

An Elephantine Experience

It all began on a hot morning in March, when various members of the Ring tribe and I were bundled into a heavily laden 4wd, packed with the necessities for life: telescope, camera, binoculars, water filters, etc. The journey was uneventful except for experiencing “washboard” for the first time.

We arrived with much excitement (and relief, as certain very young Rings thought we would never get there) at Mole Game Park. As soon as we'd parked and somebody seemed to know the right way to go and rushed off ahead. Soon we heard the cry, “elephants”! So like bees to honey we rushed over to the viewing area and there they were -- wild elephants! Soon it became a competition for who could count the most, whilst monopolising the telescope. There were 29 in various stages of bathing. They were unperturbed by the crocodiles floating lazily around in the soupy water. As we became accustomed to our surroundings we were able to distinguish more of the beasts from bush.

Some of us were rather tired and went for a rest; in my case this wasn't to be. The moment I lay down, all comfortable in the chalet and ready for dozing, there was this awful noise which made me start - the baboons were trying to get in, or so I thought; banging on the roof and jumping up and down. I didn't want one coming to greet me so I shot off the bed to the door, locking it quick. One continuously peered at me from the window near the roof—very unnerving. Baboons have never been favourites of mine, due to an unsettling childhood experience.

We expectantly gathered the following day to be led away by our friendly guide Zac, who scared little Mary; as he carried a gun and was dressed like a soldier. Suddenly we were approached by some warthogs, who veered off when they realised who we were. Zac gave us permission to approach them and we managed to get some pictures.

From there he took us down the escarpment below the chalets, right into the bush. As it was the hot season it was very dry, and all around were brittle sticks and dead looking trees. Zac pointed more out when he found out I was a birdwatcher. Certain youthful members (including Andy!) were running off ahead and had to be restrained, which was a little difficult with all that excitement! We were led to the side of the pool where the elephants came to bathe. Suddenly it all became very personal, being so close to these large creatures. They disturbed the water with all their movement. It was enchanting just sitting there watching it all happen within 100m of our presence.

I was distracted by anything that flew, especially the famous Hammerkop—famous for its large nest—ten to fifteen times larger than its size. Sad to say we didn't see a nest like on TV as it was the wrong time of year! My eye was caught by a flash of movement on an opposite bank - a Giant Kingfisher had just flown from its perch and plunged into the water. It then came and perched opposite like a water sentinel—a stunning bird and the largest kingfisher I have ever seen. The other thing that struck us was that elephants are actually black when they get in the water. When they get out they decide that being dirty is more preferable and proceed to cover themselves in dust with their flexible trunks.

A group of us continued into the bush, being careful not to get in the way of any elephants. However careful you are, you can't stop the inevitable and we came upon three elephants making their way to the pool. Old Man was the name of one of them; I think he gave new meaning to an elephant's pace - or was he just standing still? Zac couldn't get a response from him or the other two, but we did manage to get some close-up pictures of them. A detour was in order, so we had to head back towards the pool. Some of the elephants were leaving at the far end and more were arriving. I didn't think I would be scared but getting nearer I have to confess to mild anxiety! Old Man and his mates were still heading towards the pool as we moved on to the next one.

On the way to the next pool, I missed some birds by looking the wrong way, but we all managed to see Waterbuck and Kob Antelope. It was a good contrast as they were so close together. Both are small antelope probably the height of an average Ghanaian's waist. One is dark brown and the other reddish-brown.

When we reached the other pool, it was quite picturesque and proved a good residence for various heron species which Zac flushed out for us. He said there were four that had flown out but I only saw three. By this time we were all (except Zac) wilting from the heat and open air exposure as it was nearly 10 o'clock, so we headed back. We disturbed a Lizard Buzzard from its lizard prey - I'm not sure who was the most shocked!

After half an hour, guess who hadn't reached the first pool? Old Man and friends! So we had to wait for them to get in the water before we could move along the path. An amusing farce developed, as the man who looked after the pool had had enough of the elephants and was shooing them away with various colourful local words. So while all the early bathers were leaving at one end of the pool, trundling off into the bush to escape the agitated ranting man, our three friends were just entering, much to the man's annoyance. By the time we had reached the hotel they still had not taken the blindest bit of notice. They were deaf to this man buzzing in their ears like a demented insect and were not going to be hindered in any way in their bathing.

The trip sadly came to an end the following day, it had been both an enjoyable and overwhelming eyeball-to-eyeball experience of Ghana's fauna.

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