

When Winter Arrives on the Game Drive

There is a very specific kind of cold that exists on an early morning winter game drive.

It is not normal cold. It is not “put on a jersey and you’ll be fine” cold. It is not even “I probably should have brought a jacket” cold. It is the kind of cold that waits for you at the camp gate before sunrise, climbs into the vehicle with you, settles somewhere between your fingers and your soul, and then politely reminds you that you chose this life.

And somehow, despite this, we still do it.

Winter in the bush has its own magic. The mornings are crisp, the air is clear, the light is soft, and there is always that little bit of hope that something wonderful is waiting just around the corner. But before the sun has properly committed to the day, there is also the very real question of survival. Not dramatic survival, of course, but game drive survival. The kind that depends almost entirely on whether you packed your gloves, whether your beanie covers your ears, and whether your hot chocolate is still hot by the time you reach the first promising waterhole.

Earlier, a conversation started on one of the YWP groups about just how cold it was, and naturally, the topic quickly turned to how everyone keeps warm on mornings like this. One person summed it up perfectly: layers, layers, layers. That, apparently, is the secret. Not bravery. Not positive thinking. Not pretending you are fine while your nose has gone numb. Layers.

Someone else responded that, strangely enough, his legs never really get cold. It is only ever his hands and head that suffer, which is quite an achievement because most of us lose feeling in everything by the time we have driven three kilometres from camp. But yes, gloves and a beanie would probably do the trick there. Still, the advice remained firm. On an open safari vehicle, layers are the way to go.

And honestly, she was not joking. This morning she left on game drive wearing five layers on top and three layers on the bottom. Five. On top, she had a vest, a long sleeve top, a long sleeve shirt, a jersey and a jacket. On the bottom, two pairs of leggings and thick cargo trousers. At that point, you are no longer getting dressed, you are constructing a personal fortress against the elements.

But anyone who has been on a freezing open vehicle before will know that this is not excessive. This is wisdom.

The wind chill factor on an open game vehicle is no small thing. You can leave camp feeling confident, warm and prepared, only to discover ten minutes later that the wind has found the one tiny gap between your scarf and your collar. Once that happens, it is over. The cold gets in and starts unpacking. Suddenly your fingers are stiff, your eyes are watering, and you are questioning every life choice that led you to sitting outside before sunrise while perfectly sensible people are still in bed.

Self-drives come with their own advantages, of course. You have a little more control over your comfort. You can pack the car like you are preparing for an expedition to the Arctic, and

nobody can judge you because they are probably doing the same thing. Personally, I will never leave without my trusty Stanley flask. Whether it is filled with hot chocolate or coffee, it is an essential part of the morning drive routine. There is something very comforting about wrapping your hands around a warm cup while the bush wakes up around you.

Then there is the beanie, the gloves, the scarf and, more often than not, the hot water bottle. Yes, the hot water bottle. Some may call it dramatic. I call it strategy. If we are self-driving, there is usually a blanket and a pillow in the car too, because if you are going to sit and wait at a waterhole, you may as well do it while being snug as a bug in a rug.

Open safari vehicles are slightly different. You are a little more exposed, a little more at the mercy of the morning air, and very dependent on whatever you remembered to bring with you. Thankfully, many lodges provide blankets, and I am not too proud to admit that I make full use of them. In fact, if there are spare blankets not being used, I may or may not quietly gather them like a winter game drive dragon hoarding treasure.

Because once you are cold, properly cold, everything becomes harder.

You stop scanning properly. You stop enjoying the small things. You convince yourself that every bird can be identified later from a blurry photo because your hands are too frozen to lift the binoculars. And if you have forgotten your gloves, well, good luck. Your hands become icicles, your camera suddenly feels like a block of ice, and your photography standards drop rapidly. That perfect sighting you waited all morning for? Wonderful. Unfortunately, your fingers are no longer communicating with your brain, so pressing the shutter becomes a full-body effort.

There is also a very specific kind of regret that comes with leaving camp underprepared. At first, you think, "I'll be fine." This is usually said by someone who will not be fine. Then, twenty minutes later, you are trying to tuck your hands into your sleeves, pull your scarf over half your face, and convince yourself that shivering is just another form of excitement.

The funny thing is that winter game drives are often some of the best. Animals can be more active for longer in the cooler weather, the light is beautiful, and there is something special about those still, icy mornings when the bush feels quiet and sharp and alive. But comfort matters. Being warm enough means you can actually enjoy what is unfolding around you. You notice more. You stay out longer. You are patient. You are present.

So perhaps the lesson is simple. Winter game drives reward the prepared.

Pack the gloves. Wear the beanie. Take the scarf. Add the extra layer, even if you think you will not need it. Fill the flask. Bring the blanket. If you are on an open vehicle, accept the lodge blanket with gratitude and zero shame. If you are self-driving, turn your car into a cosy little bushveld nest.

Because there is nothing quite like a winter morning in the wild, provided you can still feel your fingers.