

Close Encounters of the Endangered Kind



Episode VI: When the Only Escape is Backing Up by Tricia Berry

With the afternoon unscheduled, we decided to visit the steep northern Zambezi Escarpment. This is a long cliff created ages ago along a fault line. The Zambezi River flows below it. As the dry season continues, the swampy areas and small lakes disappear as well as much of the grasses and leaves, forcing the animals to move up the escarpment for food. We planned for Sam to drive us to a lesser-used campground high on the side of the escarpment for refreshments as we took in the expansive view of the park. Debbie also had a special request. She wanted to see African wild dogs, a beautiful species that is critically endangered. She had been told a pack was active in the area so we would be on the lookout.

Getting to the escarpment camp meant using the 4-wheel drive on low going up and down a winding narrow dirt and rock track with tall bushes and large trees that scraped our vehicle. We were almost closed in on each side. The closer we came to the escarpment, the narrower and rockier the road became. We came upon a deep gulch full of boulders that we had to slowly wind our way through.

Since the driver is on the wrong side of the vehicle (to my American mind anyway), when we struggled to make a tight left turn, Sam's view was partially blocked by foliage and the need to focus on the road ahead. Being in the left front passenger seat, I was the first to see what was on the road ahead. I couldn't get any other word out but a loud "No" as I whacked Sam on the shoulder in panic.

Another huge bull in musth almost collided with our Land Cruiser. If he was startled he didn't show it, but he did show he was annoyed. 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.

Sam, Debbie and I were very aware that this was not a safe situation. Sam went right into action, backing the car over piles of river stones with no place to pull off the road. It was a masterful job of backing quickly over the boulders that we had

just finished slowly moving over going forward! Yet the bull kept coming toward us, not fast, just determined to show us who owned the road. Sam continued to back up the steep bank and the bull kept coming.

Sam backed up through the narrow portion of the track with bushes on each side and the bull stopped and grabbed some leaves off a tree, another display of dominance. We all sighed with relief thinking the bull would now lose interest in us and we could continue on. But that was not what happened. The bull was not done showing us who was boss as he once again started towards us in annoyance. Sam put the vehicle in reverse and we were again trying to wind our way through this narrow dirt track backwards, hoping to find a place we could turn around. We had no problem showing this bull that he had won.



The determined male elephant in musth—not one you want to mess with!

Fortunately, he decided that yes, he had won the battle with the measly humans when he took a left turn off the road. We sat and watched him walk away from us, quiet so as not to attract his attention back to us. Hearts still pounding we continued to sit with the vehicle off to be sure he had lost interest before we continued back through the rocky riverbed and on to the escarpment. Our adrenaline was in overdrive, all of us laughing and talking about what we had just experienced.

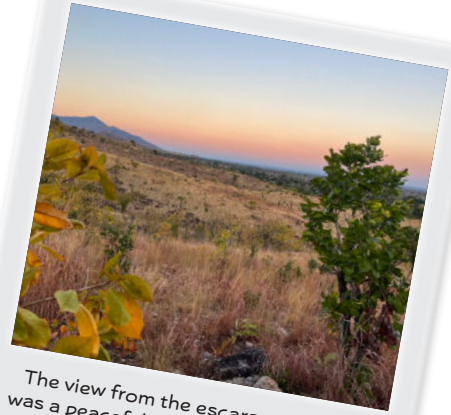
During our escape, I had my cell phone out making a video of what I thought might be the last view anyone would have of us if this elephant decided to attack. Debbie, due to her many years of experience with elephants, was too concerned to take photos, instead looking for ways to assist Sam. She says she was strategizing in her mind how she might protect our small party should the worst happen.

Joe, not knowing anything about bull elephants in musth, was smiling during this little "adventure". Our panic finally became apparent to him when Sam continued frantically trying to back out of its way. He wasn't aware that being this close to any wild elephant, let alone one fully in musth, was not a safe situation - especially when you have no place to turn around or get out of its way.



Much-needed refreshments after our encounter with the musth bull

We made it to the little escarpment camp for some refreshments - and time for our heartbeats to slow down to normal. The view was beautiful. It appeared to go on and on way into the distance. We were sad to leave but it was getting late and we were going to be driving in the dark. All of us were thinking that somewhere out there between us and the camp was a bad-tempered musth bull elephant. Thankfully the return trip was uneventful. We were relieved to get back to the lodge for dinner and to share our separate recollections of that afternoon's unexpected encounter. Tomorrow morning we would resume our safari with hopes of finding the wild dog pack.



The view from the escarpment camp was a peaceful end to our eventful day.

Next Episode:

Oh No! Hippos and Musth Bulls, Again!

We were glad we did not see all the online videos of hippos attacking boats until we returned to the States.

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