



The JUST NOW News - A now-and-then Newsletter for alumni and friends of COWABUNGA SAFARIS published whenever we have enough news and time to put it together.

The Lion Sleeps Tonight – and the Cheetah Hunts by Moonlight?

Gary K. Clarke, Cowabunga Safaris' President for Life

Wait a minute! Isn't that just the opposite of what we've always been taught?

The books say that cheetahs are diurnal, seeking their prey in daylight hours and in open savannah at that! Likewise, despite the song, conventional wisdom has been that lions hunt at night, then sleep during the day. Turn on the TV set just now and you'll see.

So, what about those lions and cheetahs in a northern Botswana wilderness that do not seem to follow the rules?

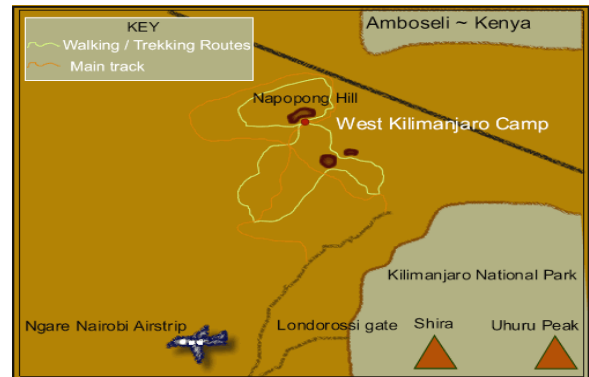
Those who have been on Safari with me over the past few decades no doubt tire of my oft repeated phrase: "There are hundreds of generalities about animal behavior and thousands of exceptions." Never was this truer than in June 2005.

Keep in mind that winter in Botswana can be very cold, with temperatures dipping to near freezing levels. Safarists bundled in layers of thermal underwear, fleece and wool, plus stocking caps, neck warmers and gloves look more like they are on an Arctic Expedition than an African Safari. Even so, when riding in an open vehicle in pre-dawn hours, the wind chill can pierce your inner core like an ice pick.

It is with great reluctance that one gets out of bed in the "dead hour" — that time before first light when it is darkest and coldest in the African bush. Sleeping in a tent is so-o-o delicious! The air is sharp and cold around your head, but your body is warm and cozy under a heavy comforter with your feet snug against a cloth covered hot water bottle. How wonderful to lie in the darkness, secure in this embryonic-like cocoon, listening to the sounds of the bush.

But the cycles of Africa continue in an ancient cadence, and if you don't get up then you miss out on the rhythms and the heartbeat of the day. And one day on Safari is like two weeks anywhere else in the world.

That was especially true with this particular group! Only four, but avid die-hard Safarists, with a single focus: PHOTOGRAPHY! (No pun intended!) And they were committed and prepared to do whatever it took to achieve their goals.



An Elephant Funeral?

Brian J. Hesse, Ph.D., Safari Leader

The drama unfolded in West Kilimanjaro Conservancy, in northern Tanzania (see map). Normally arrival in "West Kili" is an exclusive affair. Because the camp is capable of hosting no more than 10 guests, and because it is set in the middle of a private Maasai-run conservancy, it is rare to see anyone other than members of your safari group, the half-dozen or so members of the camp's staff, and, of course, Maasai – red-clad men herding cattle and goats and blue-clad women collecting firewood and carrying water in their traditional manner. Upon our arrival on this day, however, we met a Kenyan Wildlife Services vehicle with armed rangers. Later, I saw an African Wildlife Foundation vehicle with armed Tanzanian rangers. An Amboseli Elephant Research team (associated with the renowned elephant researcher Cynthia Moss in neighboring Amboseli National Park in Kenya) had already been by. Why the activity? The guys in camp told me that an elephant had died the night before no more than three kilometers from camp, right on the Tanzania-Kenya border. Authorities on both sides wanted to make sure the animal had not fallen to poachers. Fortunately, the consensus was that the elephant had not been poached: its tusks were intact when found and there were no overt indications of trauma, such as a gunshot wound.

("The Lion Sleeps Tonight," continued on next page)

("An Elephant Funeral?" continued on p.3)

“The Lion Sleeps Tonight,”

Continued from p.1

Without hesitation they would sacrifice accepted dimensions of a Safari, such as campfires, sundowners, showers, sleep — even meals. And they readily tolerated bitter cold, hot sun, wind, sand, discomfort and darkness to maintain a non-stop pace to be in the right place at the right time for the best possible photographs — up to 17½ hours a day. They nearly wore out the guides and trackers but I loved every minute of it as I was able to be in the bush for extended periods of time to experience wildlife behaviors and interactions that were new even to me!

A composite day would be up at 5:30 am, some quick coffee/tea and hot porridge, and into the bush before sunrise. Normally return to camp at 10:30 am for breakfast and then rest during midday. But, so much is happening we radio camp to advise no breakfast. Finally back to camp at 2:00 pm for proper toilet, resupply photo equipment, etc. Lunch is scheduled for 3:30 pm, but at 3:00 pm a radio call comes in — cheetahs are on the hunt! So we skip lunch, jump in the vehicle and off, tracking cheetahs until well after sunset. Night drives with a spotlight are routine, returning to camp at 8:00 pm or so for sundowners and dinner. But, so much is happening we radio camp and advise no dinner (thank heavens for granola bars and biltong). Finally to camp 11:00 pm or so. All is dark and quiet. Silently we go to our tents and drop into bed exhausted, yet exhilarated.

A demanding regime? YES.

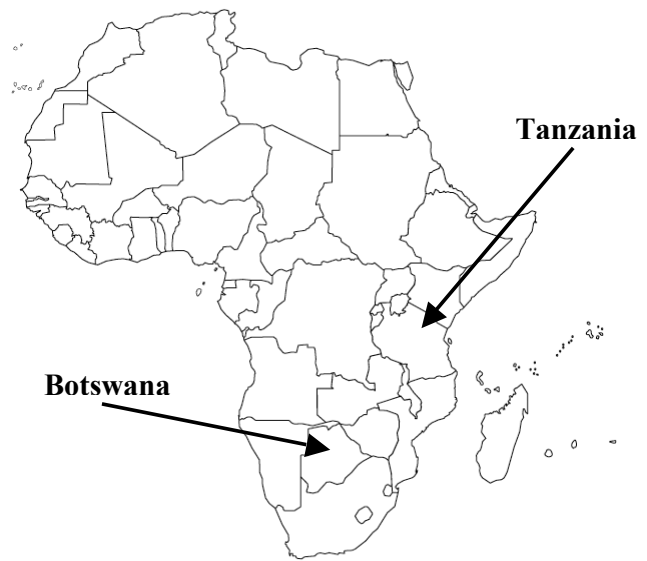
The type of Safari for everyone? NO.

Nonetheless, it did result in some remarkable sightings, fantastic behaviors, and unexpected photo ops. Example: at night in tall grass at the edge of a swamp with hyenas feeding on a Cape buffalo carcass reflecting in the water with crocodile eyes glowing in the darkness and a roaring chorus of frogs. Example: changing a flat tire at dusk with a hyena circling us. Example: the red dust of sunset in the west while a brilliant full moon rises in the east.

So many highlights but, ah: the cheetahs. We had the privilege of spending many hours in the lives of an adult female and her two half-grown cubs. We kept a respectable distance so they accepted the presence of us in our vehicle while they showed us the art of being a predator. They rested some, the cubs played, and mother scouted prey. They were hungry and much of their time was spent stalking impala in riverine woodland with no success. They continued to hunt after sunset and it seemed strange to see cheetahs on the prowl at night surrounded by darkness.

Then — in the spotlight behind the cheetahs — hyenas! One . . . two . . . three . . . or more! What was going on?

Aggressive interaction. The hyenas were harassing the mother cheetah and trying to kill her cubs. As she was being chased she suddenly stopped, turned and confronted the lead hyena. Then she jumped in the air and swatted the hyena in the face with her right front paw! WOW! Catching up with her cubs all three faced the hyenas and hissed while in a defensive posture. It was a stand off, but the cheetahs survived this particular encounter with their mortal enemy to



hunt another day.

In contrast to this drama was the night we came across a pride of ten lions not long after dusk. They were asleep on a mound which put them at eye level with us from our elevated position in the open vehicle. The lions were unperturbed by our spotlight which resulted in a great photo op of various sleeping postures. We decided to stay with them in hopes they would hunt later. Our powerful spotlight ran off the vehicle battery, and with the engine off we had to use it sparingly. So we waited. By moonlight we could see when the lions shifted positions and then check with the spotlight. Otherwise, we waited. It was cold. The lions were huddled together in a pile for warmth. We waited. An older female awakened, groomed a bit, and went back to sleep. We waited. It was quiet. We could hear each other's stomach growl and each of us hoped we wouldn't produce gas. We waited. The lions slept. Minutes passed. We waited. The lions slept. Hours passed. No one talked. You might think this would be boring but there was something magical about being in the bush at night in an open vehicle under the Southern Cross and shooting stars with a pride of lions just ten meters away in the silvery moonlight.

We waited. They slept. Then we heard an unfamiliar noise. I can usually identify sounds of the bush, but what was this? We looked around with the spotlight . . . nothing. It's coming from the direction of the mound—listen. Ohmigosh! The sound was a lion snoring! They slept. We waited. The time must have been approaching midnight and our own battery was getting low. We finally gave up, but what a privilege it had been for all of us.

Within this unique team of four photographers, one took general scenes and kept detailed notes, one shot over 25 hours of sound video, and the two with super-sophisticated digital cameras took innumerable still photos — in fact, nearly 60,000 images between them! As for me, I didn't take a camera, but reveled in absorbing so much African wilderness into my spirit.

Weeks after my return to the USA I was still finding Kalahari sand in my shoes, my hat, field bag, dop kit, even my journal and binoculars. But I didn't mind. It meant the bush was with me everywhere.

“An Elephant Funeral?”

Continued from p.1

At the first opportunity, I wanted my group to see the dead elephant – not out of macabre fascination, but because I thought it would provide a unique educational opportunity. I wanted to explain both the collaborative and confrontational aspects of cross-border conservation, to explain why the African Wildlife Foundation team and Tanzanian authorities had removed, catalogued and confiscated the dead elephant’s tusks (to make sure the ivory didn’t make its way onto the black market), and to illustrate in dramatic fashion how quickly – literally overnight -- something as massive as the carcass of a recently-dead elephant can “disappear” in the bush (vultures, hyenas, jackals, insects, etcetera). That was the hope anyway. Yet as often happens on Safari, “unexpected eventualities” intervened.

While we were investigating the dead elephant, a mixed herd of elephant appeared. We watched from a safe distance as the herd passed the body in a loose column of pairs and singles. In reverent silence, most paused at the body but did not linger. The exception was the herd’s matriarch. After all had passed by, the dominant female returned to the dead elephant. She gently touched (stroked?) the fallen elephant’s head for a long time, inhaling and exhaling with seeming profound emotion. Occasionally she put her trunk to her mouth; it reminded me of a weeping human mother might do during times of despair. Several times she gathered fine, dry soil with her trunk and scattered it over the dead elephant. Was she trying to bury her brethren? At one point she picked up a part of the elephant’s scattered remains and dragged it closer. Was she trying to reconstruct the body, to give it dignity in death? No less than three times she started to walk away, only to return and repeat some of the above actions. Was she in heartbreaking denial? Throughout, her herd maintained a melancholy, near motionless vigil nearby. Was the dead elephant a relative? Were these elephants grieving the loss of a loved one? There were more than a few teary eyes in our group as we watched this moving “elephant funeral.”

On the ride back to camp, and later back in my tent, many thoughts turned over in my mind. Gary Clarke, Cowabunga Safaris’ founder who has been instrumental in teaching me much about African fauna, has often cautioned about giving animals human qualities and emotions they do not possess. With that in mind, I tried to approach the day’s event less from an emotional point of view, and more from an analytical one.

Did the herd members pay the dead elephant reverence? Some might have stopped to look. Whether it was in “reverence” is debatable. Each elephant almost certainly employed its powerful sense of smell. Every pause was probably an effort to gather and interpret scents.

Was the matriarch crying? Elephant “tears” occur during periods of excitement or stress. In a way, these temporal secretions between the eyes and ears act like an “olfactory-oriented barometer”: through them, other elephants can smell and gauge the condition of a fellow elephant –

hence the reason why family members who have been separated spend a lot of time putting their trunks to each other’s faces during reunions. The matriarch might not have been “crying” in the strictest sense of the word. She might have been instinctively responding to the stress or excitement of coming across another dead elephant -- or maybe even other stimuli. More than likely she spent so much time *smelling* the temporal area of the dead elephant (i.e., emotionally stroking the fallen elephant’s head, inhaling and exhaling deeply) because this is where live elephants garner a lot of information about each other. Incidentally, an African elephant also has a “vomeronasal organ” in the roof of its mouth which helps interpret chemical signals, like temporal secretions. Accordingly, putting her trunk to her mouth might have been part of her natural information-gathering process, not a gesture of sorrow.

Why did the matriarch try to bury the dead elephant? Rather than ritual, she was likely “dusting” in response to swarms of flies in the area. Why did she start to reconstruct the dead elephant’s remains? It is possible she had no idea what she was picking up. The part wasn’t in full form and probably didn’t smell anything like an elephant (everything from jackals to vultures had spent time on the elephant’s scattered remains). Why couldn’t she bear to leave the fallen elephant? Undoubtedly, hyena were in the area. Though usually scavengers, hyena are also opportunistic and very capable predators. Maybe she was nervous that predators were following her herd.

Elephants are clearly “higher order” mammals with large brains. They are social and live in complex societies. Their memories are long-lived, like the animals themselves. Much of their social and ecological knowledge is acquired through learning over many years. In turn, much of this knowledge is passed on through a sophisticated acoustic vocabulary, a lot of which occurs at a level below what humans can naturally hear. In fact, recent research indicates that different elephants in different parts of the world may even speak distinct dialects and/or languages (Think about it: humans are of the same species yet speak differently depending on where they are from. The same might apply for elephants. See Katy Payne’s *Silent Thunder* or Joyce Poole’s infrasonic research). If there is an animal that *should* be able to express grief – indeed, be able to express a whole range of emotions based on intellectual capacity and rather complex thoughts -- it is an elephant.

So did we witness an “elephant funeral” in Tanzania? My head can make the case that we did not, that humans are the only animals capable of superior thought and deep emotion. My heart, however, instinctively knows otherwise.





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“I’d rather be on Safari!”

Gary K. Clarke (*Mzee Shetani*), President for Life
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2006 SAFARIS

Gary’s Scheduled Safaris

<u>Date</u>	<u>Destination</u>
6-18 Feb 2006	TANZANIA: Kilimanjaro to Serengeti
17-30 Jun 2006	KENYA: The Who Be Boo Safari
11-24 Jul 2006	ZAMBIA: Luangwa Valley to Victoria Falls
4-16 Aug 2006	BOTSWANA: The Bush by Day and Night
1-14 Sep 2006	KENYA: Mara Migration Camping
1-14 Nov 2006	KENYA: The Essence of Africa

Brian’s Scheduled Safaris

<u>Date</u>	<u>Destination</u>	<u>Tariff</u>
13-25 Jul 2006	BOTSWANA: Okavango to Vic Falls	\$4,437 (land only)
7-21 Aug 2006	BOTSWANA & ZIMBABWE: Beyond the Headlines Safari	\$4,967 (land only)
May 2007	KENYA: Endlessly Diverse Africa	TBD
Jul/Aug 2007	KENYA TRANSECT: On the Mara, In the Shadow of Kilimanjaro & Near the Ghost and the Darkness (Two-week Vehicle & Walking Safari)	TBD

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Life is so Uncertain!***