



## **BOTSWANA - TRIP REPORT February 2012**

**By Adrian Binns**

My visit to Botswana coincided with the green season or summer months when the bush is lush, foliage vibrant, and temperatures rise into the 90's. A vast part of this relatively flat, land-locked country in southern Africa encompasses grasslands, scrub savannah and the sands of the Kalahari Desert. The Okavango Delta, the largest inland delta in the world, covers the northwest, alongside Chobe National Park and Moremi Game Reserve. The delta is fed by the Okavango River, which originates in the Angolan highlands, 600 miles to the northwest of Botswana. The river waters take 6 months to reach the delta where it spreads across 6,000 square miles before dissipating into the vast sands of the Kalahari.

The remarkably stable, peaceful government of Botswana has set aside nearly 40% of the country for National Parks, Game Reserves and wildlife management in the form of private concessions. Tourism contributes significantly to the economy in the form of first-class lodges and small luxury camps. High prices keep crowds at bay, and maintain the feeling of traveling through a vast, pristine wilderness with few people around.

My travels were sponsored by the Botswana Tourism Organization (BTO), for whom I served as trip photographer. I was accompanied by James Currie and his Birding Adventures TV (BATV) crew, as they were filming several episodes of the show. Our 11-day adventure centered around three areas in the northern part of the country: Chobe National Park, the Okavango Delta, and Makgadikgadi Pans.

BATV Website : [www.birdingadventures.com](http://www.birdingadventures.com)

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Botswana Tourism Organization : [www.botswanaturism.us/](http://www.botswanaturism.us/)

### **Chobe National Park**

My adventures in Botswana began with a flight from Johannesburg to Kasane, a small town on the Chobe River, in the northeastern most part of Botswana, just 50 miles from Victoria Falls. A short distance to the east, the Chobe River meets the mighty Zambezi, whose waters swirl over the intersection of four southern african countries: Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Interestingly, this is the only place in the world where the boundaries of four countries come together geographically.

I was traveling with James Currie, host of Nikon's Birding Adventures TV (BATV), his cameraman, Robert Oliver, and Dawson, "Daws" as we called him, representative from the Botswana Tourism Organization (BTO), the sponsors of our trip. Sharing a passion for wildlife

and adventure, our small group enthusiastically embarked on our tour of northern Botswana. I was especially eager, as I've explored other areas of Africa, but this was my first time in this country.

Within hours of landing, we were motoring down the Chobe River on a sunset cruise aboard a large platform boat. Wire-tailed Swallows landed fleetingly on our craft, while a few Whiskered Terns hunted up and down the channel. We glimpsed an Allen's Gallinule, and saw the first of many Pied Kingfishers, Long-tailed (Reed) Cormorants, African Darters, and Long-toed Lapwings. Hippos swam close to our boat, while Monitor Lizards and several Nile Crocodiles basked on the riverbank. Common Waterbuck grazed in the tall grasses on the banks, and several Greater Kudus jostled together near the water's edge. Robert's camera rolled non-stop, as James narrated about the wildlife and habitat of our surroundings.

A fierce afternoon rainstorm, not unexpected for this time of year, didn't dampen our high spirits. We secured the side tarps to keep us and our equipment dry, and kept our eyes on the wildlife that utilize the river's vast resources. At one point strong gusts pushed our boat into the shallows, temporarily mooring us. Daws and James, the ever-entertaining traveling companion, didn't hesitate to jump into the croc and hippo infested water, and push us back into the gentle current!

During our return ride to the lodge, everyone imbibed on sundowners, a deliciously relaxing African tradition. We enjoyed this daily, evening ritual tremendously... occasionally too much!

We were based out of the Mowana Safari Lodge on the banks of the Chobe River. "Mowana" means baobab in the local Setswana language, and our well-situated lodge, with a strong African motif, was built around a massive 800-year-old specimen.

I didn't wander far to find plenty to capture my attention. The grounds hosted myriad colorful birds, including African Paradise Flycatcher, White-throated Bee-eaters flying sorties to capture butterflies and bees, Copper Sunbird, Grey-headed and Orange-breasted Bush-Shrikes. Family groups of Hartlaub's Babblers and Retz's Helmet-Shrikes flitted about the undergrowth and tops of trees, respectively. The reeds of the golf course pond was the best place to see male Grosbeak Weavers and Southern Red Bishops busily courted females to inspect their architectural creations.

Specialties of the lodge grounds included Collared Palm Thrush, easier to see here compared to anywhere else I have looked for them, and, Brown Firefinch which we filmed building its nest within an old Spectacled Weaver's abode.

At dusk, a pair of Barn Owls emerged from under the thatched roof eaves of the open upper lounge, and dozens of Trumpeter Hornbills returned from a day of foraging to wrangle over prime roosting spots in the centerpiece baobab.

Chobe National Park is famous for its large herds of migratory elephants, but they were seasonally dispersed with so much water about, and we saw only a few of the great behemoths. However, the damage they inflict upon the trees was evident by the many standing dead trees, stripped bark and broken limbs.

Inside the park, we drove the main sandy track hugging the river, and enjoyed terrific birdlife including Marabou Storks, African Openbills, Spur-winged Goose, Blacksmith Lapwings, African Jacanas, Little Egrets and our target, the African Pygmy Geese. These skittish diminutive waterfowl felt more protected even amongst sparse stands of rushes. A Black Heron exhibited its unique umbrella shade-fishing technique, catching minnow-sized prey which it devoured off camera. At the top of a bare perch, a pair of African Fish Eagles threw their heads back and called loudly - this is the sound of Africa!

Further down the road we stopped to admire colourful Lilac-breasted Rollers, Blue-cheeked and European Bee-eaters, duetting Swamp Boubous, and an Amur Falcon. A Southern Ground Hornbill flew up onto a tree limb, showing surprising grace for a bird of its size. Southern Red-billed Hornbills foraged for grubs amongst the open grasses, and a flock of Helmeted Guineafowl milled around, pecking the sand for small invertebrates and seeds.

Baby animals always delight me, therefore I was thrilled to see a very young hippo draped across its mother's head in the water, content to sleep in safety. We had seen this pair the day before, and I marveled at the baby's instinct to seek its mother's constant protection. A lone Buffalo, the only one seen on our entire trip, waded across a shallow channel in front of us, lumbering towards a small group of Pukus, a water-loving antelope. In dryer areas of the park, herds of impalas bounded, and a troop of mischievous Chacma Baboons roved through the scrub. A family of Warthogs ambled past, unconcerned with our presence. In a wooded section, we watched a herd of majestic Sable Antelopes crossing the track ahead of us. I held my breath as several stopped for long moments returning my gaze.

We spent time searching for Racket-tailed Roller in a stand of pink-flowered Rhodesian Teak, the preferred habitat of this uncommon, secretive species that James wanted to feature in a show segment. We never did find the bird, but experienced a completely different kind of encounter. James and Robert were on foot when James heard a faint snap, a sign that elephants were in the area. He knew they were closer than they should be, and began retreating carefully back to the vehicle. With all of us safely in the Land Cruiser, a young bull decided to give a mock charge. Like the pro that he is, Robert filmed continuously without a twitch, only telling us later that he was scared as heck, that being his first experience of elephants charging at close range in the bush! The following evening we would encounter a pride of lions in this same area. The bush is indeed full of surprises and danger, and to be approached with utmost caution.

Returning from the bush one afternoon, James discovered a young Flap-necked Chameleon on his shirt. It had apparently fallen onto him as we passed under some low-hanging branches during our game drive. After long inspection and many photos, we released the interesting creature in the garden.

Traveling with James Currie means never a dull moment in the African bush. Always eager for adventure, the crazy antics of this seasoned TV-host kept us laughing often, like when he rode the river rapids on his arse, then had to scrub the dirt off of his butt!

Bold and beautiful, wild and wonderful, Botswana was bigger than my dreams, and I was thrilled for our tour to continue on to the famed Okavango Delta!

## Okavango Delta, a Watery Oasis

My Botswana adventure continued with a wonderful visit to the famed Okavango Delta in the northwest part of the country. Fed by the Okavango River, which originates some 600 miles north in the Angolan highlands, this is the largest inland delta in the world, and home to spectacular wildlife and scenery.

The short flight from Kasane provided a fascinating, air-borne perspective of this vast, lush region, seasonally awash in greens and blues, featuring countless courses of flowing water. Thin strips of palm-fringed islands remained a few feet above the water level, one of which served as a lone airstrip for our single prop plane. Flying low for landing, we spotted elephants bathing and giraffes standing in the shade - a welcome introduction to this exciting destination.

From the airstrip, we were warmly greeted by our ranger, Barobi. It was a short ride by Land Cruiser to a nearby dock, where we boarded a boat to bring us to Xigera, our water-based camp located at the western edge of Chief's Island. Xigera, pronounced *kee-jar-ah*, could be considered the geographical center of the delta. The Okavango Delta spreads across 6,000 watery square miles, and the 30-mile long Chief's Island is the largest bit of land that manages to stay above the waterline year-round. In stark contrast to Kasane and Chobe, where relatively easy access facilitates a number of tourists, we found ourselves in the middle of nowhere, a vast pristine paradise to explore and enjoy.

We were awed by the warm greeting of the staff, who welcomed us to camp with big smiles and a traditional bush song echoing across the watery marsh, as our boat pulled up to the rustic wooden dock. This luxury camp was superb, set amidst thickets of tall trees on a small island aptly named "Paradise." A raised wooden walkway led us to lovely, spacious safari tents set on platforms where the breath-taking view from the verandah overlooked the marsh. I noticed a band of Banded Mongoose scurrying through the undergrowth and a Grey-backed Camaroptera was pinpointed by its bleating call. Fruiting fig trees attracted a family of Vervet Monkeys along with pairs of Black-collared Barbets, Black-headed Orioles, a plethora of African Green Pigeons and Grey Go-away-birds.

Our hosts, Gabby and Mia and their joyful staff, ran a top-notch camp, with excellent food and service. We feasted on freshly-prepared meals under an open timber-and-thatch roof of the main reception lodge beside the lagoon. As daylight faded, a new moon rose in the crystal clear sky, accompanied by bright planets Venus, Jupiter and a clearly visible red Mars. In this remote corner of the world, the Milky Way splashed across the sky more visibly than I'd ever seen it anywhere before. The tinkling sounds of African Reed Frogs added background symphony. From my bed at night, I heard hippos grunting close to our tents. The sounds of Africa are distinctive, night and day!

One of Africa's most sought-after owls is the huge, ginger-coloured Pel's Fishing Owl. With just about a thousand pairs remaining, the Okavango Delta is the main place to find one, especially here at Xigera. James, Robert, Daws and I loaded our gear into a boat, for a short ride to the neighboring island, a likely location for this special species.

After a bit of searching amongst the dense thicket with stately trees, Barobi managed to spot a pair, which immediately flew into the upper reaches of the canopy. We let them settle, then

tracked them down again, giving us a wonderful encounter with one of the largest and rarest owls. Robert filmed continuously, while James narrated enthusiastically about this magnificent bird, for a special segment of Birding Adventures TV.

We spent a full morning birding by boat, a wonderfully relaxing way to explore the rich landscape. Barobi, our guide, skillfully navigated us through a meandering maze of waterways lined with papyrus reeds and water lilies, always on alert for an unpredictable hippo. We stopped at the sight of a Coppery-tailed Coucal, hoping it would perch at the top of grasses for a full view. Chirping Cisticolas showed well, singing cheerfully, and a bright African (Holub's) Golden Weaver posed nicely on a papyrus. We spotted a brilliantly coloured Malachite Kingfisher, and quietly approached for close views of this diminutive bird.

Ever sharp-eyed, James spotted a Lesser Jacana crouched among some lilies. Unlike their conspicuous relatives the African Jacana, Lesser Jacanas tend to be elusive loners, considerably shier, and well adapted to blend into vegetation. When we tried to get closer, the bird flew to another part of the lagoon. We followed it there, but it promptly flew back to where it had just come from. It was frustrating, as we knew it was a great sighting and James desperately wanted to get it on film. It was reminiscent of watching a tennis match, to the left, then the right, left, right, back and forth..... and finally, the jacana won and moved on.

The traditional way to enjoy the serene landscape is by calmly being poled through waterways on a *mokoro* (dugout boat). Our limited time here meant that we couldn't experience this as much as we'd liked.

In the afternoon, we ventured back towards the airstrip, taking the Land Cruiser to search for a Saddle-billed Stork we had seen when landing. Standing over 5 feet tall in the short open grassland, they were hard to miss with oversized, bright, red and yellow bill. Two youngsters followed their mother around, still in juvenile dull-brown plumage.

We focused on seeing a Slaty Egret, another specialty and highly-localized resident of the Delta. We finally found an immature feeding in a small, water-filled depression along with a larger Little Egret. The juvenile Slaty was eventually joined by an adult in full breeding plumage with picturesque head plumes, yellow legs and rufous-coloured throat. I am fascinated by the various feeding techniques employed by egrets and herons, and never tire of watching them. The Slaty Egret dipped its bill into the shallows, stirred the waters like stirring a cup of coffee, then snatched small fish trying to escape the turbulent water.

Traversing the floodplain, we admired Rufous-bellied Herons flying in to roost, and scores of Black-winged Pratincoles and Broad-billed Rollers hawking the last of the day's flying insects. Our afternoon ended on high ground, where Robert and I alighted onto an anthill, then hastily brushed the bugs off of our legs. James sat atop the Land Cruiser basking in the glory of a wonderfully successful day, while enjoying the traditional sundowner, or three!

In two nights at the Xigera camp, we were thrilled to find our target species, Pel's Fishing Owl and Slaty Egret. I was sorry to leave our friendly, luxurious camp, and wished that we had more time to explore this fascinating part of the Okavango Delta. I looked forward to the next part of our Botswana adventure, discovering Makgadikgadi Pans.

## **Makgadikgadi Pans, Jack's Camp**

The wild, pristine beauty of Botswana shone brightly in the Makgadikgadi Pans, the third destination of my adventure. Contrasting starkly with the lush habitats of Chobe and the Okavango Delta, the Makgadikgadi Pans are the last remnants of what was once the world's largest prehistoric lake, now reduced to salt plains fringed by grasslands and mopane thickets.

Stephan the capable bush pilot dropped us into Jack's Camp in the nick of time, just before a strong afternoon rainstorm grounded most flights. The storm curtailed afternoon activities, but allowed ample time to relax in the remarkable, 1940's-style tented safari camp, set within a palm grove. A spacious, open-sided, pagoda-like tent served as the camp centerpiece, where we dined and enjoyed the bar. Our tents were scattered around the palm-fringed island overlooking grasslands that concealed roaring lions at night. Our host Kirsten and cheerful ranger Chuba welcomed us warmly, providing everything possible for our comfort and enjoyment.

The arid conditions of the Pans host an amazing variety of wildlife, including species not seen in our other travels. We found Rufous-naped and Sabota Larks calling from low-scrub vantage points to attract a mate. Eastern Clapper Larks and Desert Cisticolas displayed by taking to the air and calling, and Southern Anteater Chats busily fed their young fledglings. Rounding out small arid loving species were groups of Spike-heeled Larks, and a few Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks outnumbered by Grey-backed Sparrow-Larks.

At sunrise we paid a visit to the stars of the popular Animal Planet show, "Meerkat Manor." This clan of 18 eagerly exited their burrow and stood on their tippy-toes to soak in the warmth of the sun's first rays, and scan the landscape for predators. Well habituated to people, some of the Meerkats clamored onto James' shoulders as he sat on the mound to gain a better view, while Robert filmed intently. In chain-gang style, they formed a line to excavate their burrow. Much to our delight, the last animal, the one well out of the burrow, seemed quite happy to dump sand over James' legs, in his shoes and up his shorts! I couldn't take my eyes off of a particularly cute young pair of siblings, who were always together, holding each other for support and playing joyfully. We followed the clan as they scampered off in the short grasses in search of a morning meal. Interestingly, Meerkats forage only for invertebrates found just below the surface of the ground, leaving those on top of the soil for other predators. Perhaps the underground grubs are juicier? I wouldn't know.

Our visit to the Makgadikgadi Pans coincided with the beginning of Blue Wildebeest and Zebra migration around the Delta - a lesser version of the grand scale Serengeti-Mara migration in East Africa. The calving season was almost done and we could see a number of youngsters in shorter grasslands, hugging close to their mothers for protection. At the thicket edges, male Impalas were forming harems and gearing up to defend their females for when the rutting season begins in earnest in mid-April.

There was never a dull moment back at camp, especially when an impromptu version of "Fear Factor" began with a plate full of Mopane worms. These colourful caterpillars, larger than your index finger, turned out to be a true culinary delight for natives Daws, Chuba, and South African James. Robert opted out of the live contest, but managed to down one of the cooked ones. Despite James' cajoling, I was too squeamish to try worms prepared any style! The entertainment continued with amusing impersonations of famous personalities. We howled with

laughter, pun intended, at Robert's perfect impression of Bob Dylan's dog - "*woof, woaf-woaaf*" in the iconic nasal drawl!

We ventured to the edge of the Makgadikgadi Pans to view the vast, desolate landscape stretched as far as the eye could see. Beneath shimmering heat waves, we saw a number of Ostriches, and our first Wattled Cranes a distance away. A Leopard Tortoise crossed the track in front of us. The timing of our visit meant there was little water in the pans, and the spectacle of large congregations of breeding Lesser Flamingos would not appear for another month or so. We had to make do with a hundred or so Greater Flamingos!

Scattered pools of freshwater attracted Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, Black-winged Stilt, Ruff, Hottentot Teal, Red-billed Duck and an African Spoonbill. We had the good fortune to find not just one, but six pairs of Greater Painted Snipe, a great sighting of these wetland-edge skulkers. Their plumage is striking, albeit different for males and females. The female features a rich chestnut coloured neck and chest, while the male shows earth-toned patterning. The female Greater Painted Snipe, like some other shorebird species, defies conventional gender roles, in that she lays her eggs then leaves her mate to incubate and raise the chicks.

The sparse grasses of this arid, desert region is perfect habitat for small flocks of Temminck's and Double-banded Coursers, both of whom easily outran us to keep a safe distance away. Nomadic sandgrouse also thrive in dry, sandy areas, and we had the fortune to locate a pair of beautiful Burchell's Sandgrouse showing white-spotted, cinnamon bodies.

I was greatly intrigued by the Northern Black Korhaan, a beautiful bustard found in taller arid grasslands or savannah. This bird spends much of the day, and some nights, calling raucously to attract a mate. If the call was not compelling enough, it took to the air, circled its territory calling all the while, then parachuted slowly back down with its conspicuous white primary feathers in full display - a marvelous sight to watch, considering its ample size.

Raptors were well represented in this environment, including Pale Chanting Goshawks, Brown Snake Eagle and Tawny Eagles, who kept an eye on the multitude of Southern Ground Squirrels, its favorite prey. We followed circling vultures hoping to find a kill, but all the White-backed and Lappet-faced Vultures had already gorged on whatever they'd found, leaving only a small scrap of hide, and some individuals milling around on the ground digesting their meal.

Unique amongst raptors is the striking Secretarybird, a long-legged, terrestrial hunter of the grasslands. Chuba, our ranger guide, was delighted to see his first one in several months. In fact there were a pair, a testosterone-driven male in hot pursuit of a young female with a short tail. We followed the two, having a hard time keeping up as he chased her over the open landscape for well over 2 miles. Eventually he got the hint, she was just not ready, and he opted to go hunting. A Secretarybird's long legs enable them to cover a great deal of territory on foot, in search of grasshoppers and other insects. When they find something, they employ a foot stamping technique to flush and kill it. We were lucky to see this in action, when the male we were following began to stamp his foot and lift his wings at the same time. He had killed an olive coloured snake about 3 feet in length!

A major highlight of my Botswana adventure was interacting with some native peoples of the Kalahari, known as San Bushmen. Four men generously spent time showing us various aspects of their culture and livelihood. They demonstrated game-tracking skills and hunting techniques utilizing compact bows with poison-tipped arrows. One man dug a tubular root from the ground, squeezed the thirst-quenching liquid into his mouth, then replanted the plant to live on. They showed us how to build a bush fire, and retrieve a scorpion from a hole, though they don't eat them. They even played a fast-paced game of hand gestures, roughly based on "rock-paper-scissors," but with a hunting theme. We couldn't quite understand it all, but it ended with universally-recognized smiles and high-fives all around! One of the men spoke English, interpreting their fascinating language of clicks, sounds and sing-song inflections. Filming everything intently, Robert was shocked to feel a sharp cut on his knee when he knelt down to focus at close range. For a moment he thought it was a poison arrow, and imagined the bushmen talking about how he was now a goner! Luckily, it was just the sharp end of a bow!

I felt extremely lucky and grateful to have experienced this amazing region of the world, and, as usual, wished we had more time to explore the vast habitats of the Makgadikgadi Pans. But I looked forward to the next and final leg of our Botswana adventure, a visit to the Moremi Game Reserve.

### **Moremi Game Reserve, Chitabe Lediba**

The last big stop on my tour of Botswana was on the border of the Moremi Game Reserve, in the southeastern part of the Okavango Delta. The lovely pristine wilderness featured a wide variety of habitats, with a corresponding diversity of birds and animals. Groves of dead Leadwood trees, likely killed by drastic changes in water levels, protruded from a mosaic of acacia and mopane bushveld, riverine forests and freshwater pools.

As our plane flew in for a landing, we were greeted by Giraffes feeding along the airstrip, perhaps unaware of the Red-billed Oxpeckers hitching a ride on their backs, and large numbers of Spur-winged Goose, Egyptian Goose, Comb Ducks and White-faced Whistling Ducks. We saw Yellow-billed Duck, Little Grebe, and Green-backed Heron in nearby ponds.

We had a relatively long, winding drive to our camp, fording streams and narrow plank bridges along the way. To our amazement and delight, we got clear views of a Lesser Jacana, a secretive species, feeding amongst some lilies as we crossed one of the bridges. Red-billed Francolins darted in front of our vehicle, unable to decide whether to go left or right to avoid being hit. We saw Burchell's and Meave's Long-tailed Starlings drinking from a small puddle of water along the track. We stopped to watch a male Southern Red-billed Hornbill fly to its nest in a tree hollow. The cavity was nearly completely sealed except for a small slit from which the female took a katydid offered by its mate, likely to feed hungry youngsters inside.

Our luxurious accommodations at Chitabe Lediba camp featured spacious, comfortable tents built up on stilts, connected by a long, elevated boardwalk spread out along a narrow island. We congregated around an open, thatched-roof dining and lounge area that overlooked the picturesque floodplain.

This tropical savannah region teemed with wildlife of all kinds. Of raptors, we encountered Bateleur, Gabar Goshawk, Steppe Buzzard, and Yellow-billed Kite. A solitary Dickinson's Kestrel was seen well, a new species for me. Colorful kingfishers included Woodland, Brown-hooded and Grey-headed. Lilac-breasted and Broad-billed Rollers perched conspicuously. Little, Southern Carmine and Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters foraged actively. Nervous Jacobin Cuckoos flushed from trees, briefly alighting on shrubs before moving on. At dusk one evening, we inadvertently flushed a half-dozen Dwarf Bitterns from the reeds beside the track, while fording one of the many watercourses around Chitabe.

Botswana is home to expansive herds of Red Lechwe living in perennial swamps. Being the wet season, the antelopes were not visible in large numbers, but we did see a dozen crossing a marsh. The local pools were filling with water, and hippos guarded their stakes with snarling tusks.

While "Chitabe" means zebra in the local setswana language, it is Wild Dogs that have made this destination famous. James and Robert were eager to film these critically-endangered carnivores for an episode of Birding Adventures TV, but the pack had traveled beyond the concession boundaries, and out of reach. Our crew remained cheerfully flexible, and focused on other subjects to film.

Five Wattled Cranes feeding in shallow wetlands provided a reasonable photo opportunity - of course we wished them closer! Of all of Africa's cranes, this handsome species is the tallest and most vulnerable. With an estimated 8000 individuals remaining, the Okavango Delta is one of their last strongholds, and we were thrilled to see them.

Big cat activity is always exciting, and we were thrilled with our encounters here at Chitabe. One afternoon, our driver Ebs received a radio call and promptly turned us in the right direction. We soon reached a spot where a pride of eight lions were laying close to a Wildebeest kill, having just eaten their fill. The lone young cub was busy investigating the beast from all sides. He crawled into the carcass belly, climbed onto the top, and licked blood off of various places. Finally he tumbled over to his aunts and promptly fell asleep. Patiently waiting Hooded and White-headed Vultures edged a step closer to the kill, as the pride started to slumber.

Notably, this experience was observed by parties in three vehicles - ourselves, plus two others - the most number we had seen at one time in all our safari travels. Three vehicles is the maximum allowed in Botswana's remote concession lands, and we were all here together at this scene. Such low visitor quotas help maintain the pervasive feeling of serene, pristine wilderness in Botswana's parks and reserves.

Another fascinating scenario unfolded when we followed two lionesses and their offspring, a male and female. The juveniles, nearly full-grown, tussled with each other, and gave Robert a scare when they approached from behind, unbeknownst to him. Unexpectedly, the adult lionesses began roaring, a deafening sound at close range. Male lions roar to communicate with their pride, and keep rival males away - why were these females roaring? Perhaps they had wandered into new territory and were proclaiming their presence, saying "don't mess with us."

Tracking Leopards proved to be as exciting as actually seeing them! Both Ebs and James, having spent extensive time in the bush, exhibited remarkable tracking skills when they spotted fresh Leopard prints running parallel to tire marks on the sandy road. James observed that this was the sign of a mother and her male cub, whose paw mark was slightly larger than his mother. Leopards are solitary animals, only coming together for mating, so this was not likely an adult pair. We saw drag marks on the sand, a sign that they had made a kill of something small. While on foot, James caught sight of the kill in tall grass, and immediately felt danger as he knew that the Leopards had to be hiding close by. He and Ebs retreated slowly back to the vehicle where Robert and I had been watching the scene unfold. We drove up to investigate, and sadly saw that it was an African Wild Cat, which Leopards recognize as competition and eliminate at any opportunity. The creature was stiff with rigor mortis, and we knew the kill must have occurred hours ago. The tracking continued expertly, with Ebs and James following sign, losing the trail, then picking up on them again, often through grasses and mopane thickets. This went on for close to two hours before the alarm calls of a Red-billed Francolin gave away the Leopards' location. Lying in the shade of a tree were the mother, her son and a nearby carcass of a freshly killed male Impala. We observed, photographed and filmed this amazing experience for a long time!

Our last sundowner was bittersweet, but set the tone for a wonderful evening. A giraffe ambled over to see about our gin and tonics, as the sun set over spectacular marshland scenery. In high spirits, Robert and Daws led an impromptu sing-along of Hotel California on the way back to camp. There, a campfire crackled as we devoured a delicious dinner. Evening entertainment included a concert and dance by the staff choral society, and Daws with his guitar. Marluce, the jolly, portly camp manager, claimed to be the fastest runner in the area, and challenged James to a foot race. Enthusiastic banter and hype peaked as the details were discussed in earnest... the start time, distance, footwear, etc. Alas, Marluce's doctor finally claimed he couldn't participate for health reasons, but it was all great fun while it lasted!

Flying out of the Okavango for the last time, I could see a noticeable increase in the amount of water that had spread across the Delta since I first arrived over a week ago. It will take another 3 months before the majority of this wilderness is covered in a lush mosaic of green and blue waterways. The dry season, when it stops raining in Botswana, begins in about 2 months, though water levels continue to rise, being fed from the river 600 miles north.

It was an incredible experience to explore the pristine, wilderness areas of Botswana. I enjoyed every minute of my adventure, including brilliant birds, wonderful wildlife, luxurious lodges and amazing people at every turn. I am extremely grateful for the support and opportunity provided by Birding Adventures TV and the Botswana Tourism Organization. I look forward to exploring more of southern Africa in the future!