

# Tales from Chobe

—PHOTOS AND TEXT BY LOU COETZER —

For the last two decades, photographer Lou Coetzer has visited Botswana's Chobe National Park on a regular basis. Through patient observation, he has witnessed nature's dramas unfolding before his eyes in one of Africa's greatest wildlife regions.





To describe convincingly the sheer magic of the Chobe National Park in Northern Botswana is an impossible task.

You can tell people that the magnificent Chobe River sustains the largest population of African Elephants in the world.

You can describe the adrenalin rush of capturing images of hippos at eye-level or tell of the kingfishers hovering overhead and the comical behaviour of Chacma baboons as they cross the river.

But somehow your efforts to convey Chobe's magic will always fall short of the real experience.



The Chobe River goes into flood from March to the end of May. Photographing from boats means that new areas can be accessed and it is in these flooded areas that nesting jacanas can be found. The opportunity to photograph newborn chicks is one of the highlights of the wet season.







African jacana chicks are born with tiny, stunted wings but incongruously well-developed feet that allow them to begin foraging independently as soon as they emerge into the world. The adult male encourages them to move from one patch of waterlilies to the next and the ungainly chicks often hesitate nervously on the edge of a sinking lily pad, before swimming frantically for the next one. Their haste is due to the fact that they are vulnerable to predators such as monitor lizards and otters when crossing open water. They move between lily pads so fast that I have never witnessed jacana chicks being caught in the water (although I have seen them taken by African fish eagles swooping down to grab them). The threat posed by otters remains palpable however - the birds panic and scatter whenever one appears.







After laying their eggs, female African jacanas abandon the nest, leaving the males to incubate the eggs and raise the chicks.

Sensing danger, male jacanas will often scoop up their newborn chicks and tuck them under their wings to be transported to a safer spot. If there are more than two chicks, this method of transportation can become challenging and the chicks may fall from under the wings.

It's fascinating to watch a male tending his chicks as they grow. They can swim, dive and feed soon after hatching, so you will never see a male feeding them.





The long, thin toes and claws which give African jacanas their distinctive look enable them to walk with their weight more evenly distributed. Their ability to negotiate the floating vegetation in the shallow lakes and wetlands that they call home is the reason they are sometimes known as “Jesus Birds.”







[Above] Jacana feeding on a water lily flower bud. Vegetation is an uncommon component of these birds' diets, which consists predominantly of insects, aquatic larvae, and worms, as well as snails, small crabs and spiders.

[Right] Male jacanas defend their territory fiercely. Always remaining in close proximity to their offspring, they attack any intruders posing a threat to their brood, sometimes supported by the female.





In my numerous encounters with hippos, I've indeed found them to be by far the most aggressive beasts in or on the Chobe River. Adult bulls aggressively defend their dominance, fighting intensely using their long canine teeth as weapons. Their hides are often covered with terrible battle scars. They can also behave aggressively towards humans. There are few things more terrifying than a three-ton beast unexpectedly surging out of the water and charging towards you, obliterating everything in its path. Who decided that hippos do not belong to the so-called Big Five of Africa?







This hippo was warning me not to come any closer! Perhaps it was already agitated by the birds. Hippos don't like passengers. I have even seen one throwing a water monitor from its back, when the lizard tried using it as a stepping stone.



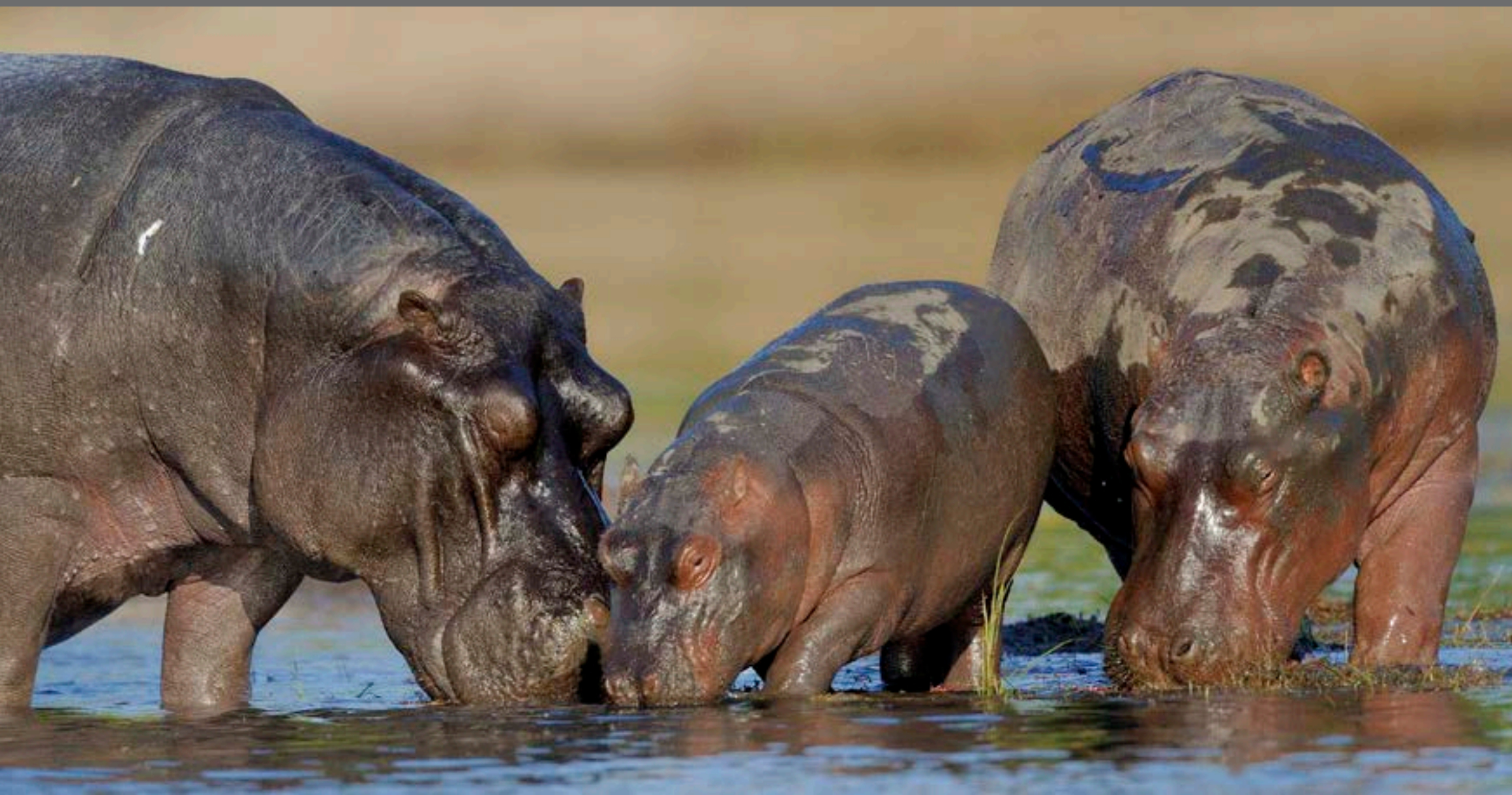
This image shows a dispute between a female hippo (on the left) who was aggressively defending her calves against a bull (on the right) that was trying to kill them. You could hear the noise for kilometers.

When I arrived at the scene, there was blood and slime flying through the air. Then, to my astonishment, the female reared onto her hind legs, trying to make herself appear larger and more formidable. Shortly afterwards, the bull lost interest.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime sighting. I'd never seen hippos behave this way before and I never have since.







Despite their reputation for aggression, hippos often demonstrate the exact opposite. One only has to observe a group with a newborn to recognise their capacity to care. It might even be said that the antagonism and awesome power with which hippos battle, is balanced in equal measure by the compassion and concern they demonstrate for their adorable offspring.





While many species of birds frequent the banks of the Chobe River, few are more persistent and efficient than kingfishers. These tireless beauties can hover over the water for what seems to be an eternity, driven by hunger into a state of perpetual motion. As their name suggests, these birds consume a great deal of fish. But their menu is more diverse than you might think. I have photographed malachite kingfishers feeding on spiders [top left], pied kingfishers devouring frogs [bottom left] and even a giant kingfisher with a crab clasped in its beak [above]





I am vehemently against baiting kingfishers (i.e. providing food to attract them towards my camera) so you have to work very hard to photograph them hunting like this.

The things that has always amazed me about giant kingfishers is that, in all my time photographing them on the Chobe, I hardly ever saw them catch a fish. They always seemed to go for crabs instead. For a long time I wondered if it was a myth that these birds ate fish!





Pied kingfishers are easy to distinguish, not only because of their distinctive black and white markings, but because they hover far more than any other kingfisher species. They often swallow small prey in flight, without having to return to a perch. Here, an adult feeds a juvenile whilst on the wing.







During the rainy season, an abundance of standing water causes a decrease in the numbers of large animals coming down to the river to drink. Deprived of their usual prey, crocodiles turn the situation to their advantage, using the deeper rivers to sneak up to smaller, unsuspecting prey.

Over a three-week period I observed this young croc learning to hunt Cape turtle doves as they arrived en masse for their afternoon drink.

Initially, he was unable to catch them, but he gradually improved his success rate until, on one occasion, he took three doves in one strike. The croc instantly devoured two of the doves, but the third managed to struggle up the riverbank and out of his reach. A troop of approaching chacma baboons panicked the poor bird and it limped off to find safety, only to walk straight into the jaws of the waiting croc.







Returning again to photograph this crocodile hunting turtle doves, I instead ended up with a very different picture.

Still full from the previous afternoon's three-dove feast, the young croc ignored the birds when they once again arrived for their afternoon drink. But as the numbers of doves increased, he could not resist the temptation and he slid into the water.

I anticipated the same ambush strategy we'd witnessed over the past three weeks. But instead, the croc stayed submerged. After al-

most half-an-hour of waiting, I became distracted by the appearance of a skittish tree squirrel on the bank. I'd never before seen one of these delightful little characters come down to the water to drink. The squirrel was nervous, dashing up the embankment whenever he got close to the water, before turning around and speeding back again.

As soon as it stopped for long enough, it was met by the open jaws of the crocodile. The reptile missed its prey by the breadth of a hair and the squirrel lived to drink another day.



Occasionally, crocodiles don't have it all their own way. Here, a young tiger fish fought back by attacking the soft throat of the crocodile. Only when the croc succeeded in working its prey sideways, was it finally able to crush the fish.







After devouring a meal, fish-eagles indulge in a splash-bath. They clean their beak and feathers and satisfy their thirst before resting on the river bank to spread and dry their wings.



Fish-eagles are opportunistic in the way they hunt. Despite being proficient predators in their own right they will also pilfer meals from herons, egrets and kites. On occasion they will even dare to snatch a meal from crocodiles.







When African fish-eagles glide over the Chobe, their presence tends to scatter other birds as they attempt to escape from potential danger. Some, however, take the opposite approach. Long-toed and pied lapwings will actively attack the predatory eagles to protect their chicks or simply to signal to the fish-eagles that they are not welcome.

I once witnessed a posse of African skimmers, pied lapwings and grey-headed gulls working in unison to mob an African fish-eagle. Relentlessly, they harassed the intruder over a distance of several hundred meters.

[Left] There is no love lost between goliath herons and African fish-eagles. Frequently these supreme predators of the winged world can be seen contesting territorial rights to a stretch of water. And invariably it is the fish-eagles that throw down the gauntlet and fire the first shot.

[Bottom left] This blacksmith lapwing flew so close to a fish eagle it could have landed on its back.

[Below] A white crowned lapwing harasses a fish eagle which has just landed a bream.





African fish eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) pair  
evading the aerial attack of a Long toed lap-  
wing (*Vanellus crassirostris*)







On many occasions I've watched African fish-eagles struggling to lift their prey out of the Chobe River, but nothing could match the confrontation I saw one afternoon between a determined fish-eagle and some very aggressive crocodiles.

The eagle had caught a very large catfish but couldn't lift it out of the water. I watched in utter astonishment as it began to swim, using its wings like arms to drag the catfish towards the river bank. The bird's progress was nailbitingly slow and noisy, attracting the attention of a crocodile.

To avoid becoming that croc's meal, the eagle was forced to abandon its trophy and to return to its perch nearby. But it wasn't ready to give up yet.

Twenty minutes later, the croc surfaced 60 meters downstream with the headless body of the catfish firmly clamped in its jaws. I couldn't see the severed head until the eagle swooped low over the reptile, raked its talons through the water and emerged triumphant. It laboured visibly under the weight of the head, but reached its perch in a nearby tree. Lunch at last!



Just when we thought I'd seen it all, I witnessed a young impala being drowned by a crocodile. The following morning I returned to the scene hoping to photograph crocs feeding on the carcass. But instead I was greeted by the sight of a fish eagle trying to lift the carcass out of the water for itself!





African fish-eagles are intensely territorial. They will immediately intercept any invader or predator that dares to intrude on their turf. This drama is often played out at the beginning of the flood season in Chobe, when catfish awake from their hibernation in the mud. While the waters are still low, the fish find themselves trapped and vulnerable. Their

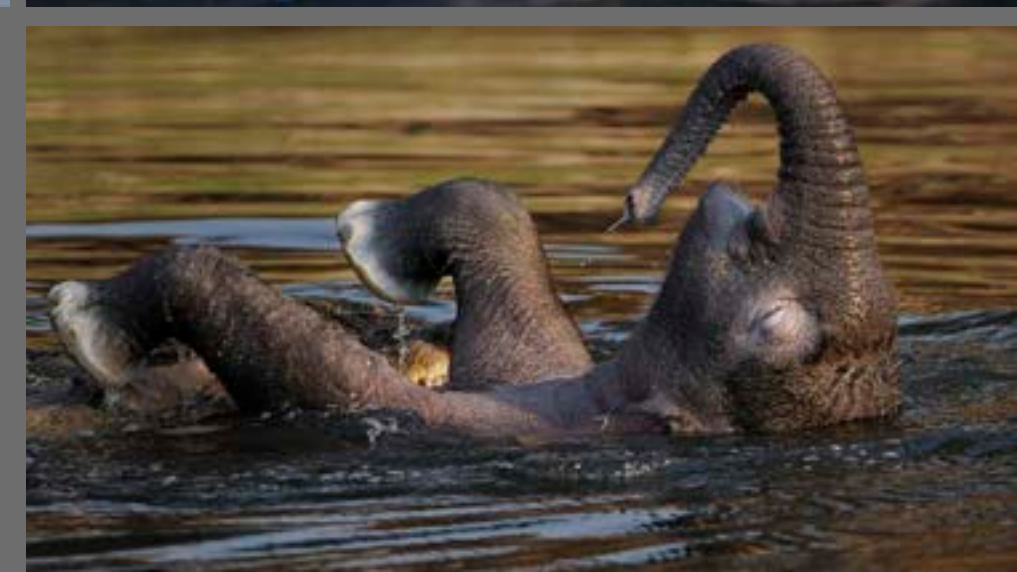
frenzied thrashing about in the mud attracts large numbers of birds of prey. This juvenile fish-eagle struggled to lift a huge catfish out of the shallow water, only to find itself defending its trophy from first an adult fish-eagle and then a marabou stork. Almost as if for fun, storks appear to make a game of chasing fish-eagles, large and small, from one catfish to the next.





For the largest resident population of elephants in the world, the Chobe River is almost the only source of water during the dry winter months. Since the vegetation on the Botswana side of the Chobe National Park has been decimated, the hungry elephants need to travel further and further inland to graze. But the need for water eventually compels them to return.

When the elephants eventually return to the Chobe, some of the calves are seriously dehydrated and weak. The elephants all drink copiously before crossing the river, then head towards islands, and ultimately Namibia, in search of nutrition. It is a dangerous time for young calves. Despite the caring support of the herd, exhausted calves sometimes drown during the crossing.







The elephants' desperate need for food and water becomes evident the moment they arrive at the river. The adults begin to graze immediately, sometimes ignoring the calves completely. Some are so distracted by the prospect of a good meal that their maternal vigilance falters. On one occasion we stood by helplessly as a mother went into a state of distressed rage upon realising that her calf had been left behind on the opposite side of the river.





As they grow older and more independent, elephant calves cope better with the tough journey and seem to enjoy the challenges of the river crossing.

in their first few months after birth, they don't really know what to do with their trunks, swinging them around involuntarily, stepping on them and even sucking them rather as human babies might suck their thumbs.

At about six months of age, they begin to master their appendages, becoming more skilled at using them for eating and drinking.

By the time they are a year old, they have usually developed full control of this strong but sensitive organ. Up to that point they are the definition of 'cute'.







I have spent many joyful hours photographing African skimmers interacting with one another, skimming the river surface for food and feeding their chicks. They generally prefer large rivers and lakes with exposed sandbars. So I was delighted when I found Skimmer Island, a textbook example of this habitat which I have patrolled regularly with my camera ever since. The birds are fiercely protective of it, regularly chasing invaders from their little sandbar in the middle of the river. Even the normally dominant and aggressive Egyptian geese have been forced to abandon the island under constant bombardment from the feisty birds.







I will never forget the day that a herd of elephant came to rest on Skimmer Island, halfway between their river crossing. The skimmers, feeling that their nests and eggs were being threatened by this sudden invasion, went on the offensive. Like dive-bombers, they flew at the elephants, which were clearly irritated by the assault. It's impossible to say whether retaliation was a planned response but during their casual grazing process the elephants systematically trampled every nest on the island, crushing the skimmers' precious eggs. An entire generation of skimmers was wiped out in an afternoon and the birds abandoned their island for the rest of the season. The birds' lost battle for survival remains etched in my memory forever, compounded by the fact that, globally, skimmers are on the brink of becoming a threatened species.





African darters are adept at swimming under water and are generally good hunters. That said, I have seen more darters losing their hard-earned meals to other birds than any other species. Darters also tend to get themselves in trouble through their own clumsiness, either by getting their meals stuck in their throats or by dropping their prey in flight and then frantically trying to recover it before it disappears under water.





Bee-eaters are extraordinarily skillful hunters. They seem to return within seconds of leaving a perch, always gorging themselves on insects. As their name suggests, they catch and eat bees and you will often see them rubbing their prey on rocks, forcing the bees to eject the poison from their stings so that they can be safely swallowed. But bee eaters are equally prodigious at catching grasshoppers, moths, butterflies and the abundant dragonflies that frequent the Chobe River.



During the winter months, vast numbers of chacma baboons settle on the riverbank in the early morning sunshine to warm themselves. The Chobe River must be one of the finest places in the world for photographing these primates. It's a joy to watch them playing, squabbling and performing gymnastics on fallen trees and logs.







Youngsters relish their play time and It's a joy to watch them playing, squabbling and performing gymnastics on fallen trees and logs.





Drinking from the river is a source of constant stress for baboons. They go to great lengths to avoid becoming crocodile food. They stake out a riverbank and observe it for some time before tentatively approaching a crossing point. Once at the water's edge they will go into a state of high alert, fine-tuning all their senses and engaging hair-trigger reflexes to dash to safety at the slightest sign of danger.





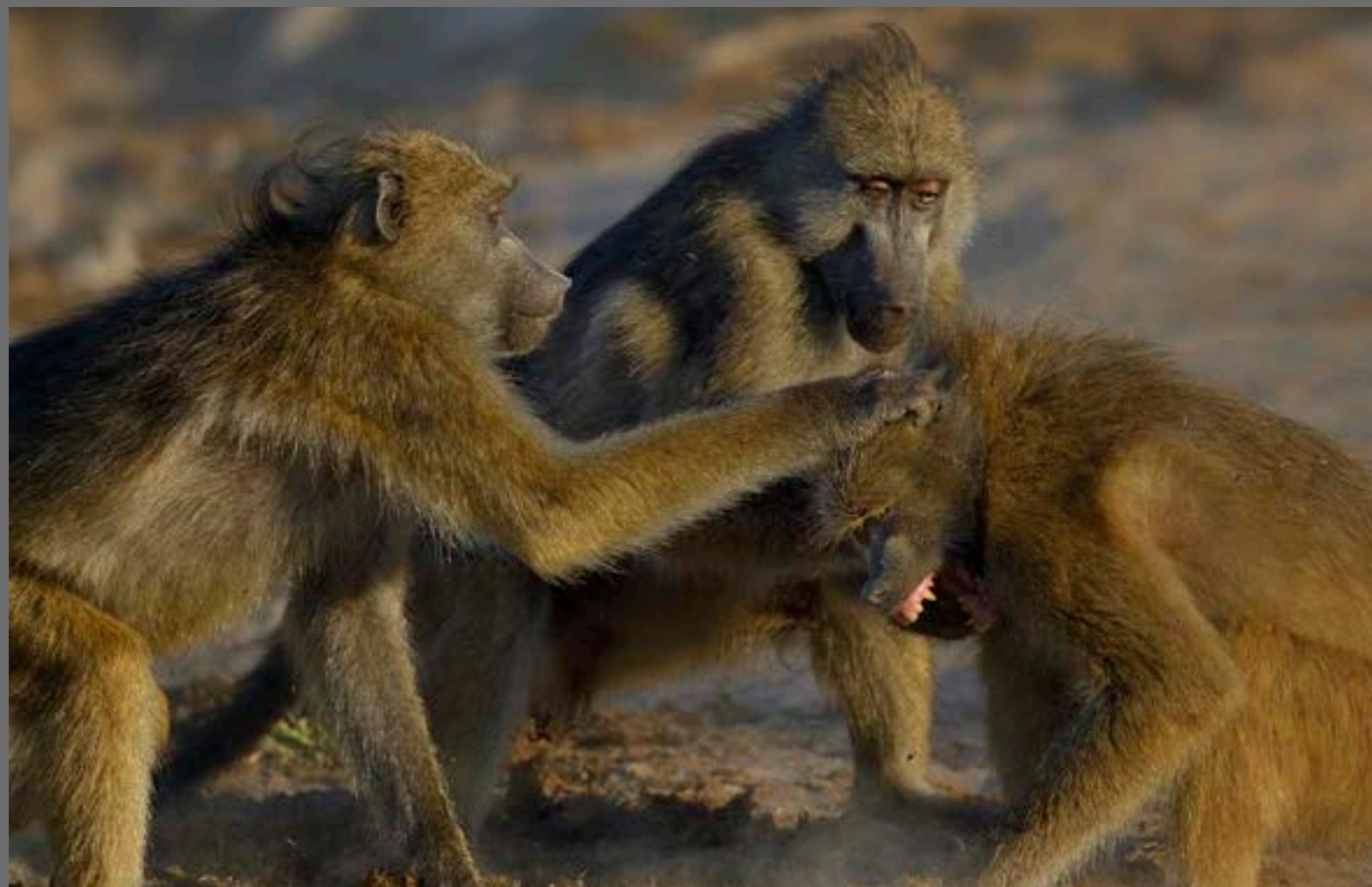
If drinking is dangerous for chacma baboons, then crossing the river is even more fraught. I was lucky enough to witness this event one afternoon in July.

Three male baboons approached the channel where I had positioned my boat, hoping to photograph a herd of sable antelope. The baboons spread out about 30 meters apart and studied the river intently, looking for any sign of a crocodile lurking in the water. Soon the rest of the troop arrived and they began crossing the river, slowly but nervously. Each had its own particular style of addressing the enormous challenge. Females tended to submerge the young they were carrying as they swam across the dark waters. Teenagers tried to run across the surface and were quickly forced to discover their swimming abilities. The younger baboons hopped on to one another's backs, reacting hysterically when the slightest touch from behind led them to believe they were about to become a crocodile's meal.

The crossing took more than an hour, with the whole troop reaching the other side in safety.







There is a constant undercurrent of aggression among the members of the Chobe River's main chacma baboon troop. On many occasions I have seen the whole troop, including females with very young babies, being bullied by senior adult males. Younger males are frequently injured during these conflicts.

Baboon females, on the other hand, are demonstratively compassionate, caring and protective of their young.







Lapwings are easily the most ferocious defenders of their territories on the Chobe River. They will kick up a fuss whenever they spy an intruder and are particularly aggressive towards any other lapwings that dare to enter their space.

[Top Left]; Long toed lapwing (*Vanellus crassirostris*) mobbing African marsh harrier (*Circus ranivorus*)

[Left] Two Long-toed lapwings (*Vanellus crassirostris*) engaged in a territorial dispute.

[Above] A black winged stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) is pushed underwater by a blacksmith lapwing (*Vanellus armatus*), whose territory it has wandered in to.



[Right] Intelligent and adaptable, yellow-billed storks catch fish by stirring the water with one foot to flush out their prey before striking with incredible speed and power.



[Left] The fish and other creatures on which black herons feed generally inhabit shallow water, seeking protective shade when the temperature increases to dangerous levels. Black herons have evolved to exploit this and, when hunting, they can be observed forming an umbrella-like canopy with their wings. They can remain still and hold this position for long periods, exercising great patience as they wait for their prey to be lured into the shade. The fact that the heron's head, neck, beak and plumage are predominantly black, reduces its visibility to prey.





The long, fragile-looking legs of black-winged stilts give them an advantage over other waders in that they are able to forage in deeper waters. Even so, they still compete with one another and, indeed, all the shorebirds on the Chobe.







Capturing action presents plenty of technical challenges. Depth of field and shutter speed need to be carefully judged based on the available light and it is difficult keeping moving subjects in the frame. Fortunately, I can draw on the skills I learned in my earlier career as a sports photographer to avoid the disappointment of missing a magical moment.





To avoid harassment from lions, this herd of waterbuck crossed a channel in the Chobe River to a small island, which had enough lush grass to last them for months. With the rainy season on its way, the island was about to get flooded and the herd was eager to leave. But the water levels were still low enough to afford them a clear view of the crocodiles patrolling the channel in anticipation of a meal.

For days the herd stared at the water, unable to find the courage to cross. That was, until a herd of buffalo showed up and the waterbuck sensed an opportunity. Buffalo don't mess around when they want to cross a channel, their numbers and force create a watery stampede that places the crocodiles at serious risk of injury.

The waterbuck watched as the buffalo hit the water, waiting patiently for the first one to get halfway across. Then they launched themselves into the channel in a frantic bid for safety. Both the waterbuck and buffalo reached the other side without suffering any casualties.











I grew up with Africa's amazing sunrises and sunsets. They are like none other in the world and I have promised myself never to take them for granted.





My approach to wildlife photography will always be to pause and wait whenever the interactive little miracles of Africa's fauna and flora unfold in front of me. I prefer to exhaust the prospects of one scene before moving on to seek another. In that way I am able to experience and photograph many of nature's little wonders that I would never have been able to script in my wildest dreams.







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