

Tour Report

South Luangwa Photo Safari

19 - 27 November 2023

Lion



Southern carmine bee-eater



Bull elephant



Impala



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Tour Leader: Sean Weekly

Day 1: Mfuwe to Flat dogs camp

Sunday 19 November 2023

After saying my goodbyes to the previous group and dropping them off at the airport, I had the pleasure of meeting my new group at Mfuwe.

We headed the 40 minute drive back to flatdogs camp and I let the guests get checked in and settle in for an hour before dinner. I then gave a briefing to the group on what to expect for the remainder of the week, telling them about recent sightings and encounters we had recently had from the previous week. Everyone was in good spirits and enjoyed a nice dinner before returning to their tents ready for an early alarm call tomorrow.

Day 2: On safari

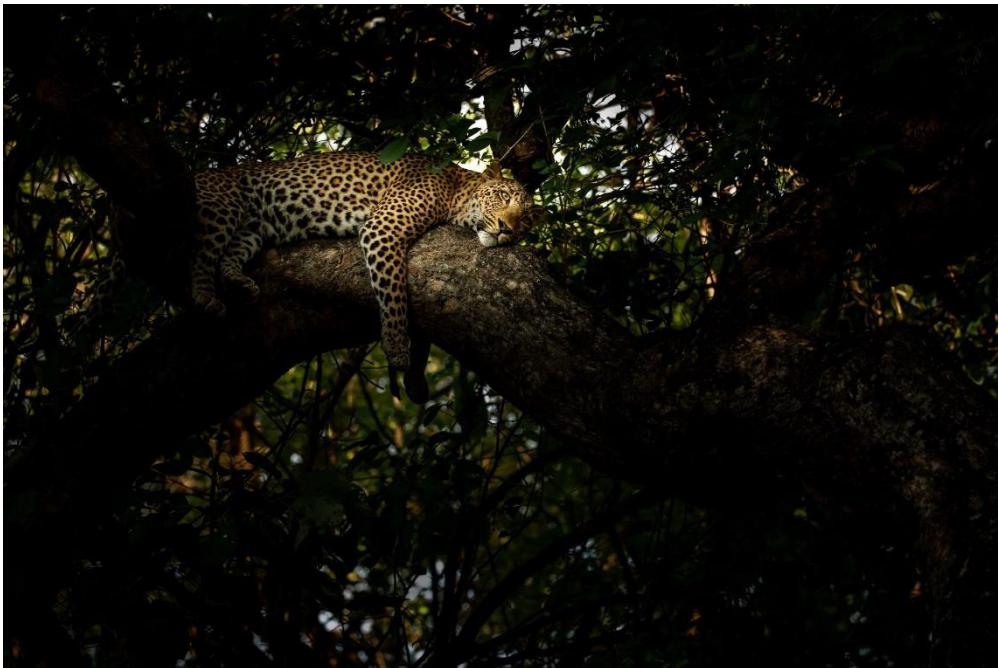
Monday 20 November 2023

Weather: sunny, 40 degrees

We started the morning off with an early light breakfast and coffee before 5am, and then headed out to the park by 5:30 am. This was to be the same routine for the coming week. Everyone was very excited and eager to get out to take photos after their long day of travel.

On entering the reserve we were immediately greeted by a big troop of yellow baboons that call the main gates of the reserve their home. We headed south of the reserve to an area known as Bangula Lagoon, to look for a female leopard and wild dogs which were spotted yesterday early evening. On route, we came across a dead hippo in the lagoon, surrounded by eager crocs lurking amongst the Nile cabbage. Despite the smell, it was a great sighting.

We drove around for another five minutes or so, and came across another vehicle who had just spotted a female leopard heading up into a nearby tree. We found her with a very full belly laying on a branch and panting in the morning heat.

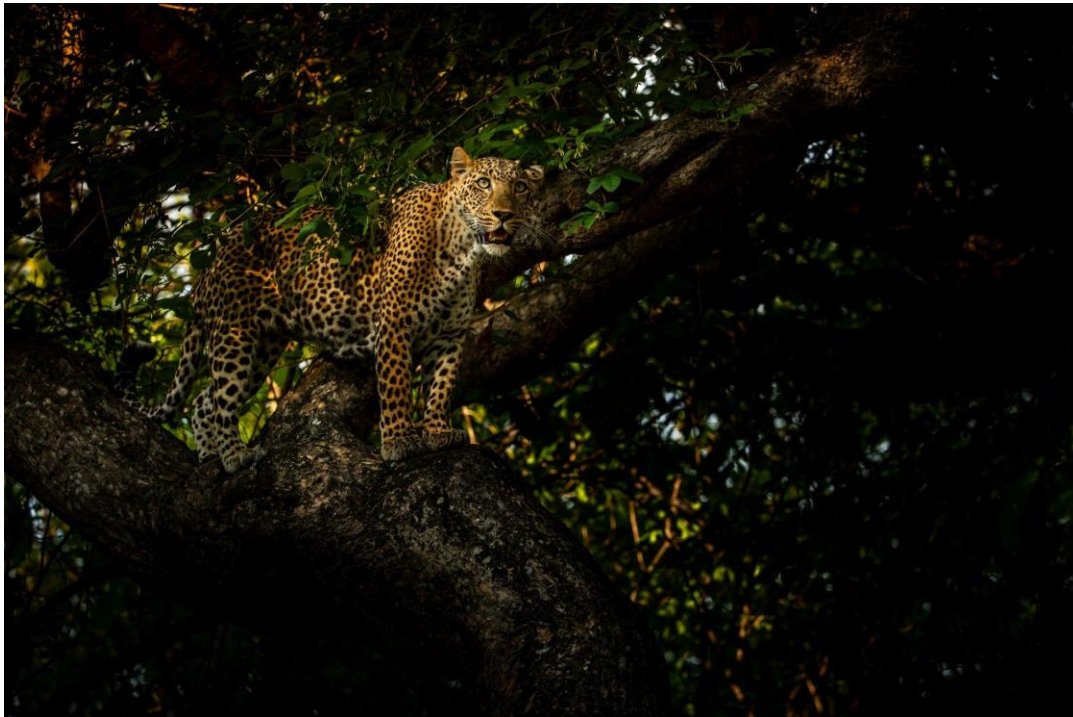


She couldn't get comfortable and got down from the tree, stopping on the way to pose nicely, standing in some dappled light. Once on the ground, she picked up a baby impala kill that she must have hunted a few

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hours ago. She carried it out of the bushes and walked directly at us. Planning her movements, we parked the vehicle in the perfect spot to get some beautiful head-on images.

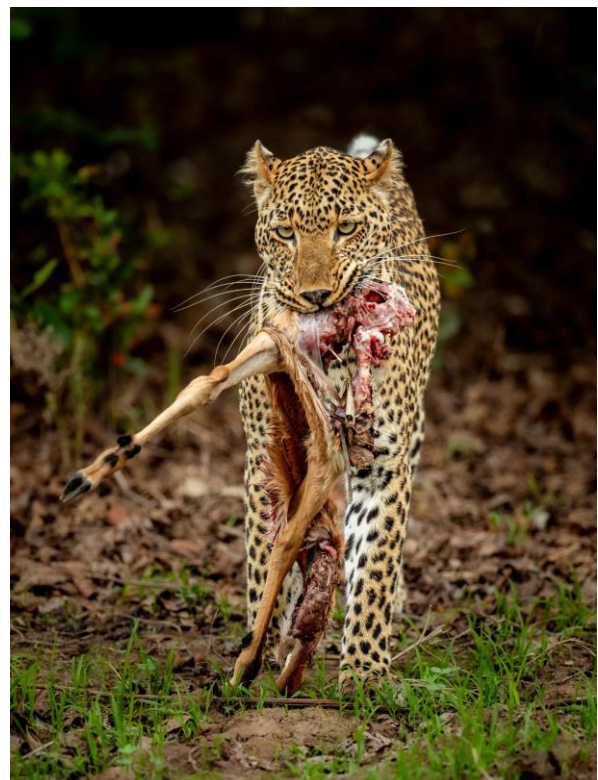


She took the carcass to some nearby bushes giving the remains of it to her 9-month-old cub. Sadly, we only got a very small glimpse of him in the bushes.

Eventually we moved on, continuing our loop of the south. It was not long before we were driving alongside the riverbank surrounded by hippos, carmines, white-fronted and little bee-eaters.

We witnessed a small herd of elephants cross the Bangula Lagoon. Luckily, we had a bit of cloud cover and some soft light. We managed to get in front of them briefly and take a few images.

It was time for our morning coffee stop which we have every morning game drive around 8:30 am. Today we decided to enjoy our coffee at the mushroom lagoon, which was full of hippos and a diverse range of birdlife. Our morning game drive had come to end and we headed back to Flatdogs Camp to escape the heat. The rest of the morning was spent at our own leisure, until we all met up again at 3:00 pm for our afternoon tea and cake break at camp.



Back at the park, we headed south again, looking for the same female leopard that we saw earlier. Less than 20 minutes in the park and we saw a spotted hyena mud-bathing in a wet road track; we think the smell of the dead hippo had attracted it to the area.

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A beautiful herd of elephants graced us with their presence in a vast opening, eating a plant called chameleon's tail. It was a gorgeous scene, with lots of interaction between the herd including a tiny 2-month-old calf suckling.



We soon moved on from the elephant herd as we heard alarm calls from some vervet monkeys in the trees. They had, we think, spotted a leopard. We stayed for a while scanning with binoculars in the direction the monkeys were looking. After some time, we couldn't find anything so we eventually moved on.

We continued to drive and came across three male kudu licking salt in the soil from an old termite mound; they were quite skittish so we weren't able to capture too many portrait images. It was a fairly quiet afternoon with regards to seeing big animals. We eventually started heading to the Wafwa area for a sundowner. We spotted lots of carmine bee-eaters along the river at sunset and guests were able to get

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some nice silhouette shots. That evening, our game drive consisted of gennets, bushy-tailed mongoose, hippo, bush baby, and roosting marabou stork, what a treat.

Day 3: On safari

Wednesday 22 November 2023

Weather: 24-39 degrees

Another early start for us, again we decided to start our morning by heading south to do our usual loop, via the hippo carcass to look for the female leopard.

Near to the park entrance, we saw a western banded snake eagle perched on a dead tree alongside three hamerkops.

Less than three minutes later, we stumbled across a female yellow baboon with her baby clinging to her belly. The female was sitting and eating some mangos very close to the vehicle.

Not too long after that we were spoilt by a sighting of the same female leopard and her cub grooming themselves in thick undergrowth. It was time to wait around and keep the binoculars locked on them to see which direction they were heading once they'd finished their morning bathing session. Eventually, the female started moving and began making tracks, possibly on the hunt for her next unsuspecting meal. Despite our best efforts, we lost her as she continued through the dense bush. So we left her and decided to head north-west to an area known as 'Big Baobab' in the search of a small pack of six wild dogs.

Unfortunately, we drove around for quite some time and were unable to locate them. Eventually, we decided to give up and find a nice shady spot for our morning coffee stop. Soon after, once we'd set up the table and poured the coffee, we got a nice surprise, a tremendous bull elephant came out of the bush and headed straight towards us! We got back into the vehicle quickly and pulled away, giving him space. It then decided to pull the tablecloth, alongside all its contents, with his trunk onto the floor! It then proceeded to start eating tamarind tree flowers from the tree that we were parked underneath. After waiting 45 minutes our guide, Yotam, manoeuvred the vehicle to position it between the elephant and the table and I packed away all of the contents that had been pulled to the floor. A great and memorable experience, it must be said!

Afternoon Game Drive

Heading south again to see what was around, a storm was building, the wind was picking up and the clouds becoming very dark. It was 38 degrees and very warm. We came across a nice southern ground hornbill feeding on frogs. It was nice to be able to get some portraits as they are usually very timid. This one was too distracted by feeding to notice our presence.

We continued to follow the river towards Lubunga and found a lovely crowned crane feeding on seeds along the bank. It was some distance away but it made for some nice habitat shots.

On our night drive evening, we saw a great selection of wildlife, including hippos, elephant shrew, chameleon, scrub hare, leopard, hyena and lots of gennets. We also captured a few nice images of impala and waterbuck against the skyline.

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Day 4: On safari

Thursday 23 November 2023

Weather: 33 degrees

This morning we left camp at 5:15 am to head to a river crossing in Chipela where we hoped to see the elephants crossing back into the reserve from the village side.

We encountered lots of animals on the way, including a couple of spotted hyenas and an African harrier hawk attacking a red-billed hornbills nest.

Further towards Wafwe Lagoon we saw a small herd of bull elephants, including one very small one. Sadly, we didn't stop for photos as we were rushing to the crossing site.

When we arrived at the river crossing, there were signs that they had already crossed ... fresh tracks and elephant dung. They must have crossed earlier than expected, so we decided to head for the bore holes. We went to a location known as 'Bore Number Three' where a watering hole is situated. We came across a nice-sized leopard shell tortoise, which was a great sighting. We carried on driving but unfortunately did not see any of the wild dogs that had been spotted in the area. It was a fairly quiet game drive and we soon headed back to camp.

Afternoon Game Drive

Weather: 36 degrees, light rain

We headed off into the park, encountering five huge elephants as we left! One of the older bulls was definitely one of the biggest elephants I have seen! We let them cross the road and carried on to the park.

We headed to the Chichele area to follow up on a potential lion sighting. It's quite a drive to get there so we were hoping they were there on arrival, as light would be dropping fast.

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We eventually reached the area where a small pride of lions had been sighted and drove around the corner and had the most incredible sighting (I think the best wildlife encounter I have had). A young male lion around 1.5-years-old, sat on a very low branch and a younger lion around 9-months, also relaxing in the tree. We spent the rest of our time with them and at one point we were the only vehicle with them - a phenomenal moment indeed.



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Weather: 38 degrees

This morning we decided to head back to the gorgeous Chichele region to follow up on the pride of lions we encountered yesterday afternoon.

On route, we saw a nice Goliath heron sitting in a tree, enjoying some warm morning sun, followed by a male puku also relishing the morning light.

We stopped off briefly to photograph a carmine bee-eater colony on route, they were quite backlit so we didn't stay with them very long.



It took us a while to reach the area we saw the lions last night as the roads were quite muddy from yesterday's rain. Eventually, we arrived and saw the lion pride, however they were doing what lions do best - sleeping in the shade. After yesterday's jackpot with them, we left them in peace and carried on exploring.

We headed back north along the river and came across an obliging African fish eagle perched in a tree. It allowed us to get fairly close for some nice portrait photos.

Afternoon Game Drive

Weather: 35 degrees, cloudy

Heading to the Wafe Lagoon area in search of elephant herds, we stumbled across a female leopard, but there were too many vehicles so we left her to hunt in peace.

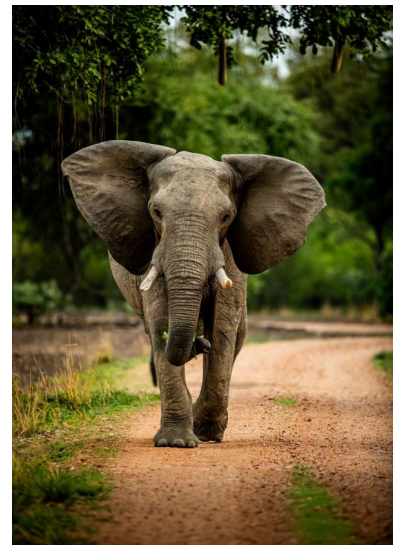
We carried on our journey through the Elephant Loop and, as the name suggests, we came across a huge mixed elephant herd crossing the Luangwa River, heading towards the villages.

The area is known locally as the 'Norman Carr Memorial Site'. Although they were walking in the opposite direction to us, it was an exceptional sight and sound as they splashed through the river, making extra noise to scare the crocs away from the young calves. They reached the other side and we could hear lots of

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trumpeting from the females as they assisted their calves up the sandy bank. It made leaving the leopard sighting even more justifiable and rewarding - as we even had the whole sighting to ourselves!



We continued on a road known as 040 when we came across a lone bull elephant feeding on a sausage tree. We kept our distance and parked further down the track, observing from a distance. However, once he'd finished eating, he walked straight towards us. He showed us who was boss by keeping his ears out and eventually turned and walked away from us across the open plain.

Day 6: On safari

Saturday 25 November 2023

Weather: 38 degrees

Our plan for this morning was to head north to Luwi to find a large pack of wild dogs that had apparently been in the area for a few days. We hadn't had any wild dog sightings yet, so we were eager to find some. Low and behold, that morning we were in the park for less than 10 minutes before spotting a small pack of

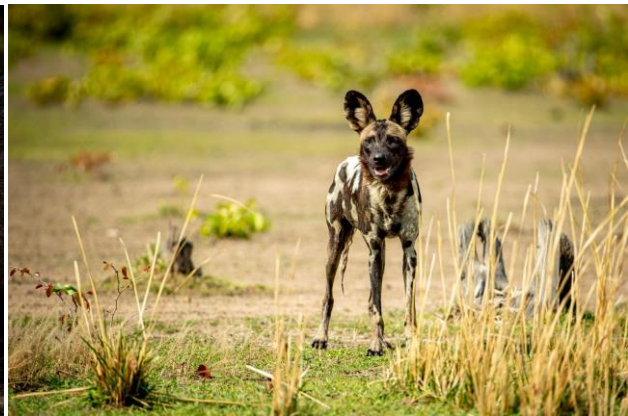
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six dogs. It was great to see and they shortly headed off into the bush on the hunt for impala, so we left them to it.

Not long after leaving the dogs we got a lovely sighting of two pairs of African crowned cranes performing their courtship display. There was lots of wing-flapping and head-bowing, plus a few calls.

We continued our drive and started to see lots of wild dog tracks. It didn't take long until we saw another small pack of four dogs running towards us. They ran into the bush and disappeared, looking startled by something. Just a little further up, we saw a lioness appear on the road with a blood soaked mouth, so we knew there was a lion kill nearby and it didn't take long to locate it. A split-away pride of 12 from the bigger Mfuwe pride of lions had recently killed a buffalo and were enjoying devouring their meal. We stayed photographing them for a while before leaving them in peace to continue gorging. What an incredibly lucky and awesome morning so far!



Our journey to Luwi continued in search of the bigger pack of dogs. We arrived at the Luwi Camp but sadly there was no sign of the dogs, so we stopped off at Luwi Lagoon for a tea and biscuit break. We all enjoyed the sight and of the hippos in the lagoon, making the most of the photography opportunity, with a coffee in hand.

On our way back to Flatdogs Camp, a guest spotted a land monitor lizard, sometimes known as a rock monitor, which is not very common. It was a good find and an exciting first for this group. We also stumbled across another first sighting, a lone Cookson's wildebeest foraging in some dense undergrowth. We re-traced our tracks back to the buffalo kill on the way back and even more of the pride were present at the kill, including two of the young cubs that we saw at the beginning of the week. It was great to see them again and a perfect end to our morning drive.

Afternoon Game Drive

It didn't take long until we came across a lovely herd of around 15 elephants fairly close to the entrance. They were parading in a straight line towards us - so majestic and beautiful! We took some photos as they passed by very close. We presumed they were going to cross the river to get to the village for the mango trees!

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We later came across a beautiful female leopard hunting for impala close to the main gate. At one point we were the only vehicle with her. She came close to us and used the vehicle as cover whilst she was watching a male puku in the distance, before moving into the bush for cover.

Not long after, the heavens opened with roaring thunder and lightning and we were getting soaked in our open vehicle waiting for the leopard's next move. Sadly, the rain was too much and we aborted the rest of the game drive, heading back to the lodge around 5:30 pm.



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Our last morning in Zambia. It's always hard having to say goodbye to South Luangwa. It's a remarkable place with such diverse and unique wildlife around every corner, and it truly is a wildlife photographer's dream. We started our morning by driving close to the entrance on the south looking for the leopard. Sadly, we didn't see her, however a little outside of her territory I spotted a young male leopard, around 3-years-old, sitting on a dead tree. Unfortunately, there were a lot of obstructions so photos were tricky. The young male was also very skittish and soon jumped down from its resting spot and vanished out of sight.

After searching for him for a while, we had no luck. However, it's always a joy to see a leopard in the wild, as they are so elusive and shy that you almost feel a sense of gratitude when they show themselves.

We slowly moved into an area known as Lampung Plains, a big open area with lots of dead mopani trees, in the hope that we would see some wild dogs. They had been spotted last night in the area so it's always worth trying to follow up on sightings from the night before.

A big loop around Lapunga gave us very few sightings, except for a female giraffe that was drinking from some small puddles. When it stuck its head up, it made for some nice high-key photos against the sky. It was also a good opportunity to get some images of the Oxpeckers which were clinging on the giraffes' necks.



Unfortunately, we didn't find the wild dogs, however we had a nice sighting of a male bateleur eagle nearby who was positioned nicely for a few images. After our brief coffee stop, we carried on further down the road and encountered four big bull elephants close to the side of the road. Two of them walked straight towards us!

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Although it had been a quieter drive compared to the other days, we had some great sightings. It's been a fantastic trip but the cold weather of the UK is calling - time to pack up and get ready to fly home!



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