

RANGER SEAN'S BUSHVELD DIARIES

DAY 4

A FAIR FIGHT

I was out on a game drive with some UK guests spotting impalas, warthogs, zebra and wildebeest, when suddenly somebody exclaimed: "Giraffe!" Straight away, cameras started clicking at the sight of these six-metre tall gentle giants.

The timid mammals stood together looking at us, one grazing on some leaves on a tree. These ruminants prefer to eat the leaves from the top parts of the tree, as they have a height advantage and can reach the tastier leaves at the top that other animals can't. When they swallow you can easily see the food going down their long necks and into their four-chambered stomachs, which allow them to get as much nutrition from their diet as possible.

We could see the ossicles (horns) sticking out from their heads, and we used these to determine their gender. With the females, the ossicles are completely covered all over in black hair. If there is a bald spot at the top of the ossicles, that looks like the tip of a white bone, then it is a male. These were all males, and we suddenly noticed that something was going on here.

Two of them began swinging their heads and long necks from side to side, twitching and turning. What looked almost like a dance show was actually a contest of dominance: the pair were fighting each other by swinging their necks in a way that can often inflict a fatal blow. But it looked so gentle and elegant - not like a fight at all!

Giraffes have quite a loose social structure and while they often stay in groups, they can sometimes be solitary. But there is still competition between them for the right to territory and females. This particular display of dominance is also how the males get their 'bald spot': when they hit each other with their necks, the ossicles collide into their opponent, knocking off hair follicles at the top.



We were so enthralled by this great show that some of us found ourselves even trying to imitate the dance...

QUIZ

- 1) How tall were the giraffes that Sean and his guests spotted in the bush?
- 2) Why do giraffes eat the leaves at the very top of the tree?
- 3) How many chambers are in a giraffe's stomach?
- 4) What is a ruminant?
- 5) How do male giraffes get bald spots on the top of their ossicles?