

# Botswana Wildlife Safari | Trip Report

## September 4 – 16, 2016 | By Peg Abbott



**With Peg Abbott, tour host, Ewan Masson & Mr. Fish Mothokawabo, expert safari guides, & nine participants: Andrea, Bud, Gingy, Les, Trina, Ed, Beth, Pam & Tere.**

Special thanks to Gingy Ferguson for careful tour notes!

The airport at Maun, as always, was a surprise ... so small, surrounding streets dusty, a first sense of how remote we were, far away from the glitz of Johannesburg and its modern airport. At Maun one feels like they have arrived at a frontier town. Multiple safari vehicles were parked outside, waiting for clients. We recognized the logo of Masson Safaris and spotted Ewan, our affable guide with scruffy hair and a big smile. And we were very happy to see who he chose as second guide, the wonderful Mr. Fish, a tribal elder that moonlights as a crack birder and just a delightful, capable guide.

The adventure begins!



### **Sat., Sept. 3 Royal Tree Lodge, Maun (For early arrivals)**

Knowing the long journey would tire everyone out, Sallie Masson had suggested the Royal Tree Lodge, owned by friends of hers with whom she works to benefit the AIDS children of Maun. Out of town, this large fenced farm is home to native wildlife, a lovely oasis, and all proceeds of our stay go to benefit charity — a win for everyone. Magpie Shrikes and our first Giraffes were there to greet us near the entry. The lodge was spacious and welcoming with an inviting deck and great room upon entry.



Lacking the large predators, the farm also provided us a rare spot on the agenda where we could walk. Our plane got in mid-afternoon and so we enjoyed refreshments at tea time, watching birds at the little

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pool that turned out to be quite the bird magnet, and then we took a rest. About 4:30 PM Peg gathered those willing for a walk to the river. It turned out to be a splendid idea!

We walked some ways through the mopane woodland, spying a cluster of what we'd later call, "giggling ladies," or Green Woodhoopoes. They were noisy and entertaining, and easier to identify than a few of the smaller drab ones. The soil was sandy and walking was easy; in the distance we spied a giant nest of Red-billed Buffalo Weavers on a power pole, with residents busily coming and going, making raspy sounds. Gray Heron elegantly flew up and down the river, and Peg soon called out, "whistling ducks!" There were at least a hundred of them, White-faced, making all kinds of sounds, and leading our eye to quite a sighting — Saddle-billed Stork! Ed was astounded by this giant bird with such classic colors, dwarfing the other herons. Until we spotted the Goliath! Quite a surprise this close to town, this nearly five-foot-high heron with a massive beak seemed indomitable. It was walking close to a group of women who were oblivious to it as they did laundry. We also saw several Coppery-tailed Coucals, bold and seemingly common here. Ed spotted a Little Bee-eater that Peg got in the scope, what a thing of beauty. Soon there were several of these little gems in view, sallying for insects, then perching on small shrubs.

One of the first animals to greet us was a Giraffe. Seeing one from our own two feet rather than in a vehicle made it all the more improbable in their proportions. Quite shy, we spotted a Blesbock, just one, our only one of the trip. Gingy described its face like an African Mask. There were Squacco Herons by the river, and so much to see, but soon we realized dusk was falling and we had some ways to go (and no flashlights with us) so we headed back. We found the way with a bit of searching, and navigated our way home. In all we'd seen 31 species on this short excursion, plus other species by the lodge for a nice start!

Our tents were surrounded by trees, and gentle lighting made for artistic silhouettes during our first African sundown. The sounds were also wonderful — Crested Barbets singing a duet, as were Swamp



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Boubou. Cocktails awaited us at the bar in the main room; we moved with them to the outside deck to hear the last of the avian symphony.

Dinner was lavish, and served around a welcoming table, with beautiful china and glassware, something out of *Out of Africa*. Pam spotted a Small-spotted Genet with delight, on its evening mission to check out crumbs from the cocktail area outside on the porch.

Our host from the lodge was delightful, we almost forget how jetlagged we were, but realizing so, soon made our way to bed.



### Sun., Sept. 4 Royal Tree Lodge, Maun

Waking up here was just way too much fun. Many sounds fill the tent at dawn, resting in perfect comfort within the drapes of a mosquito net, you can't believe the sounds and soon the porch and pathways are calling. Close to the tents was an African Hoopoe, orange feathers gleaming in the sun at dawn. Around the lodge, the small pool was active, with a pair of White-browed Robin Chats and some Terrestrial Bulbul. Bud got to photograph Southern Masked Weavers meticulously crafting a nest. Two species of sunbirds, Collared and White-breasted were attracted to flowering shrubs. So hummingbird-like, they



surprise us with territorial song.

Fearing jetlag, several of us arrived early, and had the full day. Peg suggested a walk, this one longer than the outing yesterday, passing through drier parts of the farm. There was a series of trails, we chose a combo of the Red and the Green trails, making a big loop through savanna and forest. We met after a delicious breakfast, and headed out. It was dry scrub thorn-acacia woodland, and we found it a wonder. A precious Chinspot Batis entertained us, perching before us with a giant bug we tried to discern. Then we heard the call of a Pearl-spotted Owlet. Peg found it in no time, and we marveled at it at close range. It barely stayed awake enough to keep us in view. Our first mammal was a Tsessebe, with a beautiful polished coat.





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There was a steady stream of species, and then tracks of animals the night before, even the diggings of an armadillo at a termite mound, wow! The morning heated up and we opted to cut it short for the ¾ loop, passing back past several ponds. In thick trees, we spooked up a group of Oryx, desert-adapted, handsome grazing mammals. A White-crowned Shrike hovered and put on a show.



Beth broke the peace and quiet of our stalking with a very loud, “Ouch!” We all came running. Somehow, she had put a very big, very tough thorn through the bottom of her sandal, and it had gone deep into her foot. Gingy had one too, just moments before, but this one was deep. Ed came to the rescue pulling it free as Gingy and Bud balanced her. She was then the one who started us laughing ... nothing like laughing your way through pain! Moving on to a water hole, we sorted out Red-eyed, Laughing, and Emerald Spotted Doves and spied our first Blacksmith Plover.

Back at camp, Gingy found a White-crested Helmetshrike with a queer yellow eye, a family group busy by her tent. She went to fetch Peg for a look and an ID. We all rested, ate too much lunch (a wonderful salad-rich buffet spread served outside on the deck) and waited for Trina and Les, the last of our group to arrive.

Welcoming them, we repeated the river walk, with similar species, glorious to experience at the end of the day. Back at camp, a pair of small Cardinal Woodpeckers were active by the waterhole. We found cocktails, and agreed we were getting the safari rhythm! Another fine meal, a luscious stroganoff. Admiring the place settings, Gingy quickly located a source for us to buy the little hippo and elephant butter dishes we each got at the table, that now adorn our homes ....

Peg got a call from Ewan — be ready at 7:30 AM, so we are soon off to reorganize our gear for safari and catch a full night’s sleep.

### **Mon., Sept. 5 The Safari Begins!**

In early light, Peg flushed a Fiery-necked Nightjar, heard calling in the night, on the way to the dining area. Several of us gathered by the waterhole, enjoying coffee and tea, and watching the morning bird parade. This morning we marveled that a Greater Honeyeater came in for smashing views!



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All too soon, Ewan and Mr. Fish marched into our elegant breakfast, calling us to action. We said goodbye to our hosts, and to the Yellow-bellied Greenbuls by the fountain. We took a group photo in front of our safari vehicles while still clean, and headed out for the half-day trip up to Moremi National Park.

Peg called stop number one at the Shorobe Basket Cooperative we passed along the way, having been here before and admiring of the quality of work. Baskets are Botswana's keepsake handicrafts, a few entered the vehicle as our collecting begins. We passed the fence erected in the Rhindapest control era, a demarcation zone between wild and domestic use of the land. We sensed that it has been terribly dry. A Steenbock came into full view, close to the road; it was our first mammal sighting other than the numerous Tree Squirrels. In the distance, we spied a gangly Secretary-bird, marching along.

We had a picnic lunch by the Moremi Park gate, and Ewan pulled out a map to show us the vast expanse of protected land we would be enjoying in the week to come at Moremi National Park. We then headed to our campsite in one of the most remote areas, not close to any lodge. Indeed, over the next three days we'd see few vehicles. Peg noticed a few more active camps than in prior years, newer operators than Masson Safaris which have operated here a long time. Mobile camps take work, but let you be more immersed in the landscape. When meeting other guides (who return to comfortable lodges at night), we saw their smiles at finding Ewan, sage safari guide, who far prefers the outer limits where quiet prevails. His camp staff have been with him for more than a decade. We rolled in and camp was all set up, even the dinner table set with napkins folded like birds at our place-settings. Our tents were canvas, with twin cots hosting thick foam mattress pads. We had a little table, a light, a view of the stars, and home-cooked food with wine. Our privy was an RV-toilet in a private, circular open-roof canvas area at the back of the tent through a zipped door. Not fancy, but it would do. Hippos grunted through the night. Life was good!



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### **Tues., Sept. 6 & Wed., Sept 7 Xini Camp, Moremi National Park**

By the next morning, having heard male Lions and a pack of hyena very close, if not IN camp, we understood the careful configuration of our camp. The tents were not far from each other. The vehicles were planted to be obvious to large animals. We lived in a circle, and our presence was well-defined. A camp in the big Botswana wild. Pam recorded it on her iPad from the vehicle as Peg, Andrea, Les, and Trina took it all in, sporting big smiles.

Now began the rhythm of safari. Each day would hold the same pace, but with different sightings. Each day was satisfying, some unbelievable, hard to sort through the highlights in our memories. The simplicity was most welcomed. Decisions involved: should I have a second cup of coffee?, do I ride with Mr. Fish or Ewan?, and early in the morning, should I bring my jacket (yes!)?

We had no idea what was right outside our door on any particular day, except for the very loud troop of Chacma Baboons that rested in the camp trees and woke us up before dawn. At Masson's Camp, there was no fuss in the morning. Coffee and tea were ready, breakfast had no frills, at first light we are off and running. Thankfully they woke us up with a nice "Morning, Morning" greeting, and hot water poured into our basins to wash up at the start of the day. Our first camp was near wetlands, and the grunts of Hippos were with us night and day. We left camp to wind our way out through thick grasses and a stream at the forest edge, our two vehicles parting to find whatever nature had for us on the menu that day. The two drivers were aware of each other's paths, communicated if there was something exceptional, but otherwise we were free of the constant radio chatter that is so common on an African safari. We focused on each wonder before us. Crazy groups of Helmeted Guineafowl, running in circles. Crested, Swainson's, and Red-billed Francolins, croaking away. Vultures sunning themselves atop dead snags: White-backed, White-headed, and a few Hooded most days. Bateleur Eagles, male and female we'd soon learn to discern, circling overhead. Regal Tawny Eagles; one morning a Marshal quite elegant in a tree. At a rest stop we found Verreaux's Eagle Owl. Hornbills were regular and plentiful, from the infrequent Bradfield's to the African Gray, then more





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common Southern Yellow-billed and the abundant Red-billed. Very popular, and Tere commented on their queer chameleon-like eyeballs, were Southern Ground Hornbills. Huge and lumbering, we found them in groups, with young ones almost adult-sized, learning to dig for insect prey. Bee-eaters were bright spots: Swallow-tailed, Little, and Southern Carmine there in good number. In fact, the Carmine were returning, and at times we had 50 or more in view!

Near camp we had a group of Meyer's Parrots, and Mr. Fish led us to the burrow of a HUGE Rock Python. In total on this trip we spied 40 species of mammal, many were here in profusion. Ewan explained that the area near camp had burned, a fire likely started outside the park that crept in. Now a few months later the resulting greenery was a bonanza in this dry season. We saw big numbers of Zebra with their young, and Impala, with smaller numbers of Southern Reedbuck and Greater Kudu. Feasting upon this concentration were Lions.

We saw a ridiculous number of lions, five different prides worked this area and we saw at least some of them daily. We could tell them by the ages of their cubs, ranging from teeny less than two-month olds to robust, butterball turkey-sized, playful gymnasts.

Their mothers were sleek and attentive, and they had time to lounge and preen. To Tere's relief we did not witness a knock-down gruesome killing, but we could tell they were all well-fed. A few males could be called majestic, but these hunting groups of females with young were the most apparent of the area. One long hunt sequence began when we spotted a female attentively perched on a ridgeline, with many Zebra below. There were other females with cubs lounging in the shade not far away. We waited for something to happen, Zebra were not yet aware of them, was there going to be a chase? The female seemed so intent on something in the distance. Then, another band of females came out with young, marching right out in the open. We had them cross the open area and come right by us. One young one not able to keep up, its mom picked it up by the scruff and it yowled, "I can do it myself!" to no avail. No kill but some great interactions. Gingy described this cub-filled lion collection as "overdosed with cute."

We also saw jackals, Spotted Hyena, several species of mongoose, and quite common were inquisitive Tree Squirrels. Bud was able to photograph a stunning and densely quilled African Crested Porcupine, a rare find still out in the early morning. He had good luck and the rest of us were jealous, as porcupines are rarely out by day.



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Gingy will never forget iPhone-range photos of a Hippo that did NOT want to share its island with Mr. Fish and all of us in his vehicle one afternoon. It came out of a wetland rest spot up onto dry land and we feared it would charge the vehicle. It waddled up all too quickly, with assertion, opening its very large jaws and showing us the placement of (deadly) teeth. Mr. Fish was not alarmed. He said, calmly, "Oh it's not a problem, we were here first." It left us all wondering what if our placement had been the other way around .... After it waddled off, we enjoyed the dance of some 20 Collared Pratincoles flying around us. We still had to get off our little peninsula, and that meant threading the needle through some very large Elephants. "This is Africa," our guides explained.



Elephants were a wondrous part of our experience, each and every day. Botswana has the largest herds in Africa, and there is much behavior to watch and record. Some groups ignored us, others were curious, some were clearly annoyed. One sensed a quite depth of awareness on the elephants' part, a reaction to us balanced by desires to feed, bathe, interact, or just pass through. We got very close to them at times, uncomfortably so a few times, as we would park, and they would move through. We all squealed with delight at the babies, impossibly cute, and numerous. Old ones held fragile dignity. On our first afternoon, we watched a young, healthy herd go berserk at the smell of lions. We had seen two female lions, then gone off to watch the elephants. But then, the "ellies" also sensed the lions, and quickly circled around their young. Knowing the lions had cubs we held our breath as 20 behemoths pounded the ground, literally stomping the bushes. No casualties this day, but one female lion squirted out to open ground with speed, soon followed by another, and after the elephants were gone, a third with her line of cubs. This was one of the most dramatic incidents of our journey, just amazing to watch, and ending with lots of time to watch adorable lion cubs.





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Ewan and Mr. Fish knew this ground like their own back yard. We as passengers were lost most of the time, both in time and in geography. The most recognizable features were ponds and wetlands, some round, some long and thin, all packed with waterfowl. We admired Egyptian Geese until they were present by the thousands. We found huge Spur-winged Goose, both Yellow and Red-billed Teal, and on two days, the lovely Hottentot Teal. Pink-backed Pelican lingered at one of the deeper pools, Mr. Fish said just weeks earlier there had been over 100, we had just three. Hammerkop impressed us with their queer shapes and active hunting techniques. We passed one of their massive nests coming and going to camp. One day, one individual only, we found a lovely Purple Heron. Hadada Ibis uttered their strange nasal calls. Raptors were varied, we found Brown Snake Eagles with their rounded faces, Andrea spotted a Gabar Goshawk on the hunt, and we found Dickenson's Kestrel, a pair at close range, a nice surprise. Peg spotted a species unusual for the area, two Common Ringed Plover, we were able to photograph. We all admired Three-banded Plover up in the more terrestrial areas, seen on several occasions.

Our focus here was often on mammals; we'd spy a group and stop to observe. Along with this attention came sightings like Crimson-breasted Gonolek (Shrike), a shock each time you saw them, so bright. Prinias, drongos, and three species of babblers: Harlaub's, Southern Pied, and Arrow-marked. A convergence of mammal and birdwatching took place each time we found oxpeckers, both Red-billed and Yellow-billed, riding Giraffe or Hippo or Zebra. Kori Bustards, huge birds that moved with intention, were seen on two of our days. Ostrich strutted purposefully.

Vervet Monkeys were comical and common. We were lucky near Horseshoe Bend to spy rare Roan Antelope, also seen near here were the elegant Sable Antelope. Red Lechwe were common in wetland areas, and on drier ground, in herds of 20 – 30, we found Beth's



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favorite, Bearded Gnu, or Wildebeest.



One day, Pam was very excited that Mr. Fish spied a Rock Monitor Lizard, a huge one; in time we all got to view. Leopard Tortoise was another herpetological find. There were beautiful purple-pink blossomed Rain trees in bloom. Pendulous sausage trees. Mopane across the woodland, sycamore figs on rugged rock outcrops.

We went out early, staying out for full mornings, with a tea and coffee break at some point along the way. Often tea was served by a pond where we could

birdwatch and marvel at Nile Crocodiles. The ginger cookies were divine.



We came back for lunch, which would hit quickly (hot lunch in a hot climate...) and we'd be out like lights. The tents were hot, so not a few times we napped in the shade in our chairs. Though post-lunch was also the most popular shower time, it did not deter from the ritual of napping. One day, Beth uttered her second very loud OUCH as the shower-bucket attachment came loose and landed on her scalp. She did not bust out and run about naked, but the drama emerged vocally from our makeshift shower structure just the same. Peg often used this time for note taking, hard to keep up with the sightings that appeared at a frenzied pace!



The afternoon game drives were shorter but no less special. The guides knew productive routes and where elephants or other animals would congregate. We had to keep our eyes on the lionesses, and to search for still-elusive Leopard and Wild Dog. Sometimes we waited by waterholes, visited by Double-banded and Burchell's Sandgrouse. We watched a Saddle-billed Stork devour a big fish, and a Hammerkop down a large frog.





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Small owls, African Barred and Southern White-faced, called within range of our camp each night. Ewan got almost no sleep one night when a huge, likely musth bull chose to park for the night right next to his tent, but almost touching the canvas, it rested its giant head on the Acacia tree that leaned over the tent. Between the stomach gurgles and foot stomps and changes of position, this intimate bed partner was a bit too much. Just where was Sallie!?



Sallie did come in the next night on a scheduled resupply, her husband so happy to switch the elephant out for his partner that his contented snoring then kept us alert through the night. Sallie brought in fresh foods, news of the outside world, and her very special smile. Sallie embodies the women of Africa who live so readily with challenges of all kinds, and take them on like refreshing winds on a hot summer day. She drives the dirt two-tracks solo, dodging animals and the unknown, returning straight away to home and tasks of life and



business the next day.

Evenings found us around the campfire, talking a lot about animals and Africa, and at this time, still two months before the USA elections all too often we turned to politics. Not a soul thought the election of Donald Trump was possible, but already his energy infused our experience. It would not let up through and beyond the election. We had to wash it away to return to the freshness of Africa and our precious time on safari.



### **Thurs., Sept. 8**

#### **Moving Day, Our Route: A Big Loop Past Third Bridge to Khwai**

Our six-night mobile safari was split between two camps. We packed up and left the guys to disassemble tents and carry our gear north to the lush corridor of the River Khwai. To keep a light footprint here, we camped away from the river itself, but it was in range for all of our



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outings.

But first, to get there, we had a spectacular field day, taking in much of the park, passing through the territory of a pack of Wild Dogs we'd very much hoped to see. We went to see their den site, watched a pack of Spotted Hyena feeding on what was probably one of their kills, but had no luck in finding them. The camp crew we'd find out at dusk, found them readily, on the shorter main road between camps!



Still this routing was wonderful, though a lot of dusty, bumpy road, it was full of great photo opportunities, and full of varied terrain. We found a kill site, by now several days old, with huge Lappet-faced Vultures and full-bellied hyenas. At one sunny and sandy patch, we found Bearded Gnu lounging as if at the beach, all lying down. A remarkable find by Ewan was a Small (Common) Buttonquail. He was able to maneuver the vehicle around so all got a look as it scurried across a sandy set of pathways, wow! In contrast, in the same area, a pair of Ostrich which were feeding, courting, and preening seemed enormous. At the afternoon rest break we sought out some shade, and spooked up a big Verreaux's Eagle Owl. We started to see more vehicles since Khwai is a popular area, and there are new lodges nearby. At a rest stop when we reached the Khwai River Gate, Mr. Fish called out a pair of African Harrier Hawk circling high above. We took a little walk in the designated site, finding some beautiful songbirds at the edge of the grass, Golden-breasted Buntings, Southern Cordonblue, Green-winged Pytilla, and Red-billed Firefinch. There were picnic tables here, toilet facilities, and at the gate



itself, a wonderful collection of baskets made by local people. Several of us chose some of different sizes, our collection ever-growing.

The river corridor was lush and green. We spied big groups of Common Waterbuck. Some were frisky and romping. African Black Orioles serenaded us from tall trees.

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Traveling back out through the Mopane, we found a Black-crowned Tchagra, a Black-chested Prinia, and a Southern Black Tit in a little flock. Near the airstrip, we spent time with a Little Sparrowhawk, getting very good views. We drove past big groups of African Buffalo, calves now large but still playful. Tsessebe stood on mounds, surveying the open areas of the landscape, their hides looked polished in the sun.



Crowned Plover stood guard over small chicks, at times daring our vehicle to pass. We passed a Black-backed Jackal on a mission, and kept going on ours, pulling into camp towards the end of the day.

This camp was in the Mopane, and being dry, it felt like fall with blowing leaves. We took a very quick drive out before sunset, and found a green and well-watered river corridor nearby. The Elephants were not at an expected spot, but we enjoyed the birds and took sunset photos.

The Khwai is a bigger river, slowly flowing and filling a wide reed-bed channel. There were numerous species of waterfowl, and we saw them every day from this point. Slaty Egrets, lovely in form, stood like pieces of artwork, so delicate and pretty. Long-toed Plovers were nesting, they made a racket flying off each time we drove by. Wattled Plover and the small Kittlitz's Plover were both found. With big eyes, the Water Thick-knees were regularly found as we scanned. Twenty at a time we spied Squacco Herons, fishing.



We gathered around the campfire with cocktails ahead of dinner. The guys made a stew, big loaves of homemade bread, a salad, and dessert. After a long day traversing much of the park, we found the comfort of our cots pretty welcoming and turned to bed.





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### Fri., Sept. 9 & Sat., Sept. 10 The River Khwai

Ewan and Mr. Fish knew there were Leopard active in the area, and each morning we passed along the river corridor, hoping for a great view. We finally found one across the river at quite a distance, it was resting very close to a tree, and we watched an Impala get closer and closer. Never close enough, the cat did not move, except eventually to take in better shade on the other side of the tree.



We explored here at length, often passing a lush bend of the river. We found a Wattled Crane again and again in the same spot, and one morning realized it had a nest; it was lying prone, incubating a large egg. The mate stood by regally. Hippos were everywhere, at times piled like logs at a landing, vocal, splashing, moving through great mats of vegetation. African Jacana often fed around them, and they and several heron species used the great beasts as resting spots and lookout stands. Black Crake were fairly



numerous. Peg was trying to eBird numbers, 400 of this, 600 of that, numbers were staggering. We enjoyed watching African Spoonbill feed by moving their beaks side to side. There were Sacred Ibis, Glossy Ibis, and so many Egyptian Geese. Red Lechwe were abundant here. We found only one with a very small baby, a young mother out of sequence with the others, a vulnerable calf we kept an eye on. Nile Crocodiles had an adult Lechwe down in another pond, it was sort of a sick mass of flesh by the time we got there, photos you take but really don't want to look at much once revealed. A more secretive species we still saw in fair number and daily was the Rufous-bellied Heron. Our high count was six on one outing, the one by the river's bend.

African Fish Eagle were common here along the waterway. Long-tailed Cormorants flew up and down the river with regularity. We followed the river to some remote areas where we found both Sable and Roan Antelope, and more Lions. We spotted a Side-striped Jackal with a distended belly, either pregnant or feeding young, it did not want to leave a possible den area that was a tunnel in reeds. We watched awhile to figure what was going on, then Tere urged us to give way for her to return as she seemed agitated. From this back side of the marsh we could survey, counting at times 7 or 8 massive Goliath Herons in our view. Little, Intermediate, and Great Egrets were numerous. For birders of the group this was a place of shorebirds, countless numbers of Ruff, and then sandpipers: Green, Marsh, and Wood, Little Stint, large Common Greenshank, and several plovers. We watched more Collared Pratincole fly.

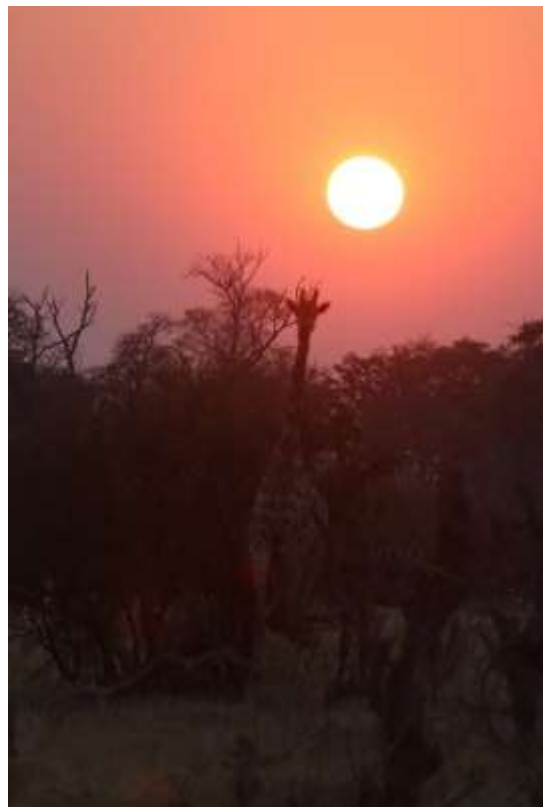


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There were clouds of starlings, numbers too large to count: Meeve's, Greater Blue-eared, and Cape the most common. Red-billed Hornbills were also numerous, along with Helmeted Guinifowl and the francolins. We all enjoyed trying to photograph Lilac-breasted Rollers, electric-colored and common, Ewan taunted us by saying, "another damn roller..." Mr. Fish saw to it that our birders got a good look at both Bennet's and Bearded Woodpeckers. Zebra were plentiful and one afternoon we got to park and watch them in particularly good light. We stopped often for Warthogs, just too cute and too entertaining. In all we'd see five species of mongoose.

One afternoon, we went to a place of Elephants, admiring African Openbill, a type of stork, along the way. The Elephants come to drink water at dusk, and we saw them lining the river on the far side. One young one, perhaps a three-year old, shows signs of a recent lion attack. It had fresh wounds, and no tail, but it had survived. The cool water must have felt good as it stayed mostly submerged. And very close to its comrades. As Elephants were coming down on our side of the river channel, we were engrossed watching Laughing Doves along the shore in lovely light when a loud rumble announced a male Elephant approaching, WAY closer than we'd like. It was on Andrea's side of the vehicle and she was alarmed. Mr. Fish, whose hand was never away from the key, started the engine to rumble back, moving off quietly, giving way, as another elephant would do. The big male went around us to the water. We then had Elephants all around with surround-sound activity. Some calves were just tiny, and Beth and Tere were cooing at the site of them. Pam took videos wearing a big smile. The sunset started to paint the sky, and we were all immersed in its beauty, and the larger than life Elephants, as darkness finally pushed us back to Camp. We saw a pair of Honey Badgers going in, a great find! We would then end up seeing them on



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several days, likely a den in the area, close to our camp.

Ewan always had a plan for us at sunset, positioning us for certain wildlife viewing, as dusk brought out the painted skies. We had sunset with Elephants, sunset with Hippos, sunset with Giraffe. Often, we saw clouds of finch-like Red-billed Quelea going to roost by the thousands. As this was prime photo time with amazing light, Masson Safaris saved having sundowners for when we'd get back to camp. We liked that style, keeping our focus on wildlife and still having time for libations in the comfort of our camp chairs. Camp amenities were simple but nice and we looked forward to them!

However, six nights was our camping portion of the journey, fully enjoyed, but towards the end most of the group had reached their limit. Canvas tents can only keep one mildly comfortable in the heat and the dust, and our visions turned to promised creature comforts in profusion ahead, at a permanent and luxurious camp, named Pom Pom.



### **Sun., Sept. 11 Khwai to Pom Pom**

On her first trip to Botswana, Peg had not experienced a deep-water camp, so on Sallie Masson's recommendation we tried out Pom Pom, finding it perfect in size and extraordinary in experience. And perfect for our trip flow, they picked us up at the Khwai airstrip, a dirt strip in the middle of nowhere. Bud clowned around resting on the one piece of equipment there as if it were a first-class airport wait lounge. Black-backed Puffbacks and Southern Tit were active in a small mixed flock in the Mopane at the airstrip edge. We said our good-byes to Ewan and Mr. Fish, thanking them for their keen eyes, safe driving, wildlife sixth sense, patience, and good humor. Soon we heard engines overhead.

The planes hit the dirt and roared on in. We stuffed ourselves and our luggage into two small planes, and



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soon were aloft over the Okavango Delta. My, it was dry! The landscape from high above seemed absolutely charred, so we were relieved to start to see large pools framed by palm trees. We saw a few lines of Elephants but surprisingly little wildlife from the air. We passed over Chief's Island, then smaller islands, braided channels of the Okavango below. Finally, they got a sighting on one, and down we went. The guides from Pom Pom awaited us in large open-air vehicles, and off we went to camp.

The camp was lovely, lavish, welcoming. Before we knew it, spry women were walking away with our suitcases balanced on their heads, our tents ordered in a line around a stunning lagoon. The central bar and lounge area also faced the lagoon, in which several Elephants were munching away and Pygmy Geese were numerous. We had time to get settled and returned for lunch in their gracious high-ceiling dining area. Striped Kingfisher was present and vocal along the lagoon shore.

African baskets and textiles gave a warm feeling to the central great room, and our tents were huge, multi-roomed, with antique furniture in the entryways. We had large comfy beds, and BIG bathrooms with tub and shower. Best yet after a week of camping, free laundry! From our porches under spreading fig trees we could watch the African Pygmy Geese delicately feed on lily tubers. African Green-Pigeons were in the fig trees feeding on fruit, so beautiful! Water Monitor lizards hunted along the shore, and various herons and egrets kept our binoculars busy. Naughty baboons played on the tent roofs like kids at a water slide.

For our first afternoon we elected a drive, out by safari vehicle with guides Ram and BT, to see if we could find a Leopard or other species known to be in the area. We had great looks at African Hoopoe as we left camp. We were taken to a Spotted Hyena den, where two tiny cubs had come out for air. No sign of the adults, we watched the cubs chew on sticks, entwine themselves in play, and sleep. They looked like little bears. Our guides were keen on bird song, and we got good looks at a colorful array of species. At one point, Ram stopped and





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got out to pick up a sausage tree fruit. They were dense and heavy, would knock you out cold if shed from the tree! We explored quite an area, ending up on a hillside where they pulled out tables, tablecloths, and served us sundowners. We were merry with our new digs, new landscape, and fun.

The drive was designed to keep us out for sunset, and do some night-viewing en route back to Camp. Our first eye shine was that of a cat, a small Wild Cat, the species that gave rise to our domestic cats, not much larger than one, but wild. We heard and saw Mozambique and Square-tailed Nightjars, the first of which Bud got some good photos.

Back at Camp, Peter's Epulet Fruit Bats fed around the lights as we enjoyed dinner and cocktails. There was a delicious minted pea soup, and lightly-fried fresh Bream, yum! We sat around the fire with the managers, Cliff and Linda, fascinated by their stories and happy to share the time.



### **Mon., Sept. 12**

#### **Pom Pom Camp / Deep Water Boat Rides on the Okavango**

This morning was memorable, the chance to be out two to a small boat, locally known as the mokoro, gliding through the lilies and reeds. We found ourselves surrounded by Meyer's Parrots at close range, so intent were they on feeding on the tender shoots. African Jacana were plentiful. When they realized we loved the birds, our paddlers got intent on finding us Lesser Jacana and with some effort we did. They were shy, and liked the deeper water among a certain type of reed. We would paddle up and they would flush, so while we did not get great photos, we had wonderful views.



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One boat spotted a beautiful herp, a Painted Reed Frog, which we all got to see. Peg and Andrea took a side channel under a small bridge, and got to see the first Malachite Kingfisher. Brilliant yellow Southern Masked Weavers were building their nest. We got to see Wattled Cranes up close and personal. And it was wonderful to be surrounded by the beauty of water lilies, and a bonus, water gentian.

We paddled over to an island to stretch our legs and enjoy coffee and tea. Getting in and out of the boats caused us laughter with not too graceful exits and entries. On the island, our guide spotted a Blacksmith Plover nest with tan and black speckled eggs. A group of Gray Go-Away-Birds came into the trees making a racket. The morning passed quickly. En route back we paddled past African Buffalo submerged to their bellies, feeding. In the distance, a huge bull Elephant was bathing, making great sounds of contentment as he turned the shower on with his trunk.

Back at camp we all took a rest after lunch, and Beth and Ed had an Elephant REALLY close to their porch they watched intimately bathing and feeding. One of the elephants was starting to get very bold around Camp, coming past the dining area, and just about knocking out the campfire ring, it plunged back into the water. At night, after dinner, we were required to get a ride back to the farther tents so not to disturb them by surprise, on foot. Delicate Bushbuck were also around our tents, quietly feeding and probably happy to avoid the threat of predation so close to human activity.

In the afternoon, we went out by speed boat. At first, they glided through the channels quietly, we got stunning views of multiple Malachite Kingfisher, quickly claiming the “favorite bird” position on many of our lists. Yellow-billed Storks were in prime breeding plumage, we got close to African Openbill and Saddle-billed Storks. Then the young drivers wanted to rip, and off we went at high speed, passing an Elephant who in moments would otherwise block



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the way, past a herd of over 100 or so African Buffalos, back to a quiet cove where light reflections



played on the water; a mirage of palms, our boats, passing waterfowl. We had very good looks at a Banded Snake Eagle. African Fish Eagle, several pair, were active over the lagoon.

We returned in time to watch sunset with sundowners from our small beach. A Pied Kingfisher had a favorite perch, and we got photos of it framed by the setting sun.

This evening the staff put on a dance and songfest that was wonderful. They arrived at the end of dinner, the same crew that carried our bags, served our tables, transformed in their performance roles. Oh, to be so fit! We had just two nights here, so this was a lovely send-off. Tomorrow, off to Chobe National Park by plane.



### Tues., Sept. 13

#### **Morning Safari / Flight to Chobe / Sunset Cruise on The Chobe River**

We had time this morning for an early safari, and as we'd seen so much, we focused on two targets. One was Pel's Fishing Owl, normally pretty easy to see here, but today not cooperative, though we checked several regular perches. The other was Leopard and we had success, marvelous views of a sleeping beauty, up in a tree near a kill, full bellied with no need to move. We could not linger long due to the need to catch our flights, but en route back also got to admire resting Reedbuck, Red Lechwe, and Giraffe.



We had the drill down for the airstrip and our small planes. This was a longer flight, a couple of hours, over to Kasane, a larger airport than Maun's, and our time along the very large Chobe River, a wildlife paradise and the border of Botswana and Namibia.

We had a couple of large suitcases shipped over from Maun, so once reunited with these we headed over to our lodge. At first all the business seemed too much, here was a town, and traffic, and big lodges, more of a resort feel. Yet at the same time we eyed the pool, the bar, the big comfy rooms with AC, this just might do! We soon found that many species were active in the dry brush around the upper lodge. Trina spied Collared Palm Chats, a dapper species that liked the edge of the pool. Peg found a



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mixed flock and went to grab the others, the most stunning find among them being an Orange-breasted Bush Shrike, wow.

This afternoon we boarded a big party boat, probably 50 or more of us, and went down river to watch wildlife and the sunset. The activity was stunning! There were teeming masses of waterfowl, including Yellow-billed Storks, herons, ibises, and a species new to us, Black Heron, seen mantling its wings over areas it was fishing. There were multiple, huge Goliath Herons. A prominent tree snag held layers of birds, African Darters, Long-tailed Cormorants, and at the top, a pair of regal African Fish Eagles. The Captain rammed the boat into the reeds to hold it, parking alongside feeding Elephants. The groups were huge, and had many small babies. There were many boats of varied size, all jockeying for position and yet the wildlife was acclimated and seemed not bothered at all. From the quiet of our time in the wild this was



quite a transition. Time to pop a beer and go with the flow! The large boat could make good time, and because of this we were able to see a new antelope species, the Puku. They are not common here, but our driver knew where to find them and took us there. We passed resting groups of Black Skimmer, watched Gray-hooded Gull, Wire-tailed Swallow, and Whiskered Tern in abundance.

We returned to our lodge; we were at the upper section where dinner was off the menu with quiet seating. Modern amenities teamed with African décor, stunning baskets and textiles once again. It was nice to have quiet to visit, wrap up our checklist and the day's sightings, and soon we were off to bed.



### **Wed., Sept. 14 Chobe River Boat Ride / Chobe National Park Safari**

In the morning, we went on an early vehicle safari into Chobe National Park. There were scores of vehicles leaving our lodge and others, heading into the park, but once inside we all seemed to fan out. The big news here was a buffalo kill, attracting many scavengers. We found scores of Maribou Stork, over a hundred White-headed Vultures and a group of five Spotted Hyena.

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After breakfast, we ventured out in private boats, two for our group, a joy as we got to explore beyond the river's main channel. We found African Swamp Hens, got super looks at Purple Heron and Hammerkop. We found a secretive Black Heron among the more common Slaty Egrets. Our driver knew where to look for Western Green Snake, a lovely creature out sunning itself in the reeds. We found a new kingfisher for the trip, the Brown-hooded, and got good views.



After lunch, Peg, Gingy, and Beth enjoyed some relaxation at the spa. This was in a tent down by the water's edge, so one could hear the sounds of songbirds as we got pedicures. A little pampering and fun!

In the late afternoon, we headed out for one more safari drive. We were all a bit weary, and almost skipped it, but thankfully did not. Our driver had a bead on a Leopard sighting, and as our other one was distant, we were keen to find one. Success! On a beautiful tree limb, covered with orange lichen, we found one resting. It stayed there some time, then slid off and sauntered away, looking back over its shoulder before heading into the bush. Yeah! This was an adult, an hour or so from then we found a young one just sitting alongside the road as light faded. Probably 4 – 6 months old, it was starting to be on its own and capable of hunting. A good Leopard day! We also saw Giraffe, a great active troop of Banded Mongoose, and more.

We ended the day at the bar overlooking the river, watching a steady stream of herons fly up and down, settling into roosts. We had dinner in the lower River lodge area tonight, a grand buffet with ample choices and a nice atmosphere. This was the end of our time in Botswana. What a journey!



### **Thurs., Sept. 16 Victoria Falls**

Ed and Beth, Bud and Gingy were heading on to the Seychelles, and due to flight schedules were not able to go with us to Victoria Falls. This last morning, they enjoyed another private boat trip, this time with a photographer, and one prize for them was a good sighting of Giant Kingfisher. The rest of us said good-bye, and after breakfast met our tour bus for a day trip over to Victoria Falls. To Peg's surprise, they changed the route from the Zambia side to Zimbabwe because of the low water flow. So, off to a new and unexpected country!



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The border crossing took time with so many people on the bus, but we saw some birds as we waited, the most notable being White-fronted Bee-eater and Pied Crow. The drive was about two hours; we made it there by late morning, and had much of the day to explore. A guide escorted us to the falls, walking along the rim and stopping at numerous viewpoints. It was absolutely breathtaking, even at this season's low water flow.



This location has a lot of history. There are historic hotels and a big market in a town, and a national park headquarters with exhibits, maps, and shops. It was teeming with visitors, so we stayed tight to our guide, who shared a good knowledge of plant species, as well as the birds. We picked up new species in the lush forest that thrives only here at the rim of the falls, watered by constant spray, it's like a greenhouse and the walk feels as if you are in a tropical rainforest. We saw Red-winged Starlings below us, and snapped many photos of the falls, of ourselves by the falls. A lot to take in!



They had a lunch set up for us, which was lovely, but wanting to see more birds, Peg and Andrea walked back out to the rim. They were rewarded as they parked by a fruiting tree: the two most desired species came in to feed. First was Schalow's Turaco, stunning in its mix of colors, and then improbable Trumpeter Hornbills! Peg was so excited she ran and got Trina and Les, who also got a view. Pam and Tere were off at a fun market finding some treasures. About 3:00 PM they loaded us back up for the return drive, return border crossings, and back to our lodge at Kasane.

### **Fri., Sept. 16 Morning Birding /**

### **Departures from Kasane**

We had late-morning flights back to Johannesburg, then connections home. So, we wandered the grounds birding a bit, watching Long-billed Crombec and various songbirds. We hit the all too well stocked gift stores to stuff a few more things in our suitcases, then prepared to bid Africa good-bye.

It was hard to believe all we'd seen and experienced in just a few weeks' time! *Photos by Peg Abbott*