



Jenny Bowen

BEING SENSITIVE

What do you miss about Africa?
For **Jenny Bowen**, it's something
we've probably heard before

A part of me is missing. I feel bereft, drifting, unconnected from my surroundings. That void is Africa. Those of you who have fallen under her spell will understand. She becomes part of your soul and when you are not there, although you don't realise it, you grieve for her absence.

Whenever I return, I religiously take the time to renew my connection. My ritual involves facing the sun, the warm glow bathing my face, my eyes closed and my bare feet in contact with Mother Earth. It is a full body experience, starting as a welling in my stomach and travelling through my whole body until it feels free, connected. No doubt next time there will be tears too.

I associate Africa with sound and smell, rather than what I can see, touch or taste: the mournful 'whoop' of the hyena that resonates through the still night air; the roar of a lion which makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up; the smell of the hot earth; the incessant call of a crested barbet.

I led a couple of groups of visually-impaired people on safari, and found when describing scenes my vocabulary became more varied and thoughtful, but it really was the sound of the bush that triumphed. I learned to take the time to properly listen to our surroundings.

Man-made noises can be very intrusive. I asked for the engine on our safari vehicle to be turned off to allow everybody to focus on the sounds of the bush. As we sat, many of us holding our breath, it became clear there is so much more to listen to than I had thought. The first discernible sound was an elephant feeding about 20 metres from us. I could hear the grass being torn from the earth, bashed against the soil and then ground by the elephant's molars. Their rumbled communication could be felt through my body. It made me smile.

I closed my eyes. It was as if I had unlocked a treasure trove of sound. I could hear the faint, yet distinctive, *Zche zche zche chirrrr* of a rattling cisticola, perched nearby; the click of a bill snapping on its prey – probably that of a forktail drongo. There was a rustle to my left – maybe a large grasshopper landing in the grass, or perhaps a small mammal running through the undergrowth.

I noticed the fainter, less obvious noises. The piercing cry of a Wahlberg's eagle high above. The grunt of impala, followed by a warning call snort and then a stampede

as they fled. A fly buzzed by. The gentle breeze rustling the combretum trees. It was liberating to allow my sense of hearing to be in the forefront of my safari experience.

I retuned my senses to the smells around me. There was the baked earth with its slightly sharp, metallic scent; the crisp dry smell of the grass which catches in the back of your nasal cavities; a hint of bush sage; the musty aroma of elephant dung.

On each subsequent safari I have made sure that all the senses get equal attention, because they bring something different to the experience. Once, we were homing in on some lions and had stopped to listen, to decide which way to go. It was then that a black bellied bustard stole the show. This bird is about the size of a chicken, and its call is a *quaaark*, similar to a frog croak, delivered with its long neck extended. It then retracts its head and there is a long wait for a final *pop*, like a champagne cork exploding from a bottle. This had us in hysterics, the lure of lions long forgotten.

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Here in the UK, in lockdown, I try to tap into my inner Africa for that sense of peace. Life seems cluttered and there are more barriers to overcome. It's cold standing bare foot on the lawn; it is harder to achieve a sense of remoteness. Listening to *When Things Fall Apart*, by Pema Chodron, has helped to unlock my wilderness state of mind. And, because I miss the uplifting songs of African birdcalls, I have downloaded *Roberts Bird Guide* on my iPad and have been learning a different African birdcall each morning with my first cup of (rooibos) tea. Today was the turn of Shelley's francolin. So far, I've made notes on 243 of the 730 birds. Let's hope we will be out of lockdown before I have completed the list!

Even now, I try to take time to tune into the smells and sounds around me. When I return to Africa, as well as standing on the bare earth to feeling its pulse, I will make sure to close my eyes and hear the wildlife melodies serenading me and welcoming me back. It will be joyful and, no doubt, emotional. But maybe I'll hear a celebratory *pop* of the black bellied bustard. 🐾

5 quintessential african sounds

By Derek and Sarah Solomon

We have been recording Africa's natural sounds for over 20 years. What started out as a side interest quickly developed into an absorbing passion that saw us taking every opportunity to capture memories of special places and animals. We now have a vast audio library ranging from ants to elephants as well as our favourite recordings – extended wild natural soundscapes that soothe the soul and take you right back to that scene.

The sounds of nature are so evocative. Think of the wind rustling leaves, a stream bubbling over rocks, a storm brewing, and of course myriad wildlife calls.

One of our favourites is the 'dawn chorus' – this is one of those grounding moments when the bush comes alive at daybreak. It is a glorious natural choir and can be enjoyed in most wild places and countryside, although Africa's dawn chorus has the edge.

Other sounds that rank high are the unforgettable roar of a lion and the wonderful whooping call of the spotted hyena, both predominantly heard at night.

The ringing call of an African fish eagle must be one of the most distinctive bird sounds and can be heard along the rivers and large waterbodies throughout much of the continent.

Some of the most exciting sounds, however, are the soft rumbles that elephants use to communicate with one another. This is such a special treat to hear, almost like eavesdropping on their private conversations.

Yearning to listen to the sounds of the African bush? Check out www.dereksolomon.com