

Commentary...

Intimate is the African night

By Chris Morin
Columnist

The young British woman sitting next to me in the dark was on her honeymoon and wouldn't leave me alone. Clutching my arm and groaning, she was absolutely ruining the moment.

I felt anger rising within and turned to confront her, breaking my absolute focus on the three lionesses beginning to probe and test the young adult hippopotamus they'd happened upon in the open. Impala and puku also watched those proceedings 40 yards away.

I snapped my head around, looked straight into her eyes, opened my mouth to admonish her and found her eyes looking back into mine, delirious. I hesitated. She opened her mouth, forcing out UMPFF! DWAQ! ZHHNN! ... ? Her eyes somehow growing ever bigger, she began frantically pointing to the side, behind us.

Swiveling my head in that direction, another of the lionesses from The Pride of Nine sauntered toward us, less than seven feet away, closing the remaining space. Kathleen sat in the middle, her new husband, Tony, to her right, I was on her left in the last row of tiered

benches for this open-air safari jeep. It was so "open air" that the jeep's sides merely came up to hip level.

We were the only ones out of 11 people in the jeep who were aware of this particular lioness. Our guide-driver, Tuke, along with his spotter, Henry, were up front and six more tourists occupied the other two rows of bench seats. All of them intently watched the lionesses testing the resolve of the young hippo forward of the vehicle.

This lioness ambled closer and sauntered within two feet of our parked jeep, the only vehicle out here. Kathleen and I didn't dare make a sound. This placed the feline no more than five to six feet from us.

Except for my eyes tracking her, I sat completely still. Tony had catatonically frozen in place while looking down into his lap, apparently unwilling to watch if the pounce were launched. This lioness only threw us a fleeting glance, however, and kept moving — past the jeep's rear, and then off into the diminishing gloom of red tail parking lights.

I rotated my head back to Kathleen, now on the verge of tears, still unable to speak coherently. She shrank by a third while letting out a

quiet but massive sigh.

The past six days had been completely lion-free in South Luangwa National Park located in Eastern Zambia. It's quite rare to go that long without seeing them in this place.

The Park's rules require the various safari camps to keep the jeeps 10 yards from any sleeping or feeding lion during the day and 25 yards from any moving lion at night, both for respect towards the great cats and for the safety of the tourists.

South Luangwa National Park carries the reputation of being a veteran safari connoisseur's park because it offers walks as well as drives during the day and night drives — rare for big-game African parks. This park also holds the greatest concentration of leopards in the world.

Although the most challenging-to-reach of the Great 5 safari parks of Africa, which also makes it the least crowded, we only chose this one because it was by far the most affordable during the shoulder season in June.

Minutes earlier, Tuke and Henry had caught a glimpse of the moonlit lions from 200 yards away through the open 'bush' of the Mopane forest just as one stood up



PHOTO BY CHRIS MORIN

Lioness hunting in the South Luangwa National Park, Zambia

in the cooling air of the evening to begin the night's hunt. Each of them had let out a muffled whoop of relief, pointed the lions out to us, and quickly plotted how to reach the pride.

A significant stream separated the lions from us, and it took a crazed and careening three-minute drive away from the pride to access a crossing location. By the time we splashed through and got back to them, they were up, moving, spread out.

Hunting had commenced. We parked and silently began observing, only later realizing we had arrived in the middle of the pride rather than to one side of it.

The night spotter not only carried a single handheld floodlight he constantly switched on and off in his search for animals, he also had a .50-caliber bolt action rifle next to him, just in case an elephant went bonkers.

As a former Alaskan wilderness guide, I will testify

that the guides of Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana are the best trained, highest skilled, most knowledgeable — quite simply the best — in the world. But anyone, including the best, can make the rare mistake.

When we arrived in the midst of the lionesses, we didn't actually know the current count; over the past five days, some of its members might have wandered away. It had become the mating season for some.

Adult male lions, not part of a pride, form coalitions, and they often have territories overlapping two or three prides. There were no males present tonight.

Just as Kathleen and I began to compose ourselves and Tony managed to swivel his head our way all glassy-eyed, a second lioness appeared at the farthest limits of the reddish glare. She followed the exact path of the previous one, moving right for us.

Part II next week.

Portraits OF SISTERS



Mel Elder is a member of the shrinking greatest generation. Filled with a sense of duty in the early '40s Mel enlisted in the Navy during World War II. He spent time on aircraft carriers and various naval ships. When American troops landed on Iwo Jima, he watched from afar and saw the first casualties arrive within an hour. And when the flag was raised over Mount Suribachi, he observed the historic moment through his binoculars at sea. On the shores

of Okinawa, his ship, the USS Hinsdale, survived a kamikaze attack. Mel proudly calls Sisters home where he spends time with family.



PHOTO AND STORY BY *Cody Rheault*

This week's "Portraits of Sisters" presented by The Nugget Newspaper.

Future portraits are available for sponsorship, call 541-549-9941 or email ads@nuggetnews.com for information.