

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Looking at Animals

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Dear Peter,

For most Americans, the first thought given to Africa is probably about animals: lions and leopards and cheetahs, elephants and crocodiles, hippopotamuses and rhinoceroses, giraffes and zebras and grazing antelopes as far as the eye can see. Informed persons know that this conception of a continent full of wild beasts is mistaken, but perhaps only those who have traveled around Africa know how far off the mark this Hollywood image is. The only wild animals I saw during two years in West Africa were wart hogs, baboons and monkeys. The surprising scarcity of wild-life didn't fully strike me until I left and went to England. I took a train from London to Bournemouth on the southern coast and saw some deer while passing through the New Forest. On four long train rides in West Africa, the only animals I saw were goats, dogs and donkeys.

Population pressures have led to the invisibility of the game in West Africa. What wild animals remain live mostly in thinly populated areas—thick forest or harsh desert—so my path seldom crossed theirs. The well-watered plains and low density human populations of east and south Africa have made the wild animals here more numerous and accessible, but even in Zimbabwe one must go looking for the game. The rolling grasslands around Harare (formerly Salisbury—the name officially changed on Independence Day, April 18) are given over to farms and cattle ranches. The only wild animals the passing motorist usually sees are occasional grazing antelopes.

I had a rare bit of luck when I visited a national park in the mountainous eastern region of the country in February. Driving along a dirt road one misty morning, I encountered a leopard and followed it for about a hundred yards. Other than casting a few curious glances at the car, it seemed unperturbed, and I thought it might be a regular tourist sight, but friends later told me I was fortunate to get such a close and long look. Not only is the leopard a forest animal, it's also nocturnal.

This fortuitous encounter with such a beautiful and uncommon creature might have spoiled me. When I embarked this month on a trip to look for wild animals, glimpses were no longer good enough. I wanted my sightings to be, like our televised introductions to

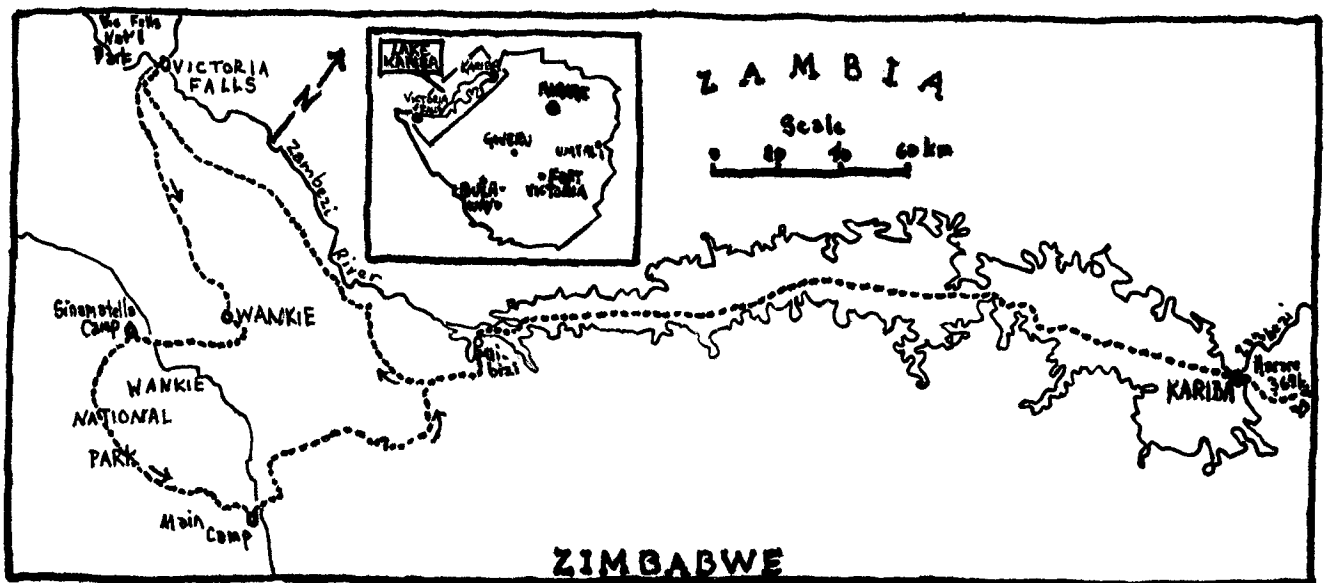
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Olympic athletes, "up-close and personal".

Game-viewing continued to seem almost too easy on the first day of my safari. A companion, Terri, and I were spending the night in a campground on the eastern shore of Lake Kariba. Setting up the tent, we heard an occasional sputtering rumble, as if someone across the lake was trying to start a chainsaw. Two hippopotamuses were in the water about 150 yards from shore. They were only dark humps in the glare of the setting sun, but I considered it an auspicious beginning. We left at sunrise, and as we started down the dirt road out of the campground, a lovely, deerlike creature stepped out of the woods in front of us. It was about three feet tall, with orangey brown fur streaked with irregular white lines down its sides and white spots around its belly and upper legs. This woodland antelope was a nyala, and it, too, is not a common sight. My luck seemed to be holding.

Lake Kariba resulted from the damming of the Zambezi River, and its formation led to the much-filmed Operation Noah in 1959, when thousands of animals were saved from the rising waters. The shores of the lake are still alive with game, but, seen through binoculars from the crowded deck of a ferry in the middle of the lake, the animals seem no more real than the subjects of some National Geographic documentary on television.

The ferry took us to the other end of the lake, and the following afternoon we arrived at a camp on the Zambezi a few miles above Victoria Falls. Almost as soon as we stopped the car engine, we heard another familiar motor noise. Across the swiftly flowing river were several rocklike bumps. It took several minutes to pick out the nostrils, eyes, ears and broad back of a hippopotamus. The rest of the animal was submerged, and though it remained within sight of the camp throughout our two-day stay, sometimes joined by a few companions, we never saw more than this top eighth of the animal.



We went for a drive along the river that afternoon and found such a wealth of game that I feared the rest of the trip would be anticlimatic. Almost as soon as we left camp, Terri saw a baboon with bright blue buttocks. A little further on we ran into a family of wart hogs. These little gray pigs are maligned by their name. They grow to less than half the size of a domesticated pig. Despite the fierce face of the male, with its broad snout, warts, whiskers and curved tusks, they are timid creatures. We were continually treated to the comic spectacle of father, mother and baby pigs retreating into the bush with dainty strides and tails stuck straight into the air, as if we had offended them. We also frequently disrupted baboon families, which reacted with similar disdain. The large, olive-brown males marched slowly off with a surly backward look, the mothers scampered away with babies clinging to their backs and the youngsters watched us with wide-eyed wonder until they screeched with sudden, causeless fright and fled.

We next saw a waterbuck, another animal we eventually came to disregard because it is so numerous, but which were much more stately than the baboons and wart hogs. The males that often watched impassively as we drove by were well over four feet in height at the shoulder and could weigh up to 450 pounds. Their horns sweep back from the skull, then forward in a crescent. The fur is chestnut brown and shaggier than on other antelopes, as if the waterbuck was made for a colder climate. It has a thick mat of white hair on its chest and a prominent white ring around its hindquarters, like a target for hunters.

Still less than 10 minutes into our drive, I saw a few large gray humps out of the corner of my eye. We swung into a drive leading to a picnic spot overlooking the water and came upon a band of seven elephants wading through a marsh. They ranged in size from two well-developed tuskers to a runt. We got out of the car and walked to within about 40 yards before the largest elephant turned in our direction, ears flapping, and we decided the encounter was close enough.

After this, myriad waterbuck, baboon and wart hog could not sustain our interest, so we took a road leading away from the river to see if more interesting creatures were lurking deeper in the bush. The grass along the road was too high to give us a good view of the countryside, and I was regretting the decision to leave the well-trampled shores of the river when we spied two families of sable antelope resting beneath some trees about a hundred yards away. Many people consider these to be the most beautiful antelope. The male is black, with a pattern of black and white on the head that makes the face look like a carved mask. The horns curve back in a great arc and can reach lengths of over five feet. These splendid ornaments dwarf the sable's body so it appears to be smaller than the waterbuck, though actually it grows slightly larger.

Returning to the river road, we saw a group of prancing, golden creatures in a glade. Some were impala, famed for their leaping ability. The males have lyre-shaped horns, so one can easily imagine that they are African fairies who change to human shape at night and accompany their dance with music. I thought I also saw some gazelles with a black stripe along the side, which may have been springbuck. These frail animals once gathered in such prodigious numbers on the southern African plains that,

according to one authority,* when they migrated "they moved in such densely packed masses that any animal met on their way was either trampled or forced along with them". Man's steady encroachment on their land has effaced these springbuck herds except in the more deserted parts of Botswana and Namibia.

A group of large antelopes were browsing on what appeared to be a bare patch of ground, perhaps a salt lick, about 30 yards from the road. They should have been easy to identify, for their fawnish-gray fur was streaked with thin white lines, like the nyala, and they had a hump above the shoulder, but we couldn't decide if they were eland, the largest antelope, or kudu. These were all females or young males; we needed to see a mature male with horns to identify the species.

We were well-satisfied with our first game-hunting expedition as we drove back along the riverbank through rapidly lengthening shadows. The elephants and sable antelopes made impressive additions to our "species-seen" list. My strongest wish was to get a good look at a rhino. Terri said she wanted to see a giraffe. I had just finished telling her that we probably wouldn't see any until we moved farther south where the terrain was more suitable when we rounded a curve and almost bumped into a young giraffe, which loped off to join its mother in the bushes about 50 yards away. No sooner had we recovered from that thrill when we found ourselves confronting a herd of about 20 cape buffalo. These brutes, which may weigh up to 1,800 pounds, with thick horns that curve off the top of their skulls like handlebar mustaches, could have hammered our Datsun to pieces, but though they sniffed and snorted they edged away as we crept past them.

The next day we were joined at breakfast by a troop of black-faced monkeys in the trees over our heads, who stared more curiously down at us than we up at them.



Cape buffalo...with a snort and a shuffle, they let us pass.

I figured with an early start we'd catch more game along the river, but except for what were by now the four regulars—impala, waterbuck, baboon and wart hog—we saw nothing of interest. A swing away from the river produced even less game, but we did get a brief look at a pair of bat-eared foxes, puppyish creatures with Mouseketeer ears, another fortunate sighting of a usually nocturnal animal. The spectacular sight for the day was Victoria Falls, but we saw little more than tons of water falling off a cliff. The view was obscured by the thick mist that rose from the gorge and fell like a steady shower on the opposite side of the canyon. April is the last month of the rainy season, and even though the country suffered a severe drought this year, the tremendous volume of water cascading onto the rocks creates a cloud of spray that hides much of the falls' grandeur. The view of the falls that impressed me most had come the day before as we approached in our car. From a ridge about 10 miles away, the white cloud rising into the clear sky looks like the smoke of a fire on the plain below.

That evening we went out for another look at the animals, but too many other people had the same idea. Sunday was apparently the day to take the family to see the animals and consequently the animals made themselves scarce. Luckily, we were first in the line of traffic, so we saw game that got scared off before the other cars caught up. Especially skittish was a group of about a dozen zebra, which stayed well away from the road. We saw two more male sable antelope returning from the river about sunset, and a gray squirrel-like animal with dark stripes, which we discovered later was a banded mongoose.

The next morning we skipped breakfast to drive for three hours along the back roads away from the river, getting temporarily lost on an overgrown trail that obviously hadn't been traveled since before the rainy season, but the only vaguely interesting sight was a group of four or five of the tall, white-striped female antelope that we still couldn't identify.

We gave the chase up about nine and prepared for our journey to Wankie National Park, Zimbabwe's biggest game reserve, a 14,650-square-kilometer chunk of mostly uninhabited and inaccessible land in the northwestern corner of the country. We arrived at Sinamatella Camp in mid-afternoon and set up our tent on a ridge overlooking a wooded plain. We could see two giraffes feeding on the trees below, and though we had to loop around the other side of the ridge to reach them, we found them easily enough. We got to within 10 yards of one, a mother whose half-grown calf was some distance away. Later we passed a large male, which looked warily down at us over the top of an acacia tree a few yards from the road. We saw little else of interest except a brown, weaselish animal with a black tip to its tail, later identified as a slender mongoose.

At Mandavu Dam a gallery had been constructed overlooking the reservoir for tourists with large binoculars and larger camera lenses to watch the animals across the water, at least a quarter mile away. Though ill-equipped for this long-range viewing, we stopped here briefly. The usual array of grazing antelope was scattered across the grass. A goliath heron, the largest of Africa's water birds, stood motionless on the shore. At its feet, a black cormorant had spread its wings to dry. A log on the mud bank seemed on closer inspection to be a crocodile, and the rocks in the middle of the lake were actually three or four hippopotamuses. On a dead tree in the middle of the lake sat a fish eagle,

with a black body and white head much like our bald eagle. Finally, I realized the fallen tree on the shore that everyone in the gallery was staring at was a rhinoceros. Even from a distance of about half a mile, it looked huge, more enormous in a way than an elephant because it seemed to be all bulk, whereas one can distinguish the different parts of an elephant. The rhinoceros moved ponderously, with long pauses between steps, as if every movement required a minute reordering of the universe.

I had seen my rhino, but certainly not up close, nor personally, since I shared the sight with a half dozen strangers. Again I felt that I might as well have been viewing a movie screen. On the drive back, Terri and I reviewed our success so far and decided we now wanted to see a lion.

As we rounded the last curve toward camp, we caught a glimpse of a large antelope with magnificent spiraling horns. It had only half emerged from the woods and retreated without revealing its body, so while we believed it was the male of the striped antelope we had seen several times before, we weren't sure.

That night, a hyena howled close to camp. Early in the evening it was to the east, but when I awoke in the middle of the night it was quite near to the west, where a dog was barking. The hyena's cry has two parts, first the haunting moan of a ghost and then the yell of a banshee. I was glad we were not alone as we had been on the Zambezi.

At breakfast we had some more inquisitive guests—glossy starlings, whose feathers shone in deep greens and purples, and gray louries, ungainly birds with a crest of feathers on their heads. We spied a herd of buffalo sleeping on the plain below and made for it as soon as we had eaten breakfast, but though we drove up and down the road three times we saw neither hide nor horn of them. I was surprised that such a large group of bulky animals could vanish in the sparse bush.

During the day we saw more giraffe and zebra, and after passing miles and miles of elephant turds on the roads—great balls of what looked like mown grass—an elephant finally crossed the road in front of us. It didn't stop, nor look at us, seeming quite intent on where it was going.

In one of the herds of impala that fled before the car, we saw a much larger, grayish antelope with spiraling horns. Again, we didn't see it long enough to be sure of what we saw, and I began to think we'd never positively identify this phantom.

We stopped at another dam, this one much more intimate because it was smaller, only a hundred yards across, and because, after our arrival had scared off a station-wagon family, we had the place to ourselves. We counted six crocodiles, two cruising through the water and four basking on the shore. They are the happiest-looking animals, lying on the mud with smug grins. In contrast, next to them stood tall, white birds with a mournful air, either white storks (according to Terri) or wood storks (according to me). Four blue-faced wildebeest appeared on the crest of the opposite bank. They looked like the old men of the plains, with large and shaggy heads and chests, a weary air and hindquarters that looked withered compared to their sturdy fronts.

On our return we stopped by Mandavu Dam and finally got a long look at the phantoms of the forest. A pair emerged from the woods and walked to the edge of the water where they lowered their heads

and dug their horns into the mud, apparently for no other reason than to get them dirty. They were greater kudu, the second largest antelope, growing to heights of more than five feet and weights of up to 700 pounds. Though smaller than eland, they are more highly prized by hunters because of their magnificent horns, which rise two feet or more above their heads in two large, twisting spirals.

That evening we returned to Mandavu Dam, where lions had been seen several times in the previous weeks, but we saw only the sights of the evening before, including the rhino. On our way to the dam, we got quite close to a group of eight giraffe feeding along the side of the road. Our greatest excitement occurred earlier, when we came upon a young bull elephant also feeding along the side of the road. We stopped only a few feet away from it and watched as it pulled branches off of bushes and stuck them in its mouth. It seemed a fairly small elephant, only about nine feet tall, with two-foot tusks and light gray skin. For a while it put up with our presence, but then it turned in our direction and gave a short trumpet blast through its trunk. That was about as personal as I wanted to get, and we and the elephant moved off in opposite directions. A couple miles farther on we came upon another elephant in almost the same proximity to the road, but this one quickly moved behind some thick bushes and we proceeded on our way.

On the last day of our safari we traveled across the middle of the park to Main Camp, from which we were to leave the next morning to catch the ferry for the return trip across Lake Kariba. We had planned to reach the camp by mid-afternoon, set up our tent and venture forth for one last sunset ride, but the day turned out to be so eventful we didn't arrive until the sun was sinking below the horizon.

The first new animal we saw was a ground hornbill, a goose-sized bird with jet black feathers and a large red beak. It waddled, also goose-like, through the undergrowth about 60 yards from the car. If I were able to identify all the birds we saw on our trip, we would have had many more species to add to our list, but I could pick out only the most distinctive. Cousins of the ground hornbill had surrounded us throughout the trip, smaller birds whose curved red beaks so weighed them down that they flew in a series of curves, flapping their wings strenuously to rise in the air, then coasting and following their noses in a dive toward the ground. These gregarious red hornbills made a whooping racket in the early morning around our camp. When we emerged from the wooded bush onto the more open plains to the east, the red hornbill was replaced by the very similar yellow hornbill. It was more of a ground feeder. We usually saw it hopping around or eyeing the earth with its head cocked to the side. The long beak gave it a comical expression; it looked like a cartoon character come to life.

Some miles past the ground hornbill, an animal like a large rodent emerged from the bush, saw our car and scurried back for shelter. I believe this was a duiker, a small antelope with a curved back and a sharp snout, which lives in dense bush. A similar creature peeped out at us from the bush a little farther on, then took off, running like a small dog. Soon afterwards we saw two slightly larger antelope, still less than three feet in height, with tiny black horns like spikes rising out of their heads. These appeared to be a more straight-backed duiker that inhabits open areas.

We stopped at another dam where we had planned to spend a couple hours, but it turned out to be little more than a water hole, with the ground all around parched and beaten to bare dirt. No game was in sight, another car had already taken the best viewing position, so we decided to move on. We came to a turn-off overlooking a field of thick brush and stopped for a look. Below, not more than a hundred yards away, something moved. Its coat was tawny. It flowed across the ground in a steady, rippling motion unlike the movements of a hesitant antelope. Its long tail curved almost to the ground and back up to end in a dark tuft. It was a lion. I tried to point it out to Terri, but before she could locate it, or I could get the binoculars on it, it disappeared behind a bush. We waited about five minutes, but it didn't reappear. In the thick brush it could easily move about unseen, and with the wind at our backs it must have been aware of our presence. I drove away reluctantly, for an unconfirmed sighting seemed almost worse than not seeing a lion at all.

Most of the park roads we had traveled were bumpy dirt lanes. We now came to a wide, tarred road, which was lined and sometimes almost covered with elephant turds. The road passed several pans—depressions that normally serve as watering holes—but we found that most of them had dried up. I was afraid we'd have a quick, boring ride to the camp.

Passing through some thick brush, Terri saw a male kudu staring at us. Though we couldn't see its body, we got a long look at its remarkable head, for it seemed as curious about us as we were about it. Driving on, we came to a pan with water on both sides of the road. A sable antelope fled at our approach, followed by an elephant that seemed terrified by the car. We stopped to see if any more game would appear, and got out of the car to stretch our legs.

A large bull elephant emerged from the brush across the water on our side of the road, and on the other side a group of 16 cows and calves came out of the woods. The herd was frightened by our presence. The elephants milled about with their trunks lifted in the air, like writhing periscopes, to sniff us. Eventually, they moved away. The bull was also hesitant, but after circling around a bit it came to the pool, which was about 20 yards from the car. Two young Africans were walking past the other side of the pool toward us. The bull moved to the edge of the water on their side, only about 10 yards away from them, and trumpeted angrily. They hardly glanced at it.

They looked after the diesel pump that brought water to the surface of the pan to provide the animals with a place to drink. They wanted us to take a note to the rangers at Main Camp. I asked if they hadn't been frightened of the elephant.

"Bull elephant not so cheek (cheeky)," one replied. "He make noise, charge, but if you throw rocks and yell, he run away."

I asked if they had trouble with any of the animals.

"Cow elephants with babies may be cheek. Don't go near them. Sometimes animals chase us so we have to run away or climb trees. Buffalo can be cheek."

Although they often found the tracks of lions and hyenas around their hut in the morning, predators never bothered them.

"Animals no bother you if you no bother them," one said. "But if you have gun, look out. Animals always know and get angry."

No other human beings lived for miles around. The men spent the entire dry season at their post, except for an occasional week-end visit to Main Camp. Some years they didn't arrive at their post until June, but because of the drought they had come out in February this year and expected to stay until November. What they lacked in human neighbors, they made up for in animals. They said a herd of about 200 elephants had come to the water hole the day before. A few days earlier, they had seen a pack of about 50 wild dogs, another endangered species.

One of the Africans pointed to the elephant, still bathing itself in the water with its built-in shower. Its tusks looked to be about three feet long.

"The tusks look small, but you can't carry one."

"Too heavy?" I asked, dubious.

"Heavy too much. Last year we killed plenty elephant like that."

"You killed elephants?"

"We helped the senior scouts kill many elephants. Six hundred elephants."

"Why?"

"Too many elephants in the park. They eat everything, so no food for the other animals."

I later read that Wankie has more than 19,000 elephants, better than one per square kilometer, and the population must indeed be controlled through large kills that aren't cullings, for female and young elephants are also slaughtered. According to the Department of National Parks and Wild Life, this country probably has ten times as many elephants today as it did at the turn of the century.

The male kudu we had seen in the bush was coming down to the pool across the road, the first long, unobstructed, close-up view we had had of this majestic animal. Just as I was about to snap a picture, the driver of a car that had stopped to watch the elephants started his engine, and the kudu bolted for the bush.



Elephants on the Zambezi...so numerous in Zimbabwe that they must be killed.

We stopped at two more pans, which, except for a multitude of birds, were deserted when we arrived. Both times, minutes after I had turned off the car engine, a small herd of zebra came out of the bush and we got our best look at these animals. Their bold markings seem suited for woodland with its alternating patches of light and shadow. In the open, they are the most conspicuous of animals.

About one o'clock we stopped at a game-watching platform overlooking a water hole. We saw two roan antelope, much like the sable but light brown instead of black, with smaller horns and slightly larger bodies. We saw four more elephants, but they no longer held my interest. Patches of bleached bones were scattered around the pan, so I hoped we might see a lion, but it seemed the wrong time of day. We decided to go to the camp, 20 miles away, and return later.

About six miles from camp we turned in for a quick look at another game-viewing platform. On our approach we saw a large male ostrich and eight youngsters, almost fully grown. I thought this odd, but later learned that ostriches share egg-sitting duties, so I suppose this dual responsibility may carry over to the baby-sitting stage.

Terri directed my attention to four rhinoceroses up ahead. They moved away as we drove up to the platform, showing more mobility than the plodder at Mandavu Dam, but we still got a fairly good look at them. Two adults and a baby were white rhino, so called not because of their skin color, which is gray, but probably as a result of an English corruption of the Dutch word for wide, in reference to their broad snouts. Another adult was slenderer than its companions, with a more pointed jaw, and I think it was a black rhino. About 75 rhinos of both species were brought to Wankie a few years ago. The rhino is another endangered animal, still relentlessly poached for its horn, which is actually compacted hair rather than a true horn made of bone. Reportedly, Orientals still believe the horn to have aphrodisiacal qualities. Arabs also buy the horns to use as dagger sheaths. The two adult white rhino were missing their horns. I wondered if they had been cut off to reduce the threat from poachers.

As the afternoon wore on, more and more animals came into view, and more and more tourists filled the platform. Never before had I seen such a menagerie (I'm speaking of the animals), a panorama like a mural in a museum. A few crocodiles lay on the mud banks, and submerged in the middle of the pool was a hippo, which came up for air so infrequently and so inconspicuously that we had been on the platform half an hour before we detected it. The shore was ringed with birds—scurrying black and white plover, peeping ceaselessly; three Egyptian geese sleeping with their heads under their wings; a yellow hornbill hopping beneath the platform and a glossy starling with a bright yellow eye boldly coming in for handouts. A herd of about 15 wildebeest had come galloping and snorting in behind us, but were now grazing quietly to the south. Spread out around the water hole were grazing herds of impala and waterbuck, with one lone little antelope that might have been another duiker. To the east, the four rhino ambled away, while further north eight giraffes were returning. The ostriches completed the circle.

Through the trees directly across the water from the platform came three elephants, ears flapping, bodies swaying—graceful, swift and silent despite their size. The largest was an old bull,

apparently a veteran of many battles. One tusk had been broken off in the middle, one ear had a jagged tear and the other ear had a hole in it. With the bull came a cow and a calf. They entered the water and the bull began to toss mud and water on its sides and belly with its trunk.

What more could one ask for? Lions, of course, and so in they came to complete the scene. Three lionesses and a dark-maned male strode across the grass and into the bushes to the north of the platform about 300 yards away. Even at that distance, I could see the rippling of their muscles as they walked. The lion is the only animal I've seen that seems to have too much muscle. It is not as graceful as the other big cats; its huge paws make it appear almost clumsy. Anyone who has seen a well-fed pride of lions at play knows how kittenish they can be. As the lions slunk out of view with a last look in our direction, as if aware of the commotion they were causing on the platform, they struck me as bashful and good-natured beasts, embarrassed by their strength.

It was the perfect ending to a wonderful five days. We had seen 35 elephant (25 on the final day), more than 50 zebra, about 25 giraffe, innumerable waterbuck, impala, baboons and wart hogs, two herds of buffalo, almost a score of wildebeest, nine ostriches and about the same number of hippos, nine sable antelope, five male kudus and dozens of females and youngsters, five rhinos, four (maybe five) lions, two roan antelope, perhaps five duiker and a few springbuck, many mongooses and monkeys and a few strange birds.

I know when I return to the U.S. I'll recount many times the adventures of my safari, which in a way is too bad, for I'll only be perpetuating the myth of Africa as the land of big game. Africa's wildlife is only part of the reason that Americans should think more about this continent, and the importance of the animals in that comparatively few of them are left. Let's hope that the rhino and other endangered animals go the way of Wankie's elephants.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn

Received in Hanover 5/11/82