

PHOTO SAFARI ADVENTURE: FOLLOWING WILD DOGS IN BOTSWANA

By Ted Cookson

"'Whiskey delta' on Hyena Alley," whispered Andre, our photo safari guide, into his two-way radio. "We're following nine adults!" Although he could boast 17 years of experience in animal conservation and guiding in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, 41-year-old South

African-born Andre Joubert was as excited as were we early on the morning of September 10, 2004.

After a three-month absence, a pack of African wild dogs had returned to the flood plain around Zibalianjo Camp near the Selinda Spillway, on the eastern edge of northern Botswana's game-rich Okavango Delta.

The 15,000-square-km Okavango Delta is well known to informed African safari enthusiasts. Seasonal floodwaters rising in Angola flow south into arid Botswana, creating the world's largest oasis. This unique ecosystem plays host to a large variety of African game animals and birds. Since good game sighting opportunities attract tourists, the Delta is also home to a great many safari lodges and camps. Until June 2004, guides from Zibalianjo Camp ("Zib") and neighbouring Selinda Camp had frequently sighted wild dogs, which are also called 'Cape hunting dogs' or 'painted dogs.' In fact, Zibalianjo means 'place of the wild dog' in the local Sesubiya tongue. However, as the flood plain had dried up and the game had thinned, the pack had moved away. Working co-operatively to bring down small animals such as imola, packs of wild dogs typically hunt over extensive and ever-shifting territories.

Our photo game drive had begun uneventfully that morning. We had photographed some elephants standing among trees on the flood plain as we had driven away from Zib. Then Andre spotted the footprints of a leopard, which had

crossed the dirt jeep track during the night. In following those leopard tracks, we came upon a sub-group of nine wild dogs hunting in tall grass. Strung out in a long line while attempting to flush out game, the dogs employed their seemingly oversized ears to their best advantage, listening carefully for the sound of potential prey or for a call from another member of the pack.

As we followed behind the dogs in our open Land Cruiser, other



vehicles from Zib and Selinda camps, whose guides had all heard Andre's radio announcement of the sighting, joined us. It soon became

apparent that the dogs were returning from a morning hunt to the pack's den, which was now situated above the flood plain on a tree-shaded mound.

After parking our Land Cruiser and studying the dogs' activities at the den over a period of 45 minutes, we counted 16 month-old pups and 14 adults. In each pack of wild dogs it is customary for the alpha male to mate with only a single alpha female. In this case it was apparent that the alpha female's litter had been comprised of 16 healthy pups.

Our two-week African safari had commenced in Zambia, where we visited both South Luangwa National Park and Lower Zambezi National Park before flying via Lusaka to Livingstone, Zambia to view the magnificent and mighty Victoria Falls. There, adventurous tourists can choose to over fly one of the world's natural wonders in a small airplane, by helicopter or even in an ultra light. World-class white water rafting is also offered on the Zambezi River.

In years past more exciting adventure activities at Victoria Falls had been available from the Zimbabwe side than from Zambia. However, with Zimbabwe's growing political isolation and increasing economic difficulties, many tourists to Victoria Falls now prefer to stay at Livingstone on the Zambian side. The multitude of activities and breadth of accommodation currently on offer in Zambia are a reflection of the recent surge in tourism to that country.

From Livingstone we flew in a five-seat single-engine charter aircraft just across the border to Kasane, Botswana. After quickly clearing Botswana immigration formalities in Kasane, we continued in our light aircraft directly to a small dirt airstrip midway between the safari camps of Zib and Selinda. As we descended to land, we photographed hippos, elephants