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BOTSWANA:

Shhh... Listen! What's that Noise?

The Swift and the Ponderous

Large as Life

SHHH... LISTEN! WHAT'S THAT NOISE?

by Gary K. Clarke

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter)

It is night, and pitch-black dark, in Africa.

You are on Safari, a privileged guest in the territory of wild animals, in a small tent.

Your wildlife sightings during the day have been great, but the night sounds have been truly phenomenal. At night while lying in the dark you are much more aware of animal sounds, and wonder how close the animals are, and what they are doing. Most sounds you can identify, some you can't.

When you are in a tent in the bush at night:

- if you hear an elephant's excited trumpet, your heart beats faster
- if you hear the eerie, crazed laughter of hyena you get goose bumps
- but if a lion roars just outside your tent, you jump out of your skin!

I know; all three happened to me in Botswana. I had a group on an overland camping Safari through the Okavango Delta, on the way to Victoria Falls.

On this Safari I was struck by the contrasting habitats which, in turn, had an influence on the type of night sounds we heard at our three different campsites. Since none of the camps had generators we heard only natural night sounds.

At our first campsite, Xaxaba Lagoon, the waters of the Okavango Delta literally lapped at our tent ground sheets. No motorized vehicles or boats were in the area -- in fact, we had to walk from the airstrip to camp. Our only mode of transportation was by mekoro, which are dugout canoes pushed through the swampy vegetation with 12-foot poles. We also did walks on islands.

Nights were extremely noisy. There must be 50 African bullfrogs per square meter of Delta judging from the resounding croaking chorus. Wonderful resonant grunts, snorts, and wheeze-honks of hippos punctuated the frog chorus. Baboons are classified as diurnal animals, but their piercing barks and "WHAGH-hoos" continued throughout the night. They were so active in the trees above us that falling leaves sounded like rain on the tents.

In contrast, our second camp in Moremi had a lovely grass area with a marsh just in front of camp. Spot-necked otters lived in the marsh pool, elephants drank from it at dusk, and a nesting pair of wattled cranes were close by. While we heard the cry of the fish eagle during the day, at night it was relatively quiet, with gentle laughter from the group around the campfire after dinner, and lions roaring in the distance.

The lion probably makes the most famous animal sound in the world. It starts with a series of low eerie moans that build in intensity until a sonorous repetitive roar fills the air, and concludes with a series of monosyllabic low grunts or coughs. It's such a true sound of the bush. And the silence afterwards can create terror and panic.

Our last campsite, at Savuti, was extremely dry, on Kalahari sand with thick bush all around. At night we heard bull elephants crashing through the trees with various vocalizations: the characteristic trumpet that you always hear in movies, as well as screams, roars, and grumblings which are actually more common. But the hyenas were the highlight. In addition to whoops and high-pitched giggles, they made sounds I had never heard hyenas make (they have at least eleven known vocalizations). I know they were hyenas because I shined my torch on them . . . right in camp.

But one noise really baffled me. It came from the direction of the open camp kitchen (the staff secures all foodstuffs and supplies in locked steel boxes at night). It sounded like someone with a sledgehammer bashing in the bonnet (hood) of one of our Land Rovers. At dawn I went over to see what had happened and the camp staff showed me. A heavy duty industrial strength storage container had an entire section along the top *chewed* open -- by a hyena! The animal had proceeded to drink the 20 liters of kerosene! I've read many accounts of hyenas, with the most powerful jaws of any land animal, chewing and eating the strangest things, but this is the most bizarre incident I know.

Every night brought something new and different. Overall, the night sounds were the most incredible of any of my 73 Safaris. And I also had the most frightening experience of my 73 Safaris. When people ask me about "scary" incidents on Safari, I think of a Cape buffalo that chased and bumped our vehicle, the hippo that swam under our canoe in the Zambezi, and being charged by an elephant while walking in the bush. But nothing like this.

It happened on our first night at the campsite in Moremi. The night was quiet, the sky clear, the moon bright. A lantern was glowing at the end of the trail to the loo located just past my tent. Although we had heard distant lions, we had not seen one yet (sometimes it is scarier to hear a lion than to see one). At 3:30 am the silence was shattered by an ear-splitting R R A A G H H!!! It was a lion -- just here, just now. The sound was not the typical lion's roar . . . it was a spine tingling growl, and so LOUD. I bolted out of bed and stood in the darkness of my tent, looking through the small mesh window with my binoculars. From the tall grass by the loo tent a huge male lion burst down the trail heading right for my tent. Through the binoculars it seemed like he was jumping into my eye sockets. I dropped my binoculars and saw him brush against the back of my tent. The tent fabric seemed tissue thin and woefully inadequate.

My stomach felt like a volcano was erupting inside, my bladder was about to burst, and my bowels felt like they were being pierced by an ice pick. The lion charged on, glancing against the next tent . . . and the next. He then knocked over a washbasin in front

of yet another tent. At that point he encountered two other male lions and they had a terrific battle right in camp. The fight lasted about 10 minutes (though it seemed an hour and 10 minutes). Needless to say, it was difficult to get back to sleep. At first light we unzipped our tents just enough to peek out and ask our neighbors in the next tent, "Are the lions gone?"

With our Guides we inspected the tracks and scuff marks made during the fight. Two lions had gone between the Guides' tents, and we concluded that two young males had challenged the dominant male in his territory, and we just happened to be camping there. The strength and power we had heard were evident in the spoor.

For well more than fifty years I have heard lions. First as a child listening to the BBC on my father's shortwave radio; then in zoos as a visitor, keeper, curator and director; and, of course, in Africa on safari for over a quarter of a century. But never like this. The sounds were so vibrant, so resonant, so alive, so REAL! And LOUD! Like a circle of huge steel drums surrounding the tent with amplified stereo speakers turned to maximum volume. No, even this comparison does not begin to describe the power of that lion showdown.

For one of the few times in my life I was truly scared while on Safari. This experience taught me a lesson. Never again on Safari will I sneak up behind someone's tent and try to imitate the roar of a lion.



Safaris since 1974.

THE SWIFT AND THE PONDEROUS

by Gary K. Clarke

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter)

Elephants . . .

Impala, zebra and ostrich.

Elephants . . .

Warthogs, giraffes and fish eagles.

Elephants . . .

Mopane and baobab trees.

Elephants . . .

Beautiful sunrises and glorious sunsets.

Elephants . . .

Bumpy rides and dusty trails.

Elephants . . .

Log bridges and picnic lunches.

Elephants . . .

Cold mornings and hot tea.

Elephants . . .
 Camera clicks and picnic lunches.
Elephants . . .
 Baboons, hippos and lilac-breasted rollers.
Elephants . . .
 Toilet paper and pit stops.
Elephants . . .
 Sleeping bags and tsetse flies.
Elephants . . .
 Fresh baked bread, hone and orange marmalade.
Elephants . . .
 Puns, jokes, and puns, and . . .
Elephants . . .
 Lions . . . and a leopard!
Elephants . . .
 Okavango Delta and Victoria Falls
Elephants . . .
 Tribal dancing and laughing children.
Elephants . . .
 Crocodiles, campfires and night sounds.

Fragments of Africa: bits and pieces of a Safari experience, impressions and memories that will last a lifetime.

An African Safari results in a variety of meanings to each member of the group, but certainly a common thread running through is elephants. But it wasn't always that way.

Our Safaris in the 1970s had taken us to East Africa — primarily Kenya and Tanzania. Each year we would encounter fewer and fewer elephant, and everyone was aware of the worldwide concern for the demise of this threatened species. In 1981 we chose a destination that was a first for us: Botswana in south-central Africa. We had heard from colleagues that we should see quite a few elephants — and we did. In fact, during our total time in the bush there was only one day when someone in our group did not see at least one elephant, and that was basically a "travel day", when we had to cover a great distance, much of it outside national parks and wildlife reserves.

Elephants quickly became a major topic of interest for our group and we were thrilled to see several dozen during our game runs on the first day. I started keeping a daily census count and at the end of the Safari we had a contest to see who could come the closest to giving the total number we had seen on the trip. On one occasion we saw a single herd of over 100 animals, and our record sighting for one day was a total of 270 elephants. Actually, it was more, but to be scientific we counted only those we could spot as individuals, and those that we knew were in back of the obvious ones. In contrast, our lowest count for one day was a single elephant — and that's a story in itself.

We were camping in the Moremi Game Reserve on the edge of the Okavango Delta. Despite extreme game runs and the sighting of a wide variety of animals, no one in our group had seen an elephant on this particular day. After dinner that evening, while sitting

around the campfire, one of our guides said: "Who would like to go out on the Delta and look for crocodiles at night?" Several of us jumped at the chance and we departed in a small wooden boat, down the channel from our camp and into a large lagoon area. A powerful spotlight cut through the utter darkness and its beam pierced underwater to pick out tiger fish and aquatic vegetation. Several young crocodiles were spotted and it was an experience simply to be on the water at night under the giant African sky and thousands of glimmering stars. We were returning to camp down the narrow channel when something caught my eye at the edge of the light beam. I shouted "hippo" and the guide quickly shined the light to the edge of the reed bed. We were all astounded to an *elephant* swimming in the darkness! The elephant was a surprised as we were and, if I were to use an anthropomorphic phrase, the elephant almost seemed embarrassed. It was one of the most unusual sightings I have experienced on any Safari, and we were almost reluctant to tell those back at camp what they had missed. But, it gave us our elephant for the day. Our total count for the trip was 655 elephants.

Botswana is an independent African nation bordered by South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Namibia. It covers the same geographical area as Kenya, and both are about two and one-half the size of Kansas. Kansas' state population is about 2.2 million, while Kenya now has over 25 million people.

In Kenya people are everywhere, even in the most remote and desolate regions. Every time your vehicle stops for any reason, people from tribes of that area seem to emerge from nowhere. You see people on the roads and in the bush, sometimes carrying firewood or water, sometimes tending their herds of cattle or goats. But in Botswana you can go for miles, and for hours, without seeing other human beings.

Kenya has a varied terrain, from beautiful mountains to the Great Rift Valley. Botswana is more uniform in its habitat and is dominated by the Kalahari Desert. While we flew over some of the desert region, most of our land Safari was concentrated in northern Botswana, which was a semi-arid habitat.

Animals were in abundance, particularly the expected large mammals. Because there are fewer people in Botswana (both indigenous residents and foreign visitors) the animals are not as used to the close proximity of humans as they are in Kenya. In other words, they are "wilder". This results in the animals maintaining a greater distance from vehicles, and a lot of "rear end shots" as they turn and run from you just as you focus in for a photography. But that is a small sacrifice to be able to experience these animals in such a state.

Bird life was among the most spectacular and abundant we had seen on any Safari, and it was a thrill to see large numbers of species that had only been isolated specimens now and then on previous trips.

The daily routine of camp life and a moveable tent Safari were quickly assimilated by the group. Since it was August and we were south of the equator, we got a taste of winter in Africa, with overnight temperatures dipping to 42 degrees F. You really hated to crawl out of that cozy sleeping bag, and I think many of us learned just how long we could hold it! Everyone welcomed the roaring campfire each morning.

While there were many highlights, two stand out in my mind. Victoria Falls is certainly one of nature's greatest spectacles, and one simply stands in awe when this

mighty force of water is first experienced. Our first visit was brief and in the late afternoon. The light was fading fast, and we followed the trail only Devil's Cataract, spellbound by the might Zambezi River crashing into the deep gorge below. The next morning before dawn, several of us perched ourselves on top of the roof deck of a nearby hotel to watch and photograph the sunrise over the Falls. It was a very special, magic moment. The cloud mist from the Falls, rising through the trees and colored orange by the sun, looked more like the rolling smoke of a forest fire. We then followed the trail a little farther along the rim to absorb the falls in the early morning burst of light. Later that morning our entire group returned for an extensive walk along the length of the trail. The mood of the Falls changed with the time of day, angle of the sun, and the number of other people present or absent. Each visit was an experience in itself.

The other grand spectacle was the Okavango Delta. Rising in the highlands of central Angola, the Okavango River flows eastward but never reaches the Indian Ocean. Instead, it floods into the low-lying areas of northern Botswana and annually forms a unique ecological habitat that mixes semi-desert and beautiful swamps. The water is so clear and clean it looks like it has been distilled and one marvels at the variety of aquatic vegetation that is so abundant. Narrow channels lined by tall reed grasses expand into open lagoons covered with beautiful water lilies. Hundreds of temporary islands are formed and a variety of animals live throughout the Delta: hippos, crocodiles, elephants, red lechwe, sitatunga, buffalo, sable, roan, hyena, baboons, kudu, impala, warthog, and many species of birds.

It is a strange sensation to be able to have one foot on the desert sand and the other foot in the marsh water. We spent time on the water in a small boat, taking long excursions back into the Delta, and time on land in our Safari vehicle, skirting the edges of the marsh areas. While we were impressed with these bits and pieces of the Okavango, it took on new significance when we flew over it on the last day in a light aircraft (a Cessna 206 manufactured in Kansas).

Our pilot maintained an altitude of just over 3,000 feet, and the Okavango Delta stretched to the horizon. The bits and pieces we had experienced on the ground and on the water suddenly fell into place, like a giant jigsaw puzzle. As far as the eye could see there was a curious mixture of desert and swamp, island and flood plain, reedbed and forest — a true mosaic of habitats. And while we did not see some animals through the reeds and sedge from the boat, from the air we could see large herds — including sable.

Our first Botswana Safari will long be remembered for a variety of reasons, but most importantly it gave us a new perspective of the African experience.



Safaris since 1974.

LARGE AS LIFE

by Gary K. Clarke

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter)

The elephant walked silently through the African forest.

An adult male, he was clearly lord of his domain. Standing over ten feet at the shoulders and approaching five tons in weight, he was, in the lingo of the African bush guides, a "classic bull".

As he emerged from the shadows into a clearing, the sun touched his ivory. His tusks were thick at the base, and evenly matched -- both were broken with fractured uneven tips. They must once have been magnificent, but their broken status added a rugged dimension to this bull.

Pausing with his trunk in the air to test the wind, he shook his huge head and changed direction. Well known in this remote region of the Okavango Delta of northern Botswana, this bull even had a name: Abu.

Proceeding at a deliberate pace, Abu headed straightaway to the swamp. He plodded into the crystal clear water thick with reeds and carpeted with water lilies.

Abu didn't lift each foot and step into the water. With his great strength, he pushed through it, creating powerful waves and causing the water to break and sparkle in the sunlight.

The local Tswana people pole their way through the Okavango Delta in dugout canoes called makora (singular: mokoro), but here the vegetation was much too thick. Special 4WD safari vehicles drive through shallow areas of the swamp, but here the water was much too deep.

Abu was going where only he could go. By now the water was up to the bottom of his ears.

With each step, every muscle in his body flexed. His pelvic girdle swayed. His shoulder blades protruded like pistons -- left, right, left, right. The thick massive skin on his back rolled back and forth across his spine.

I know.

I was riding on top of Abu.

And I felt like I was riding on top of the world!*

* Editor's Note: Gary wrote this after spending five days at Randall Moore's Abu Camp in Botswana.



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