

# Weekly Register-Call

COLORADO'S OLDEST NEWSPAPER

PUBLISHED SINCE 1862 IN GILPIN COUNTY

NEWSPAPER OF RECORD FOR GILPIN COUNTY, BLACK HAWK, AND CENTRAL CITY • THURSDAY, MAY 19, 2011 • 75 CENTS

- Stella's Upstairs Café a great place to hang out with friends. **COMMUNITY p2**
- Black Hawk Council prepares for future water needs. **CITY p3**
- Ameristar Cares green and clean team help Gilpin residents. **COMMUNITY p6**
- Gilpin Schools Spring Music Celebration. **EDUCATION p7**
- 150 years of history - more about our founder, William Gilpin. **HISTORY p11**
- Does your furry friend get cabin fever too? **PETS p18**
- Gilpin AT&T cell coverage to expand soon. **COMMUNICATION p24**



DAVE GIBSON

**Drumstick anyone?** The kill determines who survives for another day. Final chapter in the African photo safari series. **p12-13**

# The kill...

## The African photo safari ends

by Dave Gibson

This morning I meet my guide and he asks me what I'd like to see today. With a straight face I tell him I want to take pictures of termite mounds and cattle egrets. He stares blankly back as he must take each customer's request seriously. I quickly let him off the hook, for we both know at this point that it has become about "cats and dogs." Eight days have gone by, and for the last five I've had a driver and vehicle all to myself. Kichwa Tembo knows that grouping a long-term inured visitor with new arrivals would prove uninteresting for the guest who most likely didn't want to stop and view every impala and topi along the way.

My time in the Masai Mara went by quickly with the numerous animal encounters blending together. I saw two servals (an ocelot-like cat) on one game drive. On another, a side-striped jackal hunted insects by the road. One morning my guide and I made it our sole objective to find bat-eared foxes. In a less game-filled part of the Mara, we ventured south along the river and spent time with a pair of foxes guarding a den, along with the only wildebeest that I saw during my entire stay. A hippo jam blocked a bend in the river while I waited for one of them to expose

its gaping maw. Lions were feeding on a deceased hippopotamus downstream. Earlier that day, I was informed of a hippo holding a topi in its jaws for half an hour – something that even all of the guides had never witnessed. A couple of days after seeing the newborn rhino, it was noted limping with blood on its shoulder. It was probably attacked by a male rhino. A skittish leopard bolted away and hid in a leafy hummock. That leopard had spent time out of the reserve and was wary of people; he was a survivor. One of the local lion prides had recently moved 10 miles out of the park and had begun taking villagers' cattle. Plans were being made to herd them back with Land Rovers before they were exterminated. A zebra's entire side had been ripped open by lions the evening before as it stood there amongst the other zebras with its skin hanging down. Three hyenas stayed close to it looking for any hint of weakness. That zebra was most likely finished off and eaten that night. Also viewing the sanguine-splashed zebra were a group of surgical masked Japanese tourists. Apparently afraid of germs, my guide tells me that they even wore latex gloves when shaking strangers' hands!

The two brother cheetahs that we'd seen a few days earlier were lying under a tree when a young warthog appeared on the ridge. Then, standing only 100 feet away,



DAVE GIBSON

one of the cheetahs moved towards it. Accelerating to almost full speed in only a few bounds, the cheetah swiped the warthog with his left paw as my guide shouted "Got it!" We raced to the cat only to find no warthog - it had escaped at the last instant down an abandoned den in a termite mound! I

also saw cheetahs on kills twice. The first was feeding on a newly killed Thompson's gazelle beside a bush. A pair of tawny eagles bided their time behind us, patiently awaiting any scraps that the chee-

tah might leave. Periodically sitting upright and scouting the surroundings for interlopers interested in its kill, the sleek cheetah's belly ballooned noticeably while downing all of the "Tomi."



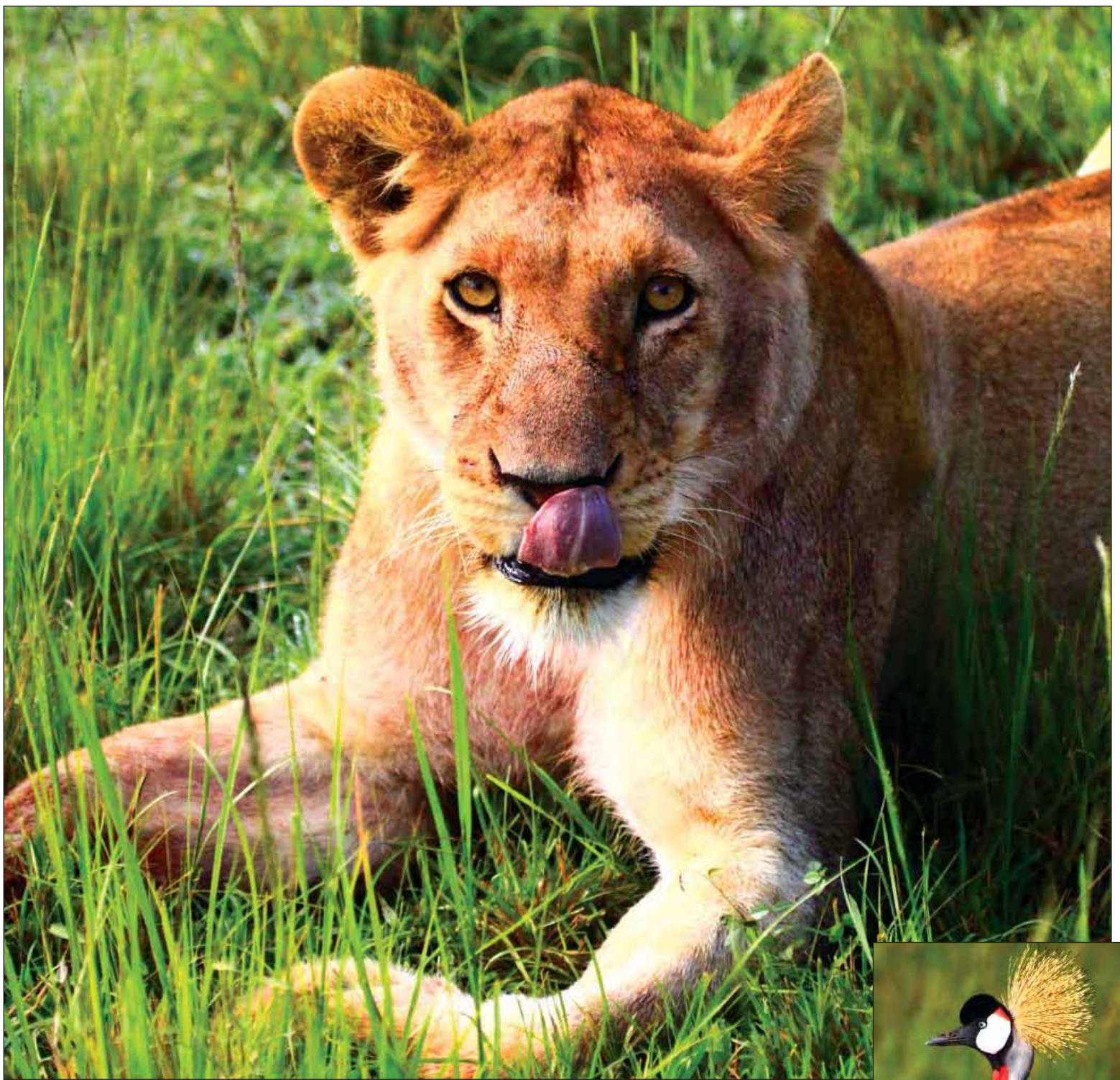
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Yet another cheetah kill involved a downed reedbuck. Like the wildebeest, albeit in worse shape, it would be the only of its kind I saw. Cheetahs will sometimes dive into the mounds of greenery that punctuate the Mara in hopes of flushing reedbuck, but that is not the cheetah's usual tactic. This reedbuck was taken in an ambush, and although a fresh kill, flies already covered the carcass. The cheetah was careful not to puncture the intestines as the pungent odor would promptly attract other predators intent on stealing the meat. Awestruck, I absorbed the scene for almost a half an hour with hardly a word spoken between my guide and myself. No communication was needed when life and death were so clearly defined in such austere form.

One of the lighter moments while on safari came when watching breeding lions. Every half hour, for three days, they will copulate, with the female rolling on her back after each brief session. They were laying claim to the area with the cub's arrival just 3 ½ months distant. Not wanting more lions in the neighborhood, a water buffalo bull with wicked horns took exception to the romance and headed in their direction. Letting the lions know who owned the valley, the lions took flight with the bull in close pursuit! The only problem the lions had – besides having their honeymoon interrupted – was that they were being driven straight into a herd of elephants. The elephants weren't crazy about the lion's presence either, and the lions were now suddenly in a precarious place with angry elephants encircling them. The felines bolted from the tightening noose of elephants and buffalo, after which the lead elephant stepped atop a dirt mound and raised her trunk, emitting a loud trumpet - declaring victory and a warning.

With most of my vacation behind



DAVE GIBSON

me, my guide Daniel and I follow some lions. Three lionesses are on the move, having not eaten the night before and hungry. Sitting partially hidden in the leaves by the edge of an opening – they watch. A warthog boar grazes in

front of one of the lionesses, and I think to myself that I'm about to witness my first kill. An adult boar is a formidable foe for even three lions; with a thick neck and tusks, a kill would take up to thirty minutes and involve lots of goading and slashing. The lions calculate the effort as too costly. Strolling along, one of them with a gouge in its leg lies on a termite mound, with the other two beside termite mounds. In the distance, a sounder of warthogs feed contentedly. One lioness begins loping away from the warthogs in a broad circular sweep of the field. In the meantime, another lioness moves to a depression by the road. Even though the loping lioness is a half-mile away, all of the porcine react to it - moving in the direction of the other lions. Crouched behind a rise by the road, the lion awaiting in ambush sets itself to spring. When the prey was within 30 feet, the lion explodes upon a group of

babies who skitter sideways. With muscles rippling and after only a couple steps and seconds of unbound fury, the lioness clamps her mighty jaws on a baby warthog's neck, killing it instantly. Daniel once again screams "Got it!" with there being no doubt this time. The other two lionesses chase after the first for their share of the booty. With manners that even Emily Post couldn't improve, the snarling lions converge in a knot, tearing the lifeless warthog to shreds in a matter of minutes. Every bite greedily contested, it is as much a lion fight as a repast with blood-soaked mouths and paws deep in guts. In order of dominance, they grab the three biggest remaining pieces of meat to enjoy alone without challenge. Run, fight, eat - or be eaten.



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