

Great Entertainment – Big Animals in the Wilds

(Second of a Three-Part Series)

By *The Honorable David E. Cain*

A leopard slept with a full belly in the tall grass near a tree from which the mostly bare skeleton of an impala dangled about 15 feet above the ground. A hyena inched closer from the brush about 50 yards away, apparently hoping some meat had fallen from the branch where the big cat had hoisted its prey after a kill in early morning or the night before.

Keeping a close eye on the spotted, slumbering giant, the hyena crept to the site of the tree fall and grabbed a fresh piece of loin. The leopard quickly stirred, sprang to its feet and galloped toward the smaller, less pretty member of the cat family who, in turn, bounded back toward the bushes with part of its stolen dinner still hanging from its mouth.

The hyena stopped short and looked back, like he knew the predator was too gorged to want to chase him too far. And the leopard sat down below the tree so as to prevent any further thefts.

For those of us in the customized, topless Range Rover with theatrical seating, the scene was another delightful photo opportunity. “The animals don’t like people, but they won’t mind the vehicle. Stay seated and quiet. They will think you are just part of the equipment,” our ranger, Helen, had advised.

The episode was one of numerous close up and personal encounters with beautiful, wild animals in the northeastern area of South Africa called Londolozi, a nature reserve with plush accommodations for human beings. That was the second place on the itinerary of our recent vacation in that country.

The first was at a reserve called Bushman Safaris near the southeastern border of Botswana. That resort normally caters to archers wanting trophies to send to taxidermists. After four days of watching animals from the hunters’ “blinds” at watering holes, we traveled by mini-bus some 400 miles to the next attraction, a 32,000-acre reserve that sits behind the same tall electrified fence that surrounds the 8 million-acre Kruger National Park and a multitude of other private wilderness areas. The “big five” (lion, elephant, rhino, buffalo, and leopard) and legions of other species roam the whole of it.

The concept of Londolozi – a Zulu word meaning “protector of all living things” – is totally different from the bow hunters’ playground called Bushman.

And the trip from the one location to the other presented a constantly changing landscape that first featured open rolling fields spotted with mounds of huge granite chunks jutting up from the earth and an occasional pine forest. Then came beautiful green mountains hovering over huge canyons.

As the countryside became cleaner and more moist, the villages and towns seemed to become more affluent. And we passed miles and miles of orange groves and banana farms. Still, we’d sometimes see a sign warning: “High Crime Area. Do Not Stop Vehicle.”

Night was falling as we passed through secured gates into the protected area at a reserve called Sabi Sands near the city of Hazyview. It took more than an hour on a narrow grayish soiled vehicle pathway (Bushman’s was reddish) to reach Camp Varty, one of five clusters that make up the housing in the reserve. More like a five-star hotel than a camp, the thatched roof, stone and stucco guest bungalows are connected with the hotel amenities by brick sidewalks, and all the rooms as well as the primary dining area are fronted by timber decks overlooking the Sand River and lush riverine habitat. All of it is covered by a large variety of trees and flowering bushes frequented by monkeys and baboons (the reason the sliding doors on our room had to always be hooked).

We were greeted by camp staff at the Varty entrance and taken to the bama – a circular, sand floored eating area surrounded by a bamboo fence and lighted by candles, lanterns and a campfire. Tables were covered by white cloth and each chair had a blanket for comfort against the cool night air (springtime in the USA is autumn in South Africa). After a master chef prepared our meals, the staff instructed us to never walk to our rooms after dark without a porter. They said the porters would look out for animals, but we later learned their concern was more for the deadly black mamba snakes that cover the continent. We learned that the hard way when my wife, Mary Ann, almost stepped on a 6 to 8 footer one mid-afternoon. It slithered a few feet away



and quickly coiled. We had been advised to stay perfectly still. We ran.

The staff also told us that a porter would knock on our door at 5:15 a.m. to make sure we were up in time for the first game drive (after coffee and biscotti) at 5:45 a.m.

Helen Young was our ranger. She grew up in Pretoria and has a master's degree in zoology and environmental science. Our tracker was Enock Mkast, from Hazyview, who formerly served as an anti-poacher in Kruger National Park. When he had that job, his basic equipment was the equivalent of a pellet gun, while many poachers had AK47s. Now, in Kruger, the anti-poachers shoot to kill. And they are killing them (the poachers) everyday, he commented one evening.

After watching the sun rise through heavy mist oozing from the gently sloping hills, we came upon a male lion about 8-years old, who was on patrol, and followed him for nearly an hour before he disappeared into the bush.

The lion seemed domesticated – paying no mind to our vehicle a few feet away – but the ranger knew better. More than 14,000 people have been eaten by lions since 1960, mostly on foot for a long trip west through the protected area trying to illegally immigrate to a country with better employment opportunities, she later commented.

Soon we mingled with a family of elephants and watched a herd of female impalas being kept together by a single male who believed they all belonged to him.

Since the animals are most active at sunrise and sunset, our second daily safari began in late afternoon. In the first “sunset” drive we saw cape buffalo (the most “unpredictable” of the big five) a dozen or more mostly submerged hippos and a gator keeping its distance. Hippos can be tedious to observe, Helen explained. They spend most of the daytime hours underwater since their skin is sensitive to bright sun and they can hold their breath for 15 minutes at a time.

The next morning brought new thrills. With the ever-present sweet smell of wild basil, anise and sage being stirred by Range Rover's tires, we came upon father and son rhinoceroses grazing in the grass. Since it's not very nutritious, each rhino needs about 140 pounds of it every day, Helen said. With no upper teeth and a stiff wide and flat bottom lip, they do not destroy the grass, they mow it, she added. Elephants, on the other hand, average about 400 pounds everyday of grass, bushes, and most anything green, and are slowly destroying the landscape, knocking down everything in their pathways, she pointed out.

The next adrenalin rush came when Enock found the trail of a cheetah. Even Helen was excited, saying she hadn't seen one for months and there are only an estimated 110 cheetahs in the entire protected area.

Unlike the elephants and rhinos, the big cats eat quickly, dining on protein rich meat, and then sleeping about 20 hours a day. Sure enough, Enock found the cheetah napping in some tall weeds. When she finally began lifting her head and rolling about, some 15 wildebeests banded together about 200 yards away and stayed totally focused on her every move, inching closer and closer to encourage her to leave the area. And she eventually did. An impala could be seen taking cover behind the larger animals.

Our next project was to see what was attracting vultures a short distance away. They led us to a fresh pile of bones. Helen said American vultures go by smell. But Africans go by sight and can clearly see something as small as newsprint from two miles away. In our travels, we also saw eagles and quite a variety of interesting smaller birds.

The next attraction was a hippo who apparently had a pond all to himself and either wanted to entertain or intimidate us by coming up for several yawns, turning over and kicking his feet and then fanning excrement with his tail.

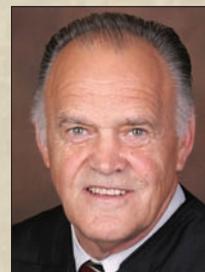
The highlight of the last morning drive was finding a lion pride with seven cubs and three lionesses. The mothers are mothers to all, even when it comes to nursing, Helen said. It takes about 2 ½ years to teach the cubs to hunt and live on their own, she added.

That evening, we sat among some 400 to 500 cape buffalo – from babies to very old – trudging around our vehicle and sloshing through a watering hole. After that came the drama of the leopard and hyena and then a surprise wine and cheese reception set up in the bush at nightfall by members of the Londolozi staff.

The next morning we boarded another mini-bus for a trip to the city of Nelspruit where we boarded a plane for a flight of about 1000 miles to Cape Town (the next and last subject in this series).



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