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ZAMBIA:

Ramblings from a Zambian Bush Walk

The **Black** Lions of Lower Zambezi

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RAMBLINGS FROM A ZAMBIAN BUSH WALK

by Brian Hesse

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter, First Edition, 2000)

The lion kill -- as we walked through the Zambian bush, my mind fleetingly returned to the kill. Only last night, in close quarters (albeit in a vehicle, but an "open" one with no sides and no top), I had observed a pride feeding on an impala. The scene had been intense: the bearing of canines, the swatting of paws, ferocious growls -- all pierced what had previously been a peaceful evening. Now, however, I was on foot, in the bush, and on the lions' turf.

Still I did not feel threatened. While some comfort arose from the fact that I and the three others on the bush walk were being led by my guide-friend Grant, who, as a precaution, was armed, an accurate description is that I felt liberated. Yes, liberated. Here I was, a humble speck in the vast expanses of the lower Zambezi with nothing between me and the complexities of nature. There were no walls or windows to confine my quiet revelry and boundless curiosity. I was wonderfully, wondrously alive. And the lions? Well, in any other context my view might sound overly nonchalant, but I inherently knew they were *not* a menace. Indeed, I understood and accepted they were necessary variables in the natural equation.

But any thoughts regarding lions were temporarily put on hold as we emerged into a small clearing. In front of us was a winterthorn acacia tree lying in a violent heap on its side. The bull elephant (there was only one set of tracks, indicating that it was probably a lone male) must have been intent on getting every last "apple-ring". I couldn't blame him. As the dry season progressed, forage was getting scarce. Many species of trees were losing their leaves and much of the grass was unappetizingly dry. The winterthorns, however, were just beginning to produce piles of delectable, protein-rich pods. I walked closer, to better inspect the scene.

Chunks of soil clung to exposed roots. I alternately touched lighter and darker dirt. The lighter fell away as dust, the darker in moist chunks. I looked to the ground, to where the tree had been anchored. In the slight depression of up-turned soil were genet tracks. The spotted cat-like predator must have been looking for insects, or possibly

birds' eggs, lizards, or frogs, out of reach when the tree had been upright. Next to one track was a leaf covered with a delicate layer of mud. It was the work of a species of termite, one which covers its food in order to protect itself from light, thereby permitting it to feed during the day. And next to the mud-covered leaf was more spoor from the lone bull. In the dung I could see numerous winterthorn seeds. The piles would act as a natural compost for future winterthorns, and the bull's travels would distribute seeds over a wide area.

Looking up from the felled winterthorn, I could see the wide, slow-moving Zambezi through a stand of nearby trees. Like the river's waters, my thoughts about last night's kill and the winterthorn's recent demise gently swirled and blended. In making the kill, the lions helped surviving browsers and grazers: one less competitor for a finite amount of food meant more for others. In pushing down the tree, the elephant enabled the emergence of more forage: freed of smothering shade, seeds could now bask and grow in ample sunlight. In a natural progression, increased forage would result in more foragers. And more foragers would result in healthier predators. Yet there would come a day when prey numbers would drop, most likely because of declining food sources, and a corresponding decline in predators would occur. But then new grasses, bushes, and trees would emerge and numbers would increase once again...

At that moment I realized the Zambian bush was neither overly brutal nor overly benevolent. It was simply in balance. I could *feel* -- with every faculty, to my very core -- its timeless cycle.



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THE BLACK LIONS OF LOWER ZAMBEZI

by Gary K. Clarke

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter, Third Edition, 1999)

The **Black** Lions of Lower Zambezi

Suddenly — unexpectedly — a **black** lion burst from the bush into the dry sand river bed and ran directly toward our open vehicles.

We sat transfixed.

I had seen **black** leopards, even **black** jaguars, and I knew of the white lions of Timbativu, South Africa. But a **black** lion?

Never had I imagined such a creature!

Melanism is an abundance of color pigment, and black specimens seem to occur in most species — even giraffes. Melanistic animals have a dramatic appearance, taking on an air of grace and beauty. There is something about them that compels you to look at them.

But *this* **black** lion was strange. It had all of the movements and behaviors of a lion, but just looked weird.

We watched it intently. First, to make sure it did not jump into our vehicles, and second, to try to figure it out. The animal was an adult female. Her coat was dull and matted, instead of sleek and shiny. Then it dawned on us: she wasn't truly melanistic — she was simply covered with thick, **black** mud, from nose to tip of tail.

We were based at Chiawa Camp in Lower Zambezi National Park in Zambia and had been on our afternoon game drive for several hours. Earlier we had seen a beautiful pair of saddlebill storks with two young, and an African fish eagle stealing prey from a yellow-billed kite. Dusk was near, and we had followed the sand river bed in search of a good place to have our Sundowners.

The mud-covered lioness ran to our left with determination and purpose. We followed her. She lay down by a bush and, although we could not see them, we heard her cubs. Apparently she was nursing them.

A second lioness was roaring in the distance. Our **black** female walked back along a ridge, answering the roar. In fading light we proceeded toward the source of lion sounds, arriving at Chifungulu Channel off the main bed of the Zambezi River.

There we encountered a notorious pair of lion brother, Grumpy and Stumpy. The humorous nicknames belie their ferocious reputation: bold, aggressive, unafraid. Robust adult males in full mane, they are well known throughout the lower Zambezi area. Both have equally "grumpy" dispositions, but Stumpy has no tail — just a nub of a stump — apparently born that way.

As we approached, Grumpy was lying in an open area and Stumpy was mating with a female. Three male Cape buffalo were watching from a distance.

So, counting our **black** lioness, that made four lion sightings on the game drive. Darkness descended.

Then we heard tremendous growling and snarling! Directing our attention (and our spotlights) to the water hyacinth edging the channel, we were astounded to see six adult female lions, wet and muddy (more **black** lions!) in a savage feeding frenzy. Couldn't tell what the prey was. Buffalo? Hippo? This now increased our lion sightings to TEN! (Well, this explained our first **black** lioness. She had been in the mud at the kill site, and had returned to the dry sand river to tend her newborn cubs when we saw her.)

Back at the shoreline we now saw three juvenile lions, which brought our total count to 13! At this point the male Grumpy walked past us to join the others at the kill. Continuing to watch the melee we determined the carcass to be a Cape buffalo — and discovered four juvenile lions, which gave us 17!

Seventeen lions on a kill in the mud of a Zambezi River channel in the heart of Africa — and under a nearly full moon. What a scene!

Just when we thought we were witnessing the ultimate in nature, the powerful spotlight picked up the glow of two burning coals in the water — the eyes of a HUGE crocodile, silently floating up behind Grumpy. We didn't know what to anticipate. The croc seemed big enough, that with the element of surprise, he could have grabbed even an adult male lion in his massive jaws and pulled him under water. The King of Beasts versus a Living Dinosaur!

Even I couldn't make this up! And some people think they can experience the real Africa on the Discovery Channel. HA! No way could it ever *begin* to compare to that moment on the Chifungulu Channel. So much was happening simultaneously we could hardly keep up.

Somehow Grumpy sensed the presence of the crocodile behind him. He whirled around, snarling and growling, and struck out at the crocodile! Not once, but twice! Splashing water glittered in the beam of the activated spotlights. We could not determine if Grumpy made contact, but the croc swam away.

Our Guides switched off the spotlights and we sat in the darkness, listening. The sounds were incredible, and seemed *so* close. While we had full confidence in our Guides, you couldn't help emitting a little nervous laughter at the situation in which we found ourselves.

"No problem" is a common phrase used on Safari regardless of any predicament, dire or not. But we *did* have a problem. A serious one. Our second vehicle had a puncture. The left front tire was flat! There we were in the dark, in open Land Rovers (no roof, no sides, no doors, no windows), miles from camp, with a pride of 17 lions actively feeding on a buffalo kill. Who could have dreamed such a scenario? (Ah, Discovery Channel, eat your heart out.)

After careful assessment of the situation we positioned our vehicles as a shield between the other vehicle and the lions. Four of the juveniles passed in back of us and climbed a tree. Our game scout was out with his rifle to stand guard. The other Safarists had to sit *very still* while the front end of their vehicle was jacked and the guides changed the tyre. During this time we had a bonus sighting: side-striped jackal (much less common than the black-backed), apparently attracted to the kill.

With the spare tyre in place we thought it best to push off. It was now 7:30 pm and we soon stopped somewhere deep in the bush to have the Sundowners scheduled for 6:00 pm. Shining the spotlight around we saw several elephants and a hyena watching us. Normally that would have been an exciting sighting on a night game drive, but our adrenalin supply was exhausted, and we took it in stride. It was all we could do to muster enough energy to toast the **Black** Lions of the Lower Zambezi!



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AN ELEPHANT'S TAIL

by Nancy Cherry

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter, Second Edition, 1998)

Just before dusk during a game drive in South Luangwa National Park our Guide

stopped on a bluff overlooking the Luangwa River in Zambia. We got out, stretched our legs, and chose a sundowner from the cool box. Standing on the edge of the bluff, we watched as about 75 hippos did all sorts of hippo things in the river below. There was snorting, sort of a hippo growl, splashing and some shrill shrieks. The water was bubbling as all the large and small hippos swam around. Two placid crocodiles floated back and forth, up and down the river, close to the hippos but with no interaction.

As we were getting cameras primed for the anticipated sunset our Guide cautioned us to whisper quietly as he pointed back to the wooded area behind us on the bank. From the trees an elephant slowly emerged -- and we moved a little farther back from the bank's edge and closer to the vehicle. We were struck by the silence of this huge animal as she walked into the open area above the river bank. So intent were we on watching and photographing her, it was several minutes before we realized the wooded area was full of elephants! We stood patiently and quietly as 27 elephants of various sizes came out of the woods from all directions, passing in front of us, and proceeding slowly to meet at the edge of the river bluff.

Meanwhile three young males had approached from another direction and had slid down a hippo chute to the river edge. They appeared to be doing a ritual before crossing the river. First, they drank for about ten minutes (during which time we gave up holding our breath and just stood absolutely still. Then, they took dust baths for another ten minutes. After that, two of them sparred, entwining their trunks and clanking their tusks (the only sound we heard from the elephants). At last the young bulls entered the water, splashed and squirted some water around, and then headed for the opposite shore.

That seemed to be the signal for the females and young to come down the chute, test the water and slowly proceed across in single file. Two areas in the shallow river appeared to be four to five feet deep. The youngest elephant was not a good swimmer and bobbed up and down using its trunk as a snorkel. Two adult females, possibly mother and auntie, were always touching the youngster with a helping trunk.

While an elephant has enormous ears and a huge trunk, its tail is not very large in proportion to the rest of its body. It's not as efficient a fly swatter as is a giraffe's tail. In fact, when you view an elephant from the back, the tail looks like a joke -- sort of an afterthought that didn't grow to fit the body. So it was with much suppressed giggling that we watched those massive elephants lift their tiny tails in the air as they crossed the Luangwa -- thus avoiding any nips from the crocodiles.

As the elephants, still silent, reached the far bank they broke away in small family groups and entered the vegetation separately just as the sun was setting. We proceeded on our night game drive, privileged to have been with the elephants at this place, at this time. Although this event occurred some years ago, it is still vivid as one of those special Safari memories.



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