

# Close Encounters of the Endangered Kind



## Episode V: Was a Hippo in my Tent? by Tricia Berry

We returned to our lodging just as the chef was putting out a beautiful riverside dinner for the three of us, taking into account the meal preferences we had emailed weeks ago. Entertainment that night was provided at another table celebrating a birthday. More than a dozen staff members serenaded the birthday girl and then each performed their own impressive dance moves for the family group. We wished that one of us had a birthday to celebrate for the next night's dinner.

Then it was off to bed for another night of nocturnal animal noises. Camp security walked us to our tents and repeated the warning that if we needed to leave our tents for any reason during the night we were to radio for security to escort us. Never step outside your tent without security present was the order.

Like the previous night, all the animals came out to party around midnight. Male impalas were serenading the females, hippos were lumbering out of the water to graze, baboons were barking and scolding one another and the insects, frogs and other unidentified voices sang a bush opera for all to hear and fall asleep to.

Debbie woke up in the middle of the night thinking she had a hippo in her tent. Well, she said it sounded like the hippo was in her tent. It was munching on the foliage on the other side of the canvas wall. Slowly and carefully she crept to the front flap and peered outside to see a hippo grazing inches from the small concrete porch in front. Once again just like the night before, she didn't know who was startled more, but the hippo rushed to the river and Debbie jumped back into bed. And two days in a row, Debbie didn't need any caffeine to get her adrenaline rush in the morning.

At breakfast, the staff asked if we had heard the lions roaring. If we did, we hadn't realized what we were hearing. Hopefully the pride we were following had succeeded in catching dinner.

That morning began our only unplanned day! This was the only day Debbie had not arranged for us to do project observations so we went exploring different parts of LZNP with the intrepid

Sam. Getting to know different people - conservationists, guides and rangers in these different countries - was as interesting as learning about the animals in their areas. In our minds, those in the trenches actually doing conservation work are some of the most interesting, admirable people you can meet.

Sam was one of those gems. Twenty years ago he had decided that after finishing college he would go to law school. A part-time job as a wildlife guide before going off to a university changed his mind. He found he loved being out in the wild and that it suited him better than office work. He was also a self-described "termite geek".

Sam is a termite expert sharing his observations with the international termite community. Little did we know that thousands of people post on termite information-sharing sites daily. If you've been to Africa, you know that huge termite mounds seem to be everywhere. In between educating us about the animals we encountered, we learned more than we ever thought one could know about life in Africa's termite mounds.

Wildlife surprised us everywhere we went, as did the weaver-bird nests hanging like ornaments from trees, and the majestic baobab trees silhouetted against the bright blue Zambian skies. We were so far from the lodge when lunchtime rolled around, Sam put us on a waiting boat and sent us off down the Zambezi for a quicker trip back to camp. I think we must have seen more than a thousand hippos in the water, on the shore and on sand banks we passed (well, at least it was many hundreds). Hippos are being mercilessly poached elsewhere in Africa, as we'd find out when we



The marabou stork...also known as the  
"undertaker bird"

visited Uganda, but they were well protected on this part of the Zambezi.

We were very hungry for lunch, so were a bit taken aback when the boat pilot said plans had changed. He told us, "A new island had been discovered and we are going to stop by there

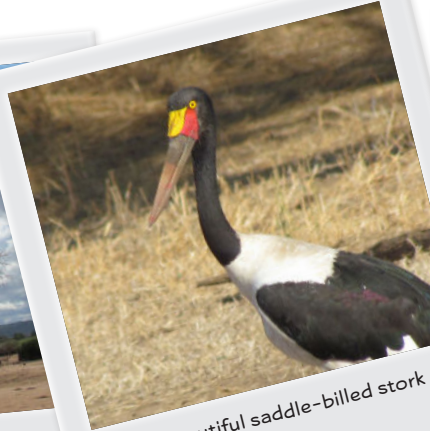
before returning to camp". OK. We were a trio always up for adventure. It turned out that this was a little joke played on guests. The lodge had set up a fancy linen-covered dining area on a pontoon boat and we were treated to a luxurious on-the-water luncheon.



Cooking over the fire



Baobab trees are characteristic of an African landscape



A beautiful saddle-billed stork



We felt spoiled by our luxurious lunch on the water!

### Next Episode:

## When the Only Escape is Backing Up

Again! we were faced with a bull elephant who clearly had decided the road was his and his alone, and he was not going anywhere, but we were. He continued strutting directly toward us.

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