

20SHORT.DOC 8-20-98

On the second afternoon in the Okivango Delta, one of the tour coordinators contracted by the Museum of Natural History took six of us on a walk. He is native to Southern Africa and a skilled guide and knowledgeable naturalist. Walks are difficult to arrange in big game country. Gun bearers must be along to support the guide. The camp manager loaned him a large bore rifle to take along, showing he had enough confidence in this particular fellow to let him go without one of his staff.

I hadn't recovered enough from the night before to serve as a gunner. About midnight, a hyena laughed close to the tent just as a baboon hooted a warning of lions nearby. I cracked my head on the bottom of the metal cot so hard the blow caused a slight concussion. The confusion made it difficult to crawl from under the bed where I always sleep on safari in case a lion jumps through the side of the tent. So I was in no condition to carry any type of weapon heavier than a walking stick.

Once out of camp, the ground set a perfect stage for tracks. It looked like the soft dry gray drilling mud around a new well location in Texas. Reddish brown grasses stood waist high along the trails; palm trees grew thick and tall over what are islands in the spring or September. Trunks of jackal berry trees, the source wood for canoes, stood long and keen as mast poles on a clipper ship. Splintered white bark lay strewn about from elephants stripping the trunks.

The ranger showed us wart hog burrows, so alive and vital, he warned us, that dirt sifting into the top of the hole might send the hogs shooting from underground, slashing blindly with their ugly tusks. Our path crossed a busy elephant road, leading, he said, "to an elephant highway." (Botswana's elephant population reaches 80,000 head.) "An elephant's track is distinct as human fingerprints," he told us.

Pointing to another huge track, he said, "Hippos' tracks look alike. Studies of individuals are impossible. Oh, we know the young nurse underneath the water in 20 second intervals, but hippos can't be ear-tagged and they are too dangerous for close observation."

We stopped next by a termite hill 15 feet high and perhaps 30 feet in circumference. The guide began his lecture by explaining that termites are not ants, but are related to cockroaches. "Termites are farmers," he said. "The workers carry food down in the den to cool and grow fungus, the only thing they eat."

He pauses, looks down in the loose soil by the hill: "A lion was by here a short time ago, leading her cubs." He continues, "the first study of termites was done in 1917 in a book, *The Soul Of A White Ant*, by a poet named Eugene Marais. Mr. Marais learned

how the colony kept the temperature of the interior of the den at 70 degrees F. by opening small holes at night to propagate the fungus."

He shifts the rifle to his right hand, "The colony fits well into the food chain. Elephants have poor digestive systems; they eat 600 pounds of matter a day. Termites thrive on their spoor. Natives consider termites a delicacy, and wild dogs turn the hills into dens. Also, the mounds become the nucleus for starting an island when the delta floods in ..."

Again repositioning the rifle, he said, "We had better go back to camp. Please form a single file and follow me. Do not lag behind."

The lady closest to me whispered, "Hear her growling? She's not far away. She's the lioness we saw last night. The guide said she had to hunt in the daytime to feed her cubs, because of an abscessed tooth."

I tried to nod, but discovered I was so tense I was only able to blink my eyes. The safety manual says not to run if you encounter a lion. The safety manual does not need to cover the disposition of a lioness nursing three playful cubs while suffering a throbbing toothache. Under spotlight, she showed to have mud on her sides from lying in pools to cool her fever. However, trailing three pesky cubs back from the water hole was probably enough to offset the effect of the treatment.

The file of walkers began making tracks like baboons make in a high run. Any minute, I expected to see the lead parties start jettisoning their glasses and cameras. I figured I'd keep mine on, hoping a buckle or strap might be left to identify my remains.

It took the rest of the afternoon to calm down in camp. I thought of asking for an armed guard to watch my tent, but remembered the safety manual said heavy canvas will keep a lion outside long enough for help to come ...

OmniPage #1

OmniPage #2

OmniPage #3

OmniPage #4

OmniPage #5

OmniPage #257

OmniPage #258

OmniPage #259

OmniPage #513

OmniPage #514§

Tms Rmn

Symbol

Times New Roman

Courier New

Annette