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Trip Report: Botswana - More Wild Dogs, Leopard and Meerkats than Santa Promised - Christmas 2010

A wonderful, wonderful trip yet again to Botswana. We returned to just three of our favourite camps in this very easy country, delayed by appalling snow in London but arriving to non-stop action served up by delightful wild dogs, leopards and meerkats on the wildlife side, and by warm hospitable people, including the amazing, humorous and knowledgeable bushmen in the Kalahari. Literally, never a dull moment on any of our game drives with superb insights into the behaviour of all these species. It was a very merry Christmas and start to the 2011 New Year!

Julie and Adam



Wild Dogs

We had selected two camps where we knew had resident packs of dogs but you just know that you will be extremely privileged should you succeed in tracking them, let alone having quality time with them. It was Christmas, and we were privileged!

Not one, but two different days, at separate camps, we managed to find the pack and with some expert driving (not ours of course) we managed to keep up with them for some time when they took off at great speed and went hunting.

Wild dogs are the most efficient of hunters. They hunt in a well coordinated pack. They are lean and fast runners. They essentially just rip their poor victim apart, devour the carcass within minutes to the extent there's nothing left for any of the usual scavengers to feed on. If you manage to lose them just briefly, you wouldn't know they had made a kill.

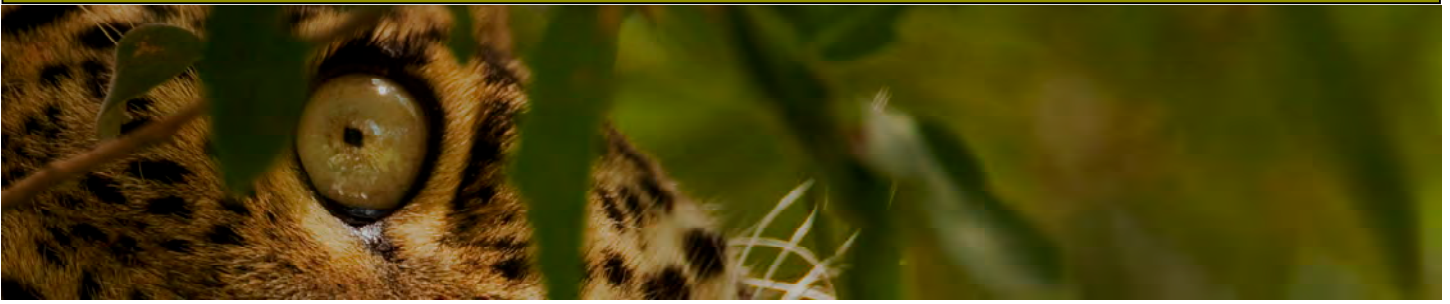
On both occasions our driver really did a great job for us and traversed the mopane bush expertly, at great speed. They were exhilarating drives! We spent several hours with the dogs as they were hunting and also as they were relaxed and socialising. This is when they are absolutely gorgeous and you wouldn't know you were observing natural born killers.

They are so gentle with their young and with the whole pack generally, they express-run back to the young or to those who haven't managed to keep up on the hunt and regurgitate the food they have wolfed down at the kill site, that way ensuring everyone gets fed. They spend a lot of time lying around which is when they are really difficult to find – they often are so well camouflaged they look like leaves on the ground. Very, very special viewings 😊



"Two separate wild dog hunts! These drives are exhilarating as the dogs initially socialise and then morph into athletic speedsters and natural born killers. Really good drivers are needed to keep up with them."





Kalahari Bushmen and Meerkats

Two separate viewings with meerkats meant we had a good practice run on Day 1 and a better crack at getting good shots on Day 2.



Once they get going, they move fast and it's tricky getting in front of them to get the shots you really want but as always, you're better picking off your favourite couple of meerkats or even you're absolute fave and just focusing

on capturing what he's up to. Otherwise it's just all a bit too schizophrenic!

At this time of year, you arrive at their latest den before the sun is fully up and wait for the first meerkat to poke his head up furtively. Before too long the whole gang are out, they huddle in a group to keep warm if it's a cool morning but then they're off, stopping only to dig up grubs, scorpions and at this time of year, huge frogs which they proceed to gobble down. A tricky shoot but extremely entertaining.



We also spent a few hours on this trip walking with and learning from the bushmen. It's incredible what you can use this plant for, that poo for, how quickly you can light a fire if you know what you're doing and how you'd go about washing the eyes of a scorpion. Now don't ask why☺ Their language is fascinating – they have five different tongue clicks and a whole range of gestures. There's no mistaking how to communicate 'meerkat'!! (Check out our Blog and YouTubes on this.) We are already planning a return film project on the bushmen.



Leopard and Cheetah viewing at its best

Next stop, Savuti area where the Savuti Channel is flowing again after 37 years and the game has needed to adapt to very different conditions. There's a lot more water around which is great for survival but the game were accustomed to walking across one side of a dry river bed to get to the other side. These days with the channel filled with water the Big Cats simply walk or swim in the water, across to the other side. On a previous trip we saw Lion do this and on this trip we saw a Cheetah wade across with only its head above water. Well, someone slept in back at camp and missed it...but it was a great sighting for the others! Fantastic.

Now let me tell you about the Leopard on this trip... we followed one sub-adult male in particular for a total of 19 hours over the course of three days. He was walking about 20 miles per day in a meandering course, depending on what he was trying to catch. But he was inexperienced and he left his first kill down on the ground for too long, it turned dusk and four hyena

laughed in, scared him promptly up a tree, and proceeded to devour a very intact bushbuck carcass. Our poor boy became thinner and thinner over the following two days and in desperation was eating frogs nests – good protein there – a squirrel – and occasionally sticking his head down old aardvark holes which is pretty dangerous given they are often inhabited by tusk bearing warthogs.

He almost mated for us with a particularly frisky female leopard – there was something quite surreal about watching our leopard taking a nap up a tree during his journey and as we looked around with our binos we spied another leopard up a nearby tree! We drove over to take a look – it was a female and after a few hours of not knowing which leopard to follow (☺), our two got together and started their long flirtation which involved dribbling, nuzzling against trees, the female ripping up leaves, and it was all looking very promising until some elephants came along and spooked our boy☹ Oh well, you can't have it all. Santa had been very kind to us already of course.





Wildlife Photography Expeditions

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Weather and the Kit

Although very hot, there is no big issue with dust in Botswana in the green season. There is some rain in the build up to the wet, and of course very heavy rain in the wet season, but this just means fabulous skies filled with shapely cumulus clouds, lightning in the evenings and rainbows during the day. There are lots of young: antelopes, baboons, warthogs and birds. The carmine bee eaters were fantastic, like dolphins riding the wake they would accompany our vehicle in the mornings and evenings near camp, catching the insects we flicked up. We took hundreds of photos of these lovely birds.

We had one camera body fail on the trip, coming up with an Error 30 and just impossible to shoot with. Something was wrong with the shutter that couldn't be fixed in the bush: very frustrating given the amount of action we were enjoying, on many days, 50 gigs per person. So it meant thinking carefully in advance about which lens to put on the one remaining good body and spending a lot of time getting the most out of that lens. Alright for some with their full kit though... A bit of a lesson perhaps to think a bit more about packing for the bush plane flights, the small planes do bump the gear around a bit.

Happy 2011, happy travels to everyone!

Julie and Adam, January 2011

For more frequent updates on our trips and what we are up to, check out our Blog at:
www.shutterspeedtravel.com

Next trips: please keep referring to the website or get in touch with us directly because some of our trips don't make it onto the web. Next scheduled trips:

India: Tigers, Holi Festival and Varanasi – March 2011

Congo: Lowland Gorillas and Bonobos – July 2011