

Diving With Dinosaurs

—*The Nile Crocs*
Okavango River, Botswana

Text and photos
by Amos Nachoum

My guide and I saw the croc on the surface, basking in the sun, laying on the papyrus grass. It was a Nile crocodile about five meters long and agitated by our invasion of its space. It moved lethargically and got into the water. We followed it, as it swam against the current. We drove the boat a hundred feet upstream, dived in and let the current carry us toward the beast. We saw it laying motionless on the gray soil of the riverbank. Its large head was under a broken tree trunk. I got myself ready to take its picture. Richard, my guide, was on one side, and I was on the opposite side. The



croc was between us. We were only at 5m depth, and the visibility was fair. Then—as if in slow motion—the croc went into reverse, climbed over the tree trunk and charged full speed toward my guide.





Richard saw the large croc rushing toward him. He raised his Hawaiian spear to defend himself. The croc pushed against the spear, pinning Richard against the river bed. The spear was bending, and sand was rising. The croc and Richard were swinging from left to right. Richard was holding his spear as hard as he could, swinging wildly from side to side. It looked almost like they were 'dancing'. More likely, they were locked in a struggle against each other and not letting go.

All this time, I had been following Richard underwater and was positioned behind him. I finned as hard as I could to get as close as possible to the action in order capture it with my super wide angle 14mm lens. But a thought was running through my mind, "Should I continue taking

Fourteen-foot croc lays on river bank amongst the reeds

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Team travels down the Okavango River seeking Nile crocodiles to photograph and film; Ready for diving; Getting into the water to meet the croc. PREVIOUS PAGE: Nile croc nicknamed, Scooby, shows off his powerful gaping jaws; Amos Nachoum (inset)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Rear view of a Nile croc; Croc inspecting underwater filmmaker, Brad Bestelink; Brad and croc in motion; Guide, Richard, with Hawaiian spear encounters croc in the Okavango River

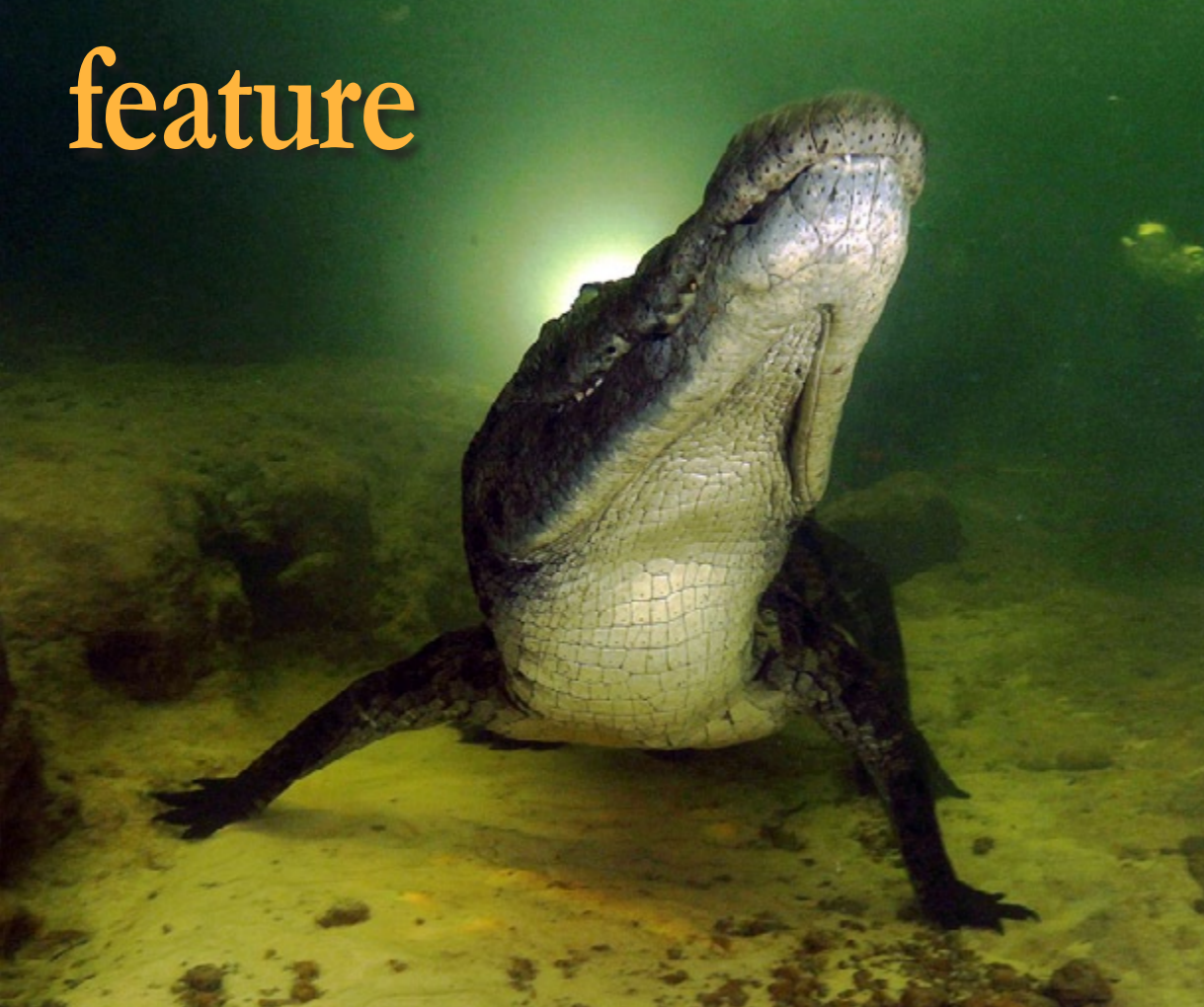
pictures, or shall I help Richard push this croc away?" Before I had to make this 'painful' decision and give up my camera, the croc let go and turned away, but not before it reached the surface and open its jaws wide, for one more fantastic photo opportunity to capture croc behavior.

Richard's head turned quickly, looking for me, and directed me to swim across to the other side of the river away from the croc. We started swimming just above the sandy

bottom of the river, pulling and helping each other to move against the current. It was hard work, but with the thought of the croc behind us, we found a new source of energy. We resolved that, under normal circumstances, we would likely abort the trip, but not this time.

We swam along the opposite bank of the river, presumably away from danger. Richard was ahead of me, moving leisurely down the current. I, for no apparent reason—just





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Crocodile at the surface of the river; Backlit croc lifts head; Richard with spear encounters croc on the river bed; Amos' hand and croc's tail

my sixth sense—decided to look back. Even if I lost sight of Richard, I thought I would catch up with him. I turned my head back, and to my surprise,

two meters away from me, a dark figure filled my view, which could not be anything else but the croc coming toward us, and this time, from

my fins and myself about a meter from the bottom, and the croc was now under me. At that moment of advantage, I pushed my camera and my

behind. Now, I was in front of this wild animal, and I had no spear to defend myself, only my camera.

In a split-second decision, I raised

knees against the croc, pinning it against the bottom. Sensing the struggle behind him, Richard turned back to look for me. The croc, which was pinned under me, turned 90 degrees, and with all its power, pushed me over and ran out into the river current. Richard then led the way, rising to the river surface, signaled the boat, which maneuvered over our heads, and we both left the water speedily. It was enough *crocking* for one day.



**PHOTO HIGHLIGHT:
TIPS FOR WORKING IN MURKY WATER**

Working in murky water immediately requires me to work only with a wide angle lens and to get very close to the subject. That means working with super wide angle lenses, and I'm talking about the Canon 14mm lens with 108-degree coverage and a 15mm fisheye lens with 176-degree coverage.

Since I was working along the bank of a river with lots of vegetation—which casts shadows over the croc—and I needed to highlight the color and texture of the crocodile's skin, I decided to work with strobes in order to highlight the shadows. However, due to sand particles in the water and the current, I had to avoid aiming the strobe light directly at the subject in order to avoid backscatter.

In this case, I decided to aim my strobes upwards toward the surface. Since we were always diving in shallow water, the light from my strobes reached the surface, which was only two or three feet above my head, and reflected back down onto the subject. However, I now had to closely monitor the results on my screen, adjusting the strobe output power, while at the same time modifying the ISO—both of which helped me to extend the range of the light reflected from the surface, since the light now had to travel much further than in the case where one aims directly at the subject, as one would usually be shooting underwater.

That being said, I was also mindful of my white balance and adjusted it according to the color of the water.

Last but not least, I do not suggest to anyone to attempt to dive any river full of crocodiles without an expert—a person who has done it before more than one or two times. If you do not understand crocodile behavior and have not dived the river location before, just don't do it.

Due to the inherent risk in diving at Okavango River, I escort only two divers for one week on this diving adventure, which is most unique in the book of diving safaris. The next expedition is in June 2012 at the Okavango Delta in Botswana. Contact Amos at: crocphoto@biganimals.com ■

The mighty jaws of the Nile crocodile (above). Expedition members saw crocs every day, four to five times per day, which were anywhere from seven to 12 feet long

Clearing the way for the boat (left)

Croc rising (top left)

Storytelling by the fire after an eventful day of *crock-ing*—the adventure of searching for and finding crocs in the Okavango River in Botswana with plenty of photo ops along the way (bottom left)



The Okavango River drops from its headwaters in Angola down the wide flat delta in Botswana and crosses Namibia's Caprivi Strip to finish its 1,100 kilometer journey to the Kalahari Desert. Yes, you read that right, the Okavango doesn't flow into the sea. Its fresh water flows into the Kalahari, fanning out during flood season to form the largest inland delta in sub-Saharan Africa. On this expedition, we saw crocs on

the river every day, four to five times per day, which were anywhere from seven to 12 feet long.

This first-of-a-kind extreme diving adventure is only suitable for two guests at a time. The next experience in the wild with Nile crocodiles is scheduled for 5-14 June 2012 in the Okavango Delta of Botswana. Contact Amos Nachoum at Biganimals.com or telephone: 415-923-9865 ■

