



## **GOLIATH SAFARIS**

**June 2010**

### **Lunar lights and lion fights**

A full moon rising in Mana Pools will lighten the darkest disposition but a new moon setting is equally therapeutic. As it's backlit crescent follows the sun below the horizon in the west, it leaves behind for us a perfect indigo backdrop for a galaxy of nightlights. Luminescent fire flies dance their courtship rituals above the water, campfire embers glow golden and the spiral band of the Milky Way is the cream on the top.

However within days the moon waxes considerably, causing the night-sky brilliance to wane and stellar galaxies to pale before the magnificence of a full moon. The moon as a balloon certainly gladdens the hearts of campers and quarry alike, but as a predator it's hard work ahead for a few nights. Their seven fold stronger night vision is of little use when the light is on bright. Nonetheless the lions of Mana have not gazed skyward or consulted any of their astrological charts for lunar guidance this month. The Spice Girls are tucked away in thickets with their cubs, and as Stretch predicted they've chosen the same well-hidden spots where they themselves were born. Two very elusive males are keeping them company, almost certainly the Beach Boys. Granny and Mum continue to be nomadic in their habits but periodically return to the area for familial support and bonding. For some reason, the old girl and her daughter chose to stay away from their four daughters last season, hence their lack of success in rearing all of their 2009 cubs to adulthood. With no real resident pride male to speak of and no other lionesses to help with the hunting, theirs was always going to be an uphill battle. However with at least two of the four Spice Girls now having synchronized the births of their cubs, perhaps the Nyamepi Pride will regroup and once again become a successful

force in a few years time. The lionesses should introduce their cubs to the others very shortly as they are now over 4 months old, but unless a big male or two puts his paw up and becomes resident and not a nomad, they may not have a pride to introduce their offspring to.

Talking of testosterone, or too little or too much of it, we recently witnessed the chaos that it can cause whilst watching an amazing four hour lion spectacle near Mana Mouth. The origins of this new healthy pride of lions still perplexes us- are they from the Wilderness area or more realistically have they moved in from Chitake , which last year saw very little of them. Stretch first caught a glimpse of them early last season when they strolled purposefully onto the floodplain. The arrival of a pride of thirteen healthy lions raises most people's attention, and most certainly that of the other participants in the food chain; - did they contribute to the disarray of the Nyamepi pride or have they arrived to take their spot? They certainly look at home here - ten healthy females are any males dream especially when they do all the hunting and gathering, but unfortunately for the pride male, it comes with a lot of defending and domestic issues to deal with.

This was evidenced as we watched the spectacle unfold at Mana Mouth. The aforesaid lionesses, together with one nonchalant adult male encircled a group of nine buffalo making very half-hearted attempts at a kill, the male being of little to no use. However when another male strode determinedly out of the grass towards them, we felt the final onslaught was about to begin. What follows confused even Stretch, who himself has seen some chaos in his time. The two males suddenly turned on each other and fought as if in a gladiator's ring. The lionesses halted their hunt and together with us watched the spectacle. In the confusion the buffalo's common sense deserted them and they too stood and watched.

The males then took their fight elsewhere, amidst much roaring and running around. We chose to stay with the females who had by now been joined by an older lactating female no doubt drawn out by the commotion. She seemed to consolidate their hunting efforts but with no male present they were unable to bring a buffalo down despite valiant attempts.



The lionesses at this point seemed to lose interest and the buffalo moved a little way off and started grazing again, seemingly unperturbed by the morning's activity. However half-time was soon over and a series of roars heralded the arrival of one of the males who returned amidst much scent-marking and deep vocalizations. He then proceeded to spook the buffalo into running into the water in a nearby channel and single-handedly brought one of them down and held onto it as though it were a young impala. We noticed the other male watching from a distance and at no stage did he or the females join in. Stretch suggested we all leave to allow the male to drag his prey out of the water; a crocodile attack would have been rather unfair right then. By early the next morning though, his kill was nowhere to be seen; we suspect he dragged it onto the far side of the channel, but the conundrum is, did he share it with the lionesses, did he lose it or is he an opportunistic nomad who doesn't share his kill?



With all this lion activity on the floodplain, Stretch has nonetheless not neglected his hunt for the other predators. Our first guests of the year were lucky enough to see all twenty of the big wild dog pack on almost every day of their safaris. Throughout May the pack chose to range across the open areas between the Chirui river and Zebra vleis, the dense indigofera on the floodplain

making their coursing hunting action a virtual impossibility. They have however been absent in numbers for a while now, no doubt consolidating the denning down of their alpha female who was heavily pregnant. It promises to be a very interesting season ahead; will this large and stable pack be able to cope with the new lion density? The floodplain affords them perfect hunting grounds in the dry season but a bucketful of healthy lions is a huge threat to their pups once they start to free range later in the year. We wait with baited breath to see the outcome and certainly hope that they can co-exist.

The leopards of Mana have certainly never had a problem with co-existing. Knowing their place at the predator feeding table, they silently go about their business building up a strong case for successful solitude. The large male who regularly walks through the back of camp shares a portion of his territory with a female and her cub. Although their territories overlap and hers may be solely encompassed by his much larger one, they will interact infrequently, unless mating of course. We get to see and hear the male fairly often, but it was a real treat recently for Stretch's early morning game drive to be held up by the female and her cub strolling casually down the road. The cub will stay with it's mother for at least a year and so hopefully we'll get to see them together often, other predators willing. The floodplain certainly supports enough impala to feed many leopard and wild dog, so lack of prey will never be their problem.

Talking of impala, the rutting rams have all but finished making fools of themselves. By late June they will have covered most of the females in their harem, so they can put away their vuvuzelas and get back to being one of the boys. Out of condition and exhausted from their vigils and challenges, they can now return to some sense of normality and the ewes can begin incubating their progeny, a somewhat less onerous task for them than the long months of the rut.

Whilst the furry residents of Mana have been all a twitter, the feathered summer visitors have got their acts together and followed the sun north. We were lucky enough to spend time with a group of over forty white storks above Long Pool who were gathering together ready to set off for their European summer. Serene and elegant as always, they showed no signs of any pre-flight stress. The resident storks are also showing no signs of stress or strain: soaring saddle-bills, morose marabous and odd open-bills are having the times of their lives with their fellow water birds at the multitude of little pans still dotted around. As the pans are starting to shrink and dry up, they have sharpened their bills for the upcoming feast of catfish and frogs that get served up on a shallow clay platter for them. The hapless fish writhe around in a thick soup of mud and clay and become sitting ducks for the long legged

storks who dash about snatching and snapping at any sign of movement. Some of the barbel will be lucky enough to burrow deep down underground and wait for the next rains but most won't. Do good things ever happen to fish?



All of this twitching and twittering aside, Stretch had his very own lifer this season, albeit on the canoeing front. With three floodgates open and the river at a record high, most of the channels have filled with water as the river pushes back. Where he once walked he now canoes. Where he once kept an eye out for angry lionesses he now keeps an eye out for grumpy hippo. Whilst all this extra water is a headache to regular campers as they find some of their campsites cut off, we have had some wonderful paddling sojourns down the Mucheni channel. Always a pioneer, Stretch recently treated a group of guests to something special. Due to the fact that the trail down the channel ends on our doorstep he was able to co-ordinate a trip that allowed us to watch the full moon rise as the current carried us gently back into camp. What an incredibly soothing and serene experience which may not be repeated for a long time yet as the river will quickly recede when the gates are closed.

And on that tranquil note, we'd like to end off by sharing one of our favourite photographs with you. As we drove into Mana early in the season, a lone female baboon sentry greeted Stretch's trademark wave with this pose. We welcome suggestions of an apt caption for it. Be kind - she's one of his favourite girls!



Take special care of yourselves and those special to you.

Warmest regards

Flo Coughlan



Goliath Safaris

Mana Pools

Lower Zambezi

Zimbabwe

Cell; 00263 912 733252

Email; [goliath@africaonline.co.zw](mailto:goliath@africaonline.co.zw)

Web; [www.goliathsafaris.com](http://www.goliathsafaris.com)

\*\*Please note that all of our landlines are still out of order