

# Tour Report

## Zambia – Walking in the Heart of Africa

11 to 22 September 2025

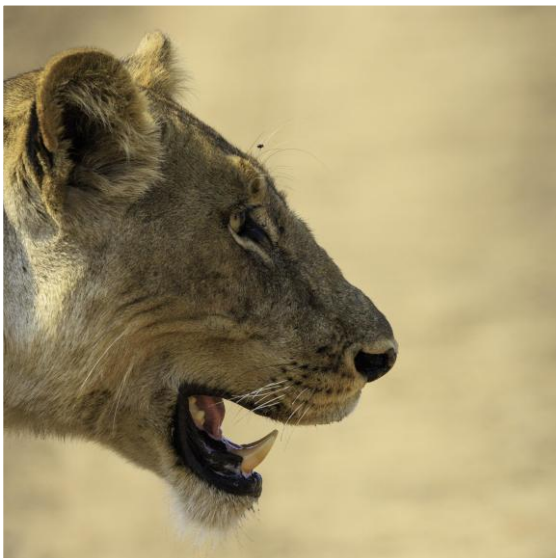
Elephant



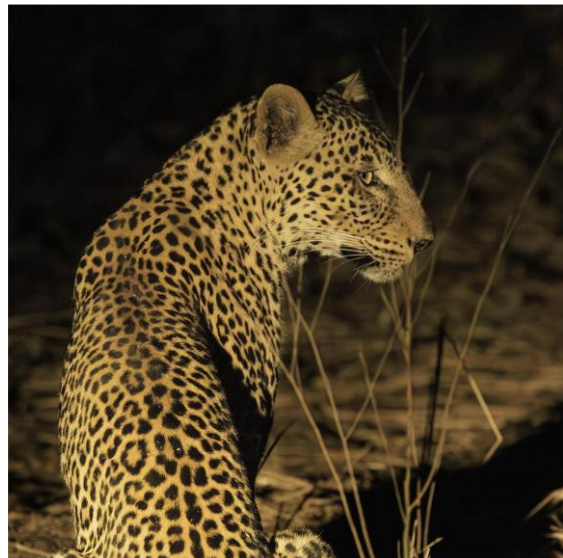
Puku



Lion



Leopard



*Tour Leaders: Chris Breen & Simon Barnes*

## Day 1: London Heathrow to Lusaka

Thursday 11 September 2025

Chris and Simon were already in Zambia as the group were departing London for the heart of Africa on their overnight flight.

## Day 2: Lusaka to Lukuzi, Tafika, South Luangwa

Friday 12 September 2025

Most of the group landed in Lusaka early morning and Chris met them at Lusaka airport for the private charter to the small Lukuzi airstrip to the north of the Nsefu sector in the heart of the Luangwa Valley. The headwind resulted in the flight being longer than we had anticipated at around two hours but it was a pleasant enough flight which, once you get out of the surroundings of Lusaka is simply over 'Africa' – there is almost no evidence of human habitation at all. We were flying over some of Africa's most pristine countryside for the entire duration of the flight.

Coming into land over the Luangwa River is an exciting conclusion to a short flight. Hippos and elephants and were visible from the air...

The group was met on the ground by Simon who was waiting at the airstrip with Steven and Lloyd, two of Tafika's most senior guides.



There were plenty of onlookers as the group got out of the plane – most of them young children who seemed delighted to see us. And, after the bags were loaded aboard the two safari vehicles, it was a 10-minute transfer to Tafika where we were greeted with cold towels to freshen up and shown into the lounge and bar area by Vel and Georgia. Everyone had a refreshing cool drink from the bar and within a moment or two 'Charlie' one of the resident male elephants, decided to walk through the camp – feeding



slowly along the way. He paused outside the toilets at a tree that Georgia said he liked to push with his head in order to shake some of the seed pods down. So, he did just that. He's a big bull elephant after all and who on earth would try to stop him!

A delicious 3-course lunch was followed by a safety briefing (there's nothing to stop the animals coming into camp – so they do - and then Georgia and Vel showed everyone to their rooms – lunch had just finished but it was nearly time for afternoon tea and

game-viewing!

We met for a delicious tea at 3.45pm and were in the vehicles shortly after 4pm on our first game drive of the trip.

It is lovely to drive on private land that has no boundaries with the national park, and we set off along the east bank in search of some lions that Lloyd had heard calling on the opposite bank which he thought may have killed. His theory was that they had killed a while ago and may well now be down at the river drinking. As is often the case, Lloyd was bang on and it wasn't long before we saw seven lions on the other side of the river – six lying down on the sandbank, and one walking towards them. They were fairly distant, but it was a fabulous start to the safari. Looking in and around the river we could see hippos, crocs, zebra, puku, and a few distant buffalo. There were some beautiful birds to see too, including a couple of African skimmers and even (unusually) a pair of grey-headed gulls.

There was so much to see, we didn't manage to get into the park before our first sundowners (gin and tonic was a popular choice!) which we enjoyed overlooking the river.

Sundowners complete, we turned on the spotlight and headed into the park. We were topping frequently –an elephant shrew, two spotted hyenas and some distant giraffe we studied with some intensity until we had a radio call about a pride of lions that had been seen heading for a drink a little south of where we were.

They were heading purposefully to the river for a drink and in doing so disturbed a large pod of hippos that began charging upriver at high speed. This particular pride Lloyd said, seem to have hippo as one of their 'specialist' meats!

Our time in the park was coming to an end but there was still so much to see, including a couple of lovely square-tailed nightjars on the way back to camp. Once we got outside the park and close to Tafika, Sasu picked up a male leopard (Kalipo) in the spotlight which we were able to follow for 10 minutes or so until it made a dock charge on our vehicle and disappeared off into the bush.

Finally arriving back at camp after 8pm there was time for a quick beer or glass of wine before we sat down for a delicious dinner. During dessert Simon read a bedtime story from his book How to be Wild... and then it was time for bed.

### ***Like a bat out of hell...***

*At night you look for eyeshine: the reflection of light from the tapetum lucidum of the mammals of the Luangwa Valley in Zambia. Baswell swung the mighty spotlight from side to side, eager for the subtlest sign. But this time he didn't need every single ounce of his considerable skills.*

*There they were, dancing before us like a swarm of fireflies, two by two by two: 24 eyes in all. Stephen stopped the Land Cruiser and waited as the lights advanced towards us and became lion.*

*For some reason a big vehicle has no meaningful existence for a lion. So they walked towards us in that slouching, menacing stride, golden eyes fixed ahead, deeply satisfied with their own threatening, sinister progress across the Valley. It was like the opening of West Side Story: here come the Jets like a bat out of hell, someone gets in our way someone don't feel so well.*

*They reached the vehicle and, as if performing a much-practiced drill movement, they split to walk either side. I could have reached out and stroked half a dozen of them but thought on the whole better not.*

*We turned around followed them as they stalked off into the night. They dropped down the riverbank and – look, nothing funny, officer, we're just nice people going out for a quiet drink. They dropped onto their keel-bones and lapped life from the Luangwa River.*

*The hippos didn't take this in good part. They caught the scent of the pride, and, as one hippo, they ran for it: 50 or 60 of them charging upstream, filling the night with splashing thunder. The lions paid them no mind whatsoever and settled down for a good old think. A planning meeting, no doubt.*

*Remember the place. We'll check them out tomorrow, Stephen said. That turned out to be a rather good idea.*

*Simon Barnes*

Despite the 4.45am wake-up call and breakfast at 5.15am, Chris was notable by his absence and complained (once he appeared) that he had slept through his alarm! Breakfast complete, everyone was eager to crack on and piled into the vehicles but Lloyd's vehicle wouldn't start so a replacement was called for.



As we drove slowly from camp it was clear just how many elephants there are around at the moment and we watched individual bulls and small family groups feeding as we headed for the park, but of particular note was the small group of males drinking at Kaware Lagoon with the baboons playing nearby in the lovely early morning light.

We crossed into the park and almost the first thing we saw as we came through the ebony glade was a small group of giraffes on the riverbank. There were five visible to begin with –

two adults together with three youngsters each of a different age and height all standing in age and size order! As we came closer we could see more on the riverside and one on the other side of the river that took its time, but gradually made its way across the Luangwa. One of the females had half a dozen yellow-billed oxpeckers combing its fur for ticks.

There was a radio call from Lloyd to meet them as quickly as possible as they had found some lions that were interested in a group of buffalo, so Stephen's vehicle changed course and headed quickly to where the other group was... and it was an exceptional sight. A group of 14 lions (some adult females, some sub-adult males and females) were at the bottom of a bank at the foot of a hippo run, and at the top of the bank, two or three metres away from them was a herd of 40-50 buffalo. It was a standoff. A wall of hungry lions facing a wall of buffalo that didn't want to be killed. Growling, crashing, mock charges from the buffalo, and an attempt by the lions to get the buffalo moving which eventually aid off as they began to move away which enabled the lions to encircle them.

They could see the weaknesses in one or two of the buffalo but try as they might – and they did – they couldn't bring one down. We watched a lioness on the back of a buffalo, but without the necessary back-up, it was thrown off – more than one such attack ended in failure.



The buffalo moved away, further into the distance, but the lions followed in relentless pursuit. But the lions were getting tired, and the line of lions was getting longer and longer, so any attack on the buffalo was becoming less likely to succeed. We watched

them continue 'inland' but heard later in the day that the group of buffalo had remained intact and that the lions hadn't been successful in their quest. It was only a matter of time though.

A quick tea and coffee break was followed by a drive to the river where there were some gigantic pods of hippos, many of them covered in oxpeckers digging relentlessly at their sores. But it was time to move on and head back to brunch – it was getting late and the temperature was rising. But as if we hadn't already had an exceptional morning we stopped to chat to a husband-and-wife film crew that had been watching a leopard – Olimba (or Pink Nose)... she was in the shade of a bush lying down. As we approached, she got up and walked off, disappearing into a gully, but the road cut through the gully so Steven was able to move the vehicle and we all had excellent views.

Olimba is 14 years old and has a young cub which is exceptional.



Our drive to brunch was largely uneventful but we looked at zebra, puku, kudu and impala along the way, finally arriving at our brunch spot under a shady fig tree about 30 minutes late – it didn't matter! Chris had invited his friend Adrian Carr (son of the late Norman Carr) to lunch, together with his wife Gid, and everyone was delighted to meet him. Lunch over, we returned to camp for a well-earned rest before an early tea and a visit to the nearby Mkasanga village.

There were two vehicles heading into the village after tea. One was going to listen to the magnificent choir at the church and see the school, the other was going to the football field to watch the local teams play an exhibition match – first two women's teams (fielded by girls aged 10, 12 and 14), and then two men's teams (all under the age of 18). They were almost all playing barefoot, and on a full-sized football pitch, in the hot African sun. Bart, from our group, had been keen to play since before the trip departed the UK and was in a full football strip. He first played for one of the women's teams, and then one of the men's – and put on a first-class performance. It was a hot afternoon and there were many local supporters who had come out to see the spectacle and enjoy the



football, and those from our group who were there to watch were incredibly impressed with the standard of football displayed by both the men's and women's teams and by how dedicated they obviously were to their sport.

There is virtually no poaching in this part of the Luangwa Valley (and many others) because of the football – curious though it may seem. Football is a powerful force though and each local team plays in a league (wherever there is a men's team there is also a women's team), and each team is named after a local mammal. And, most importantly, if any one of the footballers or their families is caught poaching then the team is ejected from the league. Football is a powerful force, and it works. Everyone is incredibly proud of their wildlife, their Valley and their football.

Games over, and there followed the typical (but crucially important!) team photographs and then it was time to get into the national park for some wildlife viewing. One of the vehicles took a minor detour to collect Pat and Helen from Tafika and then both vehicles met up at a magnificent spot by the river for sundowners.

Despite it not having been a wildlife afternoon specifically, it had been a really great couple of hours and the atmosphere at sundowners was fantastic. Overhead, we saw sacred ibis, spoonbills, a grey heron and one or two bee-eaters, and in the background we could hear freckled nightjar calling which is an unusual nightjar to hear in this part of the Luangwa.

It was pretty quiet up to this point but as we were heading back Bazwell spotted a flap-necked chameleon on a distant bush and then a genet lying on a low branch of a distant tree, but the best was yet to come. As we came out of the park onto Tafika's private land someone commented that it had been a fairly quiet drive (which it had) and Chris joked that maybe it was payback for the incredible game-viewing we have had so far. We were almost back at camp when Bazwell spotted one of the Tafika leopards very close to the works area at the back of camp. But, it wasn't just one, on closer inspection it was two, and it looked as though they were male and female. We were able to follow them through the scrub for a short period when the male stopped and sat down. He then approached the female that wasn't far away and.... mated, making a loud growling sound as they separated. This as possibly the perfect end to one of the most amazing days on safari it was possible to have.



On very high spirits, the group had a quick drink at the bar and then sat down for dinner, and at dessert Chris read a piece from Norman Carr's Valley of the Elephants about the national park and its very first safari Camp which came into being in 1950.

### **Match of the Day**

*It was Gill, one of our guests, who saw the distant buffalos, and it was Lloyd our guide, who realised they'd be going down to the river to drink – and that they'd picked the exact same place the lions had chosen to rest up last night. He parked. We waited.*

*The Luangwa Valley in Zambia provides a rare and soul-deep peace. It also provides action and drama like you've never experienced in your life. The herd of 50 buffalos defiled through a gap on the top of a short, sharp bank and a wise old cow led them towards the water. And the lions.*

*The lions shifted in an instant from slumber to action stations: crouching belly-down, agog. Apart from one young male, his mane just starting to come, still dozing with his paws in the air. But he got the vibe eventually and shifted in an almost embarrassed fashion into the lion's ready position.*

*At that the cow froze. She stared. They stared. It was like the long moment before the gunfight at the OK Corral in the film Tombstone, the tension finally breaking as Doc Holliday winks and you can hear Wyatt Earp groaning: "Oh my God!"*

*And the cow was running, and the lions were running and she reached the herd just as the herd turned and ran. But now they had to defile back through the gap, and it was the lions' moment. One – two –three – yes, three calves down, each with a lion or two fighting to inflict the killing smother-bite.*

*Not my daughter you bitch! Another film reference, this one from the final Harry Potter, and three groups of buffalos, cows as well as bulls, lowered their horns and charged at each fallen calf, driving the lions off, and the calves staggered to their feet, back into the herd behind a protective wall of horns. The air was full of dust and snarling and lowing and grunting and the drumbeat of hooves.*

*After that it was stand-off. The bulls took turns to charge the lions on their own, each time the lions understandably back-pedalled. They were trying to get behind every bull that separated himself from the rest, but turning your back on the fearsomely armed animals behind him was never a good idea. There was never enough space, enough time.*

*It went on. And on. And on. Charge and repulse. In went the lions, out went a fired-up bull like a sortie during a siege. We followed them over three kilometres and a good hour. Twice or three times the lions had an over-bold buffalo on the ground, each time the rescue came.*

*The lions tired first. The big match ended in a 0-0 draw; a better result for the buffs than the lions, it has to be said. I'd never seen anything like this before and more to the point, neither had Lloyd. Always something new from Africa.*

*Later that morning I consulted with Chris, who was co-leading the trip with me. "I think we may have peaked a little early..."*

*Simon Barnes*

## Day 4: Big Lagoon, South Luangwa

Sunday 14 September 2025



Today was an exciting day – the first day of walking safaris! Wake up was at 4.45am and breakfast at 5.15am, and then as soon as everyone was ready, we headed out to the crossing points. Macupa was Simon's guide, and they disappeared off with Helen, Pat, Robert, Nicky and Jill, and Amon and Chris took Bart, Carole, Dave, Gill and Sarah.

*[The forthcoming days are only representative of what Chris and his*

*group saw during the course of their safari as Simon was based at Chikoko Tree Camp.]*

We drove the 10 minutes or so to the crossing point but encountered a 'bear with a sore heart' elephant along the way that was intent on making our lives a little more complicated by charging us in the vehicle – trumpeting and making a loud noise and charging at us with its ears back and head down. Amon got away by driving rather faster!

We were soon at the crossing point so we jumped out of the vehicle and walked in single file to the river where we were met by a boatman. The morning light was peachy and beautiful. Three shuttles by canoe and we were on the national park side of the river, but not before we had looked at a pair of lions lying on the far bank of the river some way upstream. With everyone now together Amon officially introduced the walking group to Alex the scout and Justin the tea bearer and began with the safety briefing. Whilst Amon had originally planned to walk downstream, the presence of a pair of lions had changed the game and we began heading upstream instead with a view to getting a better look.

En route to where the lions were, we stopped to hear about ant lions, and as Amon was telling us about them we heard the distinctive call of a leopard nearby – another change of tack was required, and we began looking for the leopard... unsuccessfully. Although there was a bushbuck calling, and we could see where it was looking, the fact that the leopard was no longer calling suggested that it had seen (or more likely heard) us and had disappeared deep into a nearby thicket where it was now hiding. We decided to continue our walk looking at other things and leave the leopard to its own devices.

Amon was explaining the importance of the sausage tree to the group – in fact he described it as a tree of life. The beautiful flowers (once thought to be bat-pollinated, but now known not to be) are filled with a sweet nectar in the early mornings that the baboons enjoy drinking, and then once the flowers have fallen the impala will come past the tree and eat them. The giraffes enjoy eating the young green sausage

flowers, and as a hippo's preferred grasses become harder and harder to find late in the dry season, they come to feed on the fallen sausage fruits.

It was time to move on and to begin with we just caught a glimpse of the lions moving off from their comfy spot (some of the group saw two, some three and some four), but they were moving out onto the sandy plain near the river so we head that way and found two of them lying on the grass – though they didn't stay there for too long before moving off again. We left them and continued on our way with Amon demonstrating how funnel-web spiders catch their prey and explaining how they don't get stuck on their webs because they create special 'roads' with a particular type of silk that isn't sticky. Isn't nature amazing!



We stopped in a shady glade as Justin showed us how he made fire using a couple of sticks, a little bit of sand and some elephant dung... and after the kettle had boiled, we had tea and coffee.

We next walked under a huge flowering wild mango tree with its spectacular carpet of pale, orange-coloured flowers on the ground.

Walking on, it was really beginning to get much hotter but we came to the very end of Big Lagoon and whilst we paused to look at a pair of statuesque male kudu and some females that they were moving with, some impala, a couple of warthogs and a troop of baboons, we had our sights set on getting to camp which we could see in the distance.



As is normal in this part of the world we were greeted with cold flannels to enable us to freshen up and Amon showed us into the dining area where we then had a drink. Everyone was shown to their rooms, and we were back for a delicious 3-course lunch at 11.30am. For most of the group, a siesta followed, but the waterhole in front of camp came alive.

A young fish eagle flew past and a western banded snake eagle landed four metres or so away, caught a lizard and then flew off to eat his catch in a nearby tree. Two big bull elephants wandered across the plain to drink in the water, but instead, it was just too irresistible for one of them and he had to lie in it. Completely flat out. A few minutes later he got up to re-joined his pal who was drinking. There were another five elephants to the right with four young, ranging in age from teenagers to one that was probably only four to six years old. He was playing in the muddy puddles, rocky backwards and forwards.

More elephants came down from the other side, another family group – a matriarch with a tiny baby (not even a year old) and six others, a combination of aunties and young. Moving slowly along the watery channel they drank and bathed. One teenage female came right up to the decking and drank from the water so close that it would have been possible to touch her.

Six Cookson's wildebeest came to drink too, a family of warthogs, a small herd of impala and a family of Crawshay's zebra. And all of this while the saddle-billed storks and sacred ibises fished in the channel

next to them. The snake eagle returned to a different perch - closer to the deck and lower to the ground, and once this elephant's group moved off, another appeared... and so it goes on!

It was time for tea so we were on the deck, but from the general direction of the kitchen, we could hear some singing which got closer and closer. It was the camp team, led by the chef carrying a birthday cake with lighted candles, and Amon armed with a card, singing Happy Birthday to Bart. What a way to celebrate, and what a place to do it!

As we ate cake and drank tea the elephants continued to come to the watering hole to drink, roll around in the mud and play, and it was impossible to pull ourselves away from this most incredible of 'bush TV channels' to go for our afternoon walk. And when we finally did (after the elephants had moved off), we delayed our departure even more because of the male elephants had come up the bank and was feeding on the greenery in front of Dave and Gill's house.



The whole experience was magical, and after we arrived back from our walk for sundowners on the decking, the elephants were still there and provided the backdrop for our early evening drink. This was followed by dinner, a bedtime story from The Valley of the Elephants about the month of September, and then bed. Tomorrow is another day!

### ***And are there elephants still for tea?***

*Time to stop rushing around in a vehicle. Time to start thinking. Time to stop being a spectator. Time to start being a participant. In short, it was time to walk: and so we crossed the Luangwa River by canoe and set off for Chikoko Bush Camp, with Goodson the scout in front with his rifle to keep us safe.*

*And of course, one of the deepest pleasures of walking anywhere is when you stop walking. After one of those perfect fresh-made Luangwa mornings we sat down in a glade of winterthorns in the company of a pair of saddle-billed storks, a small group of impalas, a solitary male puku and three male kudus with their fine twisty horns.*

*But no sooner had we taken our places when a few more seekers after peace entered the glade: three fully grown elephants, all females, a teenager and a baby small enough to pass beneath its mother's belly without inconvenience.*

*In the Luangwa Valley you defer to elephants, so we retired a few dozen paces while Goodson stayed where he was, between us and the elephants, banging a stick against a fallen branch in slow rhythm, just so they knew we were there. Elephants love the curly seedpods that fall from the winterthorns: eventually this lot moved away unhurriedly with the grace of a flotilla of tall ships.*

*So, we went back and took our tea: an orange-breasted bush shrike singing his variations on Beethoven's Fifth and a pair of black-collared barbets performing their duet. Yesterday we had all the excitement in the world as the lions took on the buffalos in fair fight: today as much peace as you could hope for. But in the Valley, peace always has a slight edge to it.*

*As we approached camp across a fine plain, the same group of elephants crossed our path again. After you!*

*Simon Barnes*

## Day 5: Big Lagoon, South Luangwa

Monday 15 September 2025

A 5am wake-up was the order of the day today, with breakfast by the fire and freshly cooked toast over open mopane coals with the magnificent Big Lagoon as a backdrop with vervet monkeys and guineafowl wandering over the landscape.



It wasn't long before everyone was ready to head off and Alex (our scout) had arrived. The plan was to head east and south broadly in the direction of the river with a view to looking at the nearby carmine bee-eater colony, to then turn inland, head north and come back into camp from the same direction having explored the area fairly thoroughly. But this is the Luangwa and the best laid plans... go awry! Shortly after we began our walk, we could hear a

giant eagle owl make its grunting call, and it was close by so we headed over to where it had been calling. As we approached the tree we saw it fly out, soaring silently and low over the grass and then gently swooping up to land on the lower branches of another more distant tree. We decided to see if we could get a second look as not everyone managed to see it and as we walked towards the tree, Amon and Alex heard a distant grunt of a buffalo. We paused and waited a bit to listen for more of the same which came shortly after and Amon suggested that we should walk in the direction of the buffalo which we did.

The thinking was that they were near the river and because we had seen lions in the vicinity yesterday, it was possible that the buffalo could lead us to some lions. As we approached the river, we could see a huge buffalo herd that seemed to be scared as they were beginning to return from the water's edge running across the sand. Kicking up dust and creating a typical African dry season scene. We think they may have been disturbed by some fishermen in or near the water (rather than us). They seemed pretty content and not distressed so we continued walking towards them occasionally stopping to take photos or look at them through our binoculars.

The wind was in our favour and whilst they appeared to be able to make us out, they we stopped and turned towards us clearly unsure of exactly what we were, and whether we were a threat or not.

We did a big circle around them and came close to them on their other side (which was rather better for photography. It was a big herd which we estimated to be somewhere between 500-600 individuals strong.

We left them behind and continued our walk, but having gone down a leafy path our route was blocked by a hippo so we needed to reverse and partially retrace our steps before we could continue.

After a very relaxing tea and coffee stop in a shady glade, with each of us sitting on the boughs of a huge, but fallen winterthorn like a troop of baboons, the heat was beginning to rise and it was time to head back to camp. We passed another 'bushed' hippo, and chatted about the honeyguide that was doing his very best to lead us to bee



hive, and paused to look at the nearby large male kudu that was stationary and camouflaged behind a bush, but it wasn't too long before we were back in camp and refreshing our faces on ice cold flannels brought to us by Justin, and drinking ice-cold drinks from the fridge.



At 11.30 we gathered for lunch and then Amon took us to the kitchen to meet Brightwell (the chef) and his kitchen team. Brightwell showed us the 'hole-in-the-ground' oven, explained how he baked his magnificent cakes, took us round his stores and showed us where he kept all of his kitchen 'tools'. He is clearly (and quite rightly) incredibly proud of his kitchen, his team, and the food that they all produce.

By now the elephants were arriving to drink in the pool by the deck, but for some, the call of 'siesta' was too great to ignore.

The afternoon began with the rather excellent flapjacks that we had seen come out of the oven earlier in the day. There were a few animals down drinking at the waterhole, but the elephants were quite distant and there was nothing holding us back from heading out for our walk at 4pm as planned. Gill decided that she wanted to stay on the deck and watch the world go by, and the rest of us

headed off towards the river with a view to going to a carmine bee-eater colony and getting there in the lovely late afternoon light.

All was going well, although our passage was interrupted by an elephant or two along the way that resulted in us having to change course, and we arrived at the riverbank in perfect light at the perfect time. There were thousands of carmines flying in and out of their nesting holes in the riverbank – a fish eagle was sat in a commanding position on top of a nearby winterthorn watching the carmines.

In the river was a gigantic herd of hippos – we counted over a hundred – and of course some sizeable crocs. Egyptian geese, black-winged stilts and even a pair of grey-headed gulls flew past. And then... Amon called time as it was getting late and we had to get back to camp. So it was a straight (and fairly quick) walk as directly back to camp as we could manage. Gill who had stayed on the camp deck whilst we were out had had a fabulous afternoon watching animals come to drink including the 600-strong herd of buffalo that we had seen on this morning's walk – one of which had got stuck in the mud and was destined to remain.

A drink and dinner were followed by some impromptu stories told by Amon about his life as a youngster in Mkasanga village growing up around wild animals. Lions, hippos and elephants dominated his tales, and he had us in fits of laughter. What a fabulous way to end the day!

### ***Walking with lions (again)***

*After all the excitement of watching a pride of a dozen lions carry out a buffalo hunt you'd think the sight of a lone lioness lying about under a bush - doing nothing but think about the meaning of life - was a bit tame. Not a bit of it. For we weren't in a vehicle. We were on foot. And that makes it personal.*

*We were staying at Chikoko Tree Camp and we had just set out on a morning walk. We came across fresh lion tracks – tracks made that morning – so we changed direction.*

*We changed direction and walked towards the lions. What else would any sane person do? And soon enough we saw one: there she was, perhaps 70 metres off, scanning the savannah for anything that moves. And she was aware of us all right. She turned her head slowly and surveyed us with a mild gaze: the sort of gaze that burns right into your soul.*

*She was looking for prey. There was another female and two cubs hidden in the long grass, and they were all hungry. We didn't qualify as possible prey: in the firearms age lions have grown wary of humans. But*

*that gaze across those scanty 70 metres was a powerful reminder of the fact that our earliest ancestors walked the savannahs with no such reassurance.*

*The lioness, gold and lovely in the soft morning light, got to her feet and strolled into the long grass for a bit of socialising. She was clearly pregnant. More lions for the Luangwa Valley: huzzah!*

*After the great lion-hunt we were all filled with breathless excitement and compulsive talking. But we walked away from that lioness in silence. Cameras record some memories: others leave their mark on your soul.*

*Simon Barnes*

## **Day 6: Big Lagoon, South Luangwa**

**Tuesday 16 September 2025**

Today is transfer day and that means that after our relaxing breakfast by the fire we are walking out to meet the other group somewhere in the bush and the groups swap from one camp to the next. But breakfast this morning was important because last night when we went to bed we could hear hyenas calling around the lagoon, and we could hear the desperate cries of the young buffalo that they were coming to eat – first getting louder and then trailing off. The African bush can be unforgiving and cruel at times, but the cycle of life is what is most important here and the hyenas have to eat too. From our vantage point at breakfast, there was no sign at all that the young buffalo had even been in the muddy channel of the lagoon so it must have been killed and dragged away by the hyenas. Gone and (even) forgotten. Sad perhaps but fascinating nonetheless.

We headed off at around 6am while it was still cool. We were making good pace and enjoying the gentle breeze as we walked. We came across a male kudu doing what they do when they've seen us and think that we haven't seen them... it was standing still, hiding behind a bush. We chatted about African land snails and the fact that they are the largest snails in the world, that at this time of year are sheltering in cool dark places to keep away from the heat, and the fact that they are only really visible (live ones at least) in the rains.

We headed over the parched and cracked dry ground – black cotton soil – that was once a mopane forest, and Amon told us about elephant damage and the fact that whilst a proportion of the apparent environmental 'damage' was done by elephants in the 1970s and 1980s, it is also partly as a result of changing soil conditions that are no longer attractive to mopane trees and mean that they can no longer get the nutrients that they require in order to survive. In the middle of the parched ground, we found a large flattened dusty patch that was clearly a rolling spot for zebras and collected some white fur and some black fur, and then before too long we were at the meeting spot and waiting for Simon's group to arrive for coffee.



They appeared on the near horizon coming through the woodland and through the grass to greet us – all smiles – they had had a fabulous couple of days with Simon, Macupa and the team at Chikoko Tree Camp.

Tea and biscuits complete, my group (Bart, Carole, Dave, Gill and Sarah, together with Amon, Alex the scout and Jaston the tea-bearer) went with Simon, and Simons group (Helen, Pat, Jill, Rob and Nicky, together with Macupa, Goodson and Sasu)

came with me back to Big Lagoon – their respective bags were portered between the camps.

We didn't dilly-dally on the way back to camp as the weather was so hot, but arriving at Big Lagoon was like arriving at an oasis. Greeted by Justin with ice-cold towels and a cold drink, we sat on the decking overlooking the water, watching the marabou storks feeding and zebra and wildebeest coming to drink. It was a magical scene. At midday we had lunch and by the end of lunch there were 30 or more marabou storks fishing on the water, and the resident western-banded snake eagle had caught a snake and was sitting on a branch and eating it right next to the deck.



Heat, delicious lunch and a good walk in the morning mean only one thing at a certain point in the day – siesta. And that was that until afternoon tea!

Macupa had suggested a visit to the carmine bee-eater colony which was greeted by everyone as a great idea. Together with Amon, we had visited the colony yesterday, but Rob, Nicky, Helen, Pat and Jill hadn't. However, Helen was enjoying the scene from the deck so much that she decided to stay behind and relax – there are plenty worse places to sit and enjoy watching the world go by!

The rest of us walked the two kilometres or so to the bee-eater colony and arrived as the sun was turning the land and the light a beautiful peachy orange colour which seems to show off the carmines (and everything else in the Valley) in the very best way possible – in essence, in this light everything looks even more beautiful than it normally does!

Thousands of carmines making their distinctive yapping call, about 150 hippos making their rather louder 'laughing' sound, and the view of the sinuous Luangwa River making its way south is one of the greatest sights on earth, and this evening it looked particularly resplendent. Across the river, we could see crocodiles and further up the sandbank was a large herd of puku. Passing avifauna included African jacana, sacred ibis, grey-headed gull and a small posse of African skimmers just beginning their skimming.

As seems to always be the case, our time at the colony came to an end too quickly and we had to return to camp in order to arrive before sunset. Helen had had a relaxing afternoon on the deck overlooking the waterhole, and we all enjoyed a sundowner drink before dinner, which was a typically wonderful 3-course affair beautifully prepared in the most diminutive of kitchens.

A drink after dinner and an early night were the order of the day... we have another early start tomorrow!

### ***To drink or not to drink...***

*The upper deck at Chikoko Tree Camp looks out across a plain towards an artificial waterhole. Here between lunch and afternoon tea (with Compulsory Cake) I used to sit in a comfy chair with my book and my binoculars. From there I watched the bush go by and kept a bird list while I was doing so.*

*In truth this is bad practice. It was bad birdwatching, a subject on which I am an expert, and I was also reading with rather less concentration than my book deserved, for it was Hamlet. No matter. I found quiet delight in both activities, the one making the other still richer.*

*This is one of the deeper pleasures of the Luangwa Valley: idling away with the vastness of Africa all around you. I made notes about yellow-breasted greenbul and orange-breasted bush shrike, turned back to the book to be wooed by the grace of language once again until distant voices roused me and I noted that an African hoopoe had called and so had a brown-hooded kingfisher.*

*I looked out towards the waterhole and then, with the matter-of-fact nonchalance of creatures from a fairy-tale, a party of roan antelope advanced. Special antelopes these: not ones you see every day or every trip: sandy-brown-red with a black mask like the Lone Ranger, males and females both with a fine curving pair of horns.*

*Three of them got to their knees to enjoy their drink. The others paused, hesitated. Wouldn't do to get taken by surprise. Was it really safe to lower your head and your eyes and drink life from the muddy pool? Yes. It must be. Go for it.*

*They are big – the fourth biggest of all antelopes – and horse-like: their scientific name *Hippotragus equinus* translates as Horse-goat horse. They have distinctly horsey gaits but were in no hurry to show off their paces: a stately walk was fine, while scanning the open plain for lions.*

*I counted 14 of them, three of them very young. Eventually they all drank their fill, raised their handsome heads, looked out again through their black masks as if to say with the Lone Ranger: "My work here is done." And at once they were off together in a nice, collected canter: no itchin' hurry but no sense in pushing your luck. I lowered my eyes to the book and tried to remember what was happening in Elsinore. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.*

*Simon Barnes*

## Day 7: Big Lagoon, South Luangwa

Wednesday 17 September 2025

Slightly later to rise today with a wake-up call at 5.15am rather than 5am – Macupa obviously likes an extra 15 minutes in bed in the morning! Breakfast was at 5.45am and we were walking at around 6.15am heading in the direction of the river. We had a purpose this morning as Macupa was particularly keen to see if we could meet up with one of the big herds of buffalo and together with Goodson, our scout, his idea was to lead us in the general direction of Tafika and the vast sweeping bend of the river and its sandy treeless river beach that the big herds like to use when they come down to drink.

In reality, we were unsuccessful in our quest but it didn't make the walk any less enjoyable. To begin with we were looking at sausage tree flowers and discussing the various methods of pollination (including bats, insects and particularly butterflies and moths). Then we came across a great pile of grass that had been discarded by a hippo – hippo spit. Discarded because there was obviously something in the pile that he (or she) was eating that for some reason was unpalatable. There was a square-tailed drongo in the distance at the top of a tree.

We looked at the 'Vicks' bush (or wild sage or wild lavender) which looks rather unattractive but in fact has the most wonderful smell and which is burned in the villages and used as a mosquito repellent in the local houses.

Next up was a pair of brown snake eagles at the top of a dead mopane tree – identified by their featherless legs and large 'owl-like' heads. And then we walked out onto the vast open river beach where we'd thought we might find buffalo, but we had all of the signs (plenty of droppings and lots of tracks) but no buffalo, which had possibly either been here earlier in the day or more likely, towards the end of yesterday. There was a huge strangler fig tree on the riverbank with a magnificent spread of boughs, and it was the perfect spot for a tea



and coffee break, so we headed up the bank and Sasu got to work making drinks. A family of elephants began moving towards us (presumably with a view to having a drink at the river so our coffee was briefly interrupted, but once they had moved off it was back to 'business as usual' with hot tea, coffee and cake.

We then headed back to camp arriving at around 9.30am. There was time for a cooling drink and a shower before another delicious lunch.

It was a hot day today – perhaps the hottest we've had on the trip and at tea Rob suggested that instead of leaving camp at 4pm we delay our departure by 20 minutes or so in order that it cooled down a bit. There was time for another cup of tea and another one of Brightwell's delicious biscuits before we then headed off for our afternoon walk. Jill had decided to stay on the deck to see what came down to drink. All-in-all it was a quiet walk although we did see elephants, impala, puku, kudu, warthog and zebra... how can that be considered a quiet walk! (As well as a large group of white-backed vultures flying high and heading in the direction of Chikoko, and a collection of white helmet shrikes feeding amongst the tall grasses.)

There was a welcome beer waiting for us when we returned to camp and then another delicious dinner before we finally returned to our rooms for bed at around 9.30pm.

### ***The Eden illusion***

*Four female kudus watched us cross the plain on the far side of the dry Chikoko River. We walked on. It was late afternoon, the sun hurrying down in that unnerving tropical way, the light soft and tinged with red.*

*As you walk across the savannah there are times when all is peace: when it seems that the world has turned gentle and nothing in the world would or ever could harm anything else. This was one such afternoon.*

*Four elephants approached the muddy waterhole: aware of us, untroubled by us. We were far enough away; they could tell we meant no harm. And so they drank their fill and, since we had by now proved that we were totally trustworthy animals, they took things a little further and bathed.*

*There were four of them, an adult female, two sub-adults and a three-year-old. They indulged themselves in the watery gloop as only elephants can: splashing, spraying, squirting, scooping, sluicing, savouring the delicious cool of the water and the soft embrace of the clinging mud. The little one got right down lay flat out.*

*Elephants don't read Browning, so far as I know, but they would certainly have understood that famous line: "God's in his heaven - all's right with the world."*

*This is the Eden Illusion: here shared for long moments by humans, elephants and perhaps the kudus as well. For elephants and humans both, it meant peace and ease and promise of a decent tomorrow: all the troubles of the world could be set aside... at least for a moment.*

*I looked across the plain: a lone male kudu, statuesque, was watching us, the twin spirals of his horns adding a touch of majesty. Here was the world as it was meant to be – or so it very briefly seemed - but let me cling to the illusion a little while longer. Perhaps Eve was waiting for me in the glade of winterthorns.*

*Simon Barnes*

**Day 8: Takwela, North Luangwa**

**Thursday 18 September 2025**

As they all tend to be, today was a slightly different day – we were heading from the bush camps in South Luangwa, to those in North Luangwa and there were some serious logistics required!

Wake-up at Big Lagoon was at 5.15am and another light, but delicious, breakfast was waiting for us at 5.45am. By breakfast, everyone had got their bags ready and set some luggage aside to remain at Tafika as the aircraft we will be using in a couple of days has a limited capacity. Having packed up our gear and



had breakfast, and having said farewell to our amazing chef Brightwell, we set off on the short walking transfer to the Luangwa crossing point. Goodson (our scout) was at the helm, followed by Macupa (our guide), then our group, Chris (at the back of the group) and Sasu (the tea bearer). However, this time, there was a team of porters behind us carrying our bags. (In fact, it was our waiters and kitchen staff doubling up as porters, and they did an excellent job.)

About 20 minutes or so after setting off we were at the crossing point and our canoe was waiting for us. The first to don lifejackets and jump in the canoe was Pat, followed by Helen and then Gill. In the distance, upriver, the fishermen were completing their night shift and landing their catch, and both upstream and downstream we could see hippos. The morning light was as magical as ever. Once the first group was over the canoe came back for Rob, Nicky and Chris and then returned finally for Macupa and Sasu. Goodson was staying in the park and was waiting for more guests to arrive with another of the Tafika walking guides.

From our canoe 'bus stop' it was a short walk across the sandy beach to our Land Cruiser and then a 15-minute drive to Lukuzi airstrip where our aircraft were waiting. We were the first of the two groups to arrive but the others (Simon, Dave, Gill, Bart, Carole and Sarah) weren't far behind. We were transported north in two aircraft – the Tafika 4-seater, and a Grand Caravan. They both took off within minutes of each other for the 25-minute flight north. The Caravan



was the first to land, and again the other aircraft was only a minute or two behind. We were greeted by Alex from Takwela and Brent and Kennedy from Mwaleshi.

With bags loaded onto the vehicles, we went our separate ways again – Simon to Mwaleshi and Chris to Takwela. The drive to Takwela is approximately an hour of driving first through an expansive mopane forest and then through riverine woodland with the Mwaleshi River on the right-hand side. On the way we caught a glimpse of a pair of African hawk eagles (a nice addition to the species list!) As we arrived at the edge of the Luangwa there was a small motorboat waiting to take us out of the park and across to Takwela, after which it was a walk of 100 metres or so into camp where we were greeted by Lucy who, with her partner Ty, are currently the hosts at camp.

After a refreshing cold towel and a cold drink we were shown to our rooms before lunch was served at 1130am.

Siesta!!

Takwela is situated at the confluence of the Luangwa and Mwaleshi Rivers. Looking directly out of camp is the Mwaleshi 'delta' and flowing directly in front of the camp is the Luangwa River that flows from right to left. Tea was at 3.30pm and at 4pm we walked down to the river and took the small boat to the national park side and jumped into the vehicle. We also had a national park scout (a requirement for game-viewing in North Luangwa National Park due to the presence of black rhino in the area) and also a spotter.

Alex slowed down as we approached a big tree and pointed to the tail of a rock monitor that was poking out of the hole. Rock monitors are seen far less than their water monitor cousins, but this one is known to live in the tree and is frequently seen. Overhead was a yellow-billed kite and on the river were yellow-billed storks, a grey heron and some white-fronted bee-eaters. We approached a distant elephant that had been wallowing in a muddy pool, but the wind direction was wrong and he caught our scent and clambered out, and then climbed up a steep riverbank by placing his front legs at the top of the bank and using his back knees to climb up.

We drove through a beautiful glade of flat-topped acacia's (classic 'Out of Africa' trees!) and came out on the river to a huge number of crocodiles – more than 35 on a tiny sandy island in the middle of the river. There were also wire-tailed swallows, lesser striped swallows and the occasional fork-tailed drongo.

Ty and Lucy met us for sundowners with chairs that they positioned facing the river, and in the distance, we could see a gigantic collection of hippos almost on the other side of the river – it must have been 50 or more. After sundowners we jumped back into the vehicle and, with the spotlight on, headed back to camp. It was a largely uneventful drive (despite seeing six genets!) other than two key sightings of note – one



was when Alex shined the spotlight along the river and were able to see the reflection of literally hundreds of crocodiles eyes, and the other was an exceptional 'spot' of a group of six little bee-eaters all snuggled up together to keep warm for the night. Then it was back to the crossing point, our boat back over the river, a drink at the bar and dinner. The end of another amazing day.

### ***How to fly***

*Flight is a marvellous thing. I got on a plane in London: next day I was in South Luangwa National Park. A few days later I got on another plane, somewhat smaller – it held just four of us plus Xander the pilot – and 25 minutes later I was in North Luangwa National Park, one of just 500 visitors who make it up here every year.*

*It's beautiful, remote and subtly different to the park further south. We were at Mwaleshi Bush Camp by the Mwaleshi River, which was still flowing, shallow and bubbly, even though the dry season was cruel.*

*I have recently finished writing a book to be called *How to Fly*, in which I look at every form of flight from houseflies to angels. In its pages I made a great fuss about the bateleur: a bird of prey, rather a favourite of mine and a speciality of the Luangwa Valley.*

*It bothered me that I hadn't seen one yet on this trip; I hoped my luck would change now I was in the North Park. A good old sit in my hut brought 20 species of birds, but none of them a bird of prey: along with some rather excited elephants and a lone kudu bull posing under a twin-trunked winterthorn.*

*But it was time for tea and Compulsory Cake: and long before I had succumbed, there was a bateleur in the sky on the far side of the Mwaleshi. It really is a sensational bird: adults strongly marked in black and white and appearing to have no tail whatsoever. The light was perfect; the red beak and legs glowed like coals.*

*Bateleurs are all-day gliders, holding their wings in a shallow V, riding the thermals in the conviction that flapping is for wimps. The taillessness makes them startlingly efficient gliders, operating on a knife-edge of control; younger birds have tails that get gradually shorter over seven years as they learn to master the tailless glide, much as children first have stabilisers on their bikes.*

*Flying is great, even in Economy, if you end up in the Luangwa Valley. I wonder - has anyone ever seen a bateleur without wanting to be one?*

*Simon Barnes*

## **Day 9: Takwela, North Luangwa**

**Friday 19 September 2025**

At breakfast this morning Alex shouted excitedly, "there's my baby", as a small group of elephants moved through the bushes in the distance. He was so excited. Nine days previously Alex had watched and filmed (with a couple of clients onboard) as an elephant gave birth to a baby – something that has rarely been seen let alone filmed – and that sighting at breakfast set the tone for our morning drive.

Shortly after we jumped in the vehicle, we saw the mum and baby again, and Alex quietly positioned us so that (from a distance) we were able to see them both, and their close family – there were ten in the group. They moved through the tickets again and Alex moved forward taking us to another good viewing spot, but all the time making sure to give them plenty of space and not worry them in any way. The same happened again ten minutes or so later, but this time we drove quite a bit further and waited as they walked through the bush and came into a clearing. The light was perfect, and they strolled past, minding their own business... just going from A to B as a peaceful elephant family should!



We saw another elephant family group, but they weren't very happy with us (though we'd certainly not done anything wrong!) and one of the females trumpeted loudly and charged the vehicle causing Alex to head off along the road at high speed. It was a serious charge, and she wasn't going to stop until we had long departed her 'patch'.

On the other side of the river at quite a distance we could see yet more elephants in the vast expanse of winterthorn woodland; in front of them on the sand was a pair of male bushbuck sparring. Alex thought the ele's might be going to a crossing point to come back into the national park, so we drove for another five or ten minutes to get to a vantage point on a huge sweeping bend of the river where we could see the elephants crossing if that's what they decided to do... and they did. As we pulled up there were already some elephants there and it wasn't long before they came down the bank and walked towards

the water's edge foraging as they went. As they reached the water another group came through the woodland and down the sandy bank, as they reached the water so another appeared, and this happened two or three times more until there were no fewer than 61 elephants at the water – many of them very young – drinking at first and then crossing into the national park just behind a pair of fish eagles that were cooling themselves in the river. It was a primordial scene, a once in a lifetime experience of utter beauty and majesty... a real privilege to experience.

Once they had moved off, we carried on our way and found a shady spot for tea and chatted about what we had just seen. Magical!

It was nearing 10.30am and we were meeting Simon and the other group for brunch in a shady spot nearby but not before having an almost perfect sighting of a lizard buzzard sat on a low hunting perch, and then (somewhat unusually) of a genet that climbed the same tree and disappeared into a hole. Between us and brunch there was only one more notable wildlife sighting which was of a high-speed slender mongoose.

After brunch, and after our two groups had switched vehicles Chris' group returned to Takwela and Simon's to Mwaleshi. Tawny eagle, green wood hoopoe and purple-crested turaco being interesting sightings along the way before yet another wonderful elephant encounter with a large male that had just crossed the Mwaleshi River which was standing at the water's edge with its backed legs crossed and its trunk resting on its right tusk. It looked exceptionally content!

Tea was once again at 3.30pm and there were a couple of scarlet-chested sunbirds in a nearby tree. We headed out for our afternoon drive at 4pm. But having dutifully crossed the river and disembarked the boat on the national park side, our scout stopped us from going up to the vehicle because there was a big male elephant nearby. It was one we had seen before, and he was very relaxed, but there was no need to take a chance, so we just waited for five or ten minutes until he had moved a little further away and Alex had manoeuvred the vehicle so that we could get in safely (and not disturb the elephant).

Actually, it was a pretty uneventful drive – they happen sometimes, and especially when there is wind blowing as it was today. The predators find it hard to hunt if the wind is swirling as their prey catches their scent, and the prey species tend not to move around so much. Basically, everything stays still! Having said that, we had some tremendous crocodiles – 100 or more in a short stretch of river – and 70 or more hippos in a single pod. We also managed to see a couple of giant kingfishers and a white-tailed mongoose... so it could have been plenty worse!



### ***All around my hut***

*At Mwaleshi Bush Camp I had a guest hut. First time it had happened on this trip. I'd been in the guide huts: perfectly adequate, indeed, utterly salubrious when compared to the guest huts I stayed in 30 years ago. I mean, bathroom en-suite, with shower and flush lav: none of the old long-drop, nor the communal shower carved into living riverbank.*

*The guide hut at Chikoko was spacious and airy and almost cool, and what's more it was always full of butterflies taking a break from the heat. I loved it. But here at Mwaleshi I had a view and what's more, a comfy chair to appreciate it from.*

*The afternoon was coming up to the boil, but I was in good heart. I looked out over the shallow, hurrying Mwaleshi River and sighed with pleasure. I didn't move. Nor did anything else. It was the year's mid-afternoon break as well as the day's: an eternal boiling stillness held sway. Even the white-crowned lapwings, notoriously uncalm birds, were taking a siesta.*

*I could see eight elephants on a distant beach of the river: they seemed frozen in the afternoon sun. Nearer to camp a lone female elephant was reaching high into an acacia for the seedpods while her calf helped to hoover them up.*

*I thought about the pile of rhino dropping we had seen on a walk that morning: scabbled and spread about the place by a male keen on advertising his presence. Rhinos went extinct in the Luangwa Valley in the 1980s: a reintroduction began here in the North Luangwa National Park in 2003 and there are now between 50 and 100 individuals.*

*That was a heartening thing to think on. I heard a bearded woodpecker drumming, and there was a three-banded plover feeding in the river. The Mwaleshi River is the thinking person's television.*

*Simon Barnes*

## **Day 10: North Luangwa & Tafika, South Luangwa**

**Saturday 20 September 2025**



We woke to a clear sky and deep rich pink colour in the east - it was another beautiful morning in the Luangwa Valley. The deep, rich pink was reflected in the river and the river looked incredible - and it was cool! (But the 'coolth' never lasts long in these parts at this time of year.) We crossed the

river by boat after breakfast and jumped in the vehicle and headed off for our game drive. We went in the same direction that we had gone with the group yesterday thinking there was a good chance we'd see some nice elephant herds and perhaps see them crossing. But try as we might, we struggled to find them. The light was beautiful, and the habitat was perfect, but whereas yesterday there seemed to be elephants everywhere, this morning there were very few. But we did eventually find them, and we went to the crossing point to watch them emerge from the forest. Out they came feeding continuously, and almost without stopping they made their way down the bank to the water's edge, where they began drinking. As they drank, lifting their trunks high in the air and pouring the water into their mouths, they walked slowly and purposefully across the river until they got to the sand on the other side and disappeared up the bank.

As we made our way along the bank there was a brown-hooded kingfisher, a little and a white-fronted bee-eater, Meyer's parrot and even a small group of male waterbucks. On the other side of the river, we could see a lovely carmine bee-eater colony, so we stopped. In addition to the carmines, there were a few white-fronted bee-eaters and even some banded martins nesting. As we arrived at our coffee stop we saw a gymnogene (African harrier hawk) coming over, and then a second one – they were both in their breeding plumage, so it is possible that they were a breeding pair.

It had been a complicated morning with guests in both North Luangwa camps (Takwela and Mwaleshi) and three departures from north to south (one at 9am, a second at 10.30am and a third at 1pm). Dave and Gill were on the 1030am flight and that meant a rendezvous with Ty at 9.30am near to where we had had breakfast yesterday so they could swap vehicles and head off to meet their departure to Lukuzi – Simon and Jill were travelling with them. Chris, Sarah, Bart and Carole returned to Takwela for an early lunch and then transferred to Mwaleshi airstrip for their flight south. By 1.45pm everyone was at Tafika.

Afternoon tea at Tafika was interrupted by elephants that were passing through feeding as they went – and taking their time about it! But it wasn't too long before we were all out game viewing for the final afternoon and night drive of the safari. As we came into the park there was a small herd of 50 or so buffalo and plenty of herds of elephants all with young ones in tow (which is such a joy to see). We spent some time looking at a giant kingfisher sitting on the riverbank and in the distance looking at various waders, egrets and herons in the twisting and turning rivulets of the Luangwa, including a small group of about 20 ruff (the first of the palearctic migrants that we've seen on the trip).



Both vehicles were together for sundowners, and as the sky turned pink and the river followed suit, we had a group photo with our exceptional guides Lloyd and Stephen, and their spotters (and trainee guides) Sasu and Bazwell. And then it was time to turn on the spotlights and see what nocturnal animals we could find. It wasn't long before Bazwell picked up a slim leopard which we followed for five minutes before it went down the bank to the river and disappeared from view. But ten minutes later he picked up another female leopard, this time one that appeared to be a little more chunky and almost certainly

pregnant. Again, we followed her for five minutes or more – she was completely unfazed by us and gave us the most incredible show of a leopard’s beauty. Everyone agreed it was another cracking sighting.

By now it was time to head back to Tafika, but not before seeing a pair of bushy-tailed mongooses foraging at the lagoon near the entrance to Tafika. Back at the bar everyone was buzzing with what a fantastic drive we had had, and what a wonderful safari.

After a beer or two at the bar, Vel, Georgia and Zander led us down to the sandy beach in front of Tafika where a magnificent table had been laid, a fire made and the chefs and waiters were there to greet us with two ice-cold bottles of bubbly. Helen raised a toast to the wonderful safari we had had, and Dave raised a toast to the team at Tafika and the bush camps. Everyone drank to that.



During dessert Simon read a chapter from Rogue Lion Safaris and then we moved our chairs over to the fire. Chris’s final bedtime story was in fact an animated poem about ‘Gerald the Giraffe’ which everyone enjoyed, and then we chatted by the fire until everyone gradually crept off to bed for their final Luangwa night’s sleep.

### ***Close, closer, closest***

*I went to the riverbank for a quiet read with a bit of birdwatching thrown in. I didn’t expect a searching examination of my nerve, my character, my temperament and my bush-cred. But the Luangwa Valley is never off duty, even if you happen to be.*

*I was back at Tafika Camp, the last night of the trip coming up. I was inclined to be in elegiac mood and I expected the bush all around me to share this feeling of pleasant wistful sadness. That’s not how it worked out.*

*I chose a comfy chair, one that had been placed on the bank for guests who fancied a gentle river-watch. There were – I measured it out later – six feet between me and the edge of the bank, which then dropped 20 feet to the beach below.*

*I was reading, raising my eyes every now and then to survey the glory and the majesty of the Luangwa River. And one time when I raised them, I saw instead the glory and majesty of a bull elephant, previously hidden by the fence that divides the guest area from the staff area. This elephant was obviously staff.*

*He was 20 feet away and walking towards me in that silent bedroom-slipped walk that elephants specialise in. I felt a surge of total disbelief. This was followed by instant conversion in the manner of St Paul: total unshakable belief as the elephant walked calmly on. He clearly knew I was there – elephants being no fools – but so far as he was concerned, I was of no account.*

*What to do? The thought of running like hell was deeply attractive. But I managed not to, even as the Sergeant Wilson within me asked: “Do you think that’s wise?”*

*The elephant walked between me and the river, taking up the entire six feet that were available. I felt no temptation to reach out and touch his baggy-trousered legs as they passed in front of my eyes: eyes that could now see nothing but elephant: an entire world of grey wrinkled skin. He walked past, fed briefly from the bush he had his eyes on, but clearly found it unsatisfactory.*

*So, he turned round and came back, first reversing, his sky-filling back end towards me, and then walking back the way he had come. Between me and the river once more. The stars stood still, the planet stopped rotating, all Africa held its breath... and then he was striding gently onwards, walking with uninterrupted calm back to the far side of the fence, back to staff quarters, leaving me panting as if I had just sprinted 100 yards.*

*Bart, one of our guests, witnessed all of this great encounter. "You were very calm," he said.*

*"I was very still," I corrected.*

## **Day 11: Heading home**

**Monday 21 September 2025**

It was our last morning at Tafika before returning to Lusaka and then home and while some of the group opted to go on a game drive, most preferred to have a more leisurely start to the day with a later breakfast and a visit to the kitchen garden.

Those that went out on a short game drive (Dave, Gill, Sarah, Simon and Chris) were treated to a (well hidden!) giant eagle owl whose whereabouts were given away by mobbing go away birds, ruffs and stilts on the river, crocs, hippos and eight giraffes one of which was very young. But sadly, it had to end all too soon as we needed to return to Tafika, gather the rest of the group and head out to the airstrip for our departure to Lusaka.

The Tafika team were all there to say goodbye, but it really was sad to leave after what had been the safari of a lifetime.

### ***A sentimental journey***

*Last mornings are filled with sweet sadness. Soon it would be time to leave the Luangwa Valley: to look back on a glorious trip and wonder if I will come back next year, as planned, and indeed, if I will ever come back.*

*We headed for the river: always to the river, to the wonderful, glorious, mad, slithering, snaking Luangwa River: vast beaches of sand and just enough water to keep life going until the blessed rains finally arrive.*

*Every river vista seemed to be the perfect farewell moment, an image to treasure forever – look, I really am sorry about this, you'll have to excuse me, I always get this way on the last day. But there were three elephants drinking, and I was in no mood to take a bracing view of them.*

*I scanned the river for further delights: a black-winged stilt, as improbably long-legged as Cyd Chrise, and a grey heron, same species as the ones in my back garden. There was a small pod of hippos crammed together in the deepest pool they could find, which really wasn't all that deep. A few crocs lay along the shore: half-a-dozen of them. How is it that crocs always manage to keep so still? Until they don't of course.*

*Sweet Luangwa, run softly till I end my song... And there on the next bend stood two young male giraffes. They were involved in what they clearly thought was mortal combat. It went like this: you hold still while I gently tap your neck with my head, and then I'll do the holding still while you do the tapping. It was all in slow motion: a formal exchange of light undamaging blows.*

*When they get to be grownup giraffes this sort of thing will be a serious test of strength and dominance: but right now, they were just boys messing about. You could almost hear them giggling. There was never going to be a winner.*

*We turned round and headed back: first few yards in the general direction of home. Sweet Luangwa run softly, for I sing not loud or long...*

**Day 12: Arrive home**

**Monday 22 September 2025**

***A note on weather:** Throughout the trip the weather was consistently hot and dry – generally between 32-35deg C. On some days there was a mid-afternoon wind that kept things cool.*



This species list is set in taxonomic order based on the 'Comprehensive Field Guide to the Birds South of the Sahara' by Ian Sinclair and Peter Ryan.

The species listed are all those that may be seen in Zambia's Luangwa Valley and are not split by season.

	Common Name	Scientific Name	South Luangwa	North Luangwa
	<b>BIRDS</b>			
1	Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>	✓	✓
2	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
3	Black-headed Heron	<i>Ardea melanocephala</i>	✓	✓
4	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	✓	
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓
7	Green-backed Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>	✓	✓
8	African Spoonbill	<i>Platalea alba</i>	✓	
9	Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>	✓	✓
10	Hadedda Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>	✓	✓
11	Marabou Stork	<i>Leptoptilos crumenifer</i>	✓	
12	Saddlebill Stork	<i>Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis</i>	✓	✓
13	Openbill Stork	<i>Anastomus lamelligerus</i>		✓
14	Yellow-billed Stork	<i>Mycteria ibis</i>	✓	✓
15	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>	✓	✓



16	Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>	✓	✓
17	African Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>	✓	✓
18	Hooded Vulture	<i>Necrosyrtes monachus</i>	✓	
19	White-backed Vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>	✓	✓
20	Brown Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinereus</i>	✓	
21	Western Banded Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinerascens</i>	✓	
22	Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>	✓	✓
23	African Harrier Hawk (Gymnogene)	<i>Polyboroides typus</i>	✓	✓
24	Lizard Buzzard	<i>Kaupifalco monogrammicus</i>	✓	
25	Tawny Eagle	<i>Aquila rapax</i>		✓
26	Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus wahlbergi</i>		✓
27	African Hawk Eagle	<i>Aquila spilogaster</i>		✓
28	Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>	✓	✓
29	Swainson's Francolin	<i>Francolinus swainsonii</i>	✓	✓
30	Red-necked Francolin	<i>Francolinus afer</i>	✓	
31	Grey (Southern) Crowned Crane	<i>Balearica regulorum</i>	✓	
32	African Jacana	<i>Actophilornis africanus</i>	✓	✓
33	Water Thick-knee (Dikkop)	<i>Burhinus vermiculatus</i>	✓	✓
34	Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>	✓	✓
35	Blacksmith Lapwing (Plover)	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>	✓	
36	White-headed (White-crowned) Lapwing (Plover)	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>	✓	✓
37	Crowned Lapwing (Plover)	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>		✓
38	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	✓	
39	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	✓	✓
40	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	✓	✓
41	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓
42	Grey-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus</i>	✓	
43	African Skimmer	<i>Rynchops flavirostris</i>	✓	
44	Red-eyed Dove	<i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>	✓	

45	Cape Turtle (Ring-necked) Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>	✓	✓
46	Laughing (Palm) Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>	✓	✓
47	Emerald-spotted Wood Dove	<i>Turtur chalcospilos</i>	✓	✓
48	Meyer's Parrot	<i>Poicephalus meyeri</i>	✓	
49	Lilian's (Nyasa) Lovebird	<i>Agapornis lilianae</i>	✓	✓
50	Purple-crested Turaco (Lourie)	<i>Gallirex porphyreolophus</i>	✓	✓
51	Grey Go-away-bird (Lourie)	<i>Corythaixoides concolor</i>	✓	✓
52	White-browed Coucal	<i>Centropus superciliosus</i>	✓	
53	Verreaux's (Giant) Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo lacteus</i>	✓	
54	African Scops Owl	<i>Otus senegalensis</i>	✓	✓
55	Barred Owlet	<i>Glaucidium capense</i>	✓	
56	Square-tailed (Mozambique) Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus fossii</i>	✓	✓
57	Freckled Rock Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus tristigma</i>	✓	
58	Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>	✓	✓
59	Green (Red-billed) Woodhoopoe	<i>Phoeniculus purpureus</i>	✓	
60	Malachite Kingfisher	<i>Corythornis cristatus</i>	✓	
61	Brown-hooded Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>	✓	✓
62	Giant Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle maximus</i>	✓	✓
63	Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>	✓	✓
64	Lilac-breasted Roller	<i>Coracias caudata</i>	✓	✓
65	Southern Carmine Bee-eater	<i>Merops nubicoides</i>	✓	✓
66	Little Bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosis</i>	✓	✓
67	White-fronted Bee-eater	<i>Merops bullockoides</i>	✓	✓
68	Ground Hornbill	<i>Bucorvus leadbeateri</i>	✓	✓
69	Red-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus rufirostris</i>	✓	✓
70	Crowned Hornbill	<i>Tockus alboterminatus</i>	✓	
71	Grey Hornbill	<i>Tockus nasutus</i>	✓	✓
72	Black-collared Barbet	<i>Lybius torquatus</i>	✓	✓
73	Greater Honeyguide	<i>Indicator indicator</i>	✓	✓

74	Brown-throated (Plain) Martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>	✓	✓
75	Banded Martin	<i>Riparia cincta</i>		✓
76	Wire-tailed Swallow	<i>Hirundo smithii</i>	✓	✓
77	Lesser Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis cucullata</i>	✓	✓
78	African Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla aguimp</i>	✓	✓
79	Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	✓	✓
80	Arrow-marked Babbler	<i>Turdoides jardineii</i>	✓	
81	White-browed (Heuglin's) Robin-Chat	<i>Cossypha heuglini</i>	✓	✓
82	Black-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra senegalus</i>	✓	
83	Tropical Boubou	<i>Laniarius aethiopicus</i>	✓	✓
84	Orange-breasted Bush-shrike	<i>Chlorophoneus sulfureopectus</i>		✓
85	White Helmet-shrike	<i>Prionops plumatus</i>	✓	
86	Retz's (Red-billed) Helmet-shrike	<i>Prionops retzii</i>	✓	✓
87	Meve's Starling	<i>Lamprotornis mevesii</i>	✓	✓
88	Wattled Starling	<i>Creatophora cinerea</i>	✓	
89	Yellow-billed Oxpecker	<i>Buphagus africanus</i>	✓	
90	Red-billed Oxpecker	<i>Buphagus erythrorhynchus</i>	✓	
91	Scarlet-chested Sunbird	<i>Chalcomitra senegalensis</i>		✓
92	Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>	✓	
93	Red-billed Buffalo Weaver	<i>Bubalornis niger</i>	✓	✓
94	White-browed Sparrow-weaver	<i>Plocepasser mahali</i>	✓	✓
95	Lesser Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus intermedius</i>		✓
96	Red-billed Quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>	✓	✓
97	Green-winged Pytilia (Melba Finch)	<i>Pytilia melba</i>		✓
98	Red-billed Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta senegala</i>	✓	✓
99	Blue Waxbill (Southern Cordonbleu)	<i>Uraeginthus angolensis</i>	✓	✓

	<b>MAMMALS</b>			
	<b>Elephant Shrews or Sengi</b>	<b>Order: Macroscelidea</b>		
1	Four-toed Elephant Shrew	<i>Petrodromus tetradactylus</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Rodents</b>	<b>Order: Rodentia</b>		
		<b>Suborder: Hystricognathi</b>		
2	Porcupine	<i>Hystrix africae australis</i>		✓
		<b>Suborder: Sciurognathi</b>		
3	Tree Squirrel	<i>Pareaxerus cepapi</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Hares</b>	<b>Order: Lagomorpha</b>		
4	Scrub Hare	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>	✓	
	<b>Elephants</b>	<b>Order: Proboscidea</b>		
5	African Elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Odd-toed ungulates</b>	<b>Order: Perissodatyia</b>		
6	Crawshay's Zebra	<i>Equus burchelli crawshayii</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Hippopotamuses</b>	<b>Order: Whippomorpha</b>		
7	Hippopotamus	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Pigs &amp; Hogs</b>	<b>Order: Suriformes</b>		
8	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Ruminants</b>	<b>Order: Ruminantia</b>		
	<i>Giraffes</i>			
9	Thornicroft's Giraffe	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis thornicrofti</i>	✓	

	<b>Alcelaphines &amp; allies</b>			
10	Cookson's Wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus cooksoni</i>	✓	✓
11	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	✓	✓
12	Roan Antelope	<i>Hippotragus equinus</i>	✓	
	<b>Dwarf antelopes</b>	<b>Neotragini</b>		
13	Sharpe's Grysbok	<i>Raphicerus sharpei</i>	✓	
	<b>Reedbucks etc</b>	<b>Reduncini</b>		
14	Puku	<i>Kobus verdani</i>	✓	✓
15	Common Waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymus</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Buffaloes</b>	<b>Bovini</b>		
16	African Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Hoofed mammals: antelopes &amp; other ruminants</b>			
	<i>Spiral-horned bovines</i>			
17	Bushbuck	<i>Tragelophus scriptus</i>	✓	✓
18	Greater Kudu	<i>Tragelophus strepsicerus</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Carnivores</b>	<b>Carnivora</b>		
	<i>Hyaenids</i>			
19	Spotted Hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>	✓	
	<b>Cats</b>			
20	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	✓	✓
21	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>	✓	✓

	<b>Weasels etc</b>	<b>Mustelidae</b>		
22	Honey Badger	<i>Mellivora capensis</i>	✓	
	<b>Genets &amp; Civets</b>			
23	Large spotted Genet	<i>Genetta maculata</i>	✓	✓
24	African Civet	<i>Civetticus civetta</i>	✓	✓
	<b>Mongoose</b>	<b>Viveridae</b>		
25	Slender Mongoose	<i>Herpestes sanguinea</i>	✓	✓
26	Banded Mongoose	<i>Mungos mungo</i>	✓	
27	Marsh Mongoose	<i>Atilax paludinosus</i>	✓	
28	White-tailed Mongoose	<i>Ichneumia albicauda</i>		✓
29	Bushy-tailed Mongoose	<i>Bdeogale crassicauda</i>	✓	
	<b>Primates</b>	<b>Order: Primates</b>		
30	Yellow Baboon	<i>Papio cynocephalus</i>	✓	✓
31	Vervet Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus pygerythrus</i>	✓	✓

