



*My rare sighting of a black mamba*

# SNAKES AND SUCH

PICTURES BY THE AUTHOR

**“W**hat about snakes and such?”

**This question sometimes pops up when clients discuss with me their preferences while we plan their African safari. Few want to have snakes as part of their experience.**

**My answer?**

**“You are more likely to encounter snakes in your garden than on safari. These reptiles are shy and will avoid contact with humans at all cost.”**

Yes, I know there are all these stories about the black mamba that would seek out and attack people—tall tales that have been perpetuated at fireside chats and by Hollywood filmmakers. Like all other snakes, the black mamba will flee whenever confronted by humans and will only attack when cornered. It is true, however, that black mambas grow up to a length of 12 feet and rate as Africa’s most dangerous.

In all the many years that I have been going on safari I have only encountered black mambas twice—from the safety of a Land Rover. In both instances they slithered away at great speed to seek protection in the bushes and I had to be quick on the draw to take their pictures.

*The weaver*



By the way, the black mamba varies in color from olive to dark grey. Only the interior of its mouth happens to be black—something that I have not yet had the courage to check out in person.

My other few encounters with snakes on safari were with what are commonly referred to as garden varieties. Non-venomous, harmless and even more shy than their cousins in our gardens back home, these bush snakes like to feed on bird eggs and small chicks in the nests. On a recent trip I witnessed a golden weaver chasing a green bush snake to divert it from her nest close to the main lodge. This was nature at work without any danger involved to the guests.

**S**o what about the “such?”

This involves a whole range of reptiles that make for fascinating observation while on safari. Chameleons and other lizards, rock and water monitors, turtles, and, ultimately, the spectacular Nile crocodile.

Do not be alarmed when you find a small lizard on the wall of your quarters at the camp. They do eat harmful insects.

*and the bush snake*



My favorite creature is the slow moving turret-eyed chameleon. Whenever I encounter them I cannot resist the temptation to pick them up and have them take a slow walk up my arm to my shoulder.

The same goes for turtles that are quite tolerant of human interaction. But then where are they going to go in a hurry? Expect them to withdraw within their shell after the initial encounter. This shell game does not last very long. Turtles are inquisitive creatures and easily become accustomed to strangers, especially in safari country where they know that they have total immunity.

Less likely to stay still are a variety of lightning fast lizards and skinks and no one, trust me, would want to pick up and hug a monitor lizard or for that matter a crocodile.

The king of all reptiles in Africa is the Nile crocodile—the world’s second largest after the Indo-Pacific crocodile. I never tire of spending time along the river banks watching these ferocious creatures.

An unforgettable sight is the Nile crocodile feeding frenzy when thousands of wildebeest and zebra cross the Mara river between Tanzania and Kenya during their annual great migration. At lengths exceeding 18 feet and weighing in at up to 2,000 pounds a piece, these enormous reptiles have no problem pulling down and devouring these hefty ungulates.

Be cautioned: This is definitely not for the faint-hearted and there have been instances where some guests turned away their eyes hoping that the rest of the party would soon finish taking pictures of the slaughter and leave.

**F**orget about the snakes and concentrate on the “such” in the reptile word. Africa’s safari country certainly has a wide variety to offer. Beyond the 151 kinds of snakes (which will be hard to find, anyway)



*Rock Agama*



*Tree skink*



*Rock Monitor*



*Nile crocodile*

there are 366 other documented species of reptiles to observe. Experts inform us that there are numerous additional species of tortoises, lizards, chameleons and geckos that are still awaiting proper documentation in scientific literature.

**W**hen you get ready to embark on your first safari do not have any fears about snakes—and remember, the “such” involves a whole fascinating range of reptiles. I bet almost everyone who have been on safari before will tell you that they have rarely, if ever, encountered a snake and when they did, they saw it at a safe distance.

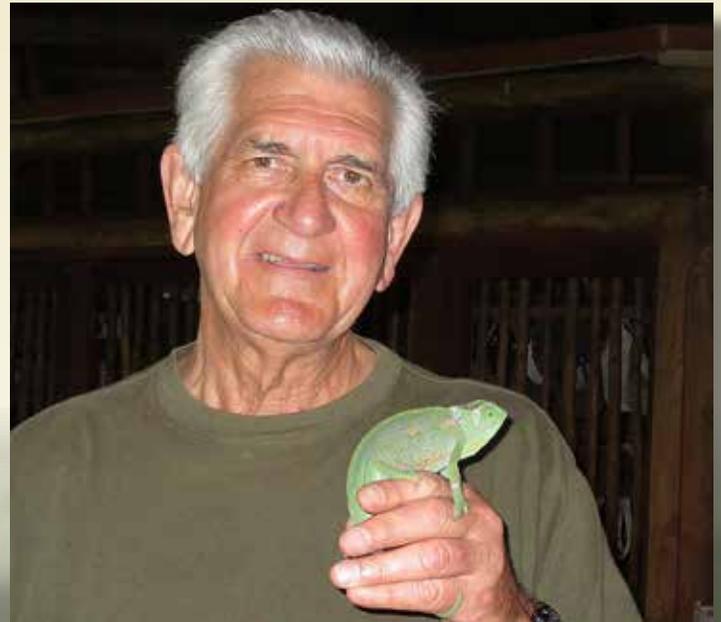


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When you are ready to leave your garden snakes at home to experience in perfect safety Africa’s animal kingdom with its abundance of hot and cold-blooded creatures and unequalled birdlife, I will be happy to assist.

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*Chameleon*



*Leopard turtle*