

Botswana

November 6 – 17, 2013

For the last decade, I have been privileged to travel to many locations, some of them quite exotic, to pursue my passion for observing wildlife in its natural habitat. On many of these trips, I have joined a tour that was already arranged by a tour company. While I have enjoyed each immensely, a few years back I began to wonder if I could plan and arrange such an expedition of my own.

When you join such a tour, you have no control over who will be your companions in quite close quarters for several days at a time. Most of the people that I have met under these circumstances have been excellent companions, but there have definitely been exceptions. I wanted, as far as possible, to choose my own companions. I especially wanted to invite along with me those who have the same passion for wildlife and for conservation that I do.

I knew that I wanted to return to Africa but I did not wish to return to a place that I had already visited. That let out Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa. Since I had thoroughly enjoyed all of the short novels of Alexander McCall Smith about the “Number One Ladies’ Detective Agency”, which are set in Botswana, I selected that nation for my next adventure.

Botswana is a politically stable, English-speaking nation with a progressive conservation policy. It is about the size of Texas, but has only about 2M people, making it one of the most sparsely populated nations on earth. Formerly known as “Bechuanaland”, it was a British protectorate until it became independent in 1966. At the time of independence, it was one of the poorest nations on earth. Today, it is one of Africa’s wealthiest nations, due to tourism, cattle ranching and especially diamonds. Botswana is also the location of a wildlife paradise known as the Okavango Delta.

The Okavango Delta is a 15,000 square kilometer wetland that sits right in the middle of the great Kalahari Desert. When rain falls in the highlands of Angola to the west, some water flows west to the Atlantic Ocean. The remainder flows east towards the Indian Ocean, but the hills of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa and a depression in the topography prevent it from finishing its journey. Instead, it overflows the banks of the shallow rivers, spreading over vast areas of flat, sandy plains, creating what is in effect the world's largest oasis. The waterways, channels and waterholes attract wildlife of every description, from elephants to fish.

I have made several trips to exotic places with Rockjumper Birding Tours of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. I have always had excellent service from them, but for this trip I specifically did not want to focus on birds. Birdwatchers can become more than a little obsessive about their sport, hobby, science, art, whatever you wish to call it. I wanted a more comprehensive activity that would focus on wildlife generally, not just birds.

Rockjumper's founder, Adam Riley, had recognized this situation several years previously and had addressed it by founding a sister company, Indri Wildlife Tours. Indri Tours primarily focus on mammals while certainly not neglecting birds. The primary difference is that on Indri tours, birds will be identified as they are observed while on Rockjumper tours they will be observed, indeed pursued, until they are identified, positively.

I believed that I would have better success at finding companions for the trip if I downplayed the birding aspect and emphasized the large mammals. To that end, I first invited my fellow docents at the Memphis Zoo. I was quickly gratified when Richard Mashburn and Nora Fernandez agreed to join the expedition, along with Nora's husband Al. The couple had decided that the trip would be their twenty-fifth anniversary present to themselves.

I next announced the expedition to the Memphis chapter of the Tennessee Ornithology Society. I also announced the trip on TN-birds, the TOS listserv. At the next meeting, one of the local members came up to me, asking excitedly if I had filled the trip roster. When I told him that I had

not, he exclaimed that he definitely wanted to join. To make the tour viable, I needed eight travelers and I had five already.

For several months, no one else showed much interest in the trip at all. Then one evening at a TOS meeting, the guy who had been so excited came up to me and said that he hated to tell me, but he was backing out, citing financial problems. At that point, I became so discouraged that on the way home I considered cancelling the trip altogether. But as I drove, for some reason that I will never understand, I remembered my friends George and Kay Owen. George is a birder and Kay had been a docent at the zoo. When George retired about ten years ago, they left Memphis for South Carolina.

When I returned home, I emailed them, telling them about the tour and asking if they were interested. Within a few days, Kay emailed me back that they were intrigued and after some internet discussion, they signed on. The tour complement was back to six.

It was not long after that I received another email, this one wholly unexpected. It was from Dawn Wilkins, a professor of biology at the University of Tennessee at Martin. Dawn is an avid birder who has done lots of research on avian ecology in northwest Tennessee and in Brazil and Peru as well. She had seen my notice on tn-birds and it just happened that she was on sabbatical during the fall term at UTM. Since she had always wanted to visit Africa, it seemed like great timing. After checking me out with our mutual friend at UTM, Dr David Pitts, she signed on as well.

Now we only needed one more to fill our complement. At the January zoo docent meeting, our president, Mona Miller, did a presentation on the trip that she and her daughter had made to Botswana in 2012. I don't know if that was the reason, but soon after, Mona's good friend Gina Cook signed on. Our trip was filled!

With a full complement, we could make travel arrangements. George and Kay decided to travel to South Africa a few days early to visit the beautiful area around Capetown. The rest of us all booked flights together; Memphis to Atlanta and Atlanta directly to Johannesburg.

On November 4, 2013, I went to the Memphis International Airport early. I had arranged for those of us who were travelling from there to change dollars for South African rand before we departed so as to save us some time when we arrived, tired and stressed. It happened that Southwest Airlines first ever flight arrived in Memphis that morning, so the airport was much busier than normal. I made my way through security and on to the gate to await my companions.

Dawn had driven from Martin that morning and had left her car at Gina's house. Gina's husband, Joel, had dropped them both at the airport where they met up with Al and Nora. Richard arrived soon after them. We all boarded Delta for the short flight to Atlanta. There we transferred to the international terminal for the long flight to Johannesburg.

The flight on a Boeing 777 was not just long, it was most uncomfortable, at least for those of us in tourist. Gina had wisely booked into first class. She visited us occasionally, looking rested and chipper. We were all envious.

Our flight arrived in Johannesburg in late afternoon of November 5. After clearing customs and immigration, we proceeded to baggage claim. Our contact at Indri, Shelly, had told us that we must restrict our luggage to a backpack and to one other bag that could be stowed in the tiny cargo hold of the small aircraft that would take us from Maun, our last destination in Botswana, to our first camp in the Okavango. I had carried my backpack onto the plane and stowed my new, surprisingly capacious dufflebag in the overhead. Gina and Richard had done the same, but Dawn, Al and Nora had checked their larger bags. When the carousel with the luggage from our flight stopped moving and those bags had not appeared, there was consternation, to say the least. Hurrying to Delta's luggage office in mild panic, we were all relieved to discover that the bags had been inadvertently checked all the way through to Maun. Not having the bags then was an inconvenience, but we were assured that the missing luggage would be waiting for us at the airport in Maun upon our arrival the next morning.

Shelly had sent us directions from baggage claim to the O R Tambo Hotel where we were to overnight. The hotel adjoined the airport but directional signs only confused us. We were approached by a cab driver who observed

our confusion and upon hearing our story offered to guide us. I was a bit apprehensive that we might end up in some slum surrounded by unpleasant people, so I tried to impress the cabbie, whose name was Charles, that I was really an old South Africa hand by speaking to him the only word of the Zulu language that I know. (“Yebo”, “yes”) He informed me that he was a member of the Tswana tribe, so I guess that he was not impressed very much. As we made our way from the terminal to the hotel, I noticed a Cape Crow outside one of the tall glass windows, the first bird of our expedition. Charles delivered us to the lobby of the Hotel Tambo in less than ten minutes. He suggested a gratuity of 100 rand (about \$10) and I was happy to oblige him.

There was some slight confusion about our reservations at the desk but the two very attractive clerks quickly, as the South Africans say, “sorted it out”. Richard and I quickly repaired to the room which we were to share where a shower and a change of clothes allowed us to feel human again. I took advantage of the very nice weather to sit by the pool where I began serious birding by observing Cape Wagtail and Red-eyed Bulbul.

The eight hour time change had messed our schedules but there was no denying that it was nearing the cocktail hour. I had suggested that we all meet in the dining room at seven pm local time, but everyone found their way to the bar before then. South African wines are justly world famous and my companions wasted no time sampling. While I enjoy wine, I prefer beer, especially with dinner. I had been impressed with South Africa’s favorite beer, known as “Castle”, on my first visit there in 2003. I ordered my first and repaired to the pool area just off the lobby-restaurant. My friends joined me there and we ordered dinner as darkness fell. It would have been pleasant to sit by the pool for several hours watching the stars drift overhead, but everyone was certainly jet-lagged, so we all turned in soon after dinner.

Jet-lagged and adrenaline pumped, I did not sleep well. I awoke much earlier than I had planned so rather than lie there, I went to the hotel exercise room for some time on the treadmill. I try to do thirty minutes per day, six days per week, and this would be my last opportunity for the next

ten days. Cross-country hiking in the Okavango is definitely not recommended, or even allowed, without an armed escort.

Breakfast was very nice; cereal, fruit and pastries, but we were all eager to leave for Maun. I stationed myself in what I thought would be a strategic position in the lobby to await the arrival of Lee Gutteridge, our guide from Indri Wildlife Tours.

Lee Gutteridge is a British-born South African who has authored several books about the wildlife, ecology and archeology of southern Africa, particularly of the Okavango. He served in the South African army as a tracker, tracking and locating terrorists, smugglers and poachers in the wilderness. He operates his own business of training wildlife guides and trackers. At the time of our meeting, he was a week or so short of his 40th birthday.

Lee is a medium sized man with a buzz cut, an affable manner and a ready smile. After checkout, he escorted us back through the maze of Oliver Tambo International Airport, Africa's busiest and, someone said, its largest. As we negotiated its many levels and terminals, we met George and Kay who had just arrived from Capetown. We finally made our way to the international terminal where we awaited the announcement of our departure on South African Airways to Maun.

When our flight was called, we boarded a bus for a circuitous ride to our aircraft. I noticed that the young man next to me was wearing a Baton Rouge, LA, souvenir T-shirt. When I asked him about it, he replied that he and his fiancé were Italians who had been visiting family in Louisiana and were now en route to Botswana to visit his mother who ran a tourist lodge somewhere in the Okavango. It seemed quite an international family.

The two hour flight to Maun was uneventful but we were very pleased to arrive. After we worked our way through customs and immigration, Nora, Al and Dawn went in search of their errant luggage, which they found secure and safe. Lee was surprised and gratified to meet another tour guide with whom he had collaborated on a book and who he had not seen in a few

years. They had little time to visit, since our aircraft were waiting to take us to our first camp deep in the Okavango.

Lee did single out two young men whom he introduced as the Reed brothers. They were the operators of the local tour company who would handle our logistics in the bush. Lee said that they and their father had come to Botswana from South Africa several years previous to start the company. They operated six four man crews through their Letaka Tours company. Letaka, in the Setswana language, means “reed”.

The sunshine of Johannesburg had been replaced by a cool overcast as we made our way down the tarmac to the two six-seater Australian GA8 aircraft that were to transport us to Xanakaxa, the entrance to the Moremi Game Reserve, where we were to spend our first three nights. I understood immediately why our luggage had size restrictions. The tiny cargo holds in the aircrafts’ bellies appeared only about large enough to hold a regulation size coffin.

Richard and Al, who are pilots, received pride of place in the right front seats of the airplanes while the rest of us squeezed into the rear. As we taxied our way to the end of the runway, we flushed a pair of Crowned Lapwings, shorebirds who live in monogamous pairs and prefer dry grasslands to the seashore. We also observed several Lilac-breasted Rollers, Botswana’s national bird, perched on fence-posts and bushes. These beautiful birds, which are a little larger than an American Robin, perch conspicuously on tree stubs and fence posts from which they sortie out to catch insects on the wing or lizards, mice or bugs on the ground. They have a long, divided, turquoise-blue tail which they spread in flight, dark blue and turquoise wings, tan back, turquoise crown and belly, white forehead and delicate lavender breast, from which they get their name.

We took off into a cloudy sky, circling over dry pastures where goats and cattle grazed. Cattle are not just important to Botswana’s economy, they are an integral part of the culture of its people. Cattle are a measure of wealth and a good judge of cattle is held in high esteem.

As we flew north, I noticed below us a line on the ground, stretching arrow-straight to the horizon. Lee told me that it was a buffalo fence, built by the government to keep disease-carrying, not to mention dangerous, Cape Buffalo, as well as other wildlife, separated from areas where livestock are grazed. The fences are controversial, because they have disrupted some ancient hoofed animal migration patterns, but they seem to work well for the purpose for which they were intended.

Once past the buffalo fence, the land below us became greener, with standing pools of water and meandering watercourses between flat, dry-looking islands. Looking straight down, I noticed black dots on the ground that became herds of buffalo and even elephants. It was Wild Africa, once again!

The flight to Xanakaxa, the gateway to the Moremi Game Reserve, took about 30 minutes. As we approached the earthen runway, I noticed a herd of antelope running madly away from the sound of the engine overhead. They were Impala and Red Lechwe, the two predominant antelope species of the Okavango.

When we landed, we were met by our Letaka Tours safari car and its redoubtable driver, Shadreck Tshanga. Both are well worthy of description. The safari car was a 4WD Toyota Land Cruiser that had been modified for tourism in the deep African bush. Instead of a tailpipe, the exhaust was directed straight from the motor to the outside by a curved tube that extended about three feet above the hood and pointed forward. This allowed the vehicle to ford quite deep water without stalling out. The entire cab had also been removed. Behind the right-hand side driver's and the left front passenger's seats were two more seats, raised about twelve inches above those in front. Between those seats sat a picnic cooler which had a motor that was connected to the car engine. This kept drinks such as water, soda, even beer and wine, cool, if not cold, for most of the day. There was also a power strip that stayed busy recharging camera batteries and cell phones. Behind and another twelve or so inches above these were another three seats, with another three similarly placed behind them, providing a mostly unobstructed forward view. A steel frame held a canvas cover in

place that kept off the intense sun and whatever rain might be encountered. Our usual protocol was to dispense with the cover early in the day, allowing much better viewing, and replace it at our morning rest stop before the sun grew too hot. There was only one door, the driver's. Everyone else had to climb the side steps and running board to clamber over the sides to board. There was a two-wheeled, canvas-topped trailer to transport our "non-carry-on" luggage.

In order to ensure that everyone got a good view and that no one was restricted to the swaying and bouncing of the rear seats, we instituted a rotation system, whereby everyone moved daily. The prize was the front passenger seat and everyone who wanted it got a turn for a day.

Shadreck Tshanga is a tall, slender man with a shy smile who looks like he might be high school basketball coach. Each day, he wore a khaki safari suit which was always immaculately clean. On his head was a wide-brimmed hat made of buffalo hide. The hat band featured a buffalo hide medallion with "ROUGE" stamped on it. As one who knows the relationship between a man and a great hat, I was intensely envious.

As driver and local guide, Shadreck was ultimately responsible for the expedition. He was also commander of the three man ground crew, which we would meet later that day. As good a guide and tracker as Lee was, he had no advantage over Shadreck. The two conferred on everything, whether it was the identification of a bird song or the age and sex of an elephant that they were tracking.

As local guide, Shadreck's most important responsibility was the safety of everyone on the expedition. While the airplane pilots and Lee stowed our luggage in the trailer, Shadreck, whose name was quickly shortened to "Shaq", completed necessary paperwork at the headquarters building of the Moremi Game Reserve, which also served as the airstrip office. It was most vital that as many tourists checked out of the reserve as entered it.

While we waited for the bureaucracy to be satisfied, we began noticing the wildlife. Two common bird species, Burchell's Starling and Red-billed

Hornbill, and our first ground-viewed mammal, a Tree Squirrel, made their first of many appearances.

Once the paperwork was complete, we all clambered into the vehicle for the drive to our first camp.

In the Okavango, there are no real roads, only jeep tracks in the sandy soil. Occasionally, there will be a concrete pillar with an arrow pointing to some particular destination and an estimate of the distance to get there, but mostly the guides rely on their extensive experience of the wilderness to get where they want to go.

Our route led through a mopani forest, multi-trunked trees which only rarely grew higher than about eight feet. At least in that part of the Okavango they seldom grew higher because of constant browsing by elephants. All around us were birds and not a few mammals, particularly Impala. These beautiful antelope are as common as White-tailed Deer in North America. Large-eyed and slender, the rams sport ringed, lyre-shaped horns. The dominant rams maintain harems of thirty to forty ewes. Young rams form bachelor herds where they practice the fighting skills that will one day allow them to challenge the herd ram. Occasionally, they try to sneak into the harems for a quick mating.

Impala are among the most graceful of creatures, executing tremendous leaps when fleeing anything that frightens them. However, as we rattle-boned our way through the forest, very few of them did so. Having become used to tourist vehicles, most merely sauntered out of the way with hardly a disinterested glance.

There were birds all around us, all of which were new and exotic. Lee called a halt when we came upon a thrush-like little species, black with a white throat and wing patches. It was an female Arnot's Chat which Lee said was endemic to the Okavango.

We also came quite close to a small herd of Common Waterbuck, which Gina promptly nick-named the "Toilet-seat Antelope". Waterbuck are strangely Wapiti-like with their dark grayish-brown coats and large heads. Surrounding their rump is a circular patch of white hair which probably

serves as a warning flash to other Waterbuck, but which makes Gina's appellation absolutely on target. But like all antelope and no deer, the horns of the male do not branch. They are very timid, even for antelope and never stray far from water whence they flee when frightened. But even they took very little notice of us.

Emerging from the forest, we found ourselves in a clearing in the center of which was a classic African water hole. As we approached, we spooked another herd of antelope that scattered out of our way. Although Impala were the most numerous antelope species in the Okavango, a close second were these Red Lechwe. These creatures are a little larger than the Impala, have redder coats and their rumps are distinctly higher than their withers. They are especially adapted to the swampy Okavango, having long, splayed hooves which spread apart to bear their weight on muddy ground. They also sport shaggy beards that serve to wick water away from their faces as they splash through the mud.

The waterhole was surrounded by hundreds of water birds. The most distinctive were a pair of Saddle-billed Storks, large wading birds with black heads, wings, backs and tails and white bodies. Their enormous bills are alternately red, black and red with the eponymous "saddle" at the base a bright yellow. There were also handsome Yellow-billed Storks; delicate, long-legged Black-winged Stilts and a raft of Cape Teal, grayish-brown with lipstick-pink bills; Hottentot Teal, cream with dark wings, dark caps, powder-blue bills and a dark mark on the cheek; Red-billed Teal sporting the eponymous bill, cream and brown body with broad cream cheek patches and Yellow-billed Ducks, larger, grayer and with, not unsurprisingly, yellow bills.

In the center of the waterhole what I first took to be a stump or a log quickly resolved itself into the head of a moderately sized Nile Crocodile. I gained new appreciation for the camouflage skills of these ancient hunters.

On the far side of the waterhole were three men, waving and calling "Welcome!" They were our camp crew; Doonga, our cook, Duke, our waiter and Mullah, whose exact duties I never quite understood. They had set up

our camp on what passes for high ground in the Okavango, overlooking the waterhole.

The camp was arranged in a rough semi-circle around our mess tent and the spot selected for our morning and evening camp fires. There were six tents, about 6' x 8' by 7' high, each with a zippered front and a fly for shade and rain protection. The tents were floored to keep out unpleasant crawling things. There was a zippered rear entrance which led to a sort of canvas-enclosed courtyard half of which was floored with a slightly raised mat. Suspended above the mat was a five gallon metal bucket whose bottom was fitted with a spigot and faucet. The bucket could be lowered to allow it to be filled with hot water for showering. There was also a table for soap, toothbrushes and other toiletries.

Each tent was furnished with a small table, one or two cots and a battery operated LED light fixture that was more than adequate for reading at any hour. Under the front fly was a camp chair and collapsible basin that was filled with hot water for washing and shaving at 5:15 am.

In the far left-hand corner of the courtyard was a raised plastic apparatus with a large circular hole in the top which sat over a hole about three feet deep. There was a round plastic ring which fitted over the hole and a plastic cover that could (and should) have been fitted over the whole when not in use. Next to the apparatus was a roll of toilet paper and a bucket filled with sand and a garden trowel.

My tent was on the left end, next was Richard's, then Al and Nora's, then George and Kay's, then Dawn and Gina's with Lee's at the far end. A wall of shrubby vegetation separated the crew area where their tent, Shaq's tent, the camp kitchen and the 2.5 ton supply truck with its water filtration system stayed.

The sun was westering into the swamp behind the camp, so while Doonga and Mullah transported our gear to our tents, Duke, Shaq and Lee introduced us to a wonderful South African custom known as a "sundowner". Orders were taken for liquid refreshments which were served around the safari car while the camp tables in the mess tent were set for

dinner. Wine, soda, gin and tonic, water and my own favorite, beer, cold and refreshing, came from the cooler. Thus fortified we adjourned to our tents to prepare for dinner.

I don't know if the old stories of the British wearing tuxedos and evening gowns to dinner in the African bush are true, but needless to say, we did not emulate them. A quick wash and comb was enough preparation.

The mess tent was about twenty feet by twenty feet by seven feet high. There were poles at all four corners and a pole in the middle supporting the tent roof. A ground sheet kept us out of mud and dust. Two folding tables with animal print table cloths sat on one side of the center pole, providing places for five diners on each side. On the other side of the center pole and just beneath the roof were two more tables supporting the buffet line. A cooler with beverages (other than coffee) sat on the ground cloth at the end of the serving table. Meals were self-service, except for desserts. Kerosene lanterns and candles, along with head lamps, provided light.

The beef industry is very important in Botswana; in fact, the nation supplies much of the beef for all of Africa. I had had some trepidation about this fact, since I was less than six months past an open heart surgery which had necessitated a drastic change in my mostly red meat diet. Our first meal was a chicken, rice and squash stew that proved delicious. We were served quite a bit of beef but chicken was often the featured item of the menu. This was quite a surprise because in Botswana, chicken is more expensive than beef.

The night sky over Africa is never less than wondrous, so with a late-rising moon we all strolled to the edge of camp after dinner so Lee could point out stars. Of course, we most wanted to see the Southern Cross, but Lee said that it would only be visible after midnight. I was too tired to stay up for it, but Gina and Kay lingered at the dying campfire for conversation with Lee. They were all surprised when an Acacia Rat wandered into camp. They marveled at its tameness before it climbed an acacia tree and disappeared into the dark.

As tired as I was, sleep proved elusive. All night, I could hear the laughter of hyenas, the roaring of lions and the honking of hippos in the dark. Surprisingly, the hippos concerned me the most, first because hippos are the most dangerous large animals in Africa, responsible for the deaths of more people than lions, leopards, hyenas and elephants combined and second because their grunts seemed to come from the swamp directly behind my tent! In the morning, Shaq reported that he had found hippo tracks just outside camp. As disconcerting as were the night sounds, I know that the real reason for my wakefulness was that I was once again in Wild Africa.

It was barely daylight when Duke brought around hot water for shaving and clean up. After dressing, I adjourned to the newly re-kindled campfire where cowboy coffee was warming in the ashes. While it was not one of the incredibly rich local brews of Kenya or Tanzania, I was drinking it in Africa, surrounded by friends and poised for adventure.

Lanterns had been set all around camp but they had all gone out as I made my way to the mess tent for sugar. I promptly tripped over one of the guy wires, fortunately maintaining my footing, but I immediately demanded that a white cloth be attached to all tent guy wires.

I was pouring my second cup when Lee emerged from his tent, gesturing over his shoulder to “Look at that!” Everyone turned to observe a half dozen Angola Giraffes advancing cautiously on the waterhole. For as long as I can remember, the giraffe family had contained only two species, the “Giraffe” and the Okapi, a short-necked version that lives only the deep jungles of central Africa. But all giraffes are not alike, differing markedly in coat color, spot shape, number of “horns” and some other characteristics depending upon where they live. Only recently have taxonomists divided the “giraffe” into six or so separate species.

The newly-promoted-to-species-rank Angola Giraffe looks very much like the Reticulated Giraffe that I am familiar with at the Memphis Zoo. But the spots of its coat are quite pale in comparison to that of the rich chestnut of the Reticulated Giraffe and the base color between the spots is whiter than the cream of the Reticulated species.

When giraffes drink, they must splay their front feet wide apart to reach the water that can be fifteen feet below the height of their head. This makes them particularly vulnerable to attack from behind by lions, their only real predator. They are naturally especially wary at waterholes. They have special physiological adaptations to their circulatory systems that allow them to raise and lower their heads rapidly without passing out. While lions are their most immediate threat, they are perhaps more vulnerable to crocodiles who can grab a nose and pull them down in a flash, either to drown or to suffer a fatal leg or neck fracture. I wondered if they were aware of the croc in our waterhole.

If you pressed me, I guess that I would have to admit that giraffes are my favorite animals. As much as I wanted to get closer to these amazing creatures, I know how dangerous they can be. I knew someone who was killed by a giraffe, the only fatality ever recorded at the Memphis Zoo.

Breakfast was cereal, with bananas and cold milk and warm toast. Our bread was baked daily in a Dutch oven and it was invariably delicious. I had to skip the butter but apricot jam from South Africa made a great finish.

After breakfast, we started our first real drive. At dusk, the waterhole had been descended upon by great numbers of Marabou Storks. Many birds are extremely beautiful, many others are quite plain-looking and a few are downright ugly. The Marabou Stork is one of these.

Larger than a Great Blue Heron, its wings and body are dark grey. Its head is bare but usually covered with a frizz of down feathers like an older businessman who can't let himself accept the fact that he would look better if he shaved his head completely. The bald head permits the stork to stick its head into carcasses of the large animals that it scavenges without becoming matted with gore. A huge, murderous-looking bill allows it to pull off large hunks of meat as well as to drive away the vultures who compete with it for the spoils. A huge, pendulous, bare crop where it stores the scraps that it collects serves to make its appearance just that much more bizarre and repellant. Gathered in a loose flock around the waterhole, they suggested to me a conference of morticians.

We began our morning drive by observing the giraffes that surrounded our camp like moving watchtowers. The swampy areas were filled with herds of Red Lechwe and Impala and we also found a Common Reedbuck, about Impala sized but with shorter horns that curved gracefully forward.

There were also many interesting birds; Stonechats, a Bearded Woodpecker and a Fork-tailed Drongo; robin-sized and glossy black with divided tail, fierce red eye and the attitude of a guy who has gotten drunk in biker bar on his way home from his first karate lesson.

At any time, there may be a couple of dozen safari cars operating out of any number of campsites in the Moremi. The guide/drivers are all on the same radio frequency, which allows them to notify each other if an interesting wildlife sighting occurs and its location. We had been following the tracks of a pack of African Wild Dogs, a species that we were all most eager to observe, when a radio call came in from another car. A Leopard had been spotted (no pun) not far away. Lee told us that we would see lots of wild dogs, but that a chance of a Leopard sighting should not be missed.

We left the troop of Vervet Monkeys that we had been observing to head for the location where the Leopard was being reported. When we arrived, we found a large herd of Cape Buffalo and safari cars that seemed almost as numerous.

The Leopard was sitting quite unconcernedly on a branch of a sausage tree. These trees grow straight and tall in the African savanna with thick branches that grow nearly perpendicular from the trunk. Leonard Stembela, the magnificent guide/driver who had driven me in Tanzania, had told me to look for Leopards in sausage trees. The strong, nearly level limbs make excellent resting and lookout positions.

The buffalo had evidently driven the Leopard into the tree where he seemed more than comfortable. A full grown buffalo is more than a match for a Leopard and this one was quite content to let the herd mill about beneath him until they moved on.

I told Lee that I had never taken a decent photograph of a Leopard and really wanted one. Lee guided Shaq as he maneuvered the car to a position

where we could get a good look and some excellent pictures. I got a close-up that I consider one of the best that I have ever made.

When we had left the camp that morning, Lee had pointed out the last few bones of a baby elephant that had died a few weeks back. The bones were in a sandy open spot just off the jeep trail. When we returned to camp for lunch, I noticed something near the carcass. Drawing nearer, it proved to be a Side-striped Jackal.

Jackals are small canines that are the African equivalent of coyotes. They are primarily scavengers, cleaning the bones of dead large animals and hunting the tall grass for insects, rodents and birds' nests. The Side-striped Jackal is larger and darker than the Black-backed Jackal and has a white tail tip. The species is much less common than the Black-backed Jackal, so we were lucky to find it.

Lunch of curried chicken, green salad and the wonderful fresh bread in the mess tent was followed by relaxation. Some napped, others, such as me, settled into a camp chairs to read in the shade of the tent flies. I had brought a half dozen paperback murder mysteries to read during down times.

Reading was, in fact, very difficult because something was always going on. I had just settled in with my first book when a flock of Blue Waxbills dropped in beside me. These tiny birds are dull tan above and sky-blue underneath. They travel in small groups called "charms", searching the ground for seeds. I tried to maneuver my camera around to get a decent photograph but the results were not up to standard.

Three o'clock brought tea-time in the mess tent, with cookies, tea or other beverages. At 3:30, we loaded the car for our afternoon drive.

As we drove back into the bush, the cars often scattered pairs of small ground birds that looked like quail. These were Swainson's and Red-billed Francolin's. They are ubiquitous in the Okavango, especially in open sandy locations.

Once we entered the forest, we began to encounter Greater Kudu. These magnificent animals are about the size of a quarter horse, the males being larger than the females. Their coat color is light brownish-gray offset by vertical white pin-stripes, which serve to break up their outline and hide them in sun-dappled bush. An erect mane runs from between the ears to the base of the tail. Their mobile ears are huge, catching every sound of possible danger. The males sport incredible spiral horns which can be up to four feet long.

Cisticolas are sparrow-sized little brown birds that inhabit grasslands all over Africa and Asia. All species look pretty much alike so it is very difficult to tell them apart unless you have them in hand. But they all have distinctly different songs. There are Chirping, Croaking, Rattling, Wing-snapping, Tinkling, Singing and my favorite, the Zitting Cisticola, as well as many other species. The species most often encountered is the Rattling Cisticola whose eponymous song can be heard from almost every patch of tall grass.

We also found the Coppery-tailed Coucal. Coucals are nearly crow-sized relatives of cuckoos who build their own nests and raise their own young. Coppery-tailed Coucals' tails are actually black but do have a coppery sheen. They are creamy-white underneath with black nape and head and rufous wings. We saw at least one every day that we were in the bush.

Another species that we observed every day was the handsome Magpie Shrike. Its body is about the size of a robin, but its tail is about four times its body length. It is all black except for white patches on the wings. It travels in small flocks hunting insects.

Another shrike that is not so spectacular but still strikingly beautiful is the Crimson-breasted Bush-shrike. The one that we observed sat tamely next to the car to allow itself to be admired and photographed. Its brilliant crimson breast contrasted sharply with its black head, body, wings and tail.

The late afternoon sun heated the ground and air, causing thunderheads to form. Lightning flashed, thunder rumbled and some light rain fell as we searched for wildlife. We saw our first zebras and an occasional solitary bull elephant strolled unconcernedly in the distance.

The Great Migration of wildebeest on the Serengeti and Masai Mara of east Africa is one of the great wildlife spectacles of the world. There are wildebeest in the Okavango but nowhere near the great herds of Tanzania and Kenya. We found a small herd on a grassy open where a bull had established a territory, attracting a small harem of cows. A few younger bulls were in the process of challenging the dominant bull for possession of both the territory and the cows. The challenger and the territory holder would face each other, snorting and pawing the ground, then rush forward, dropping to their knees and locking horns. The champion easily had the best of it, quickly vanquishing the challenger, but as soon as one was seen off another would try his luck. Then the champion would have to run around his territory rounding up errant cows and chasing off their persistent suitors.

As day's end approached, we found a small lake where we stopped for sundowners. Shaq parked the car just a few meters from the water's edge as males and females scattered to find sufficient cover on opposite sides of the vehicle. The lowering sun lit up the banks of thunderheads in the west as we proceeded to enjoy wine, soda and Hansa beer. I became a bit nervous as it became apparent that the lake was quite infested with hippos and that our parking place was right on the path that they used to travel to their nightly grazing grounds. Nevertheless, we watched the magnificent African sunset, enjoyed our wine, beer and gin and tonics and simply marveled that we all were in Africa.

Dinner was excellent, squash soup followed by beef stew, and I had hoped that we might enjoy some more stargazing afterwards, but the day's clouds lingered long after sunset. And I think everyone was well satiated and tired after such an exciting day.

There were showers during the night, the rain pattering on the tent roof making for excellent sleeping. It also made for a much cooler morning. A pair of African Fish Eagles had joined the Marabou and Yellow-billed Storks, shorebirds and ducks at our waterhole, sitting regally in a tree overlooking the camp. These beautiful and vocal birds, white with chestnut breasts and black and chestnut wings, have been called "the voice of

Africa”. Their piercing double-noted calls can be heard almost anywhere but especially near water.

Our morning’s route led us to a more open area than the previous day’s, with scattered waterholes and wetlands. A very large herd of Cape Buffalo blundered across the track that we were using, so we stopped to observe these massive beasts. Cape Buffalo are really no more than large, bad-tempered, not terribly bright beef cattle, but it cannot be denied that there is a definite air of menace about them. All black, with the males’ massive twisted horns joined together at the base in the thickened “boss” that covers the top of the skull, impenetrable to any light grained bullet, their massed numbers are a palpable threat to anything that gets in their way.

After watching the passage of a fairly large herd, we came upon a small wetland where an African Darter waited for small fish and a Long-tailed Cormorant dried its wings after a swim. In the reed-choked shallows, we found a bird that I knew from the Tropical Bird House at the Memphis Zoo. It was a Black Crake, robin-sized and stubby-tailed, all-black with a bright red eye-ring, yellow bill and carmine-red feet. It was searching the water plants for insects, looking very much like a Smoo from the Li’l Abner comic strip.

We came to an area of higher ground with scattered bushes and trees where we encountered a herd of Tsessebees. These are members of the hartebeest tribe of antelope; with long narrow faces and short lyre-shaped horns. Their coats are a rich, almost purplish chestnut. The narrow faces allow them to reach down through tall grass to access low-growing fresh, tender young shoots close to the ground. Their shoulders are distinctly higher than their rumps which gives them an ungainly appearance as they gallop over the savanna but they are accounted among the swiftest of Africa’s hoofed mammals.

Tsessebes are social creatures, but unlike impala and lechwe, they do not form large, compact herds. They tend to spread out over the savanna as scattered individuals. There were several calves in the scattered herd that we observed, romping and gamboling like lambs in a pasture.

The Tsessebes were feeding on a grassy savanna near the waterholes and we soon left them for a drier area where the grass was more sparse. This provided us with sightings of two bird species that we had not observed previously, Capped Wheatear and Rufous-naped Lark. The wheatear is buffy above and lighter underneath, like so many open country bird species, but with a distinctive black face and breast stripe surrounding a white throat. It was perched on an elephant dropping, surveying its surroundings for flying insects or danger. The lark was the first of many of its species that we observed, the most common of Africa's many lark species.

We also found a small flock of Temminck's Coursers. These are odd shorebirds who live in very dry habitats. They are very beautiful robin-sized birds with long legs, tan wings, a broad white line over the eye and a rufous cap. They run about nervously searching for insects, stopping frequently to stand on tiptoe as if searching the horizon for danger.

There was precious little shade in that part of our exploration area, so it took Shaq a little time to find a tree that provided a sufficient amount for our morning break. When one was finally spotted, we were deterred for a moment by a raptor soaring overhead. It was a Bataleur, an eagle that is primarily black, but with a chestnut back; boldly patterned black and white wings and carmine-red feet and bare face. Its tail is remarkably short, almost non-existent. "Bataleur" means "acrobat" in French and refers to its habit of rocking gently side-to-side as it soars on long and narrow wings, reminiscent of the balance pole carried by a tightrope walker.

While each of our respective sexes sought a privacy bush, Shaq and Lee broke out the biscuits (cookies), water and soda. The sun was now blazing hot, so we all pitched in to secure the canvas cover over the passenger compartment before we pulled out.

From the near-desert location where we took our rest break, we moved quickly, almost perceptibly, into an area of lush, green vegetation. Water had collected in a slight depression, attracting water birds such as Black-winged Stilt, African Jacana and Common Greenshank. The waterhole and the surrounding grassland, mowed like a lawn by millions of grazing

animals, looked for all the world like a golf course with an attendant water hazard.

Scattered around the grassland were several shrubby star-apple trees, whose branches hung to the ground making the tree look like a green, leafy pincushion. These trees are unpalatable to elephants, so they don't show the damage of the tastier Mopani and acacia trees. Whatever discourages the elephants does not seem to bother other browsers because one bush was playing host to no less than four magnificent kudu bulls. They eyed us warily before deciding that we were of no real consequence.

Our attention to the kudu and to the birds did not go unnoticed by another set of tourists whose safari car pulled up on the other side of the waterhole. The kudu paid them no more attention than they did to us, but it was not long before some other visitors arrived that caused more commotion. From the surrounding Mopani forest, a small herd of elephants emerged. The kudu became more alert at their presence as did a few nearby tsessebe and a couple of giraffes. All of the hoofed mammals began an orderly movement away from the "golf course" as a lone Spotted Hyena emerged from the forest.

A lone hyena is no threat to kudu or tsessebe, much less to a giraffe or elephant. They might well have been concerned that the rest of the pack was somewhere about, but it may be that they were just tired of being gawked at by two cars full of tourists.

As we proceeded back to camp, we passed a small lake. Shaq screeched to a halt when a Nile Monitor, Africa's largest species of lizard, scurried out of some papyrus on its shore. The big reptile kept pace with us for fifty meters or so, seemingly reluctant to dive into the water where it would have been safe.

By this, our second day, everyone had pretty much decided that midday was the best time for the daily shower. Mullah brought buckets of hot water to each tent while Duke set the tables in the mess tent and Doonga finished preparation of our lunch. All of the baking was done right in camp and the

daily fresh, hot bread was a highlight of the expedition. And it made wonderful toast for the next morning's breakfast.

After the excellent lunch of ground beef in pita bread and Greek salad with feta cheese, tomatoes, onions and cucumbers, we settled in for our afternoon break. This could encompass reading, laundry, napping or strolling about near camp. I usually spent time reading, completing six entire murder mysteries for the trip.

Three o'clock was tea time in the mess tent, with cookies, tea or soda, followed by climbing into the safari car for the afternoon game drive. The showers of the previous afternoon bid fair to re-occur with thunderheads piling up on the horizon and the occasional flash of lightning.

We were following a jeep track which had created a slight depression, no more than six inches deep. As we approached, we noticed a pair of Little Bee-eaters flying frantically across our path. These beautiful birds are about the size of a robin. They are mostly emerald green with chestnut wings and tail, yellow throat and black collar and eye line. Bee-eaters are hole nesters who excavate their nests in vertical earth banks. As we slowly approached them, we realized the reason for their distress. There was a tiny hole in the side of the jeep track that was the entrance to their nest. We left them alone as quickly as we could pass by.

The lowering clouds that had concerned us since leaving camp were soon joined by an even more ominous phenomenon, a towering pillar of smoke. Lee said that farmers and ranchers on Chief Island, on the southern edge of the Okavango, were burning off last year's grass to promote fresh growth for their livestock. It was also possible that a lightning strike had started a wildfire there.

We were a bit surprised and more than a little disappointed that there seemed to be so few animals around. We did find a Levaillant's Cuckoo, a fairly large, long-tailed bird that is black above and white below with a streaked throat and a head crest. It is named for an eccentric 18th Century French naturalist and explorer.

The showers that we had so far dodged finally caught up with us just as we came upon a herd of Burchell's Zebras, the national symbol of Botswana. About thirty of these striking black and white equines watched us unconcernedly as the rain pattered on our canvas roof. Only a mare and her foal gave us much attention.

As the rain slacked off, we followed a family of Southern Ground Hornbills as they searched the tall grass for insects and mice. These turkey-sized, all black birds with bare, bright red faces are too large to use the sealed crevice nest strategy of other hornbill species, opting instead to nest and raise their young in burrows. The mated pair had not yet shed themselves of their nearly full grown fledglings.

As they made their way through the grass, I was reminded that some native African hunters wear Ground Hornbill head headdresses when they stalk game animals in similar habitats.

Shaq's sharp eyes picked up a dark figure lying on a patch of open, slightly raised ground quite a distance away. Moving closer, we discerned that it was a Spotted Hyena, a female with two rambunctious cubs playing near her. The cubs rolled and scrapped while the indulgent mother lolled near the den entrance, perhaps waiting for sundown to send her offspring underground before joining the rest of her clan for their nightly hunt.

We watched the hyena family for quite a while, during which time the rain stopped. We had sundowners on our minds when the radio crackled. Lions had been spotted by another safari group not too far away.

Every tourist group wants to see lions, but there is often not that much to see, unless they are hunting. It is a major cliché of the safari business to see a dozen or so safari cars completely surrounding a pride of lions that are all fast asleep. Still, we had not observed any so far, so Shaq steered us in that direction.

Every nature program that I have ever seen and every book that I have ever read about lions has emphasized that they live in family groups called prides, in which a number of related females are accompanied by one or more males who sire the pride cubs. When male cubs reach puberty, the

pride male or males drive them out so that they cannot mate with their female relatives or even worse, challenge their fathers for dominance.

The lions that we found that afternoon had obviously not seen any of those programs or read any of those books. There were three of them; a fully maned adult male, a single lioness and a nearly grown young male whose mane was just coming in. I was shocked to see such a demonstration of domestic bliss as this unlikely family exhibited. The male seemed totally enamored of his single consort. More surprisingly, he not only tolerated the presence of the younger male, but seemed to enjoy his company, rubbing heads and rolling about playfully with him and the female in the tall grass.

The gathering twilight signaled that we must leave this unusual family party and head for camp. It is illegal to be out after dark in African wildlife reserves, not to mention dangerous, especially when lions are around.

The camp crew reported that the rain, which had been only a minor inconvenience for us, had hit the camp pretty hard. Accordingly, we lingered over our sundowner which became a cocktail hour in the mess tent. Beer, wine and gin & tonic were the prelude to awesome pork cutlets, sweet potatoes and cauliflower and cheese casserole, followed by crème-filled cake roll.

As the rain fell gently, we lingered in the mess tent after dinner while Lee regaled us with stories of some of his previously guided safari clients. His most favorite had been King Juan Carlos of Spain, whom he had mistaken for the bartender and who had graciously made him a drink and his least favorite had been Bill Gates, whom he described as a rude jerk.

I was awake well before Duke brought the hot water around next morning, waiting anxiously for the coffee pots to be positioned in the ashes of the previous evening's camp fire. Gear had to be packed and ready to move out for our next camp directly after breakfast. The trailer was attached to the safari car in preparation. Doonga's wonderful bread was smeared with South African apricot jam and enjoyed as duffel bags were loaded on the trailer.

As quickly as this was accomplished, the tents were struck. I was most impressed at the crew's efficiency in this activity; three men to strike, pack and load on the truck an entire camp for thirteen people, move it to a new location and set everything up before the safari car arrived at the new camp location.

The route to our next camp at Khwai village community campground led south, toward the location where the fires of yesterday had burned. We saw no sign of the smoke columns of the day before so it appeared that the lingering rain showers had quenched them.

As we left camp, the giraffe herd that had come to the waterhole the previous day strolled past us as insouciantly as spectators at a horse race upon which they have bet no money.

Before we could travel far, Shaq found lion tracks in the sandy soil. After the nighttime rains, they had to be fresh. Other safari guides had found them as well, so several cars joined in the search. After a half hour or so, Shaq spotted two forms lying under a distant acacia tree. It proved to be a pair of younger males, evidently resting in a tiny patch of shade after a night's hunting.

Both Shaq and Lee were convinced from the tracks we had been following that there were more lions around. A scan of the horizon turned up another pair lolling under a star-apple bush, this time a male and female. We approached them quite closely, but as far as anyone besides themselves were concerned, they might have been on the moon.

The mating of lions is a traumatic experience. Lions are induced ovulators, meaning that the female does not ovulate until coitus has begun. To induce ovulation, the male must vigorously shake the female by the scruff of her neck. Individual matings take from thirty seconds to a minute or so. In addition, the male's penis has backward pointing spines that cause intense pain upon withdrawal. In the thirty or so minutes that we observed them, the pair must have mated at least ten times. I did not keep count.

Lee noted that the other male lions were intently observing the mating pair. They were watching in case the male let down his guard on the female long

enough to allow her to slip away for a clandestine rendezvous with one or both of them.

Another safari car joined us as the pair began yet another coupling, so Lee decided that we had seen enough feline sex. As we progressed, we came upon another large Cape Buffalo herd, perhaps five hundred head or so. Some were grazing beneath a dead acacia where Red-billed Buffalo Weavers had built a large stick nest. These communal nests can house the eggs and nestlings of dozens of mated pairs.

The acacia also provided a perch for a few Yellow-billed Oxpeckers that were taking breaks from servicing the buffalo below. Oxpeckers are relatives of starlings that were once cited as an example of “symbiosis”; the relationship between two species that is beneficial to both. Oxpeckers use strong-clawed feet to grasp the backs, necks, even ears and faces of large hoofed animals, then use their bills to scissor through hair for ticks and other skin parasites that plague the animals. In return, so it is said, the oxpeckers provide a lookout service, warning the animals of approaching predators. It is not that simple or mutually beneficial. While the birds may indeed provide some extra security, they also pick at open sores on their so-called partners, eating their flesh and skin.

Leaving the buffalo, we passed a papyrus marsh where a pair of Saddle-billed Storks were holding court. Other marsh visitors were Red Lechwe, Impala and a pair of shy Common Reedbuck.

As we passed a sausage tree beside our trail, Lee called a halt. He had heard the distinctive chattering call of a Meyer’s Parrot. These robin-sized birds are light brown with blue breasts and yellow wing patches. Lee says that they are quite often found in sausage trees and indeed, several were engaged in tearing open the large, pendulous fruit to get at the seeds inside.

Our track left the marsh and savanna, plunging into Mopani woodland. We did not travel far before it was time for our morning break. Our stop was close by a lake that I decided was the most beautiful spot of our trip. There were hippos splashing and snorting in the lake as well as a myriad of water birds; Spur-winged and Egyptian Geese, White-faced Whistling Ducks,

Cape Teal and Grey Heron. Shorebirds included Wood Sandpiper and Black-winged Stilt. The forest sounded with the ever present calls of Cape Turtle-dove, Red-eyed Dove, Laughing Dove and Emerald-spotted Wood Dove. A Pied Kingfisher hovered over the lake like a kestrel before plunging into the water to grab a fish while a less aquatic Woodland Kingfisher, gray and pale blue with a massive red bill, placidly waited on a dead Mopani branch for an insect to make a mistake on the forest floor.

A huge wind-felled tree provided a convenient perch for a pair of Carmine Bee-eaters. This spectacular species is perhaps twice the size of the Little Bee-eaters that we had already found so enchanting. It is mostly pinkish-red with a light blue back and cap and typical bee-eater elongated central tail feathers.

The abundant foliage was most welcome to the ladies who were used to the wide open spaces of our first three days' area. As soon as the car was parked, they all headed for cover close to the lake, only to be warned by Lee to be extra careful of well-camouflaged crocs which were certainly present close to the lake shore. The warning was heeded because all returned safely.

Ginger snaps were the welcome morning break refreshment. They were quickly and appreciatively disposed off and we were off, followed by the calls of the lake's resident African Fish Eagles.

Observation of birds was quite easy in the Mopani forest since the canopy had pretty well been browsed away by the elephants. There was another bee-eater species, this one the Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, very similar to the Little Bee-eater except larger and with a blue tail. They perched conspicuously on bare branches from which they sallied out to nab large flying insects with their long, narrow bills, then returning with them to their branch. If the prey item happens to be a dangerous one, such as a wasp or bee, the bird rubs off the stinger against the branch before consuming the rest.

The track that we followed came close to a clearing where there was a small pond. The pond was in use by a few elephants, including a mother with a

calf. Elephants, indeed almost all wildlife, barely notice a safari car; first, because they are so familiar and second, because they know a safari car is not dangerous. I think that that the animals think that it is just a very noisy moving rock. But elephants are both highly intelligent and highly unpredictable. As I tell zoo visitors, there is a very large brain in that head. Young female elephants, known as “aunties”, may be quite as protective of the calves as are their mothers. On this day, one of them definitely was.

Lee may know as much about the behavior of wild African Elephants as anybody alive. From guiding us, he was headed to Rwanda, hoping to reduce the elephant/tourist unfortunate encounter rate by instructing that country’s wildlife rangers in aggressive elephant behavior by, as he put it, “messing with them”. The young elephant shook her massive head, a clear sign, said Lee, that we were close enough. Perhaps we did not get the message quickly enough, because she came straight at us. Shaq floored the accelerator and hit third gear as fast as he could. The car and attached trailer shot forward as we roared out of range. Or thought that we did. Slowing down a bit, a glance back revealed the elephant still coming, shaking her head and trumpeting. The gear shift and accelerator went into action again and this time the disgruntled pachyderm was left behind.

The canvas cover for the car had been reinstalled at the rest stop but it was becoming quite warm. One reason was certainly that the Mopani forest had little canopy due to the attentions of the elephants. But the lack of canopy did make for very good birding. We found two Brown Snake-eagles, one of which was on a nest, all dark brown with fierce yellow eyes.

Having been hugely impressed with the vast numbers of vultures that I had seen on the Serengeti in Tanzania, I had thought it a bit remarkable that we had so far observed none in the Okavango. We finally saw our first one, a White-backed Vulture, in an acacia next to the track.

The track that we followed took us over what Lee told us was a slight ridge of ground that is drier than most of the Okavango. Suddenly, Shaq braked and told us to look to our left. Mostly hidden in the low undergrowth was a Steenbok.

Steenbok are about the size of a Springer spaniel. They are a warm tan with exceptionally large ears and eyes. This one was lying comfortably in the shade of some bushes just far enough off the track to observe anything that came along it but well enough hidden from anything or anyone with a less practiced eye than Shaq's. Lack of horns made it a female. We observed it for some minutes, taking numerous photographs. Despite our obvious attention, it never showed the slightest alarm. It was an enchanting little creature whose enormous eyes, dark and mysterious, seemed to say, "You may see Africa but you can never really know it."

A radio message brought some disquieting news. The track that we were following to our next camp area led off of the ridge and back to the swampy lowlands. Another safari car with a similar load of tourists who were en route to our old camp from the opposite direction had come to a slough which was usually only a little damp, but the previous two days rains had filled it above the axles of their vehicle. The driver was unsure that he could affect a crossing and there was no way around. He wanted to wait for our arrival so that he and Shaq could confer.

We plunged soon into thick woodland and before long came to the flooded slough. The other vehicle sat on the opposite side filled with tourists who seemed as perplexed about their situation as we were about ours. Lee and Shaq disembarked, then waded into the slough to meet the other driver. They probed the bottom with sticks and conferred earnestly in English and Setswana. The object of most discussion was which vehicle would go first. In the event that it became stuck, the first vehicle could be extracted by the other and could continue on its way. If the second got stuck, the other could pull it out, but it would still be marooned on the side opposite from its destination.

Somehow, Lee and Shaq prevailed upon the other driver to allow us first crack. The slough was really too deep to wade (especially for Gina) so before I could even suggest that we disembark to lighten the load, we plunged in. Water came up to the floorboards of the driver's and front passenger's area but four-wheel low and the accelerator got us through.

The other car now faced an even greater challenge, since ours had likely deepened the muddy bottom. We waited for the other vehicle's attempt in case we were needed, but they also sailed through with a splash and a cheer.

As we left the slough, a pair of wart hogs observed us, seemingly thinking, "What was that all about?"

Our progress led on through the Mopani forest. Not too far along, Shaq braked abruptly as a Banded Mongoose scurried across the track. Then another crossed, then another and another. An entire pack of these interesting little viverrids were hunting on the forest floor. Eventually, one arrived carrying the carcass of a frog. Banded Mongooses are known to eat the eggs of ground-nesting birds, cracking the shells by hurling them backwards between their hind legs like a football center to a punter. Unfortunately, we did not observe this behavior.

The track that we were following ended rather abruptly along with the Mopani forest. Where another track met ours, a flock of Burchell's Sandgrouse, another Okavango endemic, were enjoying dust baths in the crossroads. Sandgrouse are relatives of pigeons who nest in very dry, inaccessible places. Daily, they fly great distances from their nesting areas to waterholes. To bring moisture back to their squabs (babies) the males submerge their breast feathers in the water. The feathers have special adaptations that make them extremely absorbent. Once the feathers are soaked, the sandgrouse fly back to their nests, where the squabs extract the water from the wet feathers.

As interesting as were the sandgrouse, a major distraction quickly followed. The forest quickly parted as two enormous bull elephants strolled across the track. The great beasts paid us no more attention than they did to the Cattle Egrets that followed behind and sometimes perched on their backs, waiting for the insects that they flushed from the grass. Passing just a few meters from our car, they demonstrated the incredible power and dignity of absolute rulers of their domain.

Wherever we went and whatever we were doing, Lee and Shaq were always scanning the ground. As professional trackers, they could read complicated

stories in just a few marks of disturbed dust. While we marveled at the elephants, they noticed lion tracks very near our car. When the elephants finally moved unhurriedly into the bush, we followed the tracks.

It was now quite hot and the tracks led to a patch of shady bush where four lions were either sleeping or resting. Lions can sleep up to twenty hours per day, so finding them so relaxing was not a surprise. What was a bit surprising was a young male, whose mane was just coming in, with blood all over his face. The others, too, showed some signs of recent feeding. The pride allowed us a very close approach without seeming the least disturbed by our attention.

We left the lions dozing in the shade, possibly dreaming of very slow zebras. Our new track led along the edge of a lake, an actual lake, not just a waterhole like we had seen previously. This was man-made, formed by a dam, built for no discernible reason that I could determine. As with any water source, it was surrounded by animals. The near shore held several large crocodiles, a pod of hippos floated sloppily in the middle and grazed on the far shore while kudus of both sexes came to both sides to drink.

Many species of water birds waded the shallows, such as the African Openbill, a dark plumaged stork whose mandibles meet only at the base and the tip, an adaptation for opening the shells of a particular species of water snail. Others, such as African Jacana, Water Dikkop, Great, Little and Yellow-billed Egret and Crowned and Blacksmith Lapwings searched for food along the sloping banks.

The Blacksmith Lapwing was a species that we observed every day. It is about the size of a robin with rather long legs, black breast, back, tail and head, grey wings and white belly, nape and cap. It lives in pairs just about anywhere except forest. A conspicuous species, it makes no attempt to hide itself, rather, it aggressively attacks anything that comes too near its territory.

As we watched the wonderful wildlife spectacle, two bull elephants, most likely the ones we had met earlier, came out of the bush behind us. They waded knee-deep into the lake, then began drinking and spraying cooling

water over themselves. Shortly after, a herd of a half dozen elephant cows and a couple of sub-adults emerged from the forest and entered the lake. Perhaps it was the presence of the two bull elephants, but the little herd seemed nervous, taking little time for water and none for play. They splashed through the shallows and up the other bank.

Elephant mating is a complicated process. When a bull finds a receptive cow, he approaches her from behind, rears on his hindlegs then places his forelegs on her back. From this position, he cannot see where he needs to be to insure mating. To overcome this, the elephant has evolved an unusual mechanism. The bull elephant's penis is mobile, that is, it contains muscles that allow it to move independently. Moreover, in order to reach the cow's vagina and deliver the sperm to its target, the organ is about a meter long and six inches across. Stimulated perhaps by the presence of the females, one of the old tuskers presented himself with a truly massive erection. Passing very close to our vehicle and allowing us the opportunity to admire his achievement, he and his companion eventually wandered off into the bush.

Near the dam stood a two-story building, the first permanent man-made structure that we had seen in three days. It looked to me like an American fishing camp or hunting lodge and since it was well past noon I presumed that we would stop there for lunch. It turned out to be a ranger station, evidently not for the use of passing tourists.

Shaq knew what he was doing and where he was going and shortly a halt was called at a spot where the track widened next to a massive fig tree. While we all scattered to find privacy bushes, Shaq unloaded the cooler that our drinks were sharing with a delightful vegetarian quiche, curried potato salad and cauliflower with raisins and curry.

The camp tables were being transported by the crew in the deuce-and-a-half so we were required to balance plates on our laps. Our camp chairs had been loaded under the rear seat and when Shaq was unloading them, he found a very cute little Angolan Reed Frog clinging to one. It had evidently hitched a ride when the car had splashed through the slough. It was dropped off in a nearby pond before we departed.

Our track led along the edge of the forest, very close to the savanna. Where the road led just along the edge of the forest, some trees overhung the track. Gina was sitting on the side of the vehicle next to the woods. Suddenly, she shouted “Stop! Stop! There’s an owl!” How she managed to spot it despite the canvas cover is a mystery.

Perched on a branch overhanging the track was a Giant Eagle Owl. I have seen Great Horned Owls in the US, Cape Eagle Owls in Kenya and Ural and Great Grey Owls in Finland but this bird was larger than any of them. It was not just large, it was massive. Its plumage was all grey with black mottling and a set of “ear tufts”. Swiveling its head to observe us, it blinked, flashing a set of most unexpected hot pink eyelids.

The big owl regarded us with irritated boredom while we craned our necks and cameras to see and photograph it from beneath the roof cover. Gina was ecstatic. “I really wanted to see an owl!” she crowed. “Well spotted!” was our response, which became our watchword when anyone found anything really special.

Leaving the owl to its afternoon nap, we began to notice a few signs of civilization; a distant cell phone tower, cattle grazing alongside impala and lechwe and a barbed wire fence that marked the boundary of the Moremi Game Reserve. Scattering a foraging flock of Ground Hornbills, we swept into a small plaza at the reserve’s eastern gate.

Lee and Shaq attended to the formalities of signing us out of the reserve while the rest of us enjoyed the benefits of indoor plumbing. I stepped outside just in time to observe a small raptor flash underneath the high thatched roof of the gate building.

I followed as it shot upwards towards a tree, scattering a flock of small birds upon which it evidently had had murderous intentions. It perched angrily, glaring about with a fierce yellow eye. I thought that it was a Shikra, one of several species of smaller bird-hunting hawks that are common in Africa, but when I called Lee over he identified it as a Little Sparrowhawk. I had seen Shikras previously in Kenya and India, but Little Sparrowhawk was a Life Bird for me.

We left the reserve gate compound for the short drive to Khwai village. In our path was what was quickly dubbed “The Bridge on the River Khwai”, a wooden structure that was very much sturdier than it first appeared. As we crossed I noted a Black Crake searching for insects in floating vegetation and a pair of Fish Eagles in a tree on the far bank. Once across, we passed the ranger compound where the reserve staff lived, including their children who were enthusiastically engaged in a soccer game.

Once outside the game reserve, we were on private property, so regulations on tourist activities changed. We would now be able to travel about on foot and at night, but not without an armed escort. Lee and Shaq were both firearms qualified, so they could provide escort when we acquired a weapon. Another tour company had an office in Kwahi village, so we went there to borrow a VERY large caliber rifle.

While we waited for Shaq, several small birds flitted around our car. Some little finches were black with chestnut wings and buffy crowns and very long trailing tail feathers. I recognized them from the Tropical Bird House at the Memphis Zoo as male Paradise Whydahs. Male whydahs make elaborate courtship flights trailing their long feathers to attract the drab little sparrow-like females. The ones with the longest tails win the most females. As I tell zoo visitors, size matters.

Female whydahs are brood parasites. They lay their eggs in the nests of other finches, allowing the host species to raise their young. Unlike cowbirds and cuckoos, the nestling whydahs do not kill or eject their nest mates but grow up peacefully with them until fledging.

Another species that we encountered at Kwahi village was the Namaqua Dove. This pretty species is robin-sized, gray above and white below with chestnut wings. The males have striking black faces.

Kwahi village was a collection of a very few small mud-and-wattle houses with thatched roofs, a few others built of concrete blocks with corrugated metal roofs, couple of shops that sold beer, candy and soda and even a small hostel that probably catered to travelling Botswanans. One compound of several houses surrounded by a stick fence had a strange flag

flying in its courtyard instead of the familiar blue, white and black national flag of Botswana . Shaq said that it was the house of a prominent local politician and the flag was the symbol of the ruling political party.

Our route out of town was the same rough, sandy track that we had followed from Moremi. Imagine our surprise when we came to a watercourse that was bridged by a very modern concrete structure that would not have looked out of place anywhere in rural Tennessee. Shaq said that it had been built by a Chinese construction company; another example of Chinese business' pervasive penetration into Africa.

Once past the bridge, we found another example of jarring civilization in our wilderness. We came upon an airstrip that serviced an upscale tourist lodge that Shaq said was just beyond a strip of trees. It seemed appropriate when a sounder of Wart Hogs skittered across it.

Our track left the airstrip behind, heading deeper into the bush. It followed a watercourse where elephants and other wildlife came to drink as the sun sank lower. Our next water crossing did not feature a bridge, but the ford was fortunately much more shallow than the one we had crossed previously. Hippos splashed in the deeper water but generally took little notice of us.

Passing a grove of elephant damaged acacias, we arrived at the Kwahi Community Campsites. Tour companies pay the Kwahi village council to operate the campground and to protect and conserve wildlife for eco-tourists like ourselves. It is a win-win situation for everyone; tourists, tour companies, villagers and especially the animals.

I cannot say that the Kwahi Community Campsites were much like a KOA. There was no pool, no laundry, no game room and no restrooms/showers. There was also not the privacy that we had enjoyed at our previous location as a half dozen or so campsites were occupied by other tour groups. Still, it was shady, not crowded and the campfire was welcome. Our tents were all ready, but dinner was delayed, presumably by the same trail difficulties that we had encountered.

Sundowners were broken out as Doonga, Mullah and Duke hurried to complete dinner preparations. The clear skies allowed the day's heat to dissipate rapidly enough that sweatshirts and sweaters were welcome. We finally sat down for dinner about nine pm. I think we had beef stew but whatever it was was delicious after such a long and eventful day.

The night was cool as a thunderstorm rumbled past in the distance. I rose early as usual and took my camp chair to the newly stoked camp fire as the coffee perked. George and Richard joined me so we had a very nice discussion as the sun rose.

Shaq arrived at the fire as the coffee was poured, announcing that he had found very fresh lion tracks just beyond camp. We had an appointment for a boat safari later that morning, but the opportunity to find a lion that might actually be awake and hunting was too good to pass up.

We hurried through our jam and toast, loaded into the safari car and headed into the bush, following the fresh tracks. Some of the other campers had also noticed the tracks and set off in the same direction. We had not travelled a hundred meters, just outside the campground, when we found our quarry.

It was a young male, evidently travelling alone. He had most likely been kicked out of his pride by his father when his now scruffy mane had begun to come in. He had not yet acquired the battle scars and torn ears of a pride ruler and his bright yellow mane showed proof of becoming especially beautiful. Paying us no attention at all, he sat on his haunches gazing back towards the campground. Whether he had caught scent of potential prey or another lion who might be a potential threat or, even better, a companion, was impossible to tell. His expression seemed oddly wistful, as if he knew that lions are social animals for which solitary life is not natural. We were mesmerized by his beautiful golden eyes until he finally turned and walked silently away.

We re-traced our route from the previous day, passing the large watercourse where elephants had come to drink, to bathe and in the case of

the many small ones, to play. Several large and small hippos eyed us warily from the shallows, to which they had just returned from a night's grazing.

Many were attended by African Jacanas, robin-sized birds with chestnut wings and backs, white bellies and breasts, black napes and eyelines and bright powder-blue frontal shields and bills. Jacanas are also known as "lily-trotters" for their extremely long toes on which they travel confidently over floating vegetation. They reverse the usual avian sex roles with the male incubating and caring for the precocial young. If they are threatened, he squats low, spreads his wings and gathers the chicks under them. Then he hurries away with the babies' long toes dangling from beneath his wings.

Just after we crossed the "Chinese bridge", Shaq turned us off the track and onto a trail that led down to the water's edge where four young men were waiting. Paul, K.T, Solly and Rhino escorted us to our "makoros"; boats that resembled pirogues or dugout canoes. Lee told us that makoros had formerly been just that but deforestation now so limited the supply of suitable trees that this ancient form of transportation had gone high tech and our conveyances were actually made of plastic.

There were five boats, each about four meters long and a half meter wide. Nora and Al, George and Kay and Dawn and Richard each boarded a boat while Lee, Gina and I crowded into another. The seats rested flat on the bottom requiring you to scrunch your legs up with your knees under your chin or to stick your legs out straight in front of you, rather like a Reelfoot Lake fishing boat. Each boat guide stood in the stern with a pole to propel us along the channel. Shaq commandeered the last boat, bringing along the supplies for our morning break.

A hippo and her calf watched us suspiciously as we shoved off. I knew that there must be crocodiles close by, so I was definitely nervous. The water could not have been more than four feet deep, but with these dangerous creatures in close proximity I was concerned about much more than drowning.

All along the waterway, water lilies and other plants grew profusely. The boat guides pulled up water lilies to fashion the stems and flowers into

ingenious necklaces for each of the ladies. They also made caps from the large lily leaves for each of the men, but only Lee would wear his.

The standing water was a magnet for water birds. A Rufous-bellied Heron, crow-sized and black with chestnut tail, belly and wing patches flushed from the shallows. A Saddle-billed Stork stalked the reed beds on long black legs with red knees and feet, snapping up fish and careless frogs with its massive, colorful bill. A pair of African Pygmy Geese, actually ducks, swam near the boats; the male chestnut with dark green wings, white face, emerald green ear patch and tiny yellow bill and his mate duller and lacking the ear patch. A pair of Comb Ducks, as large as geese, mottled white with dark blue wings and back, got up from the water, then flew downstream to land on the bank. The drake has a round, black, flattened comb on his bill that gives him his name. I had seen Comb Ducks in other places but had never had a really good look so I was appreciative of this pair who stood conspicuously on the bank to allow me a nice photograph.

As we rounded a slight bend, our attention was drawn to three birds who were moving deliberately through the water plants searching for prey. They were as tall as the Saddle-billed Stork, gray and white with trailing wing plumes, a dark crown, red face and a peculiar lappet of skin dangling from either side of their bill. They were Wattled Cranes.

Wattled Cranes live only in the Okavango and a few other scattered locations in southern Africa. Despite the wattle that gives their faces an expression of stupefied surprise, they are truly majestic birds. I had not really expected to find them and I was thrilled to do so.

We got a bit too close to the cranes so they flew off down the watercourse ahead of us, alighting on the far side. As we drew even with them, our boats turned to starboard and ran up onto the shallow shore, allowing us all to step out dry shod.

The bush grew very close to the water, so finding a privacy bush was quite easy. But caution was a definite requirement, not just because of the presence of crocodiles and hippos but because we were now definitely in lion country. Everyone returned to the boats as quickly as possible for

cookies, tea, water or cocoa. We all relaxed with our refreshments and conversation, some of us sitting on the driftwood logs that lined the shore watching a Pied Kingfisher hovering above the water before plunging in after a fish.

We re-embarked after about a quarter hour or so, heading back the way we had come with the calls of African Fish Eagles bidding us farewell.

Our boat featured Gina in the bow, Lee amidships and me in the stern. As we passed a side channel, Lee called to our boatman to take us through it so that we could observe some of the water plants up close. We turned to port, glided through beds of gorgeous white and purple water lilies, then headed back to the main channel. Several stalks of rushes and other plants showed above the water as we passed. I noticed one on the port side, about two feet from the boat, that was wider at the top than at the surface. Then I noticed that it was not stationary but rather keeping pace with our boat as we passed. I called Lee's attention to it and his response was "It's a Mozambique Spitting Cobra!"

The Mozambique Spitting Cobra is a member of the Elapid family of snakes, whose neurotoxic venom paralyzes the respiratory and other muscles, suffocating whatever it bites. In addition, the holes in its fangs point forward, allowing it to project venom forward from its mouth, rather than just downward into a bite. It aims for the eyes and is very accurate.

I am not inordinately afraid of snakes. I caught and played with them as a boy and have handled them at the zoo for years. Nevertheless, the word "Cobra!" unnerved me totally. To have been within two feet of such a deadly creature quite gave me the shakes.

While the snake swam unconcernedly away behind us, our boat guide evidently felt at least some of my emotions. He dug his pole into the mud and got us back into the main channel in a hurry. We glided swiftly back to our embarkation point where Shaq was waiting at the car. The ladies posed for photographs in their water lily finery, the refreshment chest was loaded into the car, handshakes and gratuities were exchanged with the boat crew and we were on our way.

Our route led us back through a stand of Mopani and acacia where we encountered about a half dozen Angolan Giraffes. Angolan Giraffes are pale to start with but one of their number was so white that it looked exactly as if had been bleached. Another giraffe was lying down behind some Mopani shrubs, its head just visible above the elephant browsed vegetation. Giraffes rarely lie down because it is so difficult for them to rise quickly at the approach of danger. This one evidently was either so secure in himself or so stupid that he thought that he could get away with it.

Passing a grove of acacias, Lee called another halt. He had heard the distinctive call of a Black Cuckooshrike.

Cuckooshrikes are neither shrikes nor cuckoos, but rather a family of insectivorous, tropical, Eastern Hemisphere birds that bear some resemblance to both. The male Black Cuckooshrike is eponymous black with a yellow shoulder patch and the female is yellowish-green with yellow wing bars and outer tail feathers, a gray head and barred breast and belly. They quietly search the tree canopies for insects, particularly caterpillars. The male courts the female by widely opening his bill to display its bright yellow lining. If the female is impressed, she will raise a set of stiff, hairy feathers on her lower back. When he raises a similar set of feathers, their pair bond is complete

By this time, we were all both hot and hungry. But we had travelled only a few hundred meters when we halted again. The reason; Lions!

Just off the track and indeed partially on it lay eight sleeping lionesses. The tall acacia that provided them with shade hung far enough over the track so that they almost blocked it. They paid us absolutely no attention as we photographed. As Shaq prepared to gently ease past them another tourist car approached from the other direction. The lions paid it no more attention than they did to us so we proceeded on our way to a very welcome lunch.

Our route back to camp led along the shallow watercourse and across the ford. A bachelor herd of bull elephants had come out of the adjacent forest to drink and to cool off from the midday heat. One old guy was enjoying a

luxurious rear end scratch on a termite mound. While the elephants went about their business, a troop of Chacma Baboons worked along the edge of the watercourse, evidently searching for insects, frogs or roots.

I love almost all animals, but I must confess that I am not at all partial to baboons. They are ugly, dirty, aggressive creatures, but at the same time their social structure, with its organization and internal politics, is fascinating. In addition, they are highly intelligent and adaptable, so I wondered if their presence near the elephants was fortuitous or whether they were shadowing the giants for protection against predators.

We arrived at camp later and more ready for lunch than usual, but the crew was ready for us. A quick wash-up and we converged on the mess tent. Lunch was fresh green salad with avocado and cucumber followed by a mac-and-cheese casserole with mushrooms. On our first day in camp, I had observed a bottle of “Ball’s Chutney” on the table at each meal. I am not a great fan of chutney, but Lee had recommended it highly. From then on, I used it liberally on just about every main dish, including the mac-and-cheese. Camp food, while excellent, was necessarily short of seasoning. The chutney never failed to enhance and bring out the flavor of whatever we were served.

After dessert, some of our number repaired to their tents for siesta and Shaq joined the crew to supervise whatever needed supervising but Gina, Kay, Lee and I remained in the mess tent discussing our wonderful morning. Suddenly someone shouted “Wow! Look at that!”

Our camp was on the very edge of the campground, taking advantage of the shade of an acacia thicket. From out of the thicket emerged a bull elephant. The big tusker gave us the eye, decided that we were of minimal or no importance, then proceeded to an acacia about sixty meters from the mess tent. Gina and I scampered to the car, which was probably ten meters closer to the elephant than the mess tent but gave us at least the illusion of shelter if he decided to take exception to our presence. Some others came out of the tents to take photographs. Extending his trunk, the elephant pulled down a few branches that were maybe twenty-five feet above the

ground. He ate a few, then a few more, then wandered back into the bush without a sound.

We left the campground after our afternoon tea, which was served with apple chunks in yogurt. Our route led in the opposite direction from the morning's, into then out, of the acacia thicket. We soon picked up the watercourse and followed it for some distance. We found a pair of Hamerkops, rooster-sized, all-dark brown birds that live near water. They derive their name, which means "Hammerhead" in Dutch, from the large bill with which they catch frogs, snakes, fish and insects, and their backward sloping crest which looks like the claw on a clawhammer. Hamerkops build enormous nests in which many other smaller birds build their own nests.

On another nest was a pair of White-backed Vultures and nearby was another scavenger, a Tawny Eagle. Tawny Eagles are fierce predators in their own right but they would just as lief follow circling vultures to a kill and save themselves the trouble.

We followed the watercourse for an hour or so, observing lots of hippos, elephants, wart hogs and waterbuck and water birds such as Cattle Egrets, Great Egrets, Blacksmith Plovers, Spur-winged Geese and Openbill Storks. Eventually, we halted, our way blocked by a herd of Cape Buffalo, perhaps five hundred strong, crossing the track.

A few elephants were at the water's edge, drinking and bathing. Among them was one elderly cow who was very underweight. Lee said that she was probably sick. A sick elephant is a dangerous elephant, so we left her quickly.

A light rain began to fall as we approached an open area which featured a muddy depression in its center. It also featured about two dozen zebras who were searching for a bit of grass among some elephant-destroyed timber. Their heads were up and their ears pricked, much more alert than they should have been just because of our presence. As we watched, a lone Spotted Hyena shambled out of the bush with the high front end, low rear end gait typical of its family. It paid neither us nor the zebras the slightest

attention, heading straight for the depression where hundreds of tilapia were flopping about, dying for lack of oxygen. I was quite surprised that the hyena did not immediately begin gobbling down fish, but instead it lay gently down in the mud next to what water remained in the drying pool. It did not even appear to drink; rather it simply lay there, perhaps cooling itself in the evaporating mud.

The rain stopped, so Shaq found a place to pull off the track for our sundowner. It was next to a fairly large lake which contained a fairly large pod of hippos. The sky began to clear as we enjoyed our wine, beer and gin & tonic, providing a gorgeous African sunset over the lake. We were enchanted by a Pied Kingfisher who perched at the very tip of a branch that hung just over the water. It would fly out, hover, dive for a fish and return to the perch which would bob up and down wildly each time it landed.

It was near dark when we packed up for our return to camp. Since we were outside the national game reserve, we were under no constraint to be back before nightfall. Lee took the front passenger seat and brought out a powerful spotlight that he shone into trees and deep bush searching for “eye-shine”, the telltale red or golden glow of the tapetum layer of the eye of nocturnal animals. This layer of cells reflects light back from the retina enabling the animal’s optic nerve to use the same light twice. It was not long before he located a Large-spotted Genet.

Genets are viverrids, related to mongooses. They look much like cats but have a pointed nose and non-retractible claws. Large-spotted Genets are mostly gray with black markings and a black-ringed tail. This one was in an acacia tree where it had evidently spent the day. Now it was ready to go about its nightly hunt for insects, mice, eggs and roosting birds.

Before we travelled much further towards camp, the radio crackled the news that we had all been hoping to hear; “Wild Dogs are close and they are hunting!”

Of all the animal species that we had hoped to see in Botswana, the one that I most wanted was the African Wild Dog. The most efficient of all of Africa’s predators, they successfully make kills on eighty percent of their

hunts. They are also the rarest large carnivore in southern Africa, having been exterminated as vermin by livestock ranchers over much of their range. Botswana is their last stronghold.

The conventional scenario of a wild dog hunt is that the pack advances purposefully upon a herd of antelope until the herd spooks, then the pack selects a target, working in concert to bring it down. Perhaps it is in some places but Lee says it is different in the Okavango.

That seemed to be the instance on this hunt. Lee says what happened was typical; the pack rushing wildly through the bush, every dog for itself, until some impala panics. One dog, which may or may not be joined by others, pursues it until it is caught. Then the rest of the pack breaks off their pursuits to join the successful dog and help with the kill.

When we arrived at the kill site, just a few meters from the watercourse, the kill had just taken place. Four or five dogs were engaged in the gruesome business of tearing apart the unfortunate animal which could be barely recognized as an impala.

Wild Dogs are very vocal animals, yipping and twittering as they ripped into the carcass. Soon the hunters were joined by four or five more dogs which Lee said were the pack's pups. They joined the adults in feeding until not much was left but bones, hair and blood.

All of this activity attracted more than wild dogs. The kill site was soon surrounded by tourist vans, camera flashes exploding upon the scenes of the carnage. A pickup truck also arrived. It was driven by wildlife biologists who had been remotely tracking the alpha male dog, who was wearing a radio collar.

Eventually, the dogs either lay down to rest or carried off a bone to gnaw at their leisure. In the excitement, a pair of Spotted Hyenas infiltrated the kill site. They attempted to steal a few bones, but were quickly set upon by the dogs and driven back into the bush.

Eventually all of the tourist vans left, including ours. We arrived back at camp late but exhilarated and ready for dinner. I had had my usual daily

quota of two beers at sundowner time, but allowed myself two more with dinner to celebrate a truly incredible day.

The extra beers undoubtedly helped me sleep, but a distant thunderstorm cooled the air enough that I was glad for the extra blanket on my cot. The campfire and the coffee were most welcome when Duke brought the hot water around next morning. We were now making something of a ritual of coffee and conversation around the campfire before breakfast.

Our morning drive took us past the site of last night's kill where the wild dog pack had returned. There were ten in all, four adults and six puppies. They seemed much more relaxed and playful than the previous evening when they were consumed with blood lust, under attack by hyenas and surrounded by tourist vans. Although another van joined us, they romped and seemed to enjoy each other's company despite their audience.

We watched the pack for nearly an hour before moving off along the watercourse, passing close to a Coppery-tailed Coucal and a Tawny Eagle searching for mice and insects in the tall grass.

As we rounded a bend, we came upon a tragic and poignant sight. A tourist van was parked close to the watercourse and the guide/driver had disembarked. He was standing next to an elephant that was lying on its side next to the water. We thought that it must be dead, but an occasional ear flap or feeble twitch of the trunk showed that the unfortunate creature was still clinging to life. We speculated that perhaps it was the obviously ill animal that we had observed the previous day.

It was apparent that there was nothing that we could do. We sat and heartbrokenly watched the poor creature for some time before moving on.

Shaq pulled off the track at what once was an acacia forest. There were a few large acacias still standing, but the ground was littered with the dead trunks and limbs of trees that had been torn down or uprooted by elephants. While we disembarked, Shaq removed the rifle from its case and loaded it with what appeared to be very large grain, large caliber ammunition. Anything less would be useless because whatever threats we

might encounter while we were on foot would most likely come from elephants.

We formed up single file, with Shaq in the lead, followed by Lee, then the rest of us with me in the rear to make sure no one straggled. I have remarked that African wildlife pretty much ignore people in vehicles, but people on foot are different. The animals also are very aware of firearms and the danger they pose. A soaring White-backed Vulture or two was about all that we observed.

In the absence of live animals, Lee and Shaq showed us their tracks. Elephant tracks were everywhere, so they showed us how to tell the age, sex, direction of travel and number of animals, all from scuffs in the sand.

They also found tracks that led to the burrow entrance of a Springhaas or Springhare. Springhaas are not really hares, but rodents. They are about the size of a woodchuck, but much slimmer. Their fur is tan and they have a long, furry black tail. Their hind legs are kangaroo-like with huge feet while the forelegs are short with strong claws for digging. They have the huge eyes and ears of a nocturnal animal. They travel by jumping with the large feet, using the tail as a rudder and counterweight. Unlike most rodents, the females give birth to a single baby. They dig burrows that may be a meter deep and four meters long. They also dig vertical escape burrows that they can dive into if they feel threatened.

As we trudged across the hot open area, Shaq suddenly called a halt. From a patch of scrub about a half mile away, a single file line of elephants emerged and headed our way. Lee and Shaq hustled us away, to a small hillock where a termite mound and a few stumps offered some illusion of safety. A bull elephant led the column followed by about a dozen or so cows with a few calves. With the keenest senses of smell and hearing of any land animals, I had no doubt that the elephants were well aware of our location and numbers and probably the expiration dates on our passports as well. Deciding that we were of no real consequence, the herd strolled off unconcernedly in the direction of the watercourse.

With the elephants gone, those of us with cameras set our self-timers for the first of many group portraits.

The morning was now well advanced, so it was quite hot. We replaced the roof canvas and started for camp. As we did, I realized that I had lost my water bottle. Each of us had been issued one of the stainless steel, Styrofoam lined bottles which kept water cool if not cold for a full day. This was a potentially serious situation since dehydration in that dry, hot climate was a real threat.

Our route back to camp led us past the spot where the dying elephant had lain that morning. We were simultaneously sad and pleased that it was now out of its misery.

Several elephants had converged on the watercourse where the dead animal lay. They did a lot of what elephants do, drinking, spraying themselves to cool off, play sparring, &, but they also were obviously aware of the presence of their deceased comrade. Elephants seem to be aware of death in a way that most other animal species are not. Whatever their level of understanding, it was evident that they did not want the carcass approached by anyone.

Due to their awareness of self and of death and their ability to create art, some scientists have speculated that elephants are sentient beings the same as humans. Regardless, I think that we all mourned the death of the elephant just as John Donne mourned the deaths of every man because the death of anyone diminishes us all.

We returned to camp by another route than we had in the morning. We came to a pool where a baboon troop was wading in, pulling up water plants for the nutritious roots. We stopped in the shade to watch them. I glanced at the other side of the car, noticing a Black-headed Oriole in the tree next to us. Eastern Hemisphere orioles are completely unrelated to the familiar orioles of the Western Hemisphere, who are actually blackbirds. It is all very confusing.

After our hot walk, showers were in order when we arrived back at camp. Lunch proved to be a special treat with the last thing I would ever have

expected to find in the Okavango bush: cheeseburgers! Doonga had grilled a patty of ground or pounded beef, baked a cake-sized loaf of his extraordinary bread, sliced it through the middle, placed the patty, cheese, tomatoes, lettuce and onions between the slices, then divided the whole into individual sandwiches. I am quite particular about my burgers (mayonnaise, pickle, onion, no tomato or lettuce) but I set upon mine with no quibble at all. A Greek salad and a side of rice with chutney were perfect complements.

Everyone was as excited as I was about the burgers and someone remarked to Shaq how talented a chef Doonga was. He replied that on Letaka tours, every staff person, including presumably him, was required to plan and prepare one meal. Whoever cooked whatever, our food was consistently excellent.

The afternoon was hot, so everyone stood down until tea time. When we re-boarded the car, I found my water bottle under the seat where I had foolishly left it before our morning hike. To have begged for another would have been humiliating.

Our afternoon drive took us back along the watercourse where we found the dead elephant, still surrounded by other members of its herd. They were really skittish, obviously very disturbed. They became even more disturbed when a Spotted Hyena emerged from the thorn scrub. It was obviously crippled, limping heavily on one hind leg. Unable to hunt with its pack, it was facing starvation. When it sighted the body of the elephant, it must have had the same feeling that an island castaway has at the sight of smoke on the horizon.

It approached the carcass cautiously, as it must needs do in the presence of the guardian elephants. They charged the unfortunate hyena time and again, forcing it to hustle painfully away. The elephants could have caught and killed it if they had really wished, so despite their charges, the hyena steadily worked its way toward the supply of food that literally meant its life or death. Eventually, the elephants seemed to become used to the scavenger as it edged nearer and nearer to the great body. It finally reached the rear where it began to gnaw through the softer, thinner skin of the anus.

When we left, it had stuck its entire head inside the body, emerging covered in blood and with a mouthful of bloody flesh.

Leaving this scene of carnage, we found a flock of Green Wood-hoopoes. These are noisy birds; about the size of a robin, with long, pointed tails, curved, bright red bills, greenish plumage and white patches in their wings. They travel about in flocks of a half dozen or more, squawking and squabbling through the thornbush.

The bush seemed not as full of wildlife as usual; a lone Wildebeest, a pair of Wart Hogs, a White-browed Sparrow-weaver and a pair of bull elephants sparring semi-seriously over a prime bathing spot on the watercourse were the only real highlights. But the water birds were active as usual, notable of which were the ibises.

Ibises are a little larger than a crow. There are three species in the Okavango; the Glossy, Sacred and Hadada. Glossy Ibis are a cosmopolitan species found just about all over the world. Their name refers to the iridescent sheen of their plumage under bright light but they usually just appear all black or dark brown.

Sacred Ibis get their name from their identification with the Egyptian god Thoth, who is represented in Egyptian art as having the head of an ibis. They are mostly white with black wing plumes and a naked black head.

Hadada Ibis are grayish-brown with iridescent greenish-bronze wings and bright red bill. Their strange name comes from the weird and raucous cries they make when they are disturbed.

We returned to camp earlier than normally, because our only official night drive was scheduled for after our evening meal. The menu was traditional Setswana, “seswaa”, the same beef that had been on our lunch burgers, cornmeal porridge and cabbage, with a butternut squash soup. Dawn said later that it was one of her favorites.

A Scops Owl began to call as we loaded the car for our nocturnal adventure. Lee called it in close enough to find in the spotlight.

The sun was setting as we left camp, heading back along our previous track. The hyena was still at the carcass and another, healthy and quite attractive for a hyena, was trying to join it. The elephants were unhappy about its presence, but they seemed resigned to the crippled one dining on their deceased companion.

We left the elephants and hyenas as the last twilight faded to very dark night. Lee had taken the front passenger seat to operate the spotlight. As we drove along the watercourse, the light picked up the eyeshine reflection of birds who had come to the water's edge to drink. Diurnal birds had long since gone to roost, so there could be no doubt that these were nightjars.

Nightjars are the most nocturnal of birds, even more than owls. Owls will sometimes be active on cloudy days, especially when they are hungry but the chances against seeing a nightjar in daylight are astronomical. During daylight hours, they roost on the ground or in trees, their cryptic coloration hiding them from predators. With their large, luminous eyes closed against the light, they can be all but invisible. At dusk, they fly off to hunt flying insects, scooping them into their cavernous gape as they fly.

There are seven species of nightjar in the Okavango, all of which look very similar, so in the spotlight's beam Lee and Shaq could not ID them as to species.

Impala and kudu came to the watercourse to drink as did the wild dogs. Either the dogs were satiated from their previous night's feast or the antelope were too wary to be vulnerable, but there was no hunt that evening.

I had requested Lee to try and find us an aardvark or a pangolin on the night drive. Aardvarks are large nocturnal animals that come out of burrows at night to hunt for termites and ants. They tear into termite mounds with their powerful claws, then lick up the ants with their two foot long, sticky tongues. Pangolins are unrelated animals who have a similar life style but are largely arboreal. They are covered in thick overlapping scales that are a formidable deterrent to any predator.

Lee and Shaq had agreed that the chances for aardvark were very slim and for pangolin even slimmer. Shaq said that he had never even seen a pangolin, even though his wife had. When it showed up, he had been close by and he had been quite put out with her for not calling him to see it.

Shaq returned us to the spot where we had done our foot safari that morning on the off chance that an aardvark might be there. It wasn't. But the Springhaas whose tracks we had seen earlier certainly were. The golden shine of their eye reflection was all around us as the animals bounded through the tall grass. They never strayed far from their burrows, though, diving down them if we approached too closely.

We drove slowly back to camp, the spotlight picking out the eyeshine of impala in the bush. At the campground's edge, it picked up eyeshine quite close to the ground, greenish rather than the gold of the Springhaas. When the eyes moved into the open, they revealed an African Wildcat.

The African Wildcat is the ancestor of the common domestic tabby. It is virtually undistinguishable from its domestic descendant but for the reddish-brown fur on the backs of its ears. First domesticated, then worshipped, by the ancient Egyptians, wild ones still range widely over Africa. The hordes of Springhaas had undoubtedly drawn its attention.

Lee shone the spotlight into the branches of the acacia trees around the camp and was rewarded by a flash of eyeshine. It quickly disappeared, then appeared again meters away. Lee was hard put to keep the bouncing creature in the light, but eventually it sat still long enough to be recognized as a Lesser Bushbaby.

Lesser Bushbaby is a prosimian primate species that the Memphis Zoo is concentrating on conserving through a captive breeding program. At one time quite common in the pet trade, it is now almost absent from North American zoos. It is not uncommon in Africa, but very nocturnal and hard to find. It roosts in a hollow tree in daytime, then heads out to search for insects and fruit in the trees in the dark. Before it departs on its nightly rambles, it urinates on its feet and hands, leaving an individual scent trail for others of its kind to interpret.

We had enjoyed a very long day, not untinged by sadness, so everyone rushed off to bed as quickly as they could. I remained somewhat wakeful and was rewarded by a sighting of the Southern Cross just above the horizon just before daybreak.

Coffee and conversation at the campfire were abbreviated next morning, as was breakfast, as we prepared for our next move. Bags were placed in the trailer so we could work in a drive before we headed to our next camp area.

We drove past the location of the dead elephant. The crippled hyena was still present but the other had disappeared. Half of the elephant's trunk was gone. In another week, there would likely be nothing left but bones.

We drove to the spot where we had seen the buffalo on the preceding day. Another herd was present so we waited for them to pass. When we attempted to move, we found that the passenger's side rear tire of the safari car was flat. We all climbed down while Lee and Shaq pulled it off and replaced it with one of the spares. As they finished, they noticed that the left wheel of the trailer was wobbling. An inspection revealed a problem with the wheel itself, not the tire. Shaq tried to raise Doonga on the radio to have him come and pick up the trailer but was unsuccessful. The hope now was that the wheel would hold until we reached our next camp.

When the buffalo had passed, we turned onto a trail that we had not previously followed. Having passed hippos and wart hogs, at the end of another watercourse we were surprised to find another pair of majestic Wattled Cranes. There were also a pair of very cute Lesser Jacanas, smaller and much less common than the African Jacanas we had seen every day. They were mostly pale gray-brown above and white underneath with black wings.

A patch of thornbush held another surprise. We had observed Meves' Starlings every day that we had been in the Okavango, but never very many at once. These birds are a little larger than a robin, iridescent purplish-black with long, graduated tails. Lee had said that they were quite rare in the Okavango, so he was astounded to find a bush that was literally covered with them. He had never seen a flock that large.

Just about then, the radio came alive announcing that a Leopard was hunting just beyond where the buffalo had passed. We turned quickly around and rushed back to where we found four other tourist vans. As the engine cut off, there was a rush in the thornbush and a beautiful female Leopard came into view. It seemed to have a quarry in mind so we held our breath as it rushed past our car, its belly almost scraping the ground.

Whatever it was hunting must have given it the slip because it halted abruptly, turned aside and disappeared into the bush again. We wheeled around to follow it, coming out the other side into a lovely green meadow. A baboon troop was exploring the water of a small pool, oblivious of its danger, but lucky for them the Leopard stopped, sat on its haunches for a few moments like a Labrador Retriever, then climbed a tree from which it could scan the entire meadow.

By now, there were more tourist vans watching and photographing the Empress of Okavango as she lay regally on her arboreal throne. Shaq was conversing with each driver in rapid Setswana, either in person or on the radio. Finally, he gunned the car, leaving several loads of tourists to admire the Leopard and the Leopard to ignore the tourists. He rushed to where we had first seen the Leopard where another van was waiting. After some more discussion in Setswana with the driver and in English with the passengers, he and Lee announced that the trailer was no longer fit for service. We were abandoning it because the other van was travelling to a camp very near to the one that we would be occupying and had room to transport our luggage for us. We profusely thanked the driver and passengers of the other van while the driver climbed onto the solid roof of his vehicle. We handed up our bags, our tarpaulin to cover them and a rope to secure them to the roof. Shaq carefully marked the trailer's location as he hid it in a thick patch of bush for Doonga to pick up later. It was a really nice thing for the other tour operator to do because none of us had relished riding 75 kilometers over rough roads sitting on our bags.

It was necessary that we return the rifle to its proper owners at Kwhai village. The road that led there passed a watercourse where a dead tree held a bird that was familiar to me and to Gina who said that she sees them

frequently at her lake house at Pickwick. It was an Osprey, another cosmopolitan species that is found everywhere but Australia, New Zealand and Antarctica. It sat patiently waiting for a fish to show itself just beneath the surface of the lagoon.

We stopped to watch and photograph it. While we did, we were surprised to hear a deep hooting from very close by. A Giant Eagle Owl, mottled gray with shocking pink eyelids, was perched in the tree that sheltered us from the sun.

Once back at Khwai village, we waited in the shade for Shaq to return the rifle and to sign us out of the campground. Since we were now behind schedule, Lee passed around packages of peanut butter crackers in lieu of a morning break. While we waited, a mated pair of Yellow-breasted Apalis flitted around a thicket below the village water tank. These little birds have greenish wings and back, white belly and throat, gray head and lemon yellow breast. The male has a black mark on his breast that the female lacks. Both sexes have deep red eyes. They call in duet, one calling a note, then the other.

A Paradise Flycatcher also appeared. This robin-sized bird has chestnut wings and back, gray breast and belly, black head, bright blue bill and eye ring and sports a pair of long chestnut tail feathers in breeding season. The extra long feathers are a dead giveaway when it is incubating eggs, fluttering in the breeze as a surefire predator attractor, but presumably the extended feathers are a terrific come on to a prospective mate.

With the firearm safely returned and the paperwork completed, Shaq rejoined us. We re-crossed the bridge and turned away from Khwai, followed by the farewell calls of a pair of fish eagles.

Once across the bridge, we turned east, toward the Chobe National Park and our next destination, the Savuti Channel. I had rotated into the front passenger seat, which made it easier for me to look for wildlife. Behind schedule as we were, it took a lot to induce a halt. Kudu, waterbuck and elephants that we would have stopped to view at length just days earlier, we passed with hardly a second glance.

Raptors were another matter. A Bateleur soaring overhead definitely called for a halt. So did a Brown Snake Eagle and an African Hawk-eagle that was very close to the road.

After a half hour or so, we arrived at a new road. It seemed to stretch arrow straight for miles in the direction we wished to travel. It appeared to be in better shape than the rough tracks upon which we had been travelling, but turned out to prove once again that looks can be deceiving.

Just as we turned on to it, we found new bird species, one that I was quite surprised not to have found earlier. A pair of Ostriches strolled unconcernedly onto the track and looked back at us with the witless gaze typical of Ostriches everywhere. They watched us for a minute or two, then wandered aimlessly into the bush.

Once onto the new road, Shaq stepped on it. We passed more wildlife but stopped only infrequently as we were now really late. A Red-headed Weaver flew across the road in front of us as did a Golden Oriole, a migrant visiting from Europe, but we hardly slowed down.

We did slow and even stop when I noticed a strange bird in the Mopani bushes just beside the road. It was the size of a large chicken with a longish neck and longish legs, streaked buff and brown above with a black breast and belly. Its neck was light gray and its head tan. It was a Red-crested Korhaan, a small member of the bustard family.

Bustards all have impressive courtship displays. Males of the larger species flaunt their nuptial plumes while strutting and posturing for the females. Red-crested Korhaans extend a small red crest on their nape but also use a spectacular flight display; flying straight up from the ground then tumbling to earth before gliding to a landing. I was very excited to have found this species, but it turned out to be quite common all around Savuti.

After a long, hot, dry, bumpy ride we reached the entrance of the Chobe National Park. The entrance building was much like that at Moremi; two buildings on either side of the road connected by a high-pitched thatched roof. One building served as an office for the rangers and the other held a small museum and very welcome restrooms. There was a whiteboard

where notable wildlife sightings from the preceding week could be recorded.

The ranger pointed one out right at the park entrance building. A pair of Barn Owls were roosting on the high ridgepole holding up the thatched roof; enjoying both shade and privacy as they slept the day away.

In the ranger office, a radio was playing African music. It gave Kay, who among her many other accomplishments is a dance instructor, an opportunity to show off a few calypso moves.

I had thought that we might take the opportunity to have our lunch, but we settled for snacks before we pulled out, observed by some interested kids from the nearby ranger compound and a pair of wart hogs who showed us no interest whatever.

Our destination was the Savuti Channel, a rather mysterious watercourse deep inside the park. Lee told us that it flowed as a drainage river until the early 1980s when a small earthquake raised a geologic barrier, cutting off its water supply. It had remained dry until 2010 when another earthquake had caused the barrier to subside, allowing the channel to flood once again. Shaq knew a perfect spot on the verdant banks of the channel for us to enjoy our lunch.

It was well into the afternoon when we came upon a road directional sign that Shaq recognized as the pull off point for our lunch break. He drove toward a grove of trees that obviously marked a watercourse. We all heaved a hungry sigh of relief as he wheeled us into the shade of the riverine forest, only to discover that this idyllic spot was already occupied. There sat another vehicle whose side was emblazoned with the logo of a wildlife film company. It was occupied by two filmmakers whose expressions of surprise at our appearance were not without annoyance.

The reason quickly became apparent. Recumbent on a limb that stretched toward the watercourse lay a Leopard. Two different Leopard sightings in one day is unheard of anywhere in Africa, but we had achieved it! We observed and photographed the great cat while Lee and Shaq queried the film crew about her.

Needless to say, it was probably not a good idea to spread a picnic lunch underneath a Leopard's rest limb, so we had to move on. It took Shaq a little time to find a suitable spot, but when he did his choice was excellent. The flooding and subsidence of the Savuti channel over many years had killed many of the acacia trees which once lined its banks. The dead trees provided perches for many fish-eating birds such as Osprey, Long-tailed Cormorant, Squacco Heron, African Darter and Pied Kingfisher. The shallows provided feeding area for shorebirds including Black-winged Stilt, Common Greenshank, Ruff and Marsh and Wood Sandpipers.

I was surprised and gratified that the sandwiches that the crew had packed for us so early that morning were still fresh and the salad still crisp. It was now four o'clock, a bit early for cocktails but considering how far we had travelled and how late was our lunch, I thought beer was appropriate to accompany it.

Hunger satisfied, we reloaded the vehicle and set off for our camp site. We only drove about an hour, taking notice of flocks of Hartlaub's Babblers, Helmeted Guineafowl, Burchell's Sandgrouse and the ubiquitous doves along the way.

Our campsite was very close to the channel, where hippo tracks led up the steep sloping bank to the road. We were a bit dismayed to find that the crew had not yet completed pitching camp. But our tents were ready so we hustled in to relax. While the crew finished pitching the mess tent, Duke brought around hot water for very welcome showers.

By the time we emerged, a campfire was blazing, the camp chairs had been placed around it and sundowners distributed. After such a long day, the wine, beer and gin & tonics were especially welcome.

As soon as they had deposited us in camp, Lee and Shaq had hurried off in the car to retrieve our bags from the other camp. They returned with breathless news that they had found ANOTHER Leopard on their way back. It was very close to the road, so we agreed that we would search for it first thing tomorrow.

It was full dark when we finally sat down to dinner. Indri Tours had furnished us with a checklist of wildlife species that we were likely to see during our stay. Our after dinner ritual was to go through it, marking off the species that we had seen during that day. That evening I was exhausted and suspected that others were as well, so I suggested that we wait until tomorrow's lunch to do the checklist.

My suggestion received universal approbation, so after dessert I removed to my tent. Some others remained for what I was told the next day was some excellent wine and stimulating conversation. I especially regretted my early withdrawal next morning when Richard and Gina told me that they had seen a strange animal in camp; house cat sized, dark and blotched, with a ringed tail and pointed nose. Lee and I finally figured out that it was an African Civet, a species that I had never seen before and still haven't.

Everyone was eager to get on the trail next morning. Right away, we found hornbills. These birds have unique nesting habits. After mating, the female finds a tree hollow. She enters and the male seals her inside with mud and feces. He leaves a slit just large enough for him to pass food to her. Her strong, sharp bill prevents incursion into the nest by snakes and other predators. She lays her eggs in the cavity, incubates them, then broods the chicks until they grow so large that the cavity is crowded. Then she pecks her way out. The chicks then seal themselves inside again. The female joins the male in feeding the chicks until they are fledged, at which time they peck their own way out to join their parents.

Hornbills are the size of crows and not at all shy. We had seen hornbills, either Red-billed or Yellow-billed, on every day of our journey. Both these species were evident on this morning, but we also found a pair of African Grey Hornbills, grey above and white below with grey head and bill and white eye stripe.

We had not travelled far when Shaq braked hard. Coming straight down the road toward us was another tourist van and trotting along in front as if it were the most natural thing imaginable was a beautiful female Leopard. Lee whispered excitedly that it was the one that he and Shaq had found in nearly the same spot yesterday. The jungle princess paid us no attention at

all, circling around our van, then dropping on the ground like a movie star bored with the attention of adoring fans.

She lay there for some minutes while we and the occupants of the other van photographed her. Suddenly, she sat up on her haunches and stared intently into the bush on the other side of the road.

We had stopped next to an acacia tree whose top had been broken off by elephants about eight feet above the ground. The Leopard brought gasps from all in our van and probably the other van as well when she jumped from the ground into the top of the tree in one bound.

I was riding on the car's driver's side back row seat. The Leopard in the tree was barely an arm's length away from me. She continued to stare at the bush until a flock of Helmeted Guineafowl emerged.

The seven species of Guineafowl are chicken-like birds that are endemic to Africa. Helmeted Guineafowl are dark gray with white polka dots all over. Their necks and heads are bare blue and red skin. They sport bony casques on their heads, hence their names. Helmeted Guineafowl have been semi-domesticated since Roman times. When I was a boy, many farms near ours kept guineas as "watch birds" because they roost in trees at night and the approach of any stranger, human or animal, would elicit piercing cries of "Potter-ack! Potter -ack!"

The guineas came closer and closer to the cars and to the Leopard. It watched them intently as they approached, seemingly oblivious to the danger. The great cat tensed its muscles for a leap and a chase when the birds suddenly changed direction, crossing the road on the side of our car away from it. The Leopard relaxed, twitched its tail a time or two, then leapt gracefully to the ground. It then proceeded away from the direction that the guineas had travelled. "Those are the luckiest Guineafowl in Botswana!", said Lee.

Lee's interest in the Okavango is much more inclusive than just for the wildlife. He is particularly interested in the people who have lived here for thousands of years. He has written books about them and their art. Not far

from our camp was a line of volcanic hills where the San people had painted the rocks as a plea to the gods for help in hunting.

As we drove, some small, weasel-like creatures scampered from some fallen logs to a nearby burrow. “Suricates!” shouted Lee.

Suricates or meerkats are mongooses who live in semi-desert areas of southern Africa. Their interesting social structures and diurnal habits have made them the objects of both scientific and general public interest. Many zoos, including the Memphis Zoo, maintain meerkat colonies. I was especially keen to see them.

As the little animals scattered, Lee called, “False alarm. They are Yellow Mongooses.” Yellow Mongooses live in family groups that are smaller than those of meerkats. They are active by day and return to the burrows that they sometimes share with ground squirrels at night. They are larger and more slender than meerkats and have bushier tails. “It would be a real rarity to find suricates here,” said Lee. “They prefer drier areas.”

We observed lechwe, impala and kudu as we drove to the painted rocks, followed by a flock of Arrow-marked Babblers. These noisy, aptly named birds are about the size of a robin. They are all brown, but get the rest of their name from the white chevrons or arrowheads on each of their head and body feathers. They are very social, calling constantly to each other. They nest communally, with young birds staying with their parents after they reach adulthood and helping to raise their younger siblings.

When we arrived at the painted rocks, we found a pair of Grey Turacos, or Go-away Birds, in a tree next to the trail. Turacos are crow-sized, long-tailed, crested birds that usually sport bright colors. The Grey Turaco is different, wearing only ashy gray. Go-away birds were named by early British big game hunters who became annoyed beyond measure by the birds. When they spied a hunter, they would spoil the hunt with their raucous calls that sound exactly like “Go-Way! Go-way!”

The rock paintings were about forty feet up the side of one of the volcanic hills. I could see that the trail was very steep and the sun becoming very hot. I decided to give my newly repaired heart a break and stay at the road.

Some of the red ochre petroglyphs were visible from the bottom of the trail. I recognized a hunter and an eland, the largest of Africa's antelope. Signs all around warned that the paintings were fragile, asking people not to touch or even go too near them.

After observing the paintings and listening to Lee's description of them, the party started back down the trail to the road, sending colorful little Striped Skinks scurrying away to protective rock crevices.

We re-boarded the car, grateful for the shade of the canvas roof. The road led between the base of the hill and a watercourse. It was near time for our morning break, so Shaq stepped on it, looking for a spot of shade. There was a belt of brush between the road and the water. As we passed a break in the vegetation screen, I noticed a pair of antelope at the water's edge, enjoying a cool drink. I thought nothing of it, assuming that they were impala, a species that we observed every day. But Lee suddenly shouted "Stop! Klipspringers!"

Klipspringers are antelope, about the size of a German Shepherd Dog. They have tan fur that is very loosely attached to their skin, useful when a predator is grabbing for your butt. The males have stubby, but very sharp horns, a fact that the keeper staff at the Memphis Zoo is well aware of.

Klipspringer means "Rockjumper" in Afrikaans, the language of Dutch-descended South Africans. It refers to the amazing agility of these animals when moving around very steep and rocky terrain. Their hooves are the consistency of hard rubber and wear out faster on the inside than on the outside. This creates a suction that holds them to whatever they are standing on. They live in monogamous pairs.

Shaq braked quickly, then backed up and drove us down to the edge of the watercourse. The Klipspringers seemed nervous about our presence, but not unduly so. They turned and slowly made their way back through the brush and toward the rocky hill that was a natural fortress for them. I had seen a Klipspringer on the Serengeti, but never up close and had never photographed one. Doing so was a real thrill for me.

Lee said that he had not known that there were Klipspringers in the Okavango. The flat, sandy terrain is not suitable habitat for them. They were not even on our checklist. He also said that they derive most of their water requirements from the leaves that they browse. He had never before observed one drinking water.

The volcanic hill dropped away abruptly as the trail swung round. Just at the base was a gigantic baobab tree. We had seen a few baobabs as we drove toward Savuti but this was the closest we had come to one. Shaq pulled into its shade, then pulled out the camp chairs and the break cooler.

Baobabs are endemic to Africa. Only one species grows on the African continent but six more live on Madagascar and nowhere else. Their trunks are huge, round and bulbous. I estimated the dbh(diameter breast high) of this one at twelve to fifteen feet. Its spindly limbs stretched above it, more reminiscent of roots than branches. There were leaves, but they were far between, casting scattered shade. There were a few creamy-white flowers whose scent was not altogether pleasant.

Big as it was, the tree was undoubtedly several centuries old. Baobabs are of no use whatever as lumber, so there is no need for people to cut them down. Their tissues do, however, store water so elephants frequently gouge them with their tusks to obtain the moisture. The trees have the capability to heal very quickly, so such damage doesn't affect them overmuch. The flowers and fruit are eaten by both human and non-human primates.

In the "Number One Ladies Detective Agency" stories, Ma Ramotse and Ma Makutsi are constantly drinking what is described as "red bush tea". On this morning, as I was reaching for my usual soda, Shaq asked me if I would like to try some red bush tea. "This is really Botswana red bush tea?" I asked. "Yes," he replied, "It is." I replied to him, "Well, I can't come to Botswana and not try red bush tea!" He poured me a cup. I am not fond of tea, especially hot tea, especially on a very hot morning, but I found it surprisingly refreshing. And now when I read about the lady detectives, I will know and appreciate exactly what they are drinking.

We all lined up in front of the baobab for another group photograph. Then we loaded up and headed for the grasslands.

Savuti is quite different from the other places where we had camped. They were mostly scrub or Mopani forest with some open grassy areas and ponds. Savuti seemed to me much more like the plains of east Africa; large expanses of grassland with scattered waterways, brushy patches and some gallery forest. There seemed to be many more hoofed animals as well.

The sun was now becoming intense. My eyes began to water from the glare. I dug into my backpack for my sunglasses but they did not help. Then my eyes began to tear so that I could hardly see. I was having a full blown allergy attack.

On a patch of open sandy ground, we found a pair of ostriches with a crèche of chicks. Male ostriches form harems of females who lay their huge eggs in a communal nest that the male incubates at night. I was a bit surprised to find a family group of these giant birds with only a male and female present. Perhaps this particular cock was just a natural family man.

On the edge of the open area, we found another unusual family group, a male and female lion. There was no sign of the pride, so perhaps this portion of the Okavango promoted monogamy. More likely, the lioness was in season and the pair were enjoying the privacy of a honeymoon.

They should certainly have enjoyed a excellent choice of cuisine. On the way back to camp, game was everywhere. The broad grassy sward was dotted everywhere with Wart Hogs, Impala, Tsessebee, even wildebeest.

At a small watercourse, we found an assortment of water birds; Red-billed Teal, Ruff, Little Egret, Grey Heron and a Pied Kingfisher perched on a dead tree. We watched as he dove and caught a fish, then carried it into his nest hole in the bank.

When we arrived back at camp for lunch, showers were particularly welcome. I suppose that my eye difficulty was more evident than I thought, because George asked me if I was OK. I muttered an excuse, then rushed into my tent for my personal first aid kit, only to find that I had no

antihistamines. Lucky for me, Gina, who is a medical technician, was better prepared. I scored a Benadryl from her and, after a shower and lunch felt much better.

Before we left home, Nora and Gina had asked me if they should bring their Memphis Zoo docent uniform shirts. I had told them that I did not know any reason why they should. They had better sense than to listen to me and brought them anyway. Gina brought two golf shirts with our docent logo and Nora brought a jacket and a pullover.

Sometime during the trip, it occurred to me that it would be fun to have a photograph made of us on safari in docent uniforms. Accordingly, Richard and I borrowed uniforms from the ladies and we were all photographed in uniform in front of our safari car. The photograph eventually appeared on the Association of Zoo & Aquarium Docents and Volunteers Facebook page and in "Exzoobrance", the Memphis Zoo Society's bi-monthly newsletter.

As we boarded the car for our afternoon drive, Shaq announced that our quarry was Sable and Roan Antelope. We had observed neither of these magnificent animals and Shaq was determined to find them for us. The savanna area where we had finished our morning was known to be frequented by both species.

There had been considerable rain in the Savuti area, so the savanna grass was lush and low spots held considerable water. This would potentially be great for finding hoofed animals, the predators that feed on them and shorebirds as well.

The shorebirds did not disappoint. We found the usual Marsh, Wood and Common Sandpipers, Blacksmith Lapwings and Ruff, but pratincoles as well. Pratincoles are strange shorebirds that resemble swallows. They hang out near water, flying over it hawking insects on the wing with their large-gaped mouths. We had found Red-winged Pratincoles previously; robin-sized birds with dark tan wings and back; white rump; long, split, "swallow" tail; white belly; tan head, throat and face with black markings and conspicuous chestnut underwings, but never in such numbers.

Hundreds sat close to the ephemeral water pools scattered around the

savanna, flying up in great swirls when they were disturbed. There were joined this day by several Black-winged Pratincoles; very similar but with black underwings.

The drier parts of the savanna also produced shorebirds, and some most unexpected. A pair of Kittlitz's Plovers, with white belly, light tan breast, brown cap, black eye line and white throat and nape were most attractive. Another plover species; larger, brown above with white throat, chestnut breast and white face was a puzzlement to Lee until he suddenly called it. "Caspian Plover!" he shouted. "That's a Life Bird for me!"

A fair sized flock flushed in front of the car to skitter off across the savanna.

Larks are grassland birds whose cryptic coloration makes it difficult to locate them in even short grass habitat. We lucked up and found four species that afternoon; Red-capped, Rufous-naped, Sabota and Grey-backed Sparrow-lark, whose males' striking, sexually dimorphic black-and-white plumage is unusual for larks.

And then we found the biggest flying bird of them all, the Kori Bustard. Kori Bustards are about the size of a peacock but at least twice as heavy. They have a brown back, a long vermiculated gray neck, black-and-white wings, a short dark crest and a white belly and breast. They stalk the tall grass on twenty inch legs looking for insects that they can grab with their dagger-like bill. Not infrequently, they are accompanied by hitch-hiking Carmine Bee-eaters who ride along on their backs to take advantage of the flushed insects.

Like all bustards, Kori Bustards have an elaborate courtship ritual. The courting male raises his tail to display its black, fan-shaped tip, puffs out his neck feathers, raises his crest and droops his wings to the ground.

We were not privileged to observe the Kori Bustard at its mating lek, but we did find another bustard, the Black Korhaan. The male of this species is about half the size of a Kori Bustard with brown wings and back, black face, neck, belly and breast and white patches on its shoulders, crown and behind its eyes. It has a striking red eye ring and red bill with a yellow tip. It was quite tame, allowing us a very close approach in the car.

Another species that allowed us a close approach was a Black-backed Jackal. Shaq spotted it from some way off, but as we closed on it, it lay calmly next to a fallen log, as at ease as a Golden Retriever in a fenced suburban yard.

Shorebirds and bustards were not the only birds on the savanna that afternoon. Raptors were also very much in evidence. At a waterhole where zebra, tsessebe, wildebeest and giraffes came to drink, three Montagu's Harriers had dropped in for water. Like all harriers, these migrants who nest in Europe hunt by "quartering"; flying low and slow on dihedral wings, watching and listening for insects, mice and small reptiles in the tall grass.

Gina's friend Mona Miller had visited Botswana in 2012 and had been impressed by the Secretary Birds. Gina had been especially keen to find one but we had had no sightings until that afternoon. The Secretary Bird has been described by one bird book as a "long-legged, cursorial hawk." That may be an apt description, but the Secretary Bird is really a unique species, the strangest bird of prey in the world.

The Secretary Bird is about the size of a Bald Eagle, but is otherwise like no other raptor. Its legs are almost a meter long and its feet end in large, strong talons. It is mostly light gray with a long black tail, thighs and wings. It derives its name from the loose crest of black feathers on the back of its crown that are supposed to resemble the quill pens that Nineteenth Century scribes kept behind their ears. It stalks the long grass searching for rodents, baby birds and reptiles, especially snakes. It kills the snakes by stamping on them with its powerful feet.

Despite its mostly terrestrial habits, Secretary Birds are strong fliers, often soaring on thermals like vultures. They are tree nesters as well. The mated pair that we found broke off their hunting stalks to fly to the top of a small acacia. It appeared that they were nesting there.

I had remarked previously about the shortage of vultures in the Okavango. As we turned for camp, one appeared perched on a dead acacia, silhouetted against the setting sun. No vultures can really be described as pretty, but one species is actually quite attractive. The White-headed Vulture is mostly

dark brown with white breast, belly and thighs. Its naked head is squared off in back, giving it a distinct triangular shape. The head is quite colorful; white with pink face, blue cere and pink bill. White-headed Vultures, though mostly scavengers, have stronger feet than other vultures and sometimes kill their own food.

All African sunsets are beautiful, but the one that evening was particularly spectacular. We even prevailed upon Shaq to stop for a moment to allow us to photograph it.

We returned to camp ready for the cocktail hour. It was particularly jovial and dinner was delightful, featuring roast chicken, white potatoes and squash casserole.

My sleep was interrupted about 2 am by rain falling on my tent. I sat up and read for a while, but was still asleep when the blaze of the camp fire woke me at 5 am. Our pre-breakfast coffee hour ran a bit long as breakfast was a bit late, probably due to the evening showers.

As we boarded our safari car, Shaq announced that our target species for the day would be Roan and Sable Antelope. These were two species that I had always wanted to see but had not placed them on my “most wanted” list because it had not occurred to me that we might find them. Nevertheless, Shaq said there was an excellent chance that either or both might be found at the savanna area we had visited the previous afternoon.

Roan and Sable Antelope are known as the “Hippotragine” or “horse-eared” antelope. They are both a little smaller than a kudu. They have horse-like neck with an erectile mane and a horse-like tail. Both species have rear-pointing, curved horns and black-and-white facial markings that appear to have influenced the masks that are such an important part of native African art.

The savanna was quite well populated that morning, possibly due to the previous night’s showers. Black-winged Pratincoles surrounded a depression which had filled with water overnight. In a drier spot, we found the pratincoles’ close but very dissimilar looking relatives, Temminck’s Coursers. Other species that avoided the wet places were Caspian Plovers

and Spotted Dikkop, a large-eyed, mostly nocturnal shorebird that had not yet retired for the day.

A Black-bellied Bustard strode purposefully from behind a small hillock. This species is about the size of a Red-crested Korhaan, but the male bird is crestless, has spotted wings, prominent white cheeks and a black throat, breast and belly. It does a courtship flight similar to the Red-crested Korhaan, but uses it to expose its black wing linings with large white patches. We also found Kori Bustard, Red-crested Korhaan and Black-bellied Korhaan, giving us a four bustard morning.

Just beneath the tree where we thought that the Secretary Birds were nesting, a very handsome male lion was dozing comfortably. I don't know whether it was us who disturbed him, but he rose and, appearing for all the world like he was posing for the cameras, stood gazing thoughtfully across the savanna. Then he walked to the other side of the acacia, flopped onto his side and fell promptly asleep, one front paw twitching slightly.

The plain was dotted with large animals which interested us more than they did the lion. We found zebra, tsessebe, Cape Buffalo, reedbuck, elephants and three long-striding giraffes. These were all very good, but Shaq had promised us Roan Antelope and Sable. The heat haze from the sun was making it difficult to see very far, but Shaq was on his game. He cut the wheel and we headed off toward some dots on the horizon. As we drew closer, they resolved into antelope; grayish-brown with an erectile mane, long ears with tufts of hair at the ends, wide-spreading, back-curving horns and distinctive, clown-make-up like facial markings. It was a sizable herd of Roan Antelope.

They were handsome creatures, the largest antelope in southern Africa after the eland. We were not the only ones observing them. A termite mound provided some shade to a lioness who was sleeping comfortably. But the top of the mound was occupied by an adorable lion cub who seemed intensely curious about all that was going around him, particularly the large herds of prey animals that he would pursue later in his life.

We followed the Roan Antelope for some distance as they grazed their way across the savanna. We were rewarded when they joined up with another “horse-like” antelope, a Gemsbok.

Gemsbok are one of three or four species of antelope known as oryx. Oryx are primarily desert-dwellers, but some species are quite at home on savanna or scrubland. They are specially adapted for dry regions, being able to go for very long periods without water. Oryx have special blood vessels connecting their moist nasal passages with other special blood vessels next to their brains, which keep their brains cool. This allows their body temperatures to rise quite sharply without causing them heat stroke.

Gemsbok are about the size of a Jersey cow. They are mostly light gray with distinctive black markings on their necks, legs and body. Their tail is long and very horse-like. The black-and-white markings on their faces are as pronounced as those of Roan Antelope. They also possess perhaps the most dangerous horns of any antelope. The horns are over a meter long, straight and as sharp as spears. They are perfectly capable of defending themselves against any lion that they cannot outrun.

Gemsbok have the distinctly horse-like appearance of the other “Hippotragine”. It is this appearance that has led to speculation that a Gemsbok that had broken off one of its horns was the origin of the myth of the unicorn.

The wind had risen when we turned back for camp. We passed the acacia tree where the Secretary Birds had established their eyrie. They had left it to stalk snakes and lizards in the tall grass. They advanced side by side, watching the ground for slithers or scampers, the hot wind blowing the strange quills that give them their strange name.

A flock of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters had stationed itself in a dead acacia to watch for insects caught in the strong gusts. These birds are very similar to Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters but are all green above and with blue faces.

Nearing camp we passed another dead tree where we finally found Africa’s mightiest bird of prey, the fierce and formidable Martial Eagle. If a bird ever deserved its name, it is the Martial Eagle. Large as a Bald Eagle, its

yellow eyes glare fiercely from its massive, crested head. It is mostly dark brown with a white belly and breast spotted with brown. While Africa's other eagles happily feast on carrion, mice and reptiles, this war-like creature captures monkeys and small antelopes with its powerful talons.

Lunch was chili with red beets. I'm not fond of beets, but Ball's chutney improved them immensely. The day was quite the warmest that we had experienced so the shade of our acacia grove was most welcome. After lunch, everyone adjourned to their tents for siesta, reading or laundry. My laundry done, I hung it out behind the tent then settled into the camp chair under my tent fly with a book. I was well into it when for some reason I glanced up. Over the edge of the book, just coming into my vision was something green and slithery, making S-shaped squiggles on the ground and heading straight for me.

I have stated that I am not inordinately afraid of snakes. I did not say that I am totally unafraid of snakes. When a snake I am unfamiliar with, especially one that looks extraordinarily like the Green Mamba at the Memphis Zoo, comes straight toward me in a big hurry I am gonna express some fear of snakes.

I jumped from my chair and shouted, "SNNNNAAAAAKE!!!!!!" at the top of my voice. This caused two separate but related reactions. Although the snake did not hear me because snakes do not have ears, it turned and headed for a nearby tree. Everyone in the camp; guides, tourists and crew, came running toward me. "It went up there!" I stammered, pointing to the tree.

An unidentified snake in camp cannot be tolerated. A eyeball search of the tree by Shaq, Lee and the crew went on for a few minutes, but since it was thinner than my little finger and all green, I thought finding it would be impossible. But after only a few minutes, Gina said, "I see it."

After she pointed it out to Shaq, he pulled it gently from its hiding spot in the branches. It was quite a pretty little creature, lime green with black markings on the front half of its body, tan on the rear. It was about two feet long with large round-pupiled golden eyes. Lee identified it as a Variegated

Bush Snake. Although the species has a reputation for aggression, it was quite calm as Shaq handed it around to those of us who wanted to handle it.

Finally, we returned it to the tree where we had found it, leaving it to search the tree for small lizards in peace.

We resumed our post-prandial relaxations until 3 pm. Then we assembled in the mess tent for our last tea time of the trip. Somehow, Doonga had prepared an incredible surprise for us. In the depths of the Okavango, he had made us a delicious chocolate cake.

As exciting as our morning drive had been, I was still disappointed. Shaq had said that we would find Sable Antelope but we had come up empty. The Sable Antelope is the signature animal of the Memphis Zoo docents, the one that appears on the logo on our shirts and patches. The award that we present for distinguished service is called the Sable Award. I had been really excited by the prospect of seeing one. Shaq was aware of this, so he drove directly back to the savanna that we had visited earlier in the day.

We drove across the flat and grassy sward, finding elephant, wildebeest, zebra, lechwe, giraffe and impala, but no Sable. Finally, we broke off the hunt and drove back to the rocky hills where we had found the rock paintings. On the way, we found Jameson's Firefinch, a sparrow-sized little bird, all pink but for brownish wings and back. A Scrub Hare scooted across the track in front of us, too quick for me, but others saw it.

We approached the rocky hillock from the opposite direction than we had on the previous day. As we approached, we noticed a sizable herd of Kudu at its base. There must have been at least twenty animals, the most that we had seen in one place, present. As we approached, the herd moved slowly, almost in single file, up the rocky slope but not at all disturbed by our presence.

We stopped at the base of the hill to observe this dignified retreat. While we did so, a pair of Tree Squirrels appeared on the rocks right next to us. We had observed Tree Squirrels every day of the trip, but usually as they scurried away at our approach. This pair paid us not the least attention so we watched their antics for some time.

Lee and Shaq had a plan to drive around the hill on the side opposite from the rock paintings. Accordingly, we proceeded, using some previously made jeep tracks. We must have travelled about two hundred meters in the very soft sand when we stopped abruptly. Backing and rocking permitted us not an inch advance or retreat. We were stuck.

Being stuck axle-deep in lion country in late afternoon is never a pleasant prospect, but for Lee and Shaq, it was just another day at the office. Each grabbed one of the shovels that were strapped to the vehicle and proceeded to dig us out. We would have helped had we could, but we would likely only have gotten in the way, so we confined ourselves to watching them. We were joined in this endeavor by a sounder of Wart Hogs and a small herd of giraffes.

When the car was once again free, Shaq backed it down the hill. We were now very close to the baobab tree where we had had our previous day's break. We took advantage of the opportunity to enjoy our sundowner.

The guides wisely decided to avoid the deep sand and return to camp the way we had come. As we drove away, I glanced back at the rocky hill. All along its summit were ranged the Greater Kudu that had arrived there just about when we did. It was a magnificent sight and fitting conclusion to our last day in the bush.

The drive to camp gave us an opportunity to observe, maybe for the last time, zebra, wildebeest, tsessebe and elephants. As we neared camp, we found such familiar species as Crowned Lapwing, Burchell's Sandgrouse, Yellow Mongoose and an entire bush festooned by a family of Magpie Shrikes. We added another Okavango endemic species, Pied Babbler; as noisy and gregarious as the Hartlaub's and Arrow-marked Babblers that we were familiar with but all white with black tail and wings.

Once again, Africa outdid herself with a beautiful sunset. Roiling thunderheads in the west glowed against the sun as we hurried toward our last dinner in camp.

But Africa was not done with us yet. Less than a half mile from camp, something large and dark darted across the track in front of our vehicle. It

was the animal that I had most wanted to see in Botswana, an African Wild Dog. It had three or four companions but did not seem to be pursuing anything. We stopped to watch the pack for a few minutes before it melted away into the bush, the perfect climax of our final day of safari.

After dinner and the completion of our checklist, there were lots of sounds in the acacia forest behind our camp. Kay, Gina and I prevailed upon Lee to guide us on a short foot safari before we turned in. Lee picked up the spotlight and led us just outside the campfire's circle of light. He quickly picked up the eyeshine of a tiny Pearl-spotted Owlet then a very pretty little White-faced Scops Owl before we trooped off to bed.

I woke at four am, beginning my packing for our last move. I had not slept well what with the whoops of hyenas and the roar of lions going all night. In addition, the night had been quite warm and unusually humid for that dry territory. The laundry that I had hung out at noon had not dried when I prepared to pack it. I had been surprisingly resourceful in this instance, having brought sufficient ziplock bags to hold it while still damp.

As Richard and I enjoyed our coffee at the campfire, he asked how I had slept. When I told him poorly, he asked about the elephants. With the spirit of Jimmy Durante in mind, I asked "What elephants?"

Richard's tent and mine were only twenty or so feet distant, so he was astonished at my question. "Last night about midnight, eleven elephants passed behind our tents no more than fifty feet away!" he answered. I did not know whether to be angry at myself for sleeping through it or relieved that I had not known about the event until now. As if that were not enough, Kay joined us with a report that she had observed an African Civet strolling past her tent some time in the night.

Our bags had been placed outside our tents for the crew to pick up. Without the trailer, it would be necessary for them to transport the bags in the deuce-and-a-half to the Chobe Safari Lodge in Kisane where we were to spend our last night. Before we had finished breakfast, our bags had been loaded and our personal tents had been struck. We interrupted their work long enough to shake all of their hands and to express, verbally and

otherwise, our enormous gratitude for their service to us. We were unlikely to encounter them again, so we said a genuinely sad farewell.

The mess tent was being struck as we drove away from our last camp, headed off in a direction we had not travelled before. The sun was very bright, promising a very hot day. Shaq took his time on the way to the park's gate, aware, I think, that for some of us, this would be our last experience of Wild Africa. We observed what were now familiar sights; Meves' Starlings, White-backed Vultures, kudu, impala, lechwe, even a bachelor herd of bull elephants. We reached the park exit about 10 am but no one left the vehicle while Shaq signed us out.

As we drove away, we were surprised to find a small pride of lions feeding on the carcass of a deceased elephant. Behind and towering over them was a lone giraffe. It seemed to me that these two species, iconic of all that is African, were there to see us off.

We had not travelled far when Lee called a halt. He had spotted a Golden-breasted Bunting at the top of a small tree. Golden-breasted Bunting is a pretty little sparrow with chestnut wings, back and tail; white belly; black and white striped head and beautiful golden-yellow throat and breast. They are considered common in Africa and I had seen them on both of my previous African expeditions but I had never taken a decent photograph. This bird was perfectly posed in profile on the topmost branch in brilliant sunlight; the making of a perfect picture. And just as I pressed the shutter, it turned its back, then flew away.

Wildlife became increasingly scarce the farther we went from the park. Kudu and impala, even the occasional elephant, browsed in the forest, but they were few and far between. The road, if it could now be called that, became more and more difficult of navigation. Ruts became wider, potholes became deeper and avoiding them harder for Shaq. Those in the back had it rougher, but nobody had it easy.

After an hour or so, we turned onto a new trail that was, if anything, less passable. As we made the turn, a very large bird dropped from a roadside tree and shot across in front of us. Lee quickly ID'd it as a Lanner Falcon.

Falcons are the swiftest and most dashing of raptors. Their long, slender, pointed wings allows them to attain speeds of over 200mph in power dives on large birds like bustards as well as to make low level strafing runs at flocks of larks or wagtails. The Lanner Falcon is mottled light gray above, creamy underneath with barred tail and rufous crown. Black “tear marks” around and under the eyes cut down on glare, allowing a clearer view of prey. Like all falcons, Lanner Falcon has a “tomial tooth” or notch in its bill. Unlike other raptors, falcons do not kill with their talons; rather, they knock the prey down with the talons and kill with a bite to the neck which the tomial tooth makes possible.

After a half hour or so of jolting, Shaq took pity on us and stopped for our morning break. While we were enjoying tea and cookies, Lee heard an unfamiliar song. A bit of tree top searching located a Willow Warbler, with olive back, crown, wings and tail and yellow throat, breast and belly. It was evidently a new arrival from the frozen boreal forests of Scandinavia, enjoying the warmth of southern Africa. It was searching the leaves for insect prey. Another nondescript little bird, a Marico Flycatcher, brown above and white below, made an appearance. It is another insect hunter, but its style is to perch upright on a branch and sortie out to snatch fliers from the air.

Some time previously, Lee had remarked to me that we had seen not a single sunbird, a most unusual circumstance for ten days in southern Africa. We had both been on the lookout but Lee scored first when a sparrow-sized little bird flew across our route. Shaq hit the brakes when Lee called out, “Scarlet-chested Sunbird!”

Sunbirds occupy the same ecological niche in the Eastern Hemisphere as do hummingbirds in the Western. They are small nectar-feeders whose males are mostly very brightly colored. They do not have the same extraordinary flight capabilities as hummingbirds; rather than hovering before a blossom and extending bill and tongue into it, sunbirds creep about on top of flowers, probing their depths with strongly decurved bills.

The male Scarlet-chested Sunbird looks all black in regular light, but under direct sun its breast is brilliant scarlet, its throat flashing emerald and its

forehead is shining turquoise. It allowed only the briefest of glimpses before disappearing into the bush.

As the track stretched on, it became more hilly, wildlife became more scarce and signs of civilization, such as a cell phone tower and some obviously long idle road repair equipment, became more frequent. Despite the jolting, some of us became a bit drowsy in the heat. Suddenly, Shaq hit the brakes. “Look!” he shouted.

On the left side of the vehicle, about thirty meters off the track, lying in the shade of a thornbush thicket, was a magnificent bull Sable Antelope.

You don’t get to be a first rate safari guide like Shaq by being unobservant. He had noticed the sable antelope logos embroidered on Nora’s and Gina’s zoo docent uniforms and had determined to find one for us. Lee told me later that Shaq had told him, “We will find a Sable Antelope for them today”, before we broke camp that morning.

We were well past the recumbent sable before everyone got a good look at him. We all shouted for Shaq to go back, so he wheeled the vehicle in a circle to put the sable our left side again. I was sure the commotion would frighten the animal, but he appeared to take no more notice of us than he would of a fly on his ear.

Sable Antelope bulls are as large as a Jersey cow, females are noticeably smaller. The males are jet black (sable) with white bellies, rumps and faces, females are similar but brown. Their faces have remarkable black stripes from forelock to nose and from ears through eyes to mouths. There is an erectile mane and a brushy, horse-like tail. But most remarkable are their horns.

The horns of a bull Sable Antelope can be 140 centimeters long. They point up and backward, then curve down and wide apart. Sable are aggressive creatures, known for bullying other animals away from waterholes and choice grazing. If threatened by a predator, they will do what the one we were observing will do; back into a thornbush to protect its rear, lie down to protect its belly and defend itself with broad sweeps of its spear-like horns.

Many lions have been impaled and killed by these most courageous of hoofed animals.

After photographs and much admiration, we left the sable. It was now very hot and wildlife sightings, even of birds, had grown scarce. The rough track seemed as if would stretch on forever when there were a few breaks in the wall of forest on our left side. A green, wet, grassy plain appeared in the distance. Then we noticed the rear of a few concrete block and metal roofed houses.

Suddenly, right in front of the vehicle, there appeared something that seemed no less alien and incongruous than a Martian spaceship; a STOP sign. Beyond the sign was a modern, two-lane, asphalt highway. Shaq turned onto it and we found ourselves, if not back in the Twenty-first Century, at least in the Twentieth, once more courtesy of the Celestial People's Republic.

On our right, the highway ran below a hill on which sat some nice concrete-block houses shaded by acacia trees. There were churches and even a school.

On the left, the hill led down to the green plain that we had glimpsed before. It turned out not to be so much grass as marsh, a wide wetland forming the floodplain of a distant river. Nevertheless, cattle were grazing there along with some familiar water birds such as ibis, egrets, storks and Egyptian Geese.

Despite our return to civilization, wildlife was not entirely absent. Wart Hogs lay cooling in roadside mud holes while impala and even kudu watched our passing from acacia thickets at the top of the hill. Also present were large piles of elephant dung which I suspected were deposited during the night as the great beasts made their way from the forest to the wetland below.

About every five kilometers or so, the pavement widened, presumably to allow a bus to load and off-load. These locations were usually under a large shade tree and featured benches, a picnic table and sometimes even a bus shelter.

As we drove east, the distant river grew ever closer to the road. Lee told us that it was the Chobe River, Botswana's northern boundary, and that the northern shore, where cattle were grazing, was territory of the nation of Namibia.

This territory is called the Caprivi Strip. Lee told us that it was about five miles wide and ninety miles long, separating Botswana and Angola. In the Nineteenth Century, the German Empire established colonies in southwest Africa (now Namibia) and east Africa (now Tanzania). The German chancellor, Leo Caprivi, had hoped to some day connect the two with a railroad. As part of a deal with Britain, he had swapped Zanzibar island off east Africa for a strip of northern Botswana to build the railroad. The road was never built, but the territory remains part of Namibia.

We travelled the blessedly smooth highway for the better part of a hour. There wasn't much traffic, only an occasional lorry or tanker truck. A few people were taking advantage of the bus stop benches and tables. A few kids stood beside the road waving at us, but I suppose that safari cars full of foreigners are not that unusual in the Okavango.

Without much warning, both sides of the road suddenly became crowded with petrol stations, warehouses, churches, garages and hostels. We had arrived in Kisane. Shaq pulled a sharp left off the highway and downhill and we were in the crowded car park of the Chobe Safari Lodge.

There were perhaps ten or a dozen safari and support vehicles in the brick-paved courtyard of the lodge, which was to be our final overnight in Botswana. The lobby building was like many others that we had seen; stuccoed concrete block with a very high-pitched thatched roof. The lobby itself was concrete floored, with a small gift shop on one side of the entrance and the reception desk on the other. Behind the desk was a portrait of Botswana's president, Seretse Ian Khama.

Seretse Ian Khama is Botswana's tenth democratically elected president, an unheard of statistic in African politics. His father, Sir Seretse Khama, was Botswana's first president and considered the founder of the nation. Seretse Ian Khama is the son of an African father and a white English

mother, a situation not unknown in some other nations. Lee is an admirer of the president, saying that he loves the outdoors and camping in his country's many national parks and nature reserves.

Tired as we were from our journey, we only had time for a quick bathroom visit and to confirm that our luggage had arrived with the supply truck. We hustled back to our vehicle and wheeled out of the car park and back onto the highway.

Ten minutes or so brought us to a lovely riverside restaurant where we disembarked for what proved to be the final time. We wound our way through the restaurant and out the back where diners were lunching under acacia trees next to a beautiful swimming pool. There we met "Dan the Man", who would guide us on our final adventure.

Dan led us through a thicket of riverside trees and down a very steep wooden stairway to a floating dock on the river. A pontoon boat with two inboard motors waited for us there. There was a table set for lunch under the boat's metal canopy. Shaq followed us down from the restaurant with a giant cooler, which he handed over to Dan.

It was then that Shaq severely disappointed us by telling us that he was leaving us. We knew that he was to pick up a fresh safari group the next day before heading back over our route in reverse, but we thought that he would stay over until morning. He said that Doonga had radioed him that the supply barge had arrived early, so he was needed to oversee unloading and packing of necessary provisions, such as petrol, food, laundry items, gin, &. He did not specifically say so, but the understanding was that the supply boat crews were not always reliable, sometimes delivering less than they had been contracted for to one company and more to another, unless they were carefully supervised.

Shaq received hugs from all of the ladies and warm handshakes, which contained gratuities, from the men. He is a wonderful person, an great ambassador for his country and someone who is thoroughly admirable in every way.

Shaq cast us off the dock and waved good-bye as Dan the Man revved his inboards. He steered us into the main channel while Lee dove into the cooler for the box lunches and water bottles that the restaurant had provided us. We all sat round the table enjoying our roast chicken, green beans, roasted white potatoes and dinner rolls. While we ate, a Cape Wagtail flew out to our boat, perched on the deck just outside the rail and waited cheekily for someone to drop some crumbs.

On our port side was Botswana. The river banks rose steeply from the water, covered with riverine forest including some trees that were very large. Along the river's edge were several floating docks where pontoon and other boats were moored in preparation for fishing or wildlife viewing expeditions for tourists.

The largest of these was located below the Chobe Safari Lodge. The lodge itself sat quite above the water, its thatch roofed bar surrounded by acacia and jackalberry trees and jutting towards the river. Once past the lodge, Dan the Man took us closer to the river's edge. The branches of a tree that had fallen into the river provided perches for two bird species that we had all come to love; a Pied Kingfisher and a Lilac-breasted Roller, Botswana's national bird. Having seen both species on every day of our journey, they had come to symbolize Botswana at its wildest and most beautiful.

As we enjoyed our lunch, Lee told us that the plain of the Chobe River was so flat that its current could run either east or west, depending upon where the rainfall was heaviest.

The river was alive with birds. There were the usual Barn Swallows, nearly identical to those in North America, that we had observed every day of our trip, swooping low over the water to catch flying insects. They were joined by Wire-tailed Swallows, about the same size with the same blue-black upperparts but brilliant white below, a rufous cap and even longer and narrower outer tail feathers. These flying insect traps were joined by Palm, Common and White-rumped Swifts, long-winged, long-tailed insect catchers that are the most aerial of all birds. Swifts feed, mate and even sleep while flying, only landing to build their nests using their sticky saliva to cement the nests together and to walls.

Once past the Chobe Safari Lodge, the road that serves it runs about fifty meters back from and ten meters higher than the river. Several tourist vans were parked there, observing a wildlife aggregation that was no less spectacular than any we had seen since we left Maun.

Possibly as many as one hundred elephants crowded the river's edge, splashing and rolling in the muddy water or wandering up the sloping banks toward the road, throwing dust over their backs to protect themselves from the sun and to ward off biting insects. Hippos, lechwe and Cape Buffalo strolled about among the giants, relaxed as they can be only in an environment where poaching is non-existent.

Dan the Man cut his Evinrudes to allow us to drift in closer to the relaxing herd of pachyderms. Not for the first time, I allowed my enthusiasm to override caution and common sense as I crowded toward the bow for photography. Lee sharply ordered Dan to "Full Speed Astern!" and me to sit down. A cow elephant had taken exception to our too close approach and was rushing into the shallows toward us. The outboards roared to life and we backed out unceremoniously but safely.

Lee was unnecessarily apologetic, but of course he was right. He explained that if the elephant had approached much closer we could not have gotten away from her, our boat overturned and someone badly hurt or killed.

Once away from the angry elephant, our boat turned back across the channel to the magical island of Sedudu.

Sedudu island is about the size of Overton Park. When Britain and Germany made their Zanzibar-Capriivi strip deal in the 1890s, they set the boundary between what was then German Southwest Africa (now Namibia) and Bechuanaland (now Botswana) as the main channel of the Chobe River. At that time, no one in Berlin or London knew, or cared, where the main channel of the Chobe River ran. A century later, with both nations independent and the increasing economic importance of tourism, especially around Kisane, the question became important.

Namibia contended that the main channel ran south of Sedudu island, which they called Kasikilli, making the island part of Namibia. Botswana's contention was that it ran north of the island, making it part of Botswana.

The dispute was taken to the International Court of Justice in Holland for resolution. The Court ruled in favor of Botswana. To emphasize the fact, a black, white and turquoise flag of Botswana, albeit a rather tattered one, flies proudly in the center of Sedudu island.

Lee said that the Court's decision was a good one. Had it become part of Namibia, that country had plans to develop the island as a luxury resort. Botswana had declared it part of Chobe National Park. Now, it's grassy plain was literally covered with hippos, lechwe and Cape Buffalo, grazing undisturbed in full view of the Chobe Safari Lodge.

Sedudu island sits about a meter above the level of the river. Crocodiles lay basking in its shallows, guarding its approaches from the unwary. A handsome Nile Monitor had dug itself a snug den into the mud bank of the island from whence it could venture out to find the eggs of the many birds that nested on the island.

A few meters from the edge of the island was an immense gray bird, striding purposefully through the close-cropped grass. Its legs were nearly a meter long, its body, wings and tail were gray and its neck, head, belly and breast were dull rufous. Its bill was as long and as sharp as a bayonet. With its neck either coiled back on its shoulders or extended in a S-curve, it searched for an unwary frog or reptile. It was a Goliath Heron, the largest heron in the world.

Hérons, which include the egrets and the bitterns, eat mostly slippery, slimy prey like fish and frogs. To keep their feathers clean and in good condition, they have several sets of special paired feathers called powder-downs. These feathers are never molted but instead grow continuously from the base, the ends fraying off with wear. Herons rub their heads and beaks into these fraying feathers, making a powder that adheres to fish scales and slime. The claws on the middle toes of their feet are serrated, forming a comb with which they rake away the powder and dirt.

Notwithstanding the many massive feet that clomped about the island, it was occupied by very many ground-dwelling birds. A pair of Egyptian Geese shepherded their gaggle of fuzzy goslings between the hooves of buffalo and hippos. Cattle Egrets and Sacred and Glossy Ibis watched the passage of the massive beasts for any insects that might be put to flight.

Shorebirds were also present; ground-nesters that might be especially threatened by the galumphing herd. Pretty little Kittlitz' Plovers crowded near the islands crumbling banks while Long-toed Lapwings,; robin-sized with gray back and wings, black breast, nape and crown, white belly, throat and face and bright red eye ring, fluttered nervously, ready if needed to do their "broken wing" distraction display to lure away threats to the nest.

It was at Sududu island that we encountered another shorebird species that has a claim for the most unusual bird in the world. The African Skimmer is the size of a crow. It has brownish-black wings, tail, back, nape and crown and a white throat, breast and belly. Its bill is very long, narrow and red with a yellow tip. And the bill is like no other bird's. The lower mandible is several inches longer than the upper.

Skimmers fly just above the surface of the water, their very long wings held high above their body. The lower mandible cuts the water like a knife and snaps shut automatically if it touches a fish or other small swimmer.

The banks on the north or Namibian side of the Chobe River were much lower and less steep than those on the Botswana side. Tall grass grew right down to the water's edge. At one point where the banks rose more steeply, there appeared to be a major construction project under way. About ten or twelve very elaborate tourist villas were going up in full view of the elephants and hippos who themselves would soon be under the observation of the tourists who would occupy the villas.

The Namibian side of the river was also the berth of numerous houseboats. Some were local but many others were based down river at Livingston, in Zambia, near Victoria Falls, having come upriver to allow spectacular wildlife viewing in relative comfort. Most were modest conveyances, but

one was both immense and, according to Lee, luxurious. It was fully two stories above water and featured an on-deck swimming pool.

The day was now well advanced and very hot. Suddenly, without warning, I came to the certain realization that our adventure was over. Lee asked if there was anything else that we might wish to see and we all answered no. I turned off my camera and stowed it and my binoculars in my backpack. Lee told Dan to take us full speed ahead to the dock at the Chobe Safari Lodge.

The dock was busy with wildlife-viewing day trippers and fishing parties boarding and disembarking. Porters and boatmen assisted us onto the dock and up the steep gangway to the lodge's pool deck. The pool deck was quite large, shaded by overhanging acacia and jackalberry trees. The bar was to the left and a few steps above the pool deck with the bar patio jutting out toward the river like the prow of a ship. Behind the bar were meeting rooms and the reception desk.

Behind the pool deck and on the same level as the bar was the dining area, with a large buffet that was empty at the moment. To the left of the pool, a catwalk led across a quite deep ravine that was filled with trees and vines. The catwalk gave access to a lawn area studded with Flame of the Forest and other flowering trees. Behind the lawn was a two story thatched roofed building, the lodge's main guest area. Between the lawn and a patch of scrubby riverine forest were about a half dozen "roundavels"; circular buildings about forty feet across. Each had a thatched roof and a thatch-covered porch. As we emerged from the catwalk, a pack of Banded Mongooses scampered across the lawn toward a guest room building at the lawn's far end and a groundskeeper hurled dirt clods and Setswanan imprecations at a pair of Wart Hogs who were attempting to turn a damp spot under a dripping faucet into a mud wallow.

Kay and George, Al and Nora, Gina and Dawn each had their own roundavel assigned, as did Lee, and Richard and I were to share another. When we entered our cabin, the air-conditioning hit us full in the face, a not unpleasant sensation. The prospect of a hot shower with no water limitation was even more enticing. There was an HDTV screen attached to

the wall which I turned on while Richard showered. We were bowled over when we realized that it was broadcasting a National Football League game with our hometown team, the Tennessee Titans!

I had brought my swimsuit for just this opportunity, so I quickly changed and headed back for the pool. The presence of Vervet Monkeys in the trees directly over the pool gave me pause, but only for a moment. I eased into the pool and swam a couple of laps, then sat on the steps just relaxing.

After a bit, I adjourned to the bar. There was an excellent selection of beer, wine and cocktails, so I took a chance and ordered a “Windhoek” beer, from Namibia. I found it very good, quite superior to the “Hansa” Botswanan brand that we had been enjoying on safari. After finishing a second, I returned to the pool for a few more laps, then returned to the room. Once there, I laid my swimsuit and the still damp laundry from the previous night on the porch rail to dry in the arid climate.

We had agreed to meet at the dining area at sundown. The buffet stretched about ten meters long, with every kind of salad, cooked and raw vegetables, pasta and at least five carving stations. These featured such delicacies as wildebeest roast, kudu filet and impala chops. I sampled as many of the wild game selections as I could and found the wildebeest roast very tasty but the impala chops a little bland. There was a nice selection of fresh fruit, so I enjoyed watermelon, cantaloupe, honeydew and pineapple. The dessert line was also highly diversified and delicious-looking, but I made a beeline for the ice cream.

The day had been a very long and tiring one, so everyone turned in right after dinner. I would have enjoyed an early swim when I woke next morning but my trunks and laundry were now dry and I did not want to pack them wet, even in ziplocks. I thought that coffee might be available in the dining room but was told when I arrived there that it would be another hour before it was ready.

The morning was very fine, sunny and cool, so I determined to enjoy my last morning in Botswana as much as possible. Leaving the room, I almost stumbled over a doe-eyed little Steenbok that had emerged from the

riverine forest to nibble at the grass of the lawn. I repaired to the bar patio with its wonderful overlook of the river. There were cattle grazing on the Namibian side and downriver, hippos and Cape Buffalo were just visible in the rising mist on Sedudu island. I took it all in with elation that I had come here and melancholy that I was leaving, probably never to return. I heard from somewhere on the hotel grounds the deep hooting call of a Giant Eagle Owl, evidently just returning to its roost after a night's hunt.

There were birds flying over the river; swallows, a Slaty Egret and two species that were new to the trip, Giant Kingfisher and White-winged Tern.

When the coffee urn bubbled, I poured myself a cup and sat on the pool deck watching the monkeys chasing each other across the thatched roof of the dining area. While I was so engaged, a group of British, German and South African young people came to the pool to swim, flirt and engage in horseplay. Even with my second cup of coffee, I felt very old.

Completing the second cup, I crossed the catwalk toward the roundavels, spooking a pair of Wart Hogs that evidently lived in the ravine below the catwalk. I don't know which of us was most frightened when they charged away.

Returning to the roundavel, I found that my key did not work in the door. I pounded on the door to rouse Richard, only to receive a reply in an indignant British accent of "I'm not up yet!" Then I noticed that my drying laundry was not on the porch rail. I had knocked on the wrong door, causing more than mild consternation to Lee, who, if anybody, certainly needed his sleep.

When I shamefacedly rejoined Richard in our roundavel, he was packing for our final departure. We hauled our bags to the lobby, then joined our companions at breakfast. I am certain that our companions were puzzled at Lee as he chuckled at me with his usual good humor because I was too embarrassed to recount waking him up so rudely.

The breakfast buffet was as elaborate as the one at dinner, so I enjoyed an omelet and permitted myself a rare indulgence, some real bacon. The fruit

was lovely and the pastries sumptuous, but none of the breads were in any way superior to Doonga's camp-baked delights.

With breakfast concluded and our bags at the desk, we engaged in that most exciting of all tourist activities, SHOPPING! There was a small gift shop just off the lobby which had a fair amount of touristy souvenirs. I was most surprised to find there three items that I really wanted. The first was a pin with the colors of Botswana. When I visit any new country, I try to collect a pin of that country's flag, which I wear on my favorite hat. I had really no apprehension of finding one in Botswana, so I was delighted. The second was a patch embroidered with "Chobe Safari Lodge, Botswana" and an African Fish Eagle, which I would wear on one of my docent uniform jackets. The third was a golf shirt embroidered with a cheetah and "African Adventure, Botswana". The shirt was khaki-colored, which meant that with the Sable Antelope Memphis Zoo docent badge sewn to the shoulder I could wear it at the zoo as a uniform shirt.

Next to and attached to the lobby was another, larger gift shop which marketed more traditional and authentic African wares. Lee said that it was operated by a guild of local craftsmen, so items purchased there directly benefited the local economy; the very purpose of eco-tourism. There were some very nice clothing items and art. I found a small carved-stone elephant for my "art" collection and a funky-looking wire and bead guineafowl for my "touristy" collection.

While the ladies and I infused cash into Botswana's economy, Lee went to check on the shuttle van that was to transport us to the airport. His errand complete, he rushed to find me. "There is a Collared Palm Thrush in a bush across the street!" he told me. "They are not supposed to be anywhere near here!"

This would be another Life Bird for me, so I hurried outside after him. A small flock of the ubiquitous guineafowl scuttled in front of us and a Wart Hog sow with a litter of piglets stood at a nearby crosswalk exactly as if they were waiting for the light to change.

When we reached the small acacia tree, Lee quickly located the palm thrush, a robin-sized bird with rufous wings, tail, back and crown; light gray cheeks and breast; white throat and pale, yellow eye. A narrow necklace of black ran from the corner of its beak, down the side of its neck, across its breast and back up the other side. Lee was overjoyed to find such a local rarity and doubly so when a second bird appeared. "Watch them and I will get everyone else!" he told me.

With my camera packed, I tried to get photographs of the rare birds with my cell phone but the results were most unsatisfactory. Lee soon returned alone, remarking that no one was interested in seeing another little brown bird this close to our departure.

The shuttle van arrived to transport us and our luggage to the airport. The drive was surprisingly brief, less than ten minutes, but on the way we observed wart hogs, kudu and even buffalo; all within feet of the busy highway and all perfectly placid that close to the traffic.

The airport terminal was not exactly primitive but neither was it luxurious. There was a very small snack bar of which everyone took advantage when it became evident that they sold ice cream bars.

Just as we were finishing our ice cream, we received a delightful surprise as Shaq walked into the terminal. A planeload of tourists was expected on the incoming flight from Johannesburg and he was there to meet them. We had not much more time than to greet him and shake his hand when we were called to security. I don't think anyone trusted their bags to be checked through on our return flight, so it took us a bit of time.

Our wait in the departure lounge was pretty brief and then our flight was called. We had noticed a lot of construction around the airport but we were disconcerted to find that it extended onto the runways, so much so that our aircraft was parked nearly a half mile from the terminal. A shuttle appeared not to be an option, so we all set off on foot, carrying all of our luggage. But we arrived in good order and settled in for our flight to Johannesburg. The flight took about two hours and included a box lunch, the least appetizing meal of our entire trip.

Our arrival at the vast Johannesburg airport meant that we must say good-bye to Lee. He was taking the short flight to his home near the Kruger National Park for a few days with his family before heading off to his next assignment in Rwanda. He had been a great guide, a cheerful companion and was now a valued friend. He said that he might well visit America in a year or so, so we all hoped that we might see him again then.

We found our way to the gate where we were to board our flight to Atlanta. Our layover would be lengthy, but it gave us time to visit many of the duty-free shops and stores in the international terminal. I offered to sit the first watch on our luggage while everyone else scattered in search of bargains.

I read for an hour or so, one eye on the page and the other on our bags, while my companions searched the many stores and shops. As they began to trickle back to our departure gate, I turned the watch over to them to allow myself some similar explorations. There must have been at least a hundred retail establishments in the international terminal alone; purveying perfume, wine and liquor, jewelry, clothing, shoes, books and magazines, handicrafts and everything else imaginable. In the center of the concourse sat what appeared to be the grandest and busiest of all, the “Out of Africa” store.

This store is really one and a half stories, with a sizable mezzanine at the rear. Its theme is arts and crafts of South Africa. There is jewelry, clothing, art, textiles, music, &, all of which are from that country. It is a noble endeavor to provide an outlet for artists and craftsmen of one’s nation but the effect was somewhat spoiled by a grotesque twelve foot papier-mache likeness of Nelson Mandela, the father of modern South Africa, in the concourse just outside the entrance.

I found nothing in any of the shops that piqued my interest, but I did stop at a pizzeria. I don’t like airport pizza any more than anyone else, but this would be the first I had had in two weeks, so I succumbed to the temptation.

The sun was setting as we boarded our 777 for the sixteen hour nonstop flight to Atlanta, the longest nonstop flight anywhere in the world. For

some reason, the return flight was not as tiring as the one going out. I read and slept and even watched a movie, something I rarely do on airplanes.

Our flight arrived in Atlanta about six am. George and Kay left us there to fly to Savannah and then drive home to South Carolina. They were wonderful companions who helped make the expedition a joy. I hope that I can travel again with them another time.

Richard, Dawn, Gina, Al, Nora and I transferred to the national terminal where we waited for an hour for our flight home to Memphis. That flight took us swiftly over the southeastern United States, landing us at home at 10 am.

We said our good-byes at the airport. Gina's husband Joel was waiting for her and for Dawn, who still had a two and a half hour drive to her home in Martin. I drove straight home to where my dogs, Paul and James, were waiting for me. As wonderful as was our African adventure, I was very pleased to be home.

I can never get enough of Africa. Before I even left for Botswana, I was planning my next expedition. I especially wanted to share Africa with friends, people that I knew would enjoy and appreciate the country, its people and its wildlife. Everyone who chose to accompany me; Nora, Al, Gina, Dawn, Kay, George and Richard, did exactly that. They, along with Lee, Shaq and the crew, made this African adventure a most special one.

Botswana Species List

November 6-15, 2013

- Denotes Life Species - *

Mammals

African Tree Squirrel

Springhaas *

Chacma Baboon

Vervet Monkey

Lesser Bushbaby

Black-backed Jackal

Side-striped Jackal *

African Wild Dog *

Slender Mongoose

Dwarf Mongoose

Banded Mongoose

Yellow Mongoose *

Spotted Hyena

Large-spotted Genet

African Wildcat

Lion

Leopard

African Elephant

Plains Zebra

Hippopotamus

Com Warthog

Angola Giraffe *

Cape Buffalo

Greater Kudu *

Com Waterbuck

Red Lechwe *

Sable Antelope *

Roan Antelope *

Gemsbok *

Com Reedbuck

Blue Wildebeest

Tsessebe *

Impala

Steenbok

Klipspringer

Birds

Com Ostrich

Helmeted Guineafowl

Crested Francolin

Red-billed Spurfowl *

Swainson's Spurfowl

White-faced Whistling Duck

Spur-winged Goose

Comb Duck

Egyptian Goose

African Pygmy Goose *

Cape Teal

Yellow-billed Duck

Red-billed Duck

Hottentot Teal

Yellow-billed Stork

African Openbill *

Wooly-necked Stork

Saddle-billed Stork

Marabou Stork

Sacred Ibis

Hadada Ibis

Glossy Ibis

African Spoonbill
Black-crowned Night-heron
Striated Heron
Squacco Heron
Rufous-bellied Heron *
Cattle Egret
Grey Heron
Goliath Heron
Great Egret
Yellow-billed Egret
Slaty Egret *
Little Egret
Hamerkop
Great White Pelican
Reed Cormorant
African Darter
Secretarybird
Osprey
Black-winged Kite
Yellow-billed Kite
African Fish Eagle
Hooded Vulture
White-backed Vulture

White-headed Vulture

Black-chested Snake Eagle

Brown Snake Eagle

Bateleur

African Marsh Harrier *

Montagu's Harrier *

African Harrier Hawk

Little Sparrowhawk

Tawny Eagle

African Hawk-eagle

Wahlberg's Eagle

Martial Eagle

Lesser Kestrel *

Lanner Falcon

Kori Bustard

Red-crested Korhaan

N Black Korhaan *

Black-bellied Bustard

Black Crake

Wattled Crane *

Water Thick-knee

Spotted Thick-knee

Black-winged Stilt

Long-toed Lapwing
Blacksmith Lapwing
Crowned Lapwing
Com Ringed Plover
Kittlitz's Plover
Three-banded Plover
Caspian Plover *
Lesser Jacana *
African Jacana
Com Greenshank
Wood Sandpiper
Com Sandpiper
Sanderling
Ruff
Temminck's Courser
Collared Pratincole
Red-winged Pratincole *
Black-winged Pratincole *
African Skimmer
Whiskered Tern
White-winged Tern
Double-banded Sandgrouse *
Burchell's Sandgrouse *

Red-eyed Dove

Cape Turtle Dove

Laughing Dove

Emerald-spotted Wood Dove

Namaqua Dove

Meyer's Parrot

Grey Go-away-bird

Senegal Coucal *

Coppery-tailed Coucal *

White-browed Coucal

Levalliant's Cuckoo

Jacobin Cuckoo

Black Cuckoo

Barn Owl

African Scops Owl *

S White-faced Owl

Verreaux's Eagle Owl *

Pearl-spotted Owlet

African Palm Swift

African Black Swift

Com Swift

White-rumped Swift

Lilac-breasted Roller

Broad-billed Roller
Woodland Kingfisher
Giant Kingfisher
Pied Kingfisher
Swallow-tailed Bee-eater *
Little Bee-eater
Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *
S Carmine Bee-eater *
African Hoopoe
Green Wood-hoopoe
Bradfield's Hornbill *
African Grey Hornbill
S Red-billed Hornbill
S Yellow-billed Hornbill
S Ground Hornbill
Lesser Honeyguide
Bennett's Woodpecker
Bearded Woodpecker
Black-backed Puffback
Swamp Boubou *
Crimson-breasted Shrike
Brubru
Black Cuckooshrike

Magpie Shrike

S White-crowned Shrike

Red-backed Shrike *

Lesser Grey Shrike *

Golden Oriole *

Black-headed Oriole

Fork-tailed Drongo

African Paradise Flycatcher

Spotted Flycatcher

S Black Tit

Rufous-naped Lark

Sabota Lark

Red-capped Lark

Grey-backed Sparrow-lark *

African Red-eyed Bulbul

Dark-capped Bulbul

Terrestrial Brownbul *

Brown-throated Martin

Barn Swallow

Wire-tailed Swallow

Lesser Striped Swallow

Cape Crow

Willow Warbler

Rattling Cisticola

Desert Cisticola

Yellow-breasted Apalis

Grey-backed Cameroptera

Arrow-marked Babbler

Hartlaub's Babbler

S Pied Babbler *

Wattled Starling

Cape Starling

Greater Blue-eared Starling

Meves's Starling *

Burchell's Starling

Yellow-billed Oxpecker

Red-billed Oxpecker

Red-capped Robin-chat *

Collared Palm Thrush *

White-browed Scrub Robin

Stonechat

Capped Wheatear

Arnot's Chat *

Marico Flycatcher *

White-browed Sparrow-weaver

S Grey-headed Sparrow

Red-billed Buffalo Weaver

Spectacled Weaver

S Masked Weaver

Red-headed Weaver

Red-billed Quelea

Red-billed Firefinch

Blue Waxbill

Pin-tailed Whydah

Long-tailed Paradise Whydah

Cape Wagtail

African Pied Wagtail

African Pipit

Plain-backed Pipit *

Golden-breasted Bunting

Reptiles & Amphibians

Mozambique Spitting Cobra *

Variegated Bush Snake *

Nile Crocodile

Tropical House Gecko

Cape Dwarf Gecko *

Wahlberg's Skink *

Nile Monitor

Angolan Reed Frog *

African Bullfrog*