausting attempts to babysit a tiny newly-born fellow cub, and the herd of swimming elephants playing in the water.

As we journeyed northwards, leaving the shallow lagoons and tributaries of the delta for taller mopane and acacia woodlands, then open grasslands and forests of teak, the bird sightings remained as plentiful as they were mesmerising.

Standouts included the utterly charming courtship dance of a pair of Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills, the acrobatic displays of rollers chasing raptors, and the madcap bravery of a Helmeted Guineafowl as it ran squawking after a leopard.

And the evening where the sky was filled with Yellow-billed Kites swooping amid a swarm of flying termites was a gorgeous thing to witness.

The Tour Begins – Into the Moremi Game Reserve for the Okavango Delta

Following the short afternoon flight into Maun, our tour began at the beautiful Thamalakane River Lodge, where we’d barely even dropped our bags in the stone-and-thatch chalets before sighting a hippo in the water in front of us.

Situated right on the banks of the Thamalakane River, this peaceful lodge has lovely garden grounds, and even the shortest of walks can reveal scores of bird species.

Before meeting our group properly for dinner, a few of us had already wandered along the riverside, photographing a host of waterfowl, water birds and a kingfisher, several species of weaver and almost a dozen Peters’s Epauletted Fruit Bats that roost in the lodge’s trees.

At night, the sound of bullfrogs and hippos honking made us know we had arrived in Africa!

After breakfast the following morning, we met Lucas, who was to be our driver and highly knowledgeable local guide. Our safari vehicle was a sizable Land Cruiser that’s specially adapted for photography and wildlife-viewing with multi-socketed inverters for charging batteries, a fridge of cold drinks, beanbags for lenses, and tiered seats.

Leaving Thamalakane, we drove for a few hours before reaching the gates of Moremi Game Reserve, stopping regularly as the wildlife sightings started to mount up. We watched a Fork-tailed Drongo bugging a Wahlberg’s Eagle and had our first sightings of impala, zebra, elephants and giraffes before even reaching Moremi’s South Gate for a packed lunch.

Moremi Game Reserve protects the central and eastern flanks of the Okavango Delta – one of the world's largest inland deltas and one of Africa's most cherished Seven Natural Wonders. Moremi was the first wildlife sanctuary on the continent to be established by local residents – the Batawana people of Ngamiland, who took the bold move to declare the entire area a protected game reserve back in 1963, after becoming concerned about the declining species in their ancestral lands. The sanctuary is named after the then-Chief Moremi III and his wife, as a mark of respect.

Covering almost 5,000 square km, Moremi contains the many tributaries that spring from the Okavango River as it carves its way southwards from Angola, bringing the water that serves as the lifeblood for a staggering number of species.

This water feeds the delta's network of glistening lagoons, fertile floodplains and wooded enclaves, before finally petering out into the clay-soiled earth.

One of the truly special things about wildlife-watching in this part of Botswana is how genuinely remote it seems. In those first three days, we only passed one other vehicle and it felt as if we had this wonderful reserve to ourselves.

On arriving at the first of our four private wilderness campsites, in the Xakanaka region of Moremi, we saw that 'camping' on our tour was actually a byword for something more luxurious.

Our mobile tented camps were built, transported and attended by a team of three – BD, our waiter, KK – our continually cheerful camphand, and Life – who somehow managed to serve the kind of three-course meals on a campfire that restaurant chefs would be proud of.

Our tents themselves were big enough to stand fully upright in, with a comfortable mattress bed, fresh linen and a bedside table, a front porch mirror and 'sink' and an ensuite private bathroom, with toilet and a hot-water bucket shower.

After coffee and cookies, we headed out for our first safari, spotting a Steppe Eagle and then a cheetah sat under the shade of a tiny shrubland 'island' in the centre of a grassland plain.

One cheetah turned out to be a coalition of three – two females and one male – one with dried blood around its lips, as if the group had just eaten. We followed this coalition until the sun started to fall below the horizon, watching them group together atop a termite mound, to pick up a scent trail.

To see three magnificent cheetahs – whose estimated global numbers left in the wild have dropped to 7,000 – pass within a metre of our vehicle, was a wonderful way to begin our safari experience. As we headed back to camp for sundowner drinks around a roaring fire, and dinner, an African Wildcat shot out from the grass in front of us, topping off a fantastic evening's drive.

Following that first day, our safari drives for the rest of the tour followed a similar pattern: an early morning wake-up call, then coffee and a small breakfast, followed by a morning drive beginning at sunrise and ending at midday, or 1pm, for lunch. Our evening drive would start at 4pm and ended, mostly, when dark had fallen.

For most nights we were in Moremi, we heard lions roaring and a leopard making its classic rasping call, while lying in our tents at night. So each morning we traversed the reserve's trails in search of these big cats and anything else we might possibly come across.

One morning, we were treated to the almost comically endearing courtship dance of a pair of Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills. Consisting of a series of formal bows to each other, followed by an opening of wings and a low purring 'gakgakgak' sound, it was impossible not to be charmed.

On other drives, we watched a large troop of Chacma baboons – which included the tiniest of infant baboons hanging on to their mothers' backs – break into fights after feasting on the remains of a baby impala, tearing around our vehicle as we photographed Little Bee-eaters catching dragonflies.

Skirting the pools formed by tributaries of the Gomoti River, we watched the dominant male in a herd of Red Lechwe continually chase female members in an effort to mate – pursuing them through marsh, as water sprayed all around them. On another turn, a pair of honey badgers scampered off in front of us.

But it was in the rich grassland meadows around these shallow lagoons that many of the delta's herbivores gathered in larger herds. Antelopes such as the Greater Kudu, Common Tsessebe, Waterbuck, Blue Wildebeest, pretty Steenboks and Impala with their newborn calves mingled with Plains Zebra – while in the shallow lagoons, our first Nile Crocodiles amidst 15-strong bloats of semi-submerged hippos.

There were so many different bird sightings in the first few days in Moremi that it would be too much to list them all. Among them – the African Fish Eagle, African Openbill, several species of roller – including the insanely colourful Lilac-breasted Roller, Saddle-billed Stork, Verreaux's Eagle Owl, Magpie Shrike, Goliath Heron, African Sacred Ibis and Hadada Ibis, a large number of waterfowl species and several weaver and kingfisher species.

On one drive, what seemed like an endless parade of Southern giraffes emerged through the vegetation to cross in front of us, while journeys to the eastern reaches of the reserve – and then over to the Xini floodplain – found us sleeping hyenas, jackal, Cape buffalo and a large bull elephant spraying himself with water.

On one afternoon, while at a particularly wildlife-rich lagoon, we photographed backlit baboons as the sky slowly morphed into a gorgeous sunset – pouring golden light onto flocks of Great white pelicans and Marabou storks as they perched atop Mopane trees.

This same evening, we photographed the beautiful full moon and the last light on an impressive Baobab tree, before some of us headed out in the vehicle, after dinner, to try and photograph South African Springhare by flashlight. I found the whole thing hilarious, trying to get a shot before the springhares jumped off – kangaroo-style – towards their burrows.

But in Moremi, we started to witness the capacity of elephants to completely change the landscape. Huge areas of trees stripped bare of bark, trampled, or uprooted completely can resemble fire damage, at first glance. Botswana has the world's largest number of wild elephants and maintaining the balance between helping to conserve these phenomenal animals and the accompanying issues both for people who live in these areas and the country's natural vegetation, will continue to be a challenge.

Into Khwai – Lions everywhere and the Rainy Season shows its power

On our last morning's game drive in Moremi we found our first lions – two former Kings, now old and tired. One in particular lay looking at us, his mane dark with age and face battle-scarred. This pair had formed an alliance and were both facing their inevitable demise, although still beautiful in that way that lions will always be.

And just a few hours later, we were photographing the opposite – three lionesses and five cubs, two of which were no more than 2-3 months old, cuddled together in a big cat pile-up under the shade of a large bush.

After a lunch spent beneath the boughs of a giant tree containing a sleeping Verreaux's Eagle Owl, we continued our journey through the Khwai Community Area and over the Khwai River into the Khwai Reserve – a 200,000 hectare sprawl of pristine wilderness that lies on the north-eastern fringes of the Okavango Delta.

Along the way, the vegetation started to change as the Mopane trees grew taller and the woodland played host to more species – such as the magnificent mature Leadwood. Our new private camp was situated right on the banks of a lagoon, with African Fish Eagles, storks and herons occasionally coming into view in front of us.

And on that first night in Khwai, over dinner and campfire drinks, strikes of lightning lit up the sky in the distance.

On our first afternoon's drive at Khwai, Lucas successfully manoeuvred our vehicle across a heavily flooded road – one that we discovered had later trapped another safari vehicle. But it showed how the whole region was starting to fill with water and how – in a few month's time – the paths we used would become inaccessible.

After receiving a tip about lions, we headed across the concession for one of the loveliest encounters of our tour. A small pride of lions on the fringes of open grassland – one male, three lionesses, three cubs around the five month mark and one cub so small it could have not been more than six weeks old.

We watched as this tiny cub scampered around like an out-of-control toddler, careering here, there and everywhere. It wandered off alone into the high grass before an older cub followed to fetch it, grabbing the tiny cub's tail with its teeth in an apparent effort to get it to slow down. This older cub's continued efforts to babysit his younger counterpart, who just wouldn't stay still for one second, was very

entertaining.

At another point, we watched as this same bundle of energy first played with its dad's tail, before lying under its father's mane, batting at his face with the smallest of paws. After tolerating this for a while, the dominant male eventually gently batted the cub away.

We were so enjoying photographing this host of lion and cub interactions that we hadn't noticed the darkening sky. What followed was one of the heaviest rainfalls that I've ever experienced.

Thankfully, most of the group were wrapped in large rain ponchos – except guest Janice and I, who sacrificed ours as a double protection for the electric points as water lashed in from all sides, as if being hurled in by buckets.

The torrential rain continued for the hour's drive back to camp, by which time I looked as if I'd gone swimming in my clothes. Thankfully, thanks to the large protective rain ponchos provided in the vehicle by our safari team, not one camera or electrical item was anything other than bone-dry. The only exception being my lens extender that – in the initial chaos – had rolled out of my bag into water and, frankly, had been threatening to die for years anyway.

Safe and dry in our tents, this heavy rainfall was exhilarating, both in experiencing its force and in the knowledge that it is downpours like this that are so crucial to sustain the biodiversity and beauty of the Okavango Delta.

This same onslaught of rain continued all evening and all night. Quite how Life still managed to cook us a three course dinner – and produce a delicious chocolate cake with ganache – will forever be a mystery to me.

We managed to get out for a morning drive the next day; the recently-passed heavy rainfall enveloping the windy wooded paths and marshy clearings in mist and revealing a glimpse at entirely new wildlife behaviour.

There was the Hamerkop repeatedly hurling a frog into the air, until it managed to manoeuvre its breakfast into just the right angle to swallow it. And a Rufous-bellied Heron catching a fish in front of us. The rains had formed pools in the paths, and as a result, we managed to get incredibly close to a Tawny Eagle plucking insects from the gathered rainwater.

And then there was a Tawny Eagle, feeding on impala legs, getting continually bugged by two Yellow-billed Kites until it retreated to a nearby tree. Just as we pulled into camp for lunch, the torrential rains returned – which, while so vitally important and welcome after drought in much of Southern Africa – may have thwarted our Wild Dog sightings. But we had an atmospheric afternoon and evening in camp, swapping some stories and listening to the deafening frog chorus and the sound of a distant hyena.

Toward Savuti – Open grassland, Leopards and in search of the Marsh Pride

Leaving Khwai, we had some lovely sightings of a troop of Vervet Monkeys, and three rare Wattled Cranes.

And we had just pulled onto the sandy road that would take us towards Savuti when we saw our first leopard. We waited as she groomed herself, partially hidden in the bushes, before she fully emerged and stood stationary – in a beautiful pose on a Mopane log – before weaving her way through trees just by us and eventually melting away into the woods.

The region of Savuti signals the end of the Okavango Delta (to the east) and forms part of the Chobe National Park. It was once submerged beneath a vast inland sea – the Paleo-Lake Makgadikgadi – which gives the area such fascinating geological features. These include the Mababe Depression, wide open grasslands, a sand ridge and unusual outcrops of volcanic rock.

As we drove through the desert-like landscape of the Mababe Depression, we saw huge herds of elephants, Cape Buffalo, and zebra, while noting that the birdlife was also very different to Moremi.

One majestic bull elephant stopped so close to us – pulling up grass and looking us all in the eye, for what seemed like minutes on end – that we could also feel the warmth in his breath.

Our new woodland camp was in a forest clearing and perfect for enjoying gin and tonics while looking at the stars, in the large number of clear nights we enjoyed following the rains. At 3am, one night, I was even woken by an unmistakable earthquake – which is not completely unusual for the region.

We had some wonderful sightings in Savuti. As we drove towards our camp, we had some beautiful light on herds of elephants, including calves that looked newly born. And several encounters of Marsh Pride lions mating, where the male and female stay in each others' company for days at a time.

But without doubt, our most visceral wildlife encounter came just before sunset, on one afternoon drive, after we'd headed over to the Savuti Gate. We'd spotted a lioness lying beside a small pool of water, and then several males. One male, in particular, was standing in gorgeous light in open grassland – so we concentrated on photographing him.

This male – known as Sekoti or 'Stumpy' due to his shortened tail that had been lost in a previous fight – began approaching the female. Within seconds, another male lion, known as 'Romeo' was on his feet to challenge him.

As Sekoti neared, he first showed some signs of submission to the fellow male. But before we knew what was happening, the pair had flown at each other, standing on their back legs in a furious fight involving both jaws, claws and body weight. At one stage, 'Sekoti' was on the floor with 'Romeo' biting his head. The lions separated – before briefly tearing into each again. The fight happened so fast that it was a challenge to capture it, but, by the end, both lions looked markedly worse for wear.

After limping to the pool to drink after his duel, 'Sekoti' slumped down, having lost the fight to mate with the lioness. His only comfort was a third adult male – presumably a sibling – that nestled into his brother's shoulder and lay down in presumed commiseration beside him.

Too dark to photograph much more, we headed back to camp amid a stunning sunset and the knowledge we had witnessed something not many safari guests get to see.

It was also in Savuti that we had our best leopard sighting. We had not long finished photographing a male Kori Bustard, his chest feathers all puffed up as he strutted around in a courtship display, when we spotted a female leopard lying by the side of the tracks ahead of us.

For the next 40 minutes, Lucas did a great job of gently following her, manoeuvring our vehicle so we could photograph her but without disturbing her or her behaviour.

At one stage, she suddenly shot up a sapling tree, in an opportunistic bid to catch a bird. It's when you see behaviour like this that you realise what incredibly strong and agile climbers leopards are. But, with her hunt ending in failure, she then had the ignominy of being chased out of the meadow by a continually squawking Helmeted Guineafowl.

Continuing to wind her way silently through the woods, at one point she started to pad up a fallen tree trunk, looking as if she was about to pounce on a terrified tree squirrel – who clearly thought his days were numbered. Eventually, she slinked away, after giving us a great show of leopard behaviour.

Savuti also gave us some wonderful bird encounters, from the beautiful to the slightly grisly. There was the Tawny Eagle tearing apart a hornbill to more heartening sightings of the beautiful Rosy-throated Longclaw, Secretary Bird, Levaillant's Cuckoo and a glimpse at the brood parasite – the Long-tailed Paradise Whydah.

But for bird sightings, one afternoon drive in Savuti really stood out. We'd headed into an area of vast open grassland after spotting a large flock of birds in the distance. As we neared, we discovered scores of Yellow-billed Kites, swooping on a huge swarm of flying termites. The light was beautiful and, before long, the kites gave way to rollers and hornbills (including the less common Bradfield's Hornbill) and a Gabar Goshawk. To see this gathering of hundreds of birds, all feasting on a swarm, was mesmerising.

Just as we left the kites, we spent time photographing a flock of beautifully-coloured Southern Carmine Bee-eaters, catching them mid-flight as they chased insects, and as the sun hit their wings, making them look as if they were lit up from the inside.

The Chobe River and Swimming Elephants

I was sad to leave Savuti behind, but we needed to press on towards the Chobe River. Before leaving the area we stopped at the Gubatsa Hills 'bushman' rock paintings – San paintings of giraffe, elephant, sable and eland antelope that dated at more than 1,500 years old.

The drive towards Chobe was fascinating, both in the wildlife we saw along the way to the way the landscape again changed completely. As we neared the river, we spotted herds of elephants and antelope, a running Bat-eared Fox and a female jackal with pups.

Chobe National Park – which covers a vast area spanning almost 12,000 square km – contains one of the most varied ecosystems in Botswana, due to the diversity of forest, pan and floodplain habitats.

And with the border to Namibia so close that it felt we could almost walk over to it, the dry expanse of Savuti gave way to lush green floodplains and more broad-leaved woodland – forests of Zambezi Teak and Mahogany together with riparian woodlands of Sausage Trees, Jackalberry, palms and papyrus.

Chobe is home to the largest number of African Savanna Elephants anywhere in the world, giving it the moniker of 'Land of the Giants'. And even as we arrived at our cosy campsite in the woods, the trees were equally tall.

Checking into the Chobe park gate, we got some fantastic photographs of a male Red-headed Weaver, diligently using grass and reeds to construct the most beautiful of hanging nests.

On our first morning's game drive by the river, we came across a large herd of elephants with bulls and the youngest of calves, both on a sandy plain, and then by mud baths. We also had a hilarious encounter with a very curious baboon, who seemed intent on copying Lucas' every move – before finding duelling impalas and two large Monitor Lizards, feasting on a large fish.

That afternoon, our three-hour boat trip along the Chobe River was undoubtedly one of the tour highlights. To see a herd of elephants slide into the water, swimming and playing together, as if weightless, is undeniably impressive. Just along the bank stood a herd of almost 30 elephants – two young bulls play-fighting and more calves. It was hard to know where to point our cameras!

As we slowly floated between the river's banks, we had good sightings of hippo, Cape Buffalo, Nile Crocodile and birds ranging from the rare Slaty Egret to African Skimmers, and a host of tern, cormorant, thick-knee and heron species.

Driving back to camp for our last night with our lovely safari crew, three lionesses crossed our path. It seemed like a fitting end to what had undoubtedly been a remarkable tour for cat sightings.

So, at its last count, my bird species list hovered at the 158 mark – not bad at all for 12 days! As we pulled into Kasane, at the end of the tour – with some of the group continuing on to the mighty Victoria Falls and a few of us sadly returning home – we all agreed we'd had a wonderful time in four of Botswana's most bio-diverse, untouched and wildlife-rich regions. And I am nothing but envious of the future Wild Images groups that get to experience this phenomenal tour.