

Commentary...

Intimate is the African Night – Part II

By **Chris Morin**
Columnist

A few rules for riding in an open-air vehicle during a safari in Africa are:

1. Stay in the vehicle until the guide says it's okay to get out for a break. 2. When parked for photographs, never stand up in the presence of lions. 3. Never ever extend a hand beyond the side of the vehicle in the presence of any predator.

Simple. But new rules can be forgotten in the excitement of the moment. For a few of us I guess, the more exciting the moment, the easier it becomes to forget.

Having been around wild animals in the Alaskan remote backcountry and marine environments as a trekker, paddler, and guide, I had enormous respect for large mammals but had also become comfortable being in close quarters with them.

I considered brown/grizzly bears to be like brothers and sisters. While there was ultimate respect for each and every one, I also came to feel only mild anxiety and almost no fear during intimate encounters.

Some educational philosophers offer the notion that "generalization and transference" is one of the premier "higher order thinking

skills." Basically, it means thoroughly learning and competently applying a particular understanding in a certain setting and situation, then reapplying it in a similar setting and situation.

Everything has its time and place, however.

The remote bush of Africa, while sitting among a pride of prowling lionesses during the night, isn't the best time to apply lessons learned long ago, particularly when the situation is novel this time around.

The second lioness continued to follow the same path as the first and would be at the rear of our vehicle in the next few seconds. Already growing far too comfortable in this situation, I made a hair-trigger decision to get the kind of photograph I'd been after since we arrived in Zambia three weeks ago.

Camera in hand, I quickly plotted how and when to take the magazine cover shot I'd dreamed of getting, forgetting the rules for a responsible safari vehicle passenger. I began naively assuming the actions of this lion because of how the previous one behaved, as if it were an encounter with familiar grizzlies on the tundra.

The lioness lightly pushed her cheek into the rear corner

of the vehicle upon arrival, either scratching herself or marking it, then began to proceed across the back of the vehicle, her body lightly touching it as she passed.

I had smoothly stood up, turned towards the rear, and bent over 90 degrees at the waist so that I was beyond the back of the bench seat and facing the ground. At six feet four inches tall, my upper body stuck out and cleared the backrest and vehicle by two feet.

The remainder of the vehicle's passengers leaned forward in the opposite direction, murmuring while the three lions in front began pressing the hippopotamus, seeing if it might panic and do something stupid. No, it wouldn't. At that very moment, stupidity was rampant right behind them.

Beside me, Kathleen and Tony had apparently dropped into yet another stupor with the next lioness's approach or possibly it was due to my inexplicably vexing behavior.

Looking through the viewfinder, I knew there would only be a single opportunity for a great shot. This particular 35 mm camera could not be set on continuous photo mode due to the multiple clicking sounds it would have made; one click



PHOTO COURTESY CHRIS MORIN

The Morning Drive Break while on Safari

was all I was willing to risk.

It was immediately obvious that the rear of the jeep would show up the photograph. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing; it certainly provided a certain drama because it would offer my perspective while taking it. Yet, it meant a different sort of photograph than what I'd been envisioning.

I quickly zoomed in for a tighter shot so as to eliminate the jeep from the picture. The lioness began entering the left side of the frame, not yet below me. Her next stride placed her within the frame; she was beginning to fill up the shot and all I had to do was push the button as I tracked her.

The head and eyes now filled the photo, but I needed to slightly adjust the focus, additional zooming

a moment ago made her slightly blurry.

Instantly adjust the focus! Refocus my thoughts! One final look through the viewfinder and ... she's stopped!

Her head had swiveled upwards during all that, the eyes looked at me.

In a singular and monumentally appalling moment, I fully comprehended the great

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