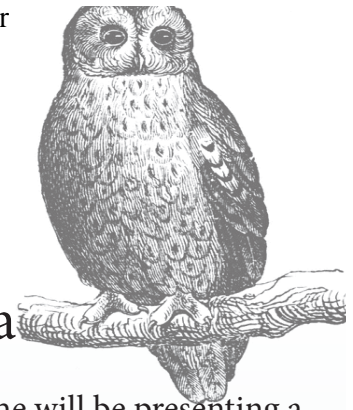


# NATURALIST'S CORNER



## Hold On Tight: My Bumpy Ride Through Botswana

As I write, Sonya is working on her September presentation for the Naturalists' Club. She will be presenting a talk about the Club's recent adventures in Africa. As always, the talk will be engaging, informative, and beautifully illustrated with Sonya's photography. My comments here are intended to complement her presentation.

First of all, it is a long flight to get to Africa. We took off from Washington D.C. Then, surprisingly, we headed north, flying over New England before crossing the North Atlantic. We passed over Western Europe and the Mediterranean. Then, we flew up the Nile, past Mount Kilimanjaro, and, finally, to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. As planned, we arrived a day early to shake off the cobwebs of jet lag and perhaps explore the city. Some Naturalists' Club members chose to take a helicopter ride over the Falls, some interacted with domestic elephants, and some chose to engage in cultural immersion. I chose to raft the Zambezi River. It was amazing to be down in the Rift Valley, running class IV and V rapids on a beautiful day. The hike out of the Valley was so steep that my calves and thighs felt it for days afterwards, but the rafting was well worth it.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your view), African safaris involve a lot of sitting. You basically ride around in a moving wildlife blind. Brightly colored clothing, quick movements, and standing in the vehicle are not allowed, so as to avoid scaring off the animals. Our vehicles were converted Toyota pickups, all of them very well used, with over 250,000 kilometers on them. In the bed of each truck, three rows of seating had been created using a frame of two-inch round steel pipe. Each row was a bit higher than the one in front of it, ensuring a great view for everyone.

Throughout our travels, drivers Julius and OT were on the radio with other guides in search of the charismatic megafauna. One morning, after a simple breakfast in camp, we were cruising around the southern end of Chobe National Park when we rode up to a cluster of other safari vehicles. We pulled into formation. Then, without any explanation, our vehicles stopped and waited.

Why were all the vehicles here? Sure there were impala around, but they're everywhere. So why were we watching these particular antelope? Then, all of the sudden, the quiet exploded. A cheetah rocketed out from behind one of the other vehicles and into the herd of impala. The impala scattered in all directions. There was excited conversation in and between all the vehicles, but no kill. The cheetah missed but we followed it around for another hour or so. I bet that Sonya will share some of her excellent photos from this encounter.

Later that evening, after we were out of safari, Julius turned the vehicle around. Without a word, he started tearing through the bush at what I considered breakneck speed. Ruttled roads be damned, he was on to something! We shot past zebras, giraffes, and even elephants without hesitation. I wondered where we were going. All I could do was hold on to the metal bar in front of me. A beautiful sunset was developing in front of us. Was that our goal? We passed plenty of vantage points for taking photographs. There must be something else, but what? Finally, we crashed off the road and through some brush to find ourselves staring at a tall, crooked tree. And to our amazement, that tree held two leopards, a male and female. I felt like a bit of a voyeur as we watched the male courting the female. In the distance an owl watched, too. Eventually the sun set and we had to go. There is no driving after dark—park rules.

We spent ten days out on safari in Botswana. We saw elephants. We saw giraffes. We saw all sorts of birds (although we did not succeed in making birders of all our crew). My favorite animals, though, were the African wild dogs. I am sure that Sonya will talk about them in her presentation on Wednesday, September 16. If she doesn't, you can ask me. I will be there. I hope you will, too.

*~Tom Condon*

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