

Tour Report

South Luangwa Photo Safari

2 November 2024

Leopard cub



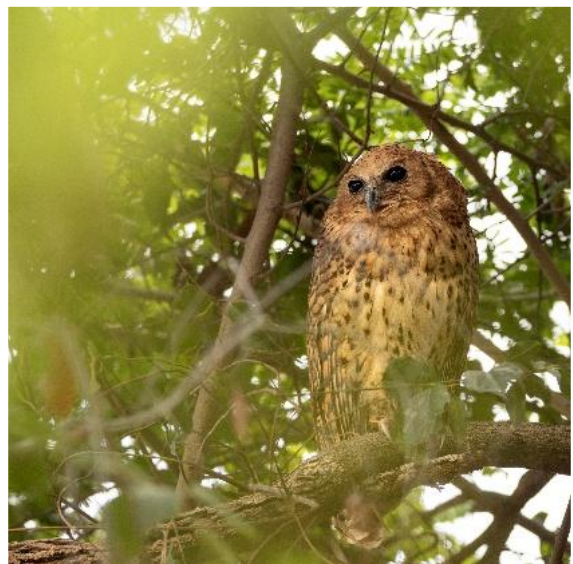
Wild dog



Leopard



Pel's fishing owl



Compiled by Emma Healey

A week of game drives in one of our favourite safari locations. With the rains arriving early, some wildlife was slightly harder to find, but the grass started to grow, flowers bloomed and the two leopard cubs were a big highlight.

Day 1/2:

Saturday/ Sunday 2/3 November 2024

After a long journey, the group arrived to angry but beautiful skies as the sun was setting. The drive to the camp followed a storm, but we managed to avoid it and enjoyed the distant impressive lightning before arriving at camp to a warm welcome. After checking in, Emma and Bret laid out the plan for the week, including the early start in the morning and then it was time for dinner and bed.

Day 3:

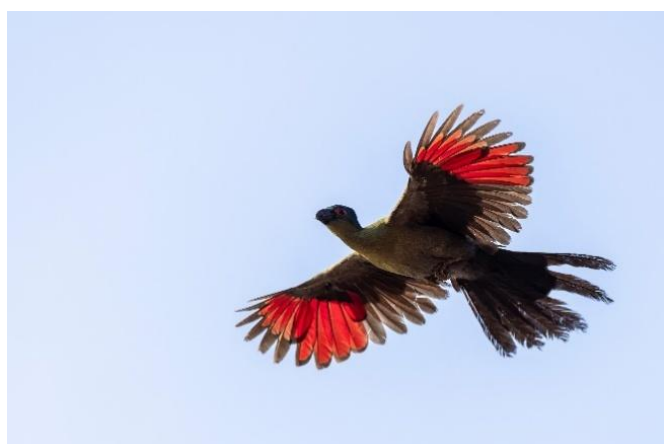
Monday 4 November 2024

After the storm last night, we weren't sure what the roads would be like in the park but luckily things were not too bad, other than some large puddles and the cotton soil being a little slippery. The first port of call this morning was to enter the park and look for the local leopard 'Lucy' and her two cubs, which have been putting on a good show recently. As we arrived at the gate, we were told she had been seen last night at the bridge with her cubs so nobody knew where she was now. We passed another driver who had heard about a leopard in a tree nearby, so we made our way over. It was a large male leopard, who had been in a tree but was hiding in the bushes when we arrived. We could see his face through a hole in the scrub, but the hole wasn't big enough so we went to the side and had a slightly better view, even though it was still obscured for most of the vehicle. He obligingly turned to look at us a couple of times but he didn't look keen on moving from his safe spot so we left him to relax.



As we turned the corner, we came across a purple crested turaco in a bush by the river. They always tend to hide behind small branches and/or in the shade at the top of the tree canopy. We watched it hop around in the tree but instead of posing for any portraits, it flew right over us into a tree behind, enabling anyone ready to get a lovely 'bird in flight' shot.

We drove around the area for a while and then further north towards Wafwa. We enjoyed some time with a number of little bee-eaters flying around in the bushes by the river and then went to the shade for a coffee break.



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As we left the coffee stop, we stopped for a while to watch some white-fronted and carmine bee-eaters catching insects in the bushes to take back to their nests. The light was very bright at this point, so not great for photos but they are always entertaining to watch. After we'd seen enough, we made our way back to camp for lunch and a rest.

After everyone had refreshed themselves with tea/coffee and cake, we started our afternoon drive, making our way to where we'd seen the male leopard earlier this morning. We found a dead waterbuck, which had likely been killed by him, but there was no sign of him around the kill or in the trees nearby.

Nearing the lagoon, we came around a corner and found Lucy moving the cubs to one of her favourite trees. She spent a little time by the road, walking right past one of our vehicles, then went into the gulley beneath the tree for some peace and quiet so the cubs could play in the safety of the lagoon bed. One vehicle remained in case they came up and were rewarded with a brief visit from one of the cubs before it returned to the safety of the gulley. The other vehicle had heard reports of dogs so they raced towards the airstrip, where they found them resting before they got up and started moving as the sun started setting.



The group reunited by the river bank to toast a wonderful first day with a G&T as the sun set over the beautifully still river.

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We returned to camp using spotlights to explore the area on a night drive. We saw some of the park's popular residents including a genet, civet and a bushy-tailed mongoose.

Day 4:

Tuesday 5 November 2024

We started off this morning searching close to the park entrance on a leopard search. The waterbuck carcass had been moved, which suggested the male had been around unless the hyenas had got involved, but there were no leopards to be seen, so we explored the area once more to double-check but then decided to move on to see what else we could find. We came across some more turacos – the most we've ever come across in a few days. The turacos and some yellow-billed storks offered some photo opportunities in a lovely morning night.

We came across a large male kudu at Wakumba and a big herd of buffalo and passed some Thornicroft giraffes sheltering under a sausage tree from the increasingly hot sunshine.

Yellow-billed kites, bateleur eagles and bee-eaters were flying around making the most of the increase in insects after the rain. The pied kingfishers were perched on the branches at the edge of the river like sentinels watching the world go by.

On our way back towards camp, we saw a couple of vehicles stopped by a large area of dense bushes. We went over and were told that Lucy and the cubs had been seen going into the bush earlier, but hadn't come out. As it was getting warmer, we decided to come back later in the hope that they were resting and would come out once the temperatures cooled a bit. It was time for us to go back to the camp for brunch and/or a rest.

We drove straight to the bushes we had passed earlier to wait for Lucy and her cubs. We could see her right inside the dense bush, but there was no sign of the cubs. After a long wait, she came out at last light, and

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although she positioned herself behind some branches (a photographer's usual challenge!) it was lovely to watch her relaxing in the warm sunlight.



One cub came over towards her, scaring a scrub hare out of its hiding place on the way, which gave everyone a shock! The second cub stayed hidden until well after sunset, appearing only as the light was too low for any good shots but we were relieved to see all three were still ok. A few too many vehicles had gathered by this point, so we decided it was time for sundowners. We were treated to a lovely view of a chameleon on a branch with the spotlight on the way back to camp.



Day 5:

Wednesday 6 November 2024

Many of us arrived at breakfast having heard hyenas overnight across the river. We drove to where the waterbuck carcass had been a couple of days before, but it had been eaten so we drove on, passing some tiny baby warthogs. The rains have encouraged a number of species to have their babies so we definitely

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saw more of various species as we drove. We came across a large male leopard in an open area. He seemed to be very bothered by flies, so didn't stay still, unfortunately.

As we drove along the open areas, we saw a large land monitor lizard and a large water monitor in quite quick succession so it was interesting to see the variation between the species, particularly the size with the water monitor being a lot bigger and bulkier than the water monitor.



One frequent sight as you drive through South Luangwa is the huge flocks of red-billed quelea, swooping and making beautiful murmuration shapes. The sheer volume of them can be quite overwhelming at times, with huge numbers landing and taking off close by creating a gust and a surprisingly loud noise! Past a big flock of quelea, we saw a couple of male waterbucks fighting, so sat for a while and watched, but it didn't seem too aggressive, so they were likely play fighting.



We soon came upon a leopard tortoise by the side of the road, so we got out and started photographing it from a low angle. As we explored the area, we also saw several red velvet mites. The other vehicle also approached and joined in – it's always lovely to see everyone get out of the vehicles to take some photos on the road with the smaller residents of the park.



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It was getting quite hot, so we stopped for a coffee break under a big sausage tree (making sure we were safe from any falling fruits!). While we were there, we saw a number of millipedes in the leaf litter, so some of the group took the opportunity to photograph them and they were quite relaxed when curled up, which enabled us to be a bit more creative. Once we'd finished coffee, it was time to head back to camp but you never know what might happen and on the way back, we found a flock of vultures around a dead impala. It was unclear how the impala had died, but the vultures were fighting over the carcass, which made for some nice opportunities, despite the light being very bright by this point.



This afternoon as we drove down the drive from camp towards the park, we spotted the first baby impala we had seen this season just standing shakily next to its mother. This always marks an exciting time in the year for the park as it signals the rainy season is upon them.

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We drove around mushroom lagoon and the elephant loop looking for any activity. We came across a lot more baby impalas, a large herd of elephants bathing and drinking and a big troop of baboons and elephants eating mangoes in the shade of a large tree next to the lagoon. We sat there for some time watching the various species enjoying their surroundings and as usual, there is always something to see including a yellow billed stork catching a frog and a hamerkop getting kicked off the back of a hippo.



As the sun began to drop, we drove to the carmine bee eater colony on the riverbank. Some clouds started to close in and we drove past some shy kudus and arrived at the colony as the light was at its best. The wind was starting to blow, so sand was being blown around but this helped to create beautiful light opportunities as the sun set.



After some well-earned sundowners, we switched to a spotlight and drove slowly back towards camp. We had so many great sightings, including five bush babies, a Pel's fishing owl, and a very posy genet. One group saw Lucy trying to hunt but she looked like she felt she was being disturbed so they left her to it.



Photo by Clare Murphy

Day 6:

Thursday 7 November 2024

As we started driving inside the park this morning, we could see some interesting behaviour suggesting that a predator was close, including a kudu that was obviously spooked by something and some strange monkey calls. We stopped the vehicle to look around and suddenly from the back row one of the guests said "There's a leopard in that tree!". We found a way round the other side of the trees and came upon Lucy up in the low branch of a tree, with the two cubs. As we arrived, she was stretching and getting down so we stopped and watched the cubs attempt to get down gracefully (graceful they were not – entertaining? Definitely!).

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We were able to stay with them as they walked along the edge of some bushes, stopping to play with some leaves before the cubs hunkered down in the bush and mum went off to hunt.



As we were leaving the area, we stopped for a beautiful male kudu who was very obliging but as we were photographing him, a vehicle stopped to say that wild dogs had been seen at Wakumba so headed that way, passing another lone male kudu.



We found the dogs resting under the shade of a tree having recently killed and eaten a baboon. They stirred

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briefly to move to another tree, but the light was very bright so it was difficult to get any good shots. A few vultures were following them and a yellow-billed kite kept swooping in so we sat and watched for a while the light was very harsh so it was either incredibly contrasty or too bright/dark, so we enjoyed watching their behaviour then went for coffee then back to camp – as ever, being observed by the resident fish eagles.



This afternoon we set out to find some hippos at eye level in the river. Chris and Bwalya knew of an area further north near Kikuli where there was a hippo pod potentially close to the beach. As we started the drive, it started to rain and there was a heavy storm as we continued – luckily we had our trusty ponchos to keep us and our kit dry.

It made it quite tricky for us to reach the area, but we did make it despite the cotton soil becoming quite slippery (which makes for a fun drive!) and due to the rain, the hippos were unfortunately quite sedate and not moving as much as we would have liked. We were still treated to some lovely ‘yawning’ behaviour by the large males, asserting their dominance over the pod, but sadly for us, there was not too much resistance so no fighting.



We stayed and had drinks as the sun set over the river, with some of the hippos waking up for a stretch before starting our long drive back to camp. We spotted a number of genets, a mouse, a few elephant shrews and a couple of bush babies in a distant tree. Our final sighting was a pel's fishing owl near Mfuwe lagoon, but as we'd been so far away there was not a lot of time to stop or photograph them.

Day 7:

Friday 8 November 2024

This morning we came upon a large journey of giraffes eating the white belly bush. Continuing to Bangula Lagoon, a malachite kingfisher was perched on a low fallen tree trunk so we were able to get a couple of shots before it flew off. We also found a beautiful pel's fishing owl hiding in the tree canopy. We tend to see

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these on night drives in the park, but it's rare and fantastic to see them in daylight.



As we drove around the bend, we found the other vehicle that had just seen Lucy attempting to hunt some warthogs, unsuccessfully. We drove around the bushes where she'd disappeared and were really pleased to see her walk out into an open plain of dead trees where we could get a few images of her coming towards us but she then moved quickly into a bush.



The monkeys were alarming, making her hunting efforts very difficult, so she stayed in the bushes and after waiting for a while we decided to move on.

Heading towards the 'big baobab', we made a couple of stops on the way for a small herd of breeding elephants eating mangoes from under the tree and caught a glimpse of a spotted bush snake crossing the road. As we approached the more open area near the baobab, we saw three hyenas. Two looked like they were displaying some mating behaviour and the other was staying close by.

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We stopped for coffee nearby, where we had plenty to keep us entertained, including a great crowned crane, beetles, millipedes and red velvet mites. As soon as the rains started, the red velvet mites started to be seen on the sandy ground and some of the group enjoyed photographing them against the contrast of the lovely green grass shoots that had started to appear after the recent rain. As we were leaving, one hyena was sheltering from the bright sunshine in a storm drain for a while, before it came out and ran off to some bushes nearby for shade. We passed some lovely lilies, which bloomed seemingly overnight after the rains.



During our break in the middle of the day, a few of us investigated the central camp area to see what we could find. There was a tree frog and a fascinating cluster of shield bug eggs, which had just hatched when we went back to check so that made for some interesting images.



We decided to explore a new location this afternoon. We drove south towards the salt flat which is a good area to see crowned cranes. The journey there was beautiful, through a dense mopani forest. As we drove, we could hear increasing thunder and we had a bit of rain. When we arrived at the salt flats it was a lot quieter than we had hoped, with only four cranes there, which unhelpfully flew off as we arrived!

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We decided to abandon the mission and head into the park on the south side across the pontoon. The higher water levels in the river caused us some issues getting on and off the pontoon, but as we were about to board the pontoon someone could see some activity on our right. Further investigation revealed a pack of dogs that had just caught a puku on the edge of the riverbed so, having planned to go and look for lions, we diverted to see the wild dogs. We arrived to find them relaxing on the beach after their feed, drinking from the edge of the river and playing.



As we watched, a couple of them returned to the kill to eat a little more, and then some took a little time to play, while others rested. A Kittlitz's plover and its baby were running around on the sand around the vehicle entertaining us while we watched.

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As the light started to fade, we decided to leave the river and make our way further south to look for the Chinzombo pride of lions close to Puku Ridge near the Chichele hills. Having found no sign at the base of the hills, we went further up and found the pride resting on the rocky slopes. The light was fading fast, so we moved around to grab a few shots of the lions with the scenery behind and then went round the corner for sundowners.



As we were packing up our drinks tables, we noticed some vehicles coming around the corner in our direction shining their dimmed spotlights so everyone got back into the vehicles a few moments before a lioness walked close to the vehicle, followed closely by the rest of the pride. What an exciting end to the day! It looked like they were keen to hunt but after following them for a few minutes, the impalas they were looking at spotted them and ran away, so we had to start our journey back to Flatdogs as time was ticking on and we were far from home. We made our way back with the spotlight, spotting two hyenas and a couple of genets.

Day 8

Saturday 9 November 2024

On our way into the park this morning there was some beautiful sunrise light, so we stopped on the bridge to photograph the hippos and crocodiles. As we were stopped, an elephant crossed and a mokoro with two fishermen passed the hippo pod, creating some lovely photo opportunities. We continued on to Elephant Loop, where we came upon a troop of yellow baboons – a great subject for early morning light – so we spent some time watching and photographing them in the forest.

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Some lovely sightings driving along, including a buffalo in lovely morning light and an African hoopoe, which never seemed to stop for long but did show a little interest for a few seconds before flying off.

It's not about the animals all the time either – we spent some time during the trip enjoying the flowers, today stopping to look at some spiny combretum – noting how the white leaves are nearer the top as the flower is so dull so it encourages the insects to come having the lighter leaves rather than the green, so they keep those further down.



We drove back to the riverbank as the group were keen to do more in-flight shots of the carmine bee-eaters hunting, flying, landing etc. so we went and watched them coming and going from the bank, feeding their young and sitting briefly to catch their breath before flying off again. It's a great time to practice birds in flight and discuss some creative tips.



Moving further down the river, we stopped for coffee near a large pod of hippos before heading back to camp through the poppies that were starting to bloom.

As we set off for the afternoon drive, we heard some reports that there was a pack of wild dogs in Mushilashi that had been seen this morning, so we made our way there to see if they were still there. We found them alongside the dry river bed – around eight dogs and five pups – in the bush area lying down.



Most were in the shade relaxing and some put on a great show of playing and chasing each other around before heading out onto the dry river bed to join the adults. It was a difficult area to photograph due to branches getting in the way and a narrow road but we enjoyed watching them, practising some video skills and enjoying photographing them when we could.



More vehicles arrived, so we left and made our way back to see if we could find Lucy and the cubs. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful so we went for sundowners by the river, where we were treated to a beautiful sunset as the clouds rolled in. Unfortunately that then brought some rain, which started on our way back to camp so we donned our ponchos and went back to camp to shelter in the restaurant, where we had dinner and celebrated a birthday.

Day 9:

Sunday 10 November 2024

It was the final morning and the search was on for Lucy – everyone was keen for a last glimpse of her (and hopefully the cubs) before we left and luckily she didn't disappoint. One vehicle spotted her and the cubs trying to cross the lagoon but they were spooked by a hyena who tried to go for one of the cubs. They ran into a bush to hide and she went up a tree. The second vehicle arrived when she was sitting in the tree, so everyone managed the 'leopard in a tree' shot, which was great and we were able to try a few angles before

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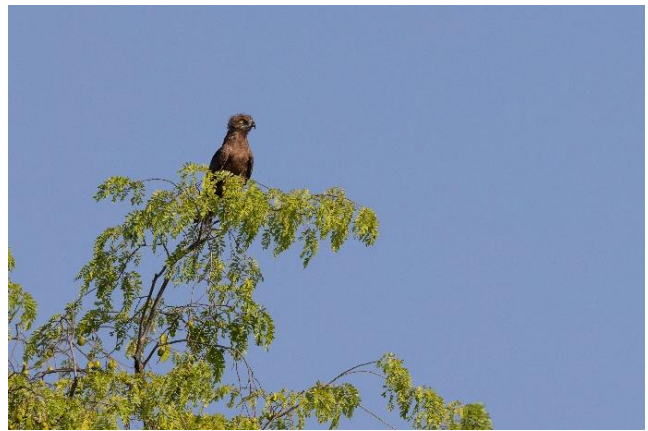
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the light got quite harsh already at around 06:30 am.



We moved off as more vehicles came in and she got down from the tree to sit in the bush with the cubs so we definitely had the best of the sightings, which is always lovely but particularly on our final drive.

We passed, as usual, a number of lilac-breasted rollers on branches, standing like sentinels watching the world go by. Not only in the lower branches, there were also some eagles, a brown snake eagle and a western banded snake eagle in the higher branches. The heat was rising by this point, and as we drove through the main open area, we came upon two male kudus, one had a limp and broken horn so it's possible that they were staying together for safety. We watched them enjoying the leaves, which had started sprouting on the bushes, before continuing to avoid the intensifying heat.



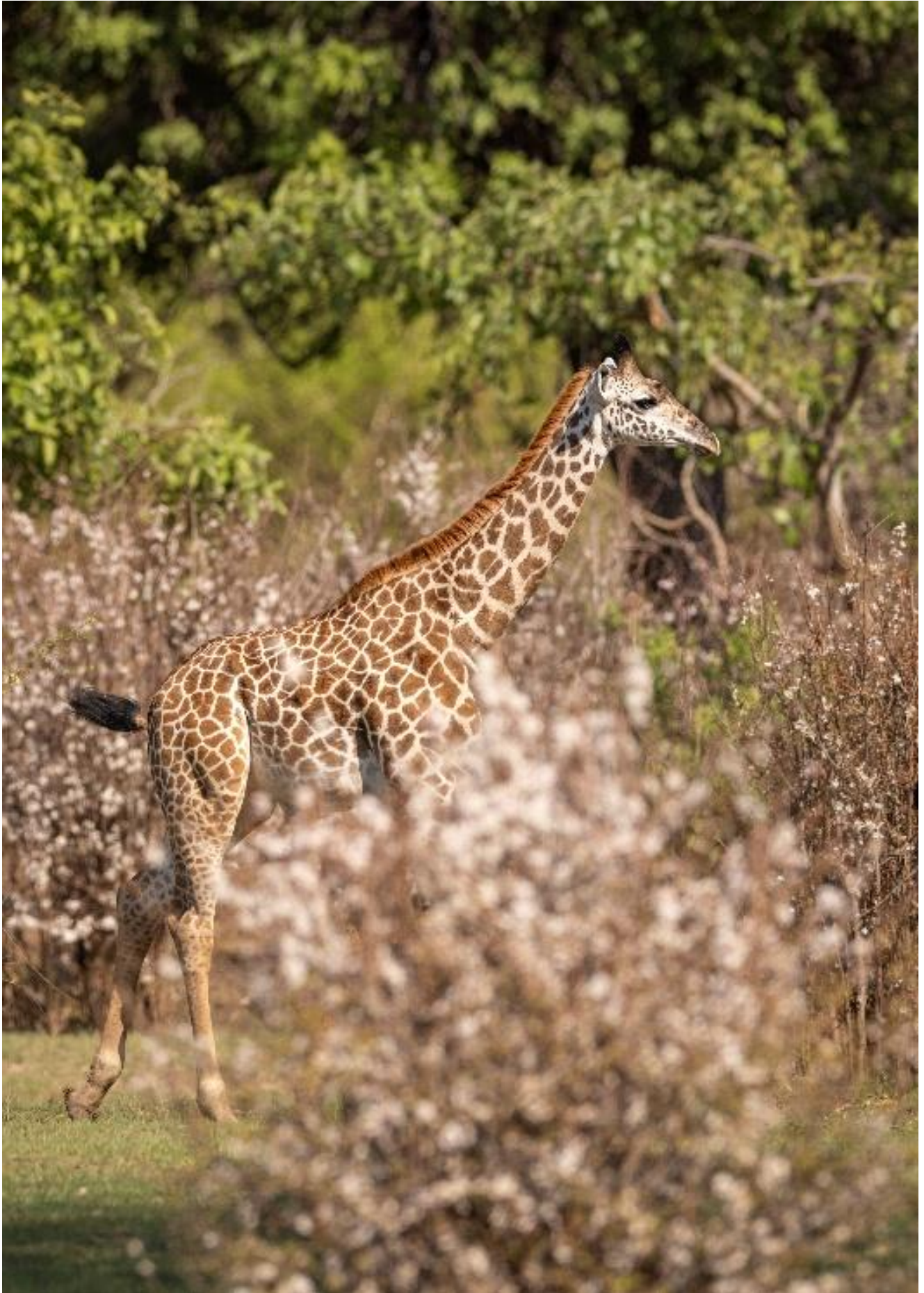
We passed a tower of giraffes eating from the higher tree canopies, providing a lovely distraction on our way to our coffee stop. As we were enjoying our break, a giant kingfisher visited the tree above us, eating a large fish. This was the first one we'd seen, so it was a lovely addition to our sightings before the end of the trip.

As we passed the large baobab outside Mfuwe Lodge, there was a small herd of elephants enjoying the bark. The baobab trees store a lot of water and nutrients, so the elephants strip the bark and use it to gain moisture, particularly when the area is quite dry. They don't get their nickname of the 'Tree of Life' for nothing!

Having watched them for a while, including a young elephant learning how to strip the bark from one of the adults, it was time to make our way back to camp for the last time. We had some time to pack, freshen up and then relax before making our way to the airport to start the journey home.

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