



Wild signs (Africa edition)

Description

As anyone who walks, treks, or rambles in the countryside knows, nature is replete with messages. Animals deposit and pick up trails and traces. They communicate within and across groups, populations, species and families.

They broadcast, narrowcast, and live stream messages to friends, rivals, predators and prey, deliberately, inadvertently, or even falsely. Not all channels are open and with equal clarity to all communicants, eavesdroppers and participants. We may as well say that these messages are coded. It's complicated.

Humans participate in this multisensory, multichannel ecology. I'm writing this as I wait for a flight after a 5 day guided safari experience in Kenya, staying in a well appointed camp in one of the northern Maasai Mara conservation areas (conservancies).

Some safari signs

We ventured out each day by jeep or on foot escorted by an experienced driver and guide. There's much to recount about the spectacle of beasts red in tooth and claw, the large and the tiny, of elephants, giraffes, lions, cheetahs, buffaloes, wildebeests, wart hogs, vultures, spectacled weaver birds and dung beetles.

So it really does exist said Sigmund Freud on first sight of the Acropolis, in an existential moment.

Was it the unseasonably dry weather, the anticipation of thunderstorms in the clouds, the long grass in the reserve that drove the grazers north into the conservancy, good land management, or my guarded expectations that rendered the setting so tangible and real? So African wildlife really does exist!

The landscape is alive with variety before calming sunsets blanket the horizons of the prairie. Were it not for the nocturnal wheezing and grunting of hippopotamus too close to the camp much happens away from human senses, as if in secret from habituated urban dwellers. Night falls consistently early in

equatorial latitudes, and we saw signs of the night's dramas on morning drives.

Tracking

Some of the pictures below capture that â?? the hunt for the perfect sighting, the best picture, following trails â?? a four-wheeled chase across the plains to quench the tourist's appetite for spectacle.

The first surprise for the safari newbie is just how invisible a jeep and its occupants are to predators, as long as no one jumps out of the vehicle.



Sibling lions find any excuse to brush up against one another, and share their scent, just like domestic cats.



One of the first signs that a predator is near is the lack of grazing animals, especially if the cats are up wind.



Wildebeests have short memories. If a cheetah has just traumatised a mother and calf during an unsuccessful chase the cheetah will wait for the herd to calm down before hunting again.



For non-human animals the sense of smell overwhelms vision. Humans are unique amongst the animals in tracking footprints on the ground â?? by sight. (These are lion footprints.)



Lions drag the carcass they feed on into the bushes to hide the meal from jackals, and other secondary feeders.



We never saw a leopard, but you can see claw marks where they have climbed a tree in which to eat and rest.



Hippos may walk and graze at night many miles from their river home. They travel at night along “hippo highways” (according to our expert guide Onyango). They mark their territory on the land and in the river by defecating and simultaneously swishing their tails to spread the muck about.



We soon discovered the importance of animal scat for trackers, which we started to call *maafi*, though I can’t find that on line as either a Swahili or Maasai word, even amongst lists of obscenities. Giraffes drop their maafi from some height. So it gets put about. Dung beetles roll it into holes.



Some hippos on the Mara River. They slump into the water and stare at you, even when they are resting on the other side of the river.

See my Facebook feed for more pics, April 2019.

Category

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