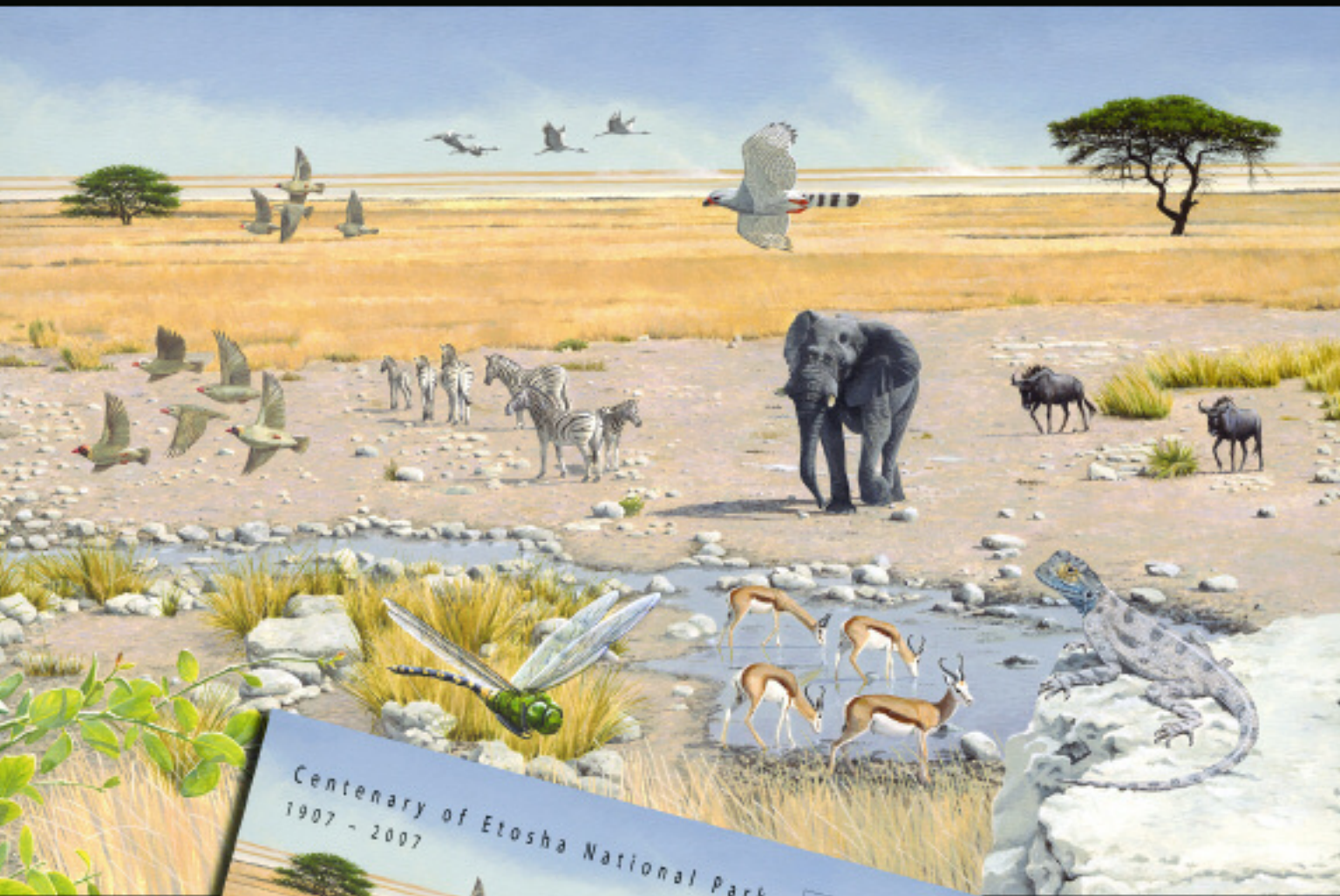


Salvadora, Etosha

Text and Artwork by Helge Denker © (2007)



Vast plains of grass, dotted here and there with distant herds of game, grazing; that wonderful umbrella thorn beyond the waterhole – the epitome of an African acacia; the magical backdrop of the infinite pan, dust devils dancing across it in the midday heat...

Salvadora is the quintessential waterhole of Etosha National Park. It is Etosha, distilled; Etosha, the 'great white place of dry water'.

You park your car on the edge of the small calcrete plateau surrounded by grassland and look down onto the waterhole, and beyond it into vastness. Large numbers of springbok, zebra and wildebeest, later a lone hartebeest, come and go at the water below. Distant ostrich are no more than black specks within the vastness. Pied crows, croaking their hoarse croak, lift and drift on the warm wind. Flocks of red-billed quelea use the dense, bushy tree nearby as a refuge between undulating, synchronised forays to the water's edge. The tree is *Salvadora persica*, the mustard tree, that gives the waterhole its name.

The herds of springbok, wildebeest and zebra drift away again into yellow-grass distances, leaving three red-billed teal and a blacksmith plover alone at the water. The stifling heat of early afternoon weighs down on your senses and induces a drowsiness, and so you close your eyes for a few minutes to rest them from the white glare and, leaning your head against the doorframe, you slip briefly, almost involuntarily, into sleep.

The rushing sound of countless small wings startles you suddenly awake and you sit up quickly to find the waterhole alive again. A Gabar goshawk is hunting the red-billed quelea in a blur of wings flashing away and out of sight to the left, behind the mustard tree. You do not bother to crane your head after it. A huge old bull elephant, walking with urgency towards the water, draws all of your attention to a point with his commanding presence.

You draw in a sharp breath and raise your binoculars. The huge dragonfly (a black emperor) whizzing past your window with its crackling wing-beat, the zebra, the springbok and the approaching wildebeest, even the three blue cranes floating down across the horizon to land somewhere along the pan's edge, are all periphery. You notice them with joy, glance briefly at them through your binoculars (you might focus more closely on them later), but you return your attention immediately to the elephant.

You smile in happy awe and wonder and excitement. What a wonderful sight! The old elephant,

here, surrounded by all of this! You pick up your camera and take a few quick photos. But it is impossible to truly capture all this in a photograph. These snaps are no more than memory tabs, that will remind you of this day, that will take you back here when you sit on your couch on a cool, quiet evening back home, sipping a glass of red wine and longing for African wilderness. No one who sees them, but has not been here, will grasp any of what they mean to you.

Elephants are extremely rare at Salvadora. But every now and then, perhaps only once in a decade, a lone old bull, one of those great old African wanderers, might amble along the edge of the pan and then with a quickening of his determined strides might approach the water, drink for long minutes to quench the thirst generated by hours, perhaps a day or more of walking, splash one trunkful of water across his back in parting, and then walk on.

Only when the elephant has wandered on, leaving behind a strange void somewhere in your heart, do you look down and notice the ground agama perched on the edge of the calcrete ridge, just a metre or so from the car.

And you are still smiling when the last two wildebeest have gone and you are left alone again with the plover and the ducks. And you decide that you will stay here, even if no other animal comes, until the sun is so low above the pan that you will have to rush to get back to Halali by sunset, because you have just experienced one of those truly magical moments of Africa. Because this *is* Etosha. The Great White Place.