

Traveler's notebook



Courtesy Holmes Rolston

RARE SIGHTING: A leopard creeps through the night in Botswana, Africa, during Holmes Rolston's safari there.

Call of the wild

African safari a mix of intrigue, adventure and survival

By **HOLMES ROLSTON**

For the Coloradoan

"Leopard!"

The cry in the African night was quickly hushed, as we realized how close we were. There, spotlighted suddenly as the lamp swung round to my side, was a poised and motionless leopard, hardly 20 feet from our open Land Rover.

Startled, I suppressed my initial alarm and began to admire the magnificent cat, the epitome of feline beauty, power, grace. She stared back, puzzled by the light. Close though she was, I lifted my binoculars.

Her head and shoulders filled the field. I could count her whiskers!

About the author



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ON THE PROWL:

Wild dogs search for prey in this photo taken during Holmes Rolston's safari in Botswana, Africa.

Courtesy
Holmes
Rolston

She began to move, silently, not away from us but diagonally, toward the rear of the car.

Leaving the bush, she joined the track behind us. We turned the vehicle around and found her again. Slowly we followed, keeping the spotlight peripheral. Now she seemed unconcerned, judging our vehicle neither prey nor predator.

She left the road only to return again, always with stealth. Ever alert, she

crouched, pounced on a rodent, gulped it down, and soon faded back into the night.

I was on safari in the vast Okavango Delta in Botswana. When we met the leopard, I was in the Linyanti Delta, just north of and joining the huge seasonal wetlands, forming as near primordial Africa as anywhere remains.

Could it really be that I was seeing the

See AFRICA, Page D7

most difficult of the African cats to see, and so soon after a pack of wild dogs had passed just as close? And the dogs, even more elusive, are Africa's most endangered carnivore.

The wild dogs appeared at sunset, this time at such distance across the veldt, coming in from the delta, that we were unsure what they were. More lechwe maybe? We had been seeing that aquatic antelope, endemic here, and enjoying its splashing speed when alarmed in the wetlands. No, they are too dark and a different shape.

Hyenas then? No, too stringy. They are dogs! And they are coming our way! Our surprise grew as the pack continued toward us. Within a few minutes, they passed close by. Again, our vehicle didn't fit their search image. With binoculars, I noted the sharp canine teeth, black muzzles open and panting. Two went to one side, three to the other, to disappear where the veldt joined the forest.

These are the wolves of Africa, and as rare and difficult to see as wolves in America.

Lycaon pictus, their scientific name, means "painted wolf." In contrast to the ordered spotted beauty of the leopard, the dogs are striking for their disordered splotches of dark brown, black and yellow.

No two dogs are alike. Their patterns vary dramatically and are in no way evenly distributed or symmetrical. Their huge ears and long legs increase their ungainly appearance. They have only four toes, which is why they are not placed in the genus *Canis*, which has five toes.

Turning the Rover around, we hurried to a forest road that we hoped they might cross. To our delight, like the leopard, they not only reappeared but followed the road. We followed in the growing dusk.

We watched their hunting, jousting, defecating and dragging their rears on the grass to wipe clean. They gnawed at an old carcass, ever alert to sounds, sniffed this way and that, evidently with skilled powers and subtle perceptions out of our human ranges. I last saw them, with the full moon rising, silhouetted in the night.

The leopard hunts in solitary stealth and surprise, with bursts of speed. Even so, this super cat succeeds in only one of three chases. Seeing fast impala and lechwe run, we understand why. The dogs are the carnivore with the most endurance. They hunt as a pack, take turns in pursuit, wear their prey to exhaustion, and catch 80 percent of their quarry.

Their endless chase gives them the reputation of being cruel killers, probably undeserved.

Yet they are the most sociable of Africa's carnivores, sharing regurgitated food, nursing each others' pups. The success of one depends on the success of all.

Nomads without a home territory, the dogs range so widely that encounters are quite unpredictable, mostly by chance.

On the last day of safari, I saw movement in the grass. A lion? One of the five we had seen hunting the night before? By

now we had sighted lions 41 times, and almost had come to expect them.

"A leopard, I think!" exclaimed our guide. Hardly, I thought, not at mid-morning. In the binoculars, I got a good glimpse of a lithe body disappearing in the grass. But were those spots or stripes? A few moments later, a head appeared, looking our way. This one had a different profile and moved with more lurking.

Try to relocate it we did, and failed. But we confirmed the leopard in the spoor (tracks) left behind.

The night before, we spotted the five lions on the hunt, silently and

in the dark. We waited, spotlights off, lest we disturb their hunt. Twenty minutes later, there was the stampede of hoofs, zebra frightened in the light. Lions roared; hyenas howled. Zebra, separated in the stampede, called to re-gather. Would that we could have seen that drama.

"Safari" means "journey," "adventure." Even the wildlife one expects are met with surprise: elephants, giraffe, buffalo, warthogs, impala, kudu, hippos, crocodiles. Excitement escalates with the unexpected: sitatunga (an aquatic antelope), tsessebe (a purple-chestnut antelope), puku (a small, endemic antelope), sable.

By night we found bat-eared fox, the African wild cat (the ancestor of all domestic cats); bushbabies (nocturnal primates, no larger than a squirrel); genets; civets. Hyena, seldom seen by day, were heard by night, a chilling call.

Leopards in the night. Wild dogs on the run.

The biologist in me caught the excitement: The fittest survive, in the age-old struggle to eat and not be eaten.

The philosopher in me rejoiced: Life persists in the midst of its perpetual perishing. Such is the mystique of this Dark Continent, exuberant with life.