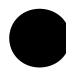
fields of DREAMS

All too often we spend our limited time on safari peering through the vegetation in search of animals. Are we missing a trick? Perhaps only time will tell. →

BY **SUE WATT**

WILL WHITFORD

TRIVIA: VERONICA ROODT DOCUMENTED 98 SPECIES OF GRASS IN BOTSWANA



In March, as we drove around the Okavango Delta, it dawned on me that something rather odd was happening. I was becoming obsessed with grasses.

Usually, at waist height after the rains they just got in the way, smothering the plains and irritatingly obscuring animals and birds we'd been so keen to see. Yet in Khwai it all seemed very different, with long grasses taking on an almost ethereal quality, like gentle waves of dew-kissed gold swaying in the breeze and the morning light.

But maybe it was me that was different...

This was our first trip back to Africa in two years, thanks to Covid closing all borders. Having been trapped in London for most of lockdown, I'd been yearning to return. Yet, the pandemic taught me to find joy in life's little pleasures, to slow down, cherish what was on our suburban doorstep and appreciate our familiar, homegrown nature with fresh eyes. Unexpectedly, that mindset travelled with me to Botswana – and it changed everything.

Instead of rushing around catching bush planes to different camps or parks every couple of days as we'd done in the past, my partner Will and I had opted for a 'slow' safari. We would spend six days in just one place – and we wanted to savour every moment. We chose African Bush Camp's new Khwai Leadwood camp, in the heart of Khwai Community Concession, neighbouring Moremi Game Reserve.

"Part of the reason we felt Khwai was a perfect fit for our African Bush Camps journey is because the concession is community-run and it benefits the locals," Beks Ndlovu, ABC's founder told me. He explained how the company is encouraging guests to stay longer at their camps, aiming for a deeper connection with the people and places they visit: "The usual two-night stay doesn't do justice to an area. I've always been fond of Khwai and I'm confident that, surrounded by diverse wildlife and tranquil surroundings, our camp will create the meaningful connections we hope our guests experience."

Out of season, we met few other tourists and often had the concession and Moremi's lush plains to ourselves, exploring the delta from the air, on the water by *mokoro* (a dug-out canoe) and on drives in the excellent company of our guide, Kutlwano Banda, known as Banda.

On our scenic helicopter flight, we saw the seemingly never-ending canvas of the Okavango spread out below us in a luxuriant palette of greens, blues and inky black. The world's largest inland delta is unfathomably vast, spanning 6000 square miles when the floodwaters are at their highest, drawing 200,000 large mammals to its 2.5 trillion gallons of water.

"Around June and July, this area is all flooded. Every few months, it looks totally different," Matt Cocker, our pilot from Helicopter Horizons said. With the doors removed, my tummy somersaulted whenever I looked down to the plains below as Will and Banda took photos. Both keen photographers, the connection between them developed as their shutters snapped away at hippos splashing and fighting in a murky brown pool and curious giraffes looking up at us as they browsed acacias. Elephants waded in the shallows, and huge crocodiles basked on sandbanks in the sun.

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Above: Waterlily Pan was a top spot for watching birds, including a pied kingfisher and a pin-tailed whydah performing a mid-air mating dance
Right: Khwai Leadwood Camp, nestled in the trees overlooking the Khwai River, bordering Moremi Game Reserve

Big cats proved more elusive. On drives we would track spoor with Banda, hoping to find lions and leopards, but they often disappeared into those long, lush grasses. Dramatic overnight storms exacerbated our challenge. "The rains wash away the lions' scent from marking their territories, so they have to go round again and again to keep it fresh," Banda explained.

With plenty of time and no pressure to 'tick off' the Delta's fauna, my fascination with flora began to kick in. I realised I'd stopped wondering what was hiding deep within the dense vegetation. Instead, the grasses themselves became the focus for my curiosity, awakened by my new post-pandemic mindset of appreciating the 'here-and-now' of nature all around me. Seeing them with fresh eyes, I heard myself asking Banda: "What's this type of grass called?"

"This is catstail," he replied, sweeping his arm to →

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AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS

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PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM **GRASS**

A good example of what grasses can tell us about a landscape is provided by **catstail grass,** which is found across southern Africa and easily recognised by its distinctively purplish, slightly bushy spike (hence the feline name). For wildlife, catstail is largely inedible, and it is a good indicator of a compromised habitat, perhaps due to over-grazing or disturbance (along roadside ditches, for example) — although it also plays an important role as a 'pioneer' species able to stabilise disturbed soil and prepare it for more nutritious but less hardy species.

TRIVIA: THE MOREMI GAME RESERVE COVERS ABOUT 40% OF THE OKAVANGO DELTA

Top: A spur-winged goose and her chicks march to safety at Waterlily Pan **Above:** Banda's auntie's tuckshop in Khwai village **Right:** A *mokoro* excursion allows a closer inspection of the waterways' flora **Far right:** Guide Kutlwano Banda

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emphasise the extent of the plant's coverage on Moremi's Wildebeest Plain, topped with soft pink flowers like brushes holding tiny droplets of dew. Instinctively picking up on my new-found interest, Banda would explain the different grasses as we drove around, showing me their sheer variety and subtle beauty, their textures and colours from wispy white, pink and mauve to vivid green and gold.

He showed me beautiful feathery dropseeds and spear grass with tips as sharp as pins; finger grasses with tiny flowers spread out like a splayed hand; and heartseed love grass with, yes, seeds in the shape of hearts. I learned how people here use grasses in their daily lives, from pounding the seeds of signal grass for cooking to collecting yellow thatching grasses between July and September, when migratory birds return to nest.

Banda told me about the books of Veronica Roodt that had brought Okavango's grasses, flowers, and trees so vividly to life for her loyal readers. "She died last week in her camp here in Moremi," he said softly. "It's very sad. Her drawings were really beautiful, they had so much detail in them."

Born and bred in Khwai village, Banda made our visit there far more meaningful and less intrusive than some village visits can be. Everyone seemed to know him as he showed us his childhood home and his auntie's tuck-shop, and took us to the colourful new kindergarten supported by visitors, local businessmen and tourism operators, including African Bush Camps.

"Before tourism, there was nothing here, no school or health facilities, just mud-and-grass houses," Banda recalled. "We used to swim in the river where there are crocodiles; elephants would come out while we played soccer, and we'd all run into the river to get away from them."

He gained his love of nature from his father, who was also a guide. "This was our favourite spot for fishing," he said as we sat on the deck at Khwai Leadwood, G&T in hand, watching the fiery colours of sunset reflected on the river right in front of us.

Banda's stories vicariously enriched our connection with this place and its people, making me feel glad we weren't moving on and starting over with a new guide like some kind of safari speed-dating scenario. Whether through Will and Banda's mutual passion for photography, my new interest in grasses, or our shared sense of humour and fun, just being with one guide throughout our trip enhanced our experience in a way I hadn't expected.

The same applied to the rest of the staff in Khwai Leadwood, an intimate camp with an air of understated luxury and a warm, friendly team. Laone Disho, our delightful hostess, would welcome us with a genuinely happy smile on our return 'home' every day. I realised by staying in one place that familiarity, far from breeding contempt as the old adage goes, bred comfort and a soothing sense of calm. Sometimes we indulged in the luxury of a lie-in, disturbed only by the dawn chorus of birdsong or the distant roar of a lion. And occasionally we just chilled by the pool, sipping wine, waiting for Henry the resident hippo to emerge from the river nearby.

Those meaningful connections Beks had mentioned continued to evolve as we became more familiar with the plains and pans of Moremi and Khwai, where we'd spot giraffes, zebras, tsessebe antelopes and elephants aplenty. On the edge of Wildebeest Pan we finally found our elusive leopard, with striking dark rosettes and ice blue eyes, lying in the shade of mopane. And near Dombo hippo pool, surrounded by acacias, shrubs and aromatic bushes of wild sage, we saw Saxwapa, a gorgeous dark-maned lion patrolling his new territory. "He used to rule our concession but got pushed out by other lions," Banda explained.

We had the time to focus on the smaller things too. Our favourite spot was Waterlily Pan, rich in birdlife beautifully reflected in its still water. We'd caught Banda's infectious interest in birds and would often return to take photos of pied kingfishers darting down for fish, grey herons and egrets tiptoeing in the water or comical hamerkops catching a ride on the hippo's back. We watched a pin-tailed whydah's mid-air mating dance, fluttering his long tailfeathers to attract a female, and a spur-winged goose with her seven tiny chicks all marching together in a single line to safety.

All too soon, after six days of bliss, it was time to say goodbye. On our last drive, with layers of morning mist resting just above the glistening grasses, Banda showed me Veronica Roodt's book, *The Wild Flowers of the Okavango*, full of her exquisite drawings. I vowed to buy a copy and bring it with me when I next come back to Khwai.

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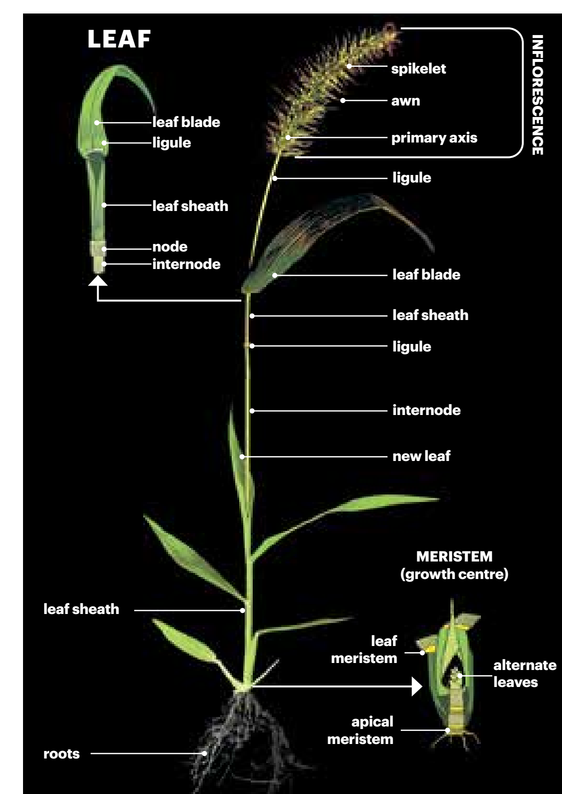
Sue Watt's trip was organised by Far & Wild Travel, African Bush Camps and Helicopter Horizons.



PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

the anatomy of grass

Grasses are flowering plants, characterised by a hollow stem (culm) divided into sections by small nodes which support the stem and allow it to bend. Leaves (blades) are typically long and flat, usually branching off on alternate sides. The topmost, flowering spike (the 'inflorescence') is usually the most easily identifiable part, ranging from the fluffy splayed tips of (for example) oat grass to tightly bunched, catkin-like racemes.

GRASS MATTERS

Grass covers around a quarter of the earth's land surface. The 10,000-odd members of the *poaceae* family range from lawn grasses to cereals and bamboo, providing food for humans and animals, and underpinning the ecology of many of the planet's wild spaces.

Grasses are key to the African food cycle, taking nutrients from the soil and providing fodder for grazing animals, which are in turn eaten by carnivores, with animal remains then decomposing and returning to the soil, after which the cycle repeats.

The search for nutrient-rich grasses also fundamentally shapes migratory patterns across the continent, including wildlife spectaculars such as the great Serengeti migration, as herbivores move seasonally in search of healthy grazing.

Much of the nutritional value of grass lies in its protein content — over 10 per cent in some grass types. Phosporous and calcium (essential for bone formation) is another key ingredient, which is why elephants in the phosphorous-rich Ngorongoro Crater tend to have larger tusks than those in phosphorous-poor Botswana.

SWEET AND SOUR

Much wildlife movement is driven by the fundamental difference between 'sweet' and 'sour' grasses (or 'sweetveld' and 'sourveld').

Sweetveld grasses typically grow at lower altitudes and retain nutrients in their leaves year-round, attracting a diverse range of herbivores, although they are also easily damaged by over-grazing.

Sourveld grasses are more resilient, but provide nutritious grazing for only a part of every year and support a less diverse range of wildlife, typically bulk roughage feeders (such as elephants, zebra and buffalo) able to digest the fibrous plants.

ANNUAL AND PERENNIAL

Annuals (living for a year or less) tend to grow slowly and lose nutritional value once they have flowered. Perennials (lasting two or more years) grow much faster and retain nutritional value throughout their growth cycle.

READ MORE? The information in these sidebars is taken, with permission, from ***Grasses & Grazers of Botswana***, by Veronica Roodt (Penguin Random House South Africa)

DAMPENER: WHEN THE FLOODS ARRIVE, THE OKAVANGO DELTA SWELLS ALMOST THREEFOLD, FROM 6000 SQ KM TO APPROX 15,000 SQ KM