

10/27/2003

Before my foot touched the ground, the hyena's head snapped towards me.

As I brought my second foot down, he slowed his syncopated gait and turned in my direction, at most a couple hundred feet away. I knew hyenas ate the entire body of their prey, crushing the bones in their powerful jaws. I also knew their bizarre shape and ungainly movements belied their speed and ruthlessly efficient cooperative hunting techniques. I glanced furtively towards him, and then looked in the opposite direction toward the female lion ripping meat off of the elephant she had just killed. She hadn't spotted me yet, as the truck was partially blocking her view, and thankfully, I was downwind of her. The two male lions, having eaten their fill before she had her turn, were lounging on the other side of the tree, without a direct view of me.

By taking that first step, I had violated the fundamental rule of survival in the bush. I had broken the visual outline of the trucks the animals are acclimated to and presented a new shape on the ground, the shape of fresh prey.

I was standing almost exactly midway between a female lion, one of the world's most powerful and cunning killing machines, and the lead elements of a hyena pack, closing in to battle the three lions for the elephant carcass. To them, I was nothing but fresh meat on the prairie, and fresh meat that did not have the speed, camouflage, armor, or fighting ability that their daily prey possessed.

I looked towards the lioness and saw that she had spotted my legs beneath the truck. Her ears perked up at full alert and her eyes locked onto my calves. They were a new target, unfamiliar, but distinctly animal.

My scent was blowing towards the gathering hyenas and my legs were being tracked by the lion.

I was on the ground in Africa, with two hungry carnivores sizing me up for dinner.

It was not necessarily the best place for a small town boy from Iowa to be.

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It had started innocently enough.

"I dropped my lens cap," Steph said quietly. Busi, our Botswanian guide and driver, spun his head around and said, "What did you say?"

"I'm sorry. I dropped my lens cap," Steph repeated.

I lowered my camera and looked over the edge of the game drive truck we were perched upon. Sure enough, there lay her lens cap in the mud, tiny rivulets of water threatening to float it towards the water hole that had attracted the unlucky elephant calf.

I looked up at Busi. Our eyes locked. "I'll come and get it," he said with sincerity, albeit without his usual enthusiasm.

"No, I'll get it," I said firmly. He didn't argue. After all, he had a family to feed.

He moved the truck slightly to block the direct view of the lioness, but he could do nothing about my legs and feet showing underneath the truck, directly in her line of sight as she peered over the carcass scanning for her arch enemies, the fast approaching hyenas.

## Okavango Delta Part One

As I climbed down the short ladder I knew this would be an interesting moment in our trip around Southern Africa, but I didn't expect the impact of being a target locked in the sights of both a lion and a hyena. By visiting zoos, nature parks and watching carefully edited wildlife shows, we've become desensitized to the true nature of predators and the fate of their prey. As I swiveled my head back and forth between the hyena and the lion I felt exactly what it was like to be the pursued. I was powerfully reminded of how we fit into the scale of nature when it comes to bare handed killing power, or lack thereof.

The carcass of the elephant lay motionless except for the jerking limbs being tugged by the lion's jaws. Her eyes never left my legs as she worked on another bite. I felt the eyes of the hyena boring into my back. Around the fringes, a jackal slinked about, looking for opportunities to bolt in and grab a few bites between the feasting of the lions and hyenas. In the tree above us all, a vulture patiently waited its turn at the kill, wondering if their might be two meals tonight.

All the players in the drama were assembled. It only remained to see what fate would befall me as the action unfolded. A few hours before we had watched vultures consume three quarters of a fresh antelope carcass in twelve minutes. I knew it would take them even less time to pick apart whatever was left of me if things did not go well.

The last drops of the rain shower played a slow staccato on the canvas roof of the truck. My shoes added the harmony of a slow sucking slurp as I moved them in the thin layer of mud. The rains that day signaled the end of the dry season, and in some areas, the end of a four year drought. The underlying pan was sun baked to the consistency of concrete so the water had nowhere to go but to form pools, small streams and liquefy the top millimeter of dirt, where the lens cap waited. It was close, but very, very far away considering who was watching my every move.

Time slowed dramatically as I took the first few steps. The lioness stopped chewing. The hyena quickened his walk towards me. The jackal stopped his pacing and turned my way. The vulture stared down with interest.

As I bent down to pick up the lens cap, I was fervently hoping that no one had taken up a fund to pay Busi to drive off and leave me. Fortunately, the truck was still there when I turned back and reached for the ladder.

I was up and back in quickly, no one noticing my racing pulse and quiet panting.

As I lay in bed in our tent in the Okavango Delta that night, listening to the elephants trumpeting and the lions huffing, coughing and roaring all around us, I thought about how otherworldly it felt to be on the ground with the carnivores and to be just another piece of prey. It had been a life changing experience, but not one I would recommend for the faint of heart or ill prepared.

Through the canvas of the tent I heard a lion, very close, let loose a mild roar. I was very happy the lions had not yet discovered that these easily sliced open tents contained tasty treats, soft on the outside and crunchy on the inside.

I rolled over and went to sleep, my dreams filled with running antelope and pursuing carnivores, my limbs twitching in rhythm with the pounding hooves.

Be well,  
Doug

PS – Following are pictures from our four days and three nights in the Okavango Delta.

## Okavango Delta Part One

A note about the photos:

- All photos were taken by Douglas Hackney
- All photos, unless otherwise noted, were taken on a Canon EOS 10D digital SLR using one of the following lenses: 16-35mm f2.8L, 100mm f2.8 Macro, 35-350mm f4.5-5.6L. Due to the imaging sensor size, the 10D creates a 1.6 lens magnification factor, so a 100mm lens performs like a 160mm lens on a normal 35mm camera.
- All photos were shot in high resolution, low compression JPEG mode.
- All photos have been reduced in size and resolution in order to keep this document down to a reasonable file size. The result is a significant loss of detail and clarity when compared to the original images.
- Image processing consisted of Unsharp Mask adjustment to all images to compensate for resolution reduction. Some images shot in low or flat lighting have also had histogram adjustments.
- Most of the images have been cropped.
- A circular polarizing filter was used for several shots, all others were taken with a UV filter.
- Unless otherwise noted, all shots were handheld.
- I have identified the species that I could remember, but I don't have access to a mammal or bird book in order to ID the rest.



Cape buffalo grazing with cattle egrets. It is very difficult to capture the immensity of the open savanna and the uncountable numbers of grazing herbivores.

Okavango Delta Part One



Hamerkop



Male green (red billed) wood-hoopoe passing food to a female in their nest.



Okavango Delta Part One



African Jacana



Female impala

Okavango Delta Part One



Male impala



African fish eagle in flight.





Zebras and giraffe.



African elephant

Okavango Delta Part One



Sunset on the Okavango Delta, day one



Dinner under lantern light. Manfrotto 482 micro tripod.