

October 2012 Dubai & Southern Africa
Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, Chiwa Wildlife Management Area & Lower Zambezi
& Mosi-o-Tunya National Parks Zambia, Victoria Falls & Zambezi National Parks
Zimbabwe, Chobe National Park Botswana

Last month I had the opportunity to return to Africa for my 27th visit to that fascinating Continent. This trip was business related; a travel industry “educational” tour to see new lodges and newly established air routes into South Central Africa via Dubai. I decided to arrive in Dubai the day before the rest of my group of fellow travel professionals specifically to spend an afternoon, evening and morning at the Al Maha Resort located within the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve. The Reserve was created in 1999 and is currently 225 sq kms but started as the 27 sq kms Al Maha Reserve. This part of the reserve is now managed by the Al Maha Resort. Al Maha was developed by the same South African team that created the Shamwari Private Game Reserve in the East Cape and therefore has some sound wildlife management policies. What attracted me to Al Maha was the chance to see free ranging Arabian oryx. Al Maha was originally a camel farm and in 1999 domestic animals were removed and 117 captive born Arabian oryx, some Arabian gazelles (*Gazella gazelle cora*) were introduced and 6,000 indigenous trees and shrubs were planted. Initially supplementary feed was provided for the oryx and Arabian gazelles to allow the reserve’s natural vegetation to recover from years of livestock grazing. By 2008 there were 270 free-ranging oryx and both Arabian and sand gazelles (*Gazella subgutturosa marica*) with all three species breeding and supplemental feeding for the oryx being phased out. Some of the oryx and many of the gazelles came from the Emir of Dubai’s personal menagerie. Included with these gazelles were 3 Thomson gazelles which some of the resorts rangers think may now be interbreeding with the Reserve’s Arabian gazelles.

I arrived in Dubai on the morning of October 08 on an Emirates Airlines flight directly from New York’s JFK Airport. I managed to get a complementary business upgrade on all my Emirates flights so that may have influenced my impression that the Airline is the most spectacular I have ever flown. When you fly Emirates Airlines Business Class you also get a special pass that helps you clear Dubai immigration quickly. In the Arrivals Hall I met my contacts, was taken to my car and driver and shortly I was on my way to Al Maha. The drive took about an hour from the Airport on excellent roads. Once outside the City one passes by large camel breeding farms which in themselves could make an interesting day excursion. Like the Airline, the Resort is equally spectacular but pricy; however one can arrange daytrips from Dubai directly with Al Maha. I decided to splurge and pay for the cost of one night. The first wildlife I saw when I entered the reserve were several male Arabian gazelles. This species is also common on the Resort grounds and you can approach them easily. Interesting birds that I saw during my stay included Southern grey shrike, white-eared bulbul, European bee eater, purple sunbird & grey francolin. Houbara bustards are also said to be found within the Reserve. For each full night at the Resort you have the choice of two complementary activities which include a desert safari on the nearby sand dunes, camel trekking, horse riding, falconry, archery. I picked the most nature oriented activities: an afternoon wildlife drive and a morning nature walk. I was the only one on the drive with my ranger who was a South African trained Zimbabwean who gave a brief review of desert ecology, the history of the Reserve and the wildlife found there and showed me the oryx and both species of gazelles, including a small group of sand gazelles and the very interesting Leptien’s spiny-tailed lizard. He also took me to the captive species holding

facility which had a breeding herd of scimitar oryx and showed me the male of a breeding pair of Ruppells fox. This was the first time I had seen this species in person and I was surprised how similar they are to fennec fox, being a sort of a long legged version of the smaller species. Afterwards I returned to the Resort and it's bar balcony and while having a few glasses of a nice South African red watched the sun set behind the Omani Mountains while small groups of Arabian oryx visit the adjacent water hole, overall a very idyllic experience. While walking to my room after sunset to get ready for dinner I tried to pass by a male oryx who made a slow motion bluff charge towards me. Having been charged more than a few times by male antelopes in my Zoo career, on my return I left the path and made sure I had a good sized bush between me and the annoyed oryx before walking past him again.

The October 09 morning walk was led by a South African trained Swiss ranger. She showed me numerous animal tracks including desert red fox, lesser jerabo, gerbil (both Cheeseman's & Baluchistan species are listed), horned viper and sand boa. We also found the desiccated body of an adult Arabian oryx that had died of old age or perhaps a poisonous snake bite. Based on my 24 + years working in the Zoo field finding this animal dead of a natural cause is an indication to me that Al Maha's oryx population is truly free-ranging. In a captive situation this animal would have had a field necropsy so its exact cause of death could be determined. I also asked the ranger if any Resort guests had ever been gored by an oryx and I told her about my experience the night before. She said that no one had ever been gored but guest have hurt themselves running from the bluff charges into trees, bushes or falling on the path. When asked she also mentioned that the resort stopped doing night drives a few years ago since the noise of the vehicles scared away small mammals and very few if any wildlife was seen as a result. That being said she mentioned that she sees Arabian hare with some frequency driving out of the reserve late at night and had also seen Gordon's wildcat once. So there does seem to some potential for night viewing around the lodge grounds, I had just a small Resort supplied flashlight which did not prove very useful on my walks outside at night around my room. These walks did not turn up any wildlife although on my last morning there were fresh fox tracks in front of my plunge pool. I left the Al Maha at noon and returned to Dubai to spend the night before continuing on to Zambia the next morning. Besides Al Maha, Dubai has a couple of other interesting natural attractions. The Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary has resident greater flamingos as well as other birds and dolphin and dugong viewing tours can also be arranged on the coast.

Chiwa Wildlife Management Area & Lower Zambezi National Park

In the early morning October 10 we arrived at the Dubai Airport in plenty of time to board our direct Emirates direct flight to Lusaka. The airport, however was shrouded in fog which delayed our departure for two hours. When we finally arrived at the Lusaka Airport we quickly passed through Zambian immigration formalities which included paying \$80.00 USD for a multiple entry Zambian visa and changing enough USD into Kwacha, Zambia's currency that would be needed to pay a recently implemented airport tax for local flights. This came to about \$5.00 USD per flight resulting in 26,250.00 Kwacha. We then boarded a small regional airline – Royal Air and flew to the Royal Zambezi Lodge airstrip arriving near dusk. Our drive to the Lodge turned up our first Zambian mammal, a slender mongoose. The Lodge is located along the Zambezi River within the Chiwa Wildlife Management Area. Our delayed departure from Dubai

prevented us from taking the sunset cruise planned for us dinner. During dinner we heard the grunting of the local hippos and by flashlight I saw some of them grazing close to my chalet. The hippos and other local wildlife necessitates guests being escorted from their rooms after dusk and before dawn. During dinner that evening a large male elephant, well known to the Lodge's staff, walked into the grounds and entered the dining area for a brief time. During his visit he also leaned against a stockade fence which he knocked over. On my return to my room a quick look with a flashlight outside turned up a few hippos and a small group of common waterbuck. The next morning I was up at dawn and heard spotted hyena calling from the Zimbabwe side of the River. The Royal Zambezi Lodge offers a range of activities including a wildlife cruise in small boats, canoe safaris, game drives – both day & night, armed ranger escorted wildlife walks and fishing excursions with catch & release tiger fishing as the main target. The Lodge has a strong community component with much of the staff being from the area and therefore village visits are easily arranged.

Our first morning activity was a boat ride down the River until we reached the border of the Lower Zambezi National Park. There our lodge vehicle met us for a game drive. Before we set off we were warned that one needs to keep one's hands inside the boat at all times. This was no "lets scare the travel agents joke"; this area of the Zambezi has a large and aggressive Nile crocodile population. In a recent survey of 142 local households in the Chiawa Management Area 22 had a family member attacked by crocs with over half of these attacks resulting in fatalities. Going downriver we saw family groups of elephants, passed pods of hippos, a troop of chacma baboons and a few male African buffalo as well as the occasional crocodile and always in view some interesting birdlife. My first impression of this area of Africa, that it was like the Amazon with elephants and hippos! We eventually caught up with our vehicles and started our drive. We saw small family groups of elephants and occasional lone male, baboons, a lone female bush buck, troops of impala, small groups of vervet monkeys, the occasional warthogs and a few greater kudu females and young males. We also saw another slender mongoose which turned out to be the only carnivore species we saw during our Zambia stay. The most interesting thing I saw on this drive was a large serrated shell terrapin some distance from any obvious source of water. It could have been ready to lay eggs or just slowly making its way from one waterhole to another.

In the afternoon we had a canoe trip down a small tributary of the main River. This is the first time I had canoed around large animals. We were given clear instructions on how to avoid getting close to hippos, many of which were either young or old males kicked out of their social groups and therefore potentially short tempered and aggressive. How does one do this? The hippos prefer the deeper pools in the channels so when you see a hippo ahead one steers to the opposite shallow side. Canoeing is a very quiet way to get close to birds and other wildlife on shore. The big bull buffalos we passed were not quite sure what to make of us and watched us intently but made no aggressive moves towards us. After an hour we stopped for sundowners before heading back up river. That evening we had an outdoor buffet style brai on an island downriver from our lodge. During this we needed an armed Zambia ranger patrol to keep an eye on 4 large bull elephants who were sharing the same island as us. As we feasted on our side of the island the elephants did likewise, feasting on grass on their side. We had our brai with other lodge guests who showed us cell phone photos of a pride of lions that they had seen just before dinner, a short distance from the Royal Zambezi. The next morning we set out looking for the

same lions on a morning drive. Although we saw tracks and passed some very nervous kudu, impala and a good sized herd of buffalo the lions eluded us. The buffalo in particular were skittish and although the lions must have been close by, the thick bush prevented us from seeing just where they were. This habitat must have been good for crested guineafowl since we saw several small flocks here. Other wildlife we saw were several male and female bushbucks, baboons, vervets, a few elephants and again another slender mongoose.

Zambezi and Victoria Falls National Parks

On October 12 after the drive and breakfast we were driven to the airstrip where we boarded a Royal Air charter flight back to Lusaka. After paying our Zambia air tax we connected with a regional airline - Proflight to Livingstone Zambia. Upon arrival we were met and transferred by road to the Victoria Falls Bridge. There we cleared Zambian immigration formalities easily and drove to the Zimbabwe side. There we cleared Zim immigration formalities less easily and went on our way to the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge. We would overnight here for two nights at the Lodge's newly upgraded Safari Club. The Lodge & Club both border Zambezi National Park. It was very dry and hot this past October in this region of Africa and water sources away from the Zambezi River were scarce for wildlife. As a result the large waterhole located close to the Lodge attracted herds of elephants, African buffalo and impala each evening of our stay. Other wildlife on the Lodge grounds included bush buck, warthogs and one lone banded mongoose. The Lodge has a daily vulture feeding which attracted numerous hooded and white-backed vultures, some marabou storks and a few yellow-billed kites trying to steal a meal in flight from the aforementioned other bird species. Our first evening we had a sunset cruise (aka the "Booze Cruise" above the Falls) on the Zambezi River. While trying to avoid camera happy Japanese fellow passengers rushing from one side of the boat to the other, we saw several pods of hippos and a few elephants and bushbucks on shore. Interesting birds seen included African skimmers and spoonbills. The next morning we had a guided walk in the Victoria Falls National Park. We searched for the Livingstone lourie with no luck and although others saw bushbuck we did not. Although the Zambezi's October water level does not allow one to see the potential full flow of the Falls, the amount of water going over the Zim side is still impressive. So is the dry (this time of year) Zambian side with its long, narrow and deep gorge, a very impressive bit of geology. Almost equally impressive was watching other visitors risk their lives walking along the edge of the Falls on the Zambia side and seeing others sitting on the very edge of Devil's Pool risking a fatal fall of hundreds of feet to the rocks below.

Chobe National Park

On October 14 we drove through Zambezi National Park and the Matetsi Safari Area en-route to the Zim/Botswana border post near Kazungula. Our Zimbabwe colleague mentioned that wildlife including elephant, sable antelopes and the occasional pack of African wild dogs can be seen along the road side but all we saw was a troop of baboons. Compared to the Victoria Falls entry point getting out of Zimbabwe here went quickly, however there was a long line of travelers trying to get into Zim from Botswana. We were told these types of immigration processing delays at this post are not unusual and something to keep in mind if one has a tight flight connection out of the Vic Falls Airport. Clearing Botswana immigration was a snap and we were off to Kasane. I had last been in this area in 2005 and if anything the town is even more

developed than 7 years ago. Kasane now has one of the few traffic lights in all of northern Botswana. This rather useless light is supposed to provide a clear path on to the road for the local fire company in case of fire. However all other traffic along this major road now has to stop numerous times during the day with no sign of fire or a fire engine. This traffic light is one of those oddities that seems to defy all logic that one often finds in Africa. Before entering Chobe our group did a brief walk through the Mowana Safari Lodge. The only reason I mention this is that I was told some years ago that grounds of the lodges along the Chobe River are the best places to look for Sharpe's grysbok in Botswana. When I asked the Mowana manager about this he said he had never even heard of the animal until I showed him a picture of a grysbok in my "Field Guide to the Mammals of Southern Africa". He recognized it as the small antelope that he sees in the garden around his living quarters early each morning.

We then entered Chobe National Park at the Kasane Gate. Before checking into Botswana National Parks you now need to have your passport in hand. I am not sure how new this policy is but you can be turned away if you don't have it in hand and we were told photocopies will not suffice. Our group had to produce our passports each of the four times we entered the Park. We drove for about two hours on a newly paved road and kept within the speed limit of 30 km. per hour unlike many other vehicles that went past us at much higher rates of speed. I wondered how many animals become road kill in this part of Park. Driving slowly does allow some time for wildlife viewing. We saw a male sable antelope, and a plains zebra cross the road in front of us, 2 adult male kudu and a group of females, a few family groups of elephants with calves, warthogs, vervets and a small group of Southern ground hornbills. Our Lodge for the next two nights - Ngoma is located outside the Park in the Ngoma Forest Reserve. In the Reserve en-route to the lodge we saw a common duiker and kudu. The Lodge is located on a hill overlooking the Chobe River and the Caprivi Strip of Namibia and from the Lodge veranda I saw large herds of zebra, small groups of waterbuck as well as herds of Namibian buffalo - the local Botswana tour guides somewhat sarcastic name for the herds of domestic cattle that graze the Chobe flood plain. After lunch we had a late afternoon sunset game drive on which we saw giraffe, impala, waterbuck baboons & vervets, elephants, more large herds of zebra and "real" African buffalo. The concentration of zebras was impressive and the most I had seen outside Serengeti National Park. Interesting birds included a tawny eagle and numerous carmine bee-eaters. An advantage of being in this area of Chobe is that there are only two lodges - Ngoma & Muchenje both with limited capacity. The eastern region of the Park near Kasane has numerous larger accommodations such as Mowana, plus day trippers arriving from both the Zim & Zambian side of the Falls that can make this area rival at times the crowds of vehicles that one often sees in Kenya's more crowded conservation areas. In 2005 I spent two nights on a mobile safari in the Ngoma area and along with my two nights on this trip saw no other vehicles except for Ngoma and Muchenje lodge vehicles.

Early next morning one of our group saw a large herd of a couple hundred buffalo leave the flood plain and head off into the bush followed by a lone spotted hyena. The plan for this day was to return to Kasane for a wildlife cruise along the Chobe River and then afterwards continue on a game drive back to the Lodge with a picnic lunch long the way. So we returned to Kasane on the same road as the previous day, again being frequently passed by speeding vehicles. As on the drive the day before a slower speed produced some wildlife including male sable, giraffe, common duiker and the first steenboks of this trip. My 2005 safari also had a wildlife cruise but

that was in November after the rains had started so although we saw a good diversity of wildlife, the numbers were low. Not on this cruise at the height of the dry season. Elephants were nearly everywhere including large family groups crossing the Chobe to feed on the flood plain islands in the River channel. The adults could walk across while the young calves had to swim. It was very noticeable that the adult elephants would surround a baby while crossing to make sure that the little ones did not get pushed downstream away from the herd and perhaps become prey for the numerous large crocodiles that are easily seen along the banks of the River and the shores of the islands. Other wildlife included hippos of course, large herds of buffalo that joined the elephants on the islands. Among them were waterbuck and red lechwe including groups of females of both species. We watched for about 10 minutes while a male waterbuck and male lechwe went at it horn to horn. The waterbuck was twice the size of the lechwe and he would push his smaller challenger backward like he was using him to plow a field. However the lechwe would not quit, he kept going after the waterbuck and the sound of the clash of horns was loud considering the distance. Eventually a large bull elephant walked towards the combatants who stopped to let the bull pass by. We continued upriver to see what else we could find and I have no idea if the fight continued. I asked our boat guide and our Ngoma ranger if they had ever witnessed an altercation between two different species like this and neither had. I could also find no record of it in my Este's Behavior Guide to African Mammals. However my home library copy of Communication and Expression in Hoofed Mammals by Fritz R. Walther confirmed my initial impressions of this seemingly unusual behavior. Both waterbuck and lechwe are in the same genus – Kobus and each have similar aggression postures and fighting styles and therefore clearly understand each other's body language. Walther's last chapter records aggression between males of different hoofed stock species in zoos or other captive wildlife facilities. During my Zoo career I saw this several times among different species which at times lead to fatal results for one or sometimes both of the combatants. Our cruise continued with herds of impala, warthog families and a troop of vervets & baboons being seen on the bank of the River and another mammal highlight was large group of banded mongoose foraging along the River side.

The cruise ended by noon and we returned to our starting dock and vehicle. Waiting there was troop of vervet monkeys, some of whom were missing a hand or foot. As I mentioned previously there are numerous lodges in this area of Chobe and knowing that vervets can be a pest I'm sure these were monkeys that got caught in traps and escaped losing a body part in the process. We then started an extended game drive in the Serondela region of Chobe detouring around the Chobe Game Lodge (the only lodge actually located within the Park) and followed the Chobe River sometimes on the adjacent flood plain, sometimes a bit further inland. Common mammals encountered were wart hogs, chacma baboons, vervet monkeys, family groups of elephants and one stone cold dead ele, African buffalo including 6 dead adults untouched by predators. Chobe has been prone to occasional outbreaks of anthrax which could have been the cause of this mortality as well as the dead elephant. We also saw giraffes, small groups of waterbuck, larger groups of impala, greater kudu including 3 large mature males, good numbers of zebra all species we had seen previously. But we also saw a small group of puku, this is the furthest south this species ranges, a lone female sable, a lone male tsessebe and a small group of ½ dozen roan. That was a treat for me since I had not seen this species in wild since 1989 in the Masai Mara. Roan are now extinct in that area of Kenya. Due to the excessive heat we knew that predators were going to be hard to find but our ranger spotted 3 adult female and 1 adolescent male lion

crouched down in the shade of a thick bush. One tree squirrel was the last new mammal for the drive and the birding highlight was a full grown marital we flushed as it sat on the flood plain. Near dusk we stopped for sundowners at a side of a rocky ridge hoping to see two young leopards that had been seen by everyone at our lodge but us. A nearby noisy troop of baboons most likely was the reason the leopards remained hidden. We did hear a nearby black-backed jackal but did not see it. That is the closest we came to a wild canid although as with the leopards everyone else staying at our lodge saw a pack of 7 African wild dogs. That was of interest to me since on my camping safari in Dec 05 we saw a pack of 4 just down the road from the Ngoma Gate. That sighting was during a light rain and the dogs were playing for several minutes. One would pick-up a stick and others would chase it until the stick dropped, then another dog would grab the stick and the game would continue. Suddenly this behavior stopped and the four dogs moved off into the bush in a hunting formation. An advantage of being in the Forest Reserve was being able to do a night drive. After dinner on our drive we added three new mammals to our trip list a Southern African porcupine, African civet and a honey badger who we saw in the Lodge rubbish bin.

On October 16 it was time to start the long way back to the USA. We took a brief morning walk before breakfast with an armed ranger concentrating on tracks and scat and seeing one curious male giraffe who was very interested in what we were doing. Going to breakfast I spotted a slender mongoose hunting close to the Lodge reception area. This may be the first African trip on which I had seen as many slender mongoose as lions! Our plan was to return through the Park to Kasane and cross into Zambia at Kazungula. Again on the Park road we saw a few small family groups of elephants, impala, some waterbuck, zebras and a lone territorial male sable. In Kasane we had to wait again at the only traffic light in northern Botswana and then drove up to the Kazungula Border Post. In 05 I had crossed from the Zambian side to Botswana, on this trip I would do the reverse. The Kazungula ferry is the only direct route from Botswana into Zambia and from Zambia to Bots. From what I have been told trucks carrying goods in either direction have less duty to pay using this access point versus traveling an hour downriver to cross at the Victoria Falls Bridge between Zimbabwe & Zambia. Therefore dozens of trucks line both sides of the ferry crossing, with usually one or two trucks at most fitting on the ferry for each trip. Due to the slow pace of this process some trucks and truck drivers sometimes wait weeks to get from one country to the other. Along with the trucks local folks use the ferry to take goods across the border so between them and the mass of huge vehicles I consider crossing at Kazungula truly an “authentic African experience” that has to be seen to be believed. Tourists on the other hand cross via a private small boat. So we cleared Botswana immigration, waited for our boat to bring a load of tourists from Zambia to Botswana, we then used the same boat to cross to Zambia, cleared Zambian immigration and drove to the Livingstone. Part of this route goes through Zambia’s Mosi-o-Tunya National Park and it was here that we saw our last wild mammal of the trip - a lone giraffe. Giraffes are not native to Zambia except for the endemic Thornicroft’s giraffe from the Luangwa Valley, so the giraffes found here are an introduced species. From Livingstone we flew on Proflight to Lusaka where some of us continued on to Dubai on Emirates Air. From Dubai I flew Emirates to JFK. In my opinion when an airline beats Singapore Air it is truly the best airline on the planet.