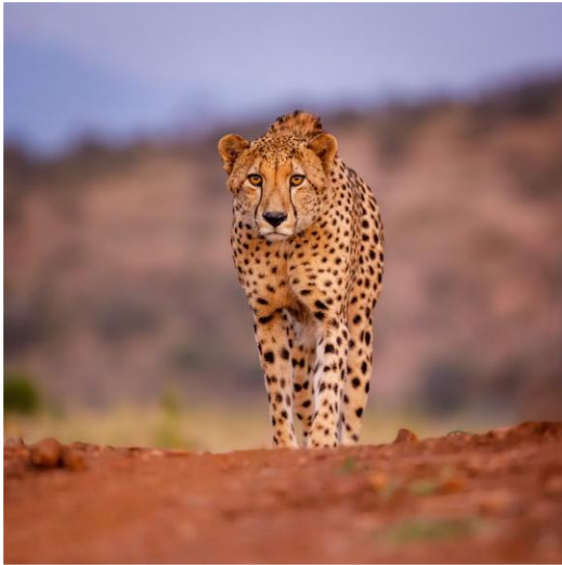


## Tour Report

### Zimanga – Wildlife & Night Sky Photography

19 – 27 June 2025

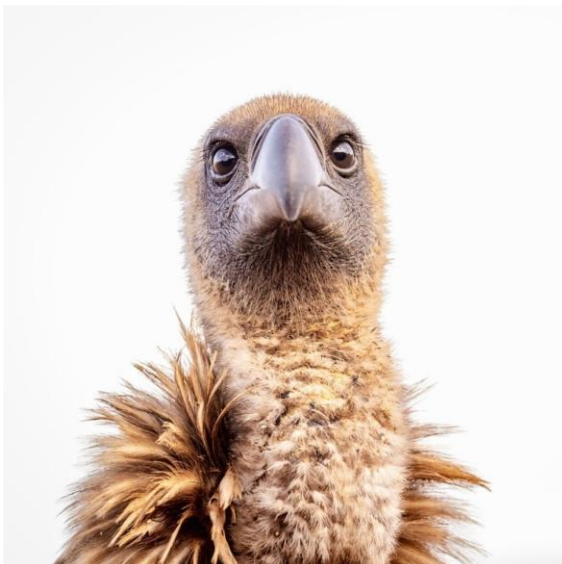
Cheetah



Tawny eagle & White-backed vulture



White-backed vulture



Lion



Compiled by Sean Weekly

**Thursday 19 June 2025**

**Day 1:**

Back to Zimanga – The Journey Begins

Today was an exciting day, as I packed up and left my rather hot and sunny harbour town of Portishead, I was once again bound for one of my all-time favourite wildlife locations, Zimanga Private Game Reserve in South Africa.

We hit the road around midday, and right from the get-go, it was nice and calm. I was travelling with two familiar faces from Wales, both returning guests, and great company to share the journey with. There's something about being with people you already know that helps you relax before a big tour, with a lot of laughs, stories from previous tours, and excellent company.

Arriving early to the airport, we had time to stretch our legs, grab a coffee, people-watch, and relax. And then, just when I thought the day couldn't get any better, I was handed a homemade ham sandwich, Homemade! Neatly wrapped, packed, and shared from one of the guests. It may have been the early start talking, or maybe it was just the comfort food in a busy terminal, but it hit the spot.

Eventually, we made our way to the gate where the rest of the group began to arrive. And here's the cherry on top. I already knew every single one of them. It wasn't a briefing, it was a reunion. Big smiles, quick catch-ups, a few running terrible jokes (standard practice for me) and lots of excitement between the group.

And just like that, we were off, bags loaded, cameras packed. Next stop, Zimanga.

**Friday 20 June 2025**

**Day 2**

Delays, Dashes and a Hippo welcome

I knew all that smooth travel the day before was too good to be true. Our flight out of Heathrow was delayed by 45 minutes, not a huge deal on paper, but when you're sitting on a plane watching your Johannesburg-to-Durban connection window shrink minute by minute, the stakes start to rise. Fast. By the time we landed, we were tight on time, cueing a *dash* through Johannesburg airport that felt more like an episode of The Amazing Race.

Despite a big effort, not all of us made it onto the connecting flight. And to make matters a little more fun, a few pieces of luggage decided to take the long scenic route and never even boarded the flight from London. Classic!

So, after a bit of re-routing, some emergency luggage troubleshooting, and a fair amount of airport laps, we managed to get everyone on new flights, and, just as importantly, we kept smiling (just about anyway). No panic, just a bit of shared suffering! All good memories to talk about at the end of the week.

Eventually, after a four-hour road transfer that included a half way service stop and some naps, we finally rolled up to the entrance of Zimanga Private Game Reserve. There to greet us was Tyrone, our legendary Zimanga guide. Greeting us with a big welcome, Ty got us and our (somewhat incomplete) luggage loaded into the safari vehicle for the final leg: a 20-minute drive through the bush to the main lodge.

At this point, everyone was tired but eager to shake off the travel and settle into our accommodation. And just when eyelids were getting heavy, the bush delivered an instant wake-up call... A hippo. Running. Right across the track in front of us!

We were in Zimanga now. Wild and unpredictable, it was time for the real adventure to begin!

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Saturday 21 June 2025

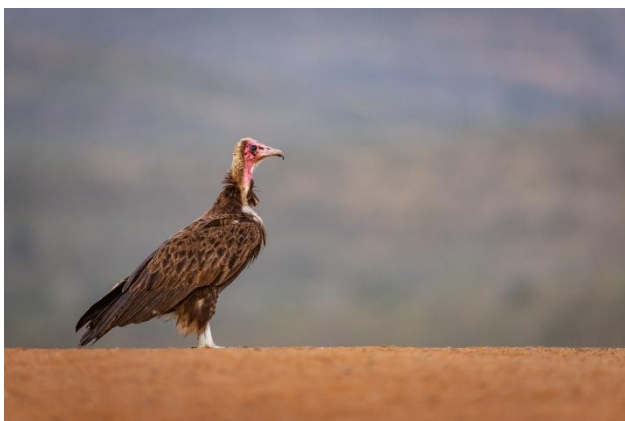
### Day 3

#### Scavenger Hide

After a restful night and a much-needed rest, we kicked off the day with a 5:45 am meet-up at the main lodge. After a coffee to get us going, we loaded up into the vehicle.

Our group headed to the Scavenger Hide, and it didn't take long before the morning came alive. Within minutes of settling into our seats, the first visitor appeared, a lone woolly-necked stork, pecking at the food laid out as bait. A peaceful start, but that didn't last long.

Before we knew it, the sky was raining vultures. White-backed vultures stormed in, wings stretched wide open coming in en masse. Among the frenzy, a few hooded vultures skulked around the edges, waiting for their chance to get some food. It was all action squabbles breaking out, wings flapping in every direction.



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As if that wasn't enough, a side-striped jackal appeared, drawn in by the commotion. The vultures, ever cautious of ground-based competition, gave him a wide berth as he tucked into the food. He was totally unfazed by the dozens of birds swirling around him. A real treat for the session.





Meanwhile, Pied Crows were darting in and out, some even perching close to the hide itself. The lighting was perfect for high-key photography, the blacks and whites of the crows against the pale sky background offered up some seriously creative opportunities.



In the background, a pair of tawny eagles kept watch from the trees. They wanted in, but the chaos on the ground was too intense. Outnumbered and outweighed, they kept their distance, regal and patient, waiting for the moment that never quite came.



It was pure sensory overload, in the best way. The noise, the movement, the light, it was everything you'd hope for in a hide session and then some. A dream start to our first full day of photographing in South Africa.

### **Meanwhile, out on the game drive...**

The second group had their morning game drive, and while it was quieter overall, they had some standout moments of their own.

One of the highlights was a female white rhino and her young calf, who was seen suckling in the soft morning light, an incredibly lucky and rarely seen moment. They also came across two lioness sisters stalking a group of buffalo, including some younger calves. Unfortunately, it was not a successful hunt and ultimately it wasn't their day. Still, a brilliant behavioural sighting.

Bird-wise, a nice surprise came in the form of a Burchell's Coucal, through the undergrowth with its signature bubbling call, always a nice sighting, and notoriously tricky to photograph well.

In the afternoon, we split up again.

One group visited the Bhejane Bird Hide, and it was buzzing with bird activity. Emerald-spotted wood doves, yellow-fronted canaries, and blue waxbills flitted in and out of frame, often just feet from the lens. The changing light, soft reflections, and clean backgrounds made it a brilliant playground for creative compositions. The small birds then disappeared due to some hungry crested guinea fowl coming and lapping up all the seed. Mind you, these birds made for some awesome pictures.

Tonight, I bunked down in the Tamboti hide alongside two eager guests. We were all pretty excited and

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had our cameras ready with plenty of snacks and food to last us the 19-hour shift.

As we arrived, the bush rolled out a warm welcome: five giraffes and a group of zebras had claimed the open space near the watering hole, casually hanging out like it was their regular Friday night meet-up spot. We didn't even have time to unpack or familiarise ourselves with the hide, we just grabbed our cameras and dove into shooting. Sometimes, moments vanish quicker than you can turn your camera on, so hesitation isn't an option in moments like this.

Then... cue the tumbleweed.

Aside from a fleeting visit by a hammerkop and a franklin, the rest of the night was eerily silent. No growls, no rustles, not even a pair of eyes glowing in the dark.

Wildlife, as always, plays by its own rules. Some nights it gives, some nights it ghosts you entirely. It was a long, quiet shift but that's the game when it comes to these night hides. You never know when the magic will strike, and that is what keeps me coming back.

**Sunday 22 June 2025**

#### **Day 4**

Tamboti overnight hide

I was still in the tamboti overnight hide with two other guests for our morning session.

Dawn crept in quietly over Zimanga and before we knew it the darkness had turned into light, and with it, came the hope that something, anything, would stroll past our hide for a morning greeting.

However, nature had other plans. No lions, no leopards, not even a thirsty impala. Just the sound of a waking wilderness of distant birds and the smell of freshly made coffee that I made to keep us hanging on, more out of optimism than necessity. Our long, quiet session continued until extraction; it was more like a "zen retreat" than wildlife photography.

Meanwhile, across the river...

The other group were off on their morning game drive and what a treat they had! They stumbled upon the well-known resident cats, the famous *cheetah brothers*. The sleek duo were, however, fully engaged in their second-favourite activity (after hunting, of course): serious catnapping. With no action on the feline front, the team pushed on.

Their persistence paid off. Just beyond the river, two impressive bull elephants were engaged in some play-fighting, locked tusks and all. Though a bit distant, the clash of tusks made for some excellent long-lens shots.

They even tracked fresh leopard prints for a while, but the elusive cat kept its mystery intact (as they tend to do). Still, the trail led them into a sighting of three impressive greater kudus, including one big, spiral-horned male, posing perfectly in the morning light. Not a bad drive at all!

Both teams reconvened back at camp for a good breakfast. Our session encounters were swapped over scrambled eggs, fresh orange juice and more strong coffee, and our overnight group got some sympathetic chuckles for our action-free stint. We wore our "night champions of patience" badges with quiet pride and joked about how we had pressed the button on the kettle more times than we had pressed the shutter on our cameras!

#### **Afternoon: Into the Mngodi Hide**

That afternoon, I swapped groups and joined the second team for their first overnight adventure, this

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time in the legendary Mgodhi Hide. With an impressive 19-hour stretch ahead of us, we rolled in with high spirits, an alarming number of snacks, and enough camera batteries to keep us going for a while, and right off the bat, it delivered.

A herd of elephants appeared in the distance, emerging from the tree line. They moved slowly and purposefully, clearly more focused on feeding than visiting in front of the hide. Most of the herd kept their distance, but one inquisitive female broke away and meandered a little closer to the hide. She raised her trunk high in the air, simply curious, or perhaps picking up our scent, and then, with quiet grace, turned back and melted into the trees after the others. A perfect, subtle moment and a great start.



Next came a family of warthogs, trotting in with the usual urgency, their snouts down, tails comically vertical, like aerials picking up bush gossip. They slurped a quick drink and dashed off again.



Then, just as we were settling back into the rhythm of the hide, we were treated to a short but hilarious visit from a pair of three-banded plovers. They fluttered down to the edge of the water, had a very brief romantic encounter (nature doesn't mess about), and disappeared just as fast. Blink and you'd have missed it.

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A pair of red-billed oxpeckers also dropped in for a delicate drink. They didn't stay long, but their presence added a nice splash of colour to the otherwise still scene.



listening for footsteps, eyes scanning for movement in the dark. But no predators, no antelope, not even the low grunt of a distant buffalo. Just the subtle noise of insects and the occasional sighting of a distant nightjar catching insects. It was undoubtedly frustrating. Especially with a hide as famous as Umgodi, you always come in expecting fireworks. However, unfortunately, wildlife does not always work in that way and it always comes down to luck in situations like this. But as our guide explained, the recent rains had left plenty of water scattered across the reserve, and when water is easy to find, the hides lose their exclusivity as water becomes readily available to the animals. We're talking about animals choosing a small puddle in front of the hide, out of a 70,000-hectare reserve. Luck really does come into it.

That's just the honest rhythm of the wild. Sometimes, you sit through hours of nothing and go back to camp with empty cards and stiff backs, but that, too, is safari. You're not just showing up for the drama. You're showing up for the possibility and enjoying being in nature.

And tomorrow? It resets. The bush rolls the dice again. And so do we.

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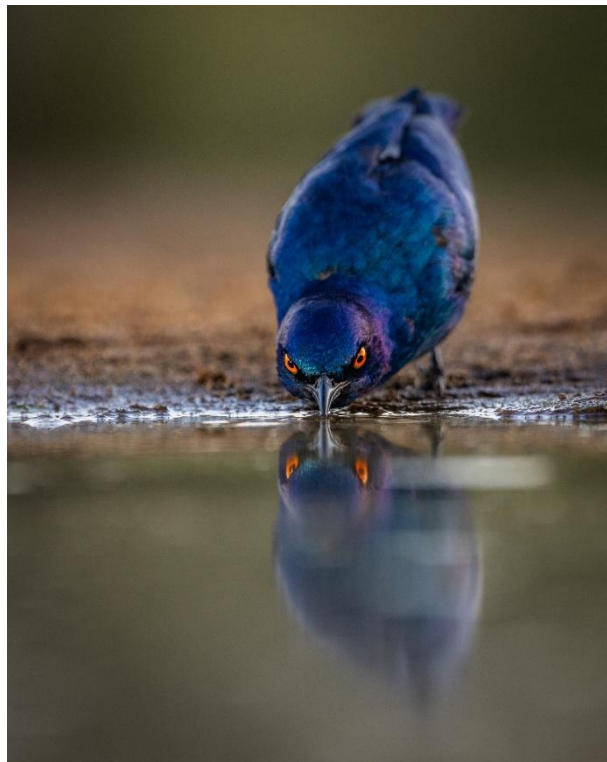
Monday 23 June 2025

## Day 5

### Mgodi overnight

We were still tucked away in the Mgodi Hide when the sun was just starting to rise and soft light trickled through the open front of the hide, illuminating the empty waterhole. The night had been uneventful, and the dawn didn't bring much more in the way of big action. But in the stillness came a few birds.

A cape starling, feathers shimmering with iridescent blue, dropped in for a brief sip, followed closely by a red-billed oxpecker and a yellow-fronted canary. Short visits, but enough to lift the spirits after a slow night.

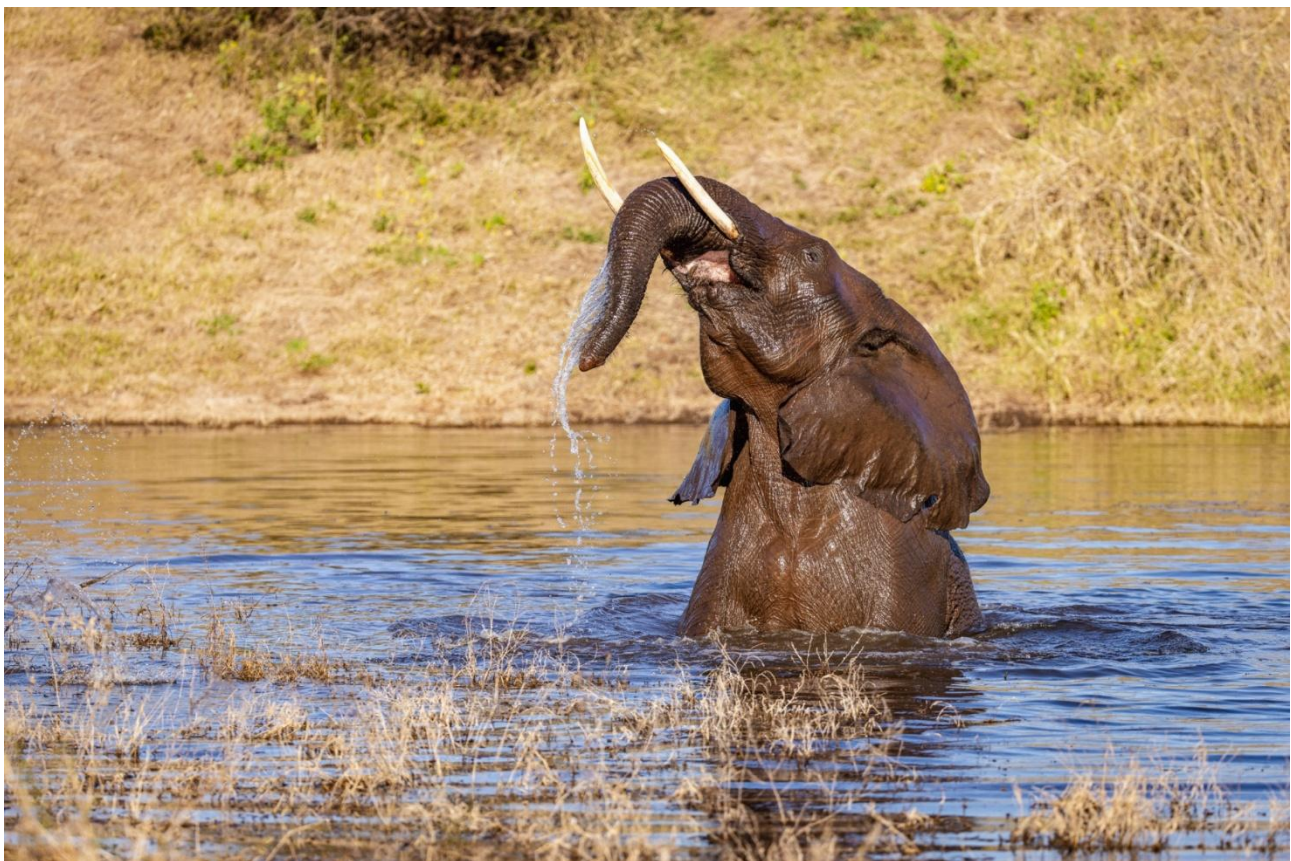


Once we packed up and left the hide, we had time to reset, recharge, and get ready for the afternoon drive, which, as it turned out, brought the energy right back up!

Not long into the drive, we were treated to a fantastic sighting of elephants bathing at the reservoir. And not just a casual drink, this was full-body submersion, splashing, spraying, rolling in the water. One young calf in particular was in absolute heaven, kicking up water and mud. These are the moments that stick with you, the raw joy of wild animals just being themselves.

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A call came in over the radio not long after, a potential sighting of two female lions. Naturally, we changed course and followed up. But the bush wasn't giving them up easily. We searched the area carefully, scanning thickets and dry grasses, but they'd disappeared. With light starting to fade, we decided to switch focus and visit a nesting site of white-fronted bee-eaters. It was absolutely worth the detour.

The bee-eaters, ever charismatic, zipped in and out of their nests carved into the sandy banks, displaying those vivid splashes of green, red, and turquoise in every direction. While the lions had eluded us, these colourful acrobats gave us a beautiful end to the drive.

Meanwhile, the other group spent their afternoon in the Lagoon Hide, where the birdlife put on a steady performance. Sightings included water thick-knees, a shy monitor lizard, and a malachite kingfisher,

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always a favourite with its electric blue back and fire-orange breast. They also saw pied kingfishers, African jacanas, Egyptian geese, and even a striated heron.

Tomorrow's a new day, and in Zimanga, that means the possibilities are wide open!

**Tuesday 24 June 2025**

## **Day 6**

### Scavenger Hide

Early mornings in the hide are always a bit of a gamble; you never quite know what you're going to get. And today? Well, let's just say it started off slow. However, I've never had a disappointing session in this hide.

But just when we were starting to suspect we'd only be photographing shadows and tree bark all morning, a woolly-necked stork swooped in. A bit later, a white-backed vulture dropped by for a blink-and-you'll-miss-it landing, scanned the scene and flapped off into the distance.

Then, at exactly 07:40, like someone flipped a switch, the whole clearing came alive. Vultures, lots of them, started pouring in. Mostly white-backed, with a few grumpy-looking hooded ones mixed in. And just like that, the hide went from zero to feathered frenzy in seconds.

There was hissing, shoving, wing-flapping chaos. Birds squabbling for space, side-eyeing each other, throwing attitude. But oddly... no one was really eating. Turns out they'd probably already had their breakfast, rumour has it, courtesy of a zebra the cheetah brothers took down the day before. So this was more of a vulture brunch hangout than a feast. Still, it made for some fantastic photography.



Then, just to keep things interesting in came a pair of tawny eagles. Smooth, silent, and totally unbothered by the chaos below, they cruised in low and landed.

One of them even had a little stare-down with a vulture twice its size. Nothing came of it, but it made for

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one of the more intense (and weirdly cinematic) interactions of the morning.



And then came the pied crows. Bold, cheeky, and absolutely one of my favourites from the morning session.

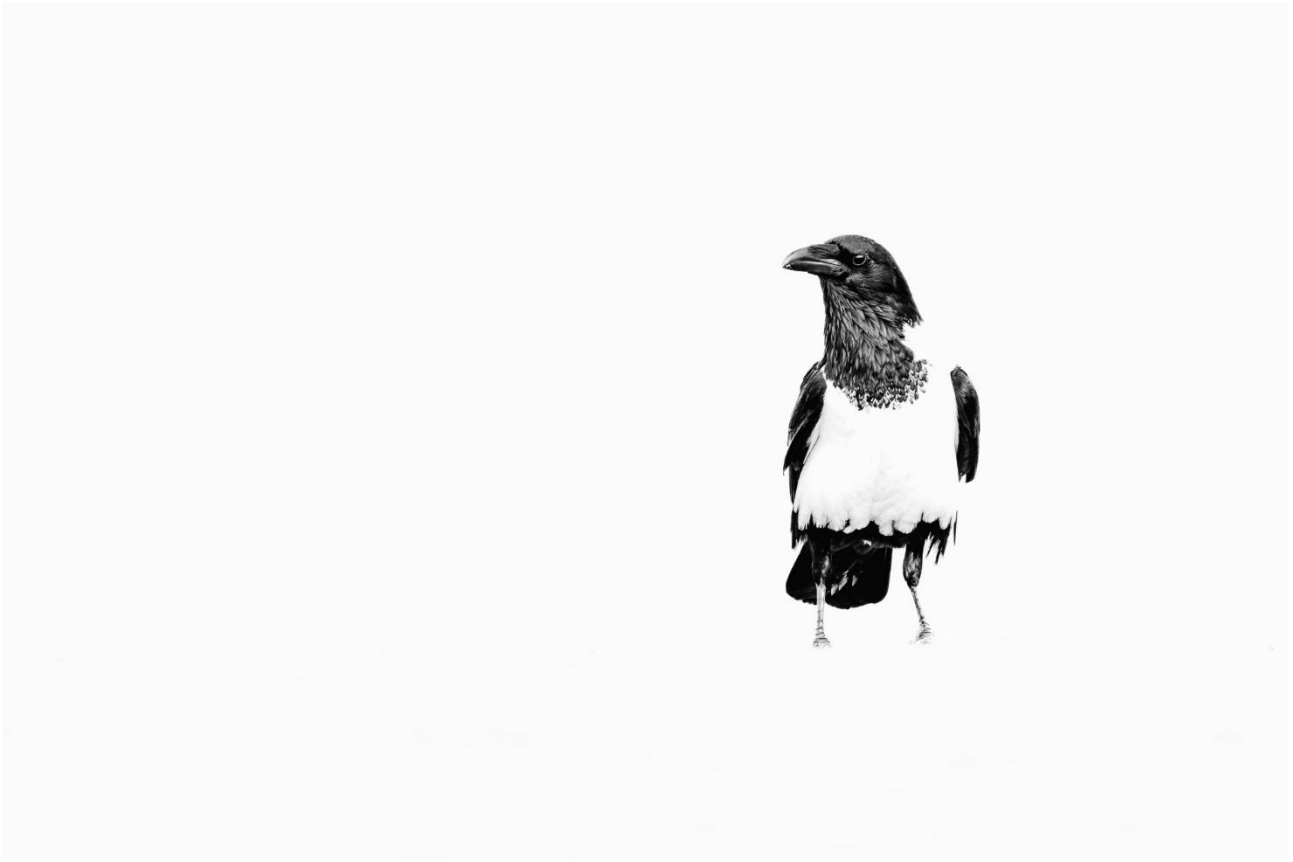
They swooped in, constantly hovering around the hide, walking into our frames, and generally being

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nosey. At first, we groaned. Then we realised... they were actually giving us some of the best shots of the day.

With the soft light and pale backgrounds, we managed to grab some gorgeous high-key portraits, clean, artistic, and totally unexpected. Sometimes the most annoying birds end up giving you your favourite shots. Go figure.





They spotted a female cheetah on the move, stalking impalas and zebras, scent-marking trees, and looking generally awesome. Not long after, they caught up to the cheetah brothers, one stretched up a tree, the other taking a well-earned rest nearby.

Later, a burst of vervet monkey alarm calls hinted at a leopard in the area, and sure enough, the strong smell of “leopard popcorn” was in the air. Sadly, no cat in sight but another vehicle later confirmed a sighting of a female leopard that hadn’t been seen in the reserve for over two years. A proper comeback!

### **Afternoon game drive**

We headed out for our afternoon game drive with the whole group on board. The original plan was to check in on the cheetah brothers. But word in the bush was that they were still in full-on digestion mode after their zebra kill, flat and not particularly photogenic. Knowing they’d likely get moving later in the evening, we changed course.

Instead, we made our way toward the fever tree forest, where we bumped into a local herd of elephants!

And when I say, “bumped into”, I mean we were basically *stuck*. The narrow tracks, thick bush on both sides, and a slow-moving elephant traffic jam meant we were completely boxed in at times. Our Welsh guests quickly learned this was a very different kind of roadblock from the sheep that they’re used to back home!

We were surrounded at one point, elephants of all ages, some just an arm's length away from the vehicle. They were so close that we could get some great, detailed images of eyes and tusks. It was one of those quietly magical moments where time just seemed to slow down. Calm, close, and unforgettable. One male even leaned up against a fever tree, using it to balance while reaching for the high stuff, always impressive to watch.

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Eventually, once the path cleared, we eased out of the forest and went on a bit of a leopard mission. Sadly, no luck on that front - they were playing hard to get.

As the sunset started to paint the sky, we swung back to check in on the cheetah brothers again. Still flat. Still sleeping. Occasionally lifting a head to acknowledge our efforts.

Not far from them, our guide picked up a signal for a female cheetah, so we made a call to try our luck with her before the light completely dropped. It paid off. We found her fairly quickly, tucked into some long grass. She was a little shy, but gave us a few lovely moments where she lifted her head just enough for some soft evening portraits.

A really peaceful end to the drive.



### **Evening night drive**

That evening after dinner, we headed out for a night drive, and it didn't disappoint!

First up was a side-striped jackal, followed by a real treat... a beautiful male serval. He was calm, posed a few times for the camera, then slipped away into the night on the hunt. A perfect sighting where everything just lines up. It was a first for me too!

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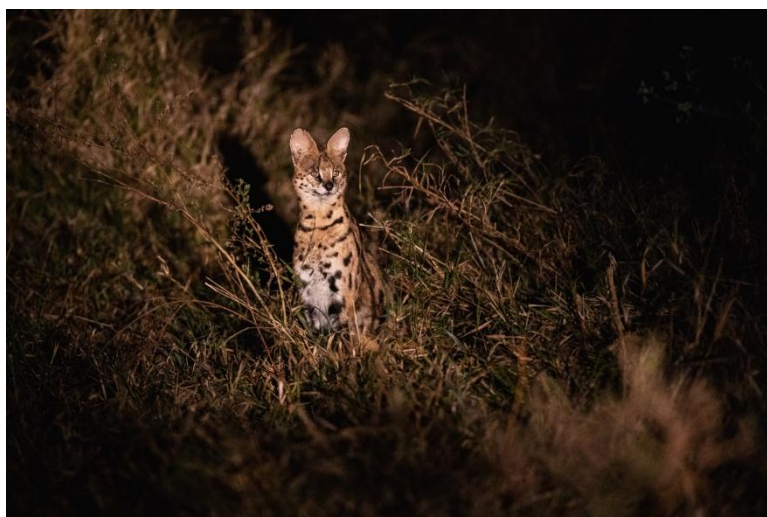


We then made another attempt to track down a female leopard near the fever tree forest by the reservoir. No luck again, but the night still delivered some special moments.

We found an African spotted genet tucked up in an umbrella thorn tree, always a bonus to see one. A few hippos were out grazing, scrub hares zipped across the track, and we caught a distant glimpse of a white-tailed mongoose.

The highlight for me personally? A porcupine! My first. Sure, it was a rear view, but still getting eyes on one in the wild is always special.

We wrapped up with a couple of nightjars fluttering across the track, and then called it a night. A little bit of everything, big, small, feathered, and spiky. And although the leopards kept their usual distance, the night drive gave us a whole new cast of characters, a bold serval, a genet, a glimpse of a porcupine, and even a distant white-tailed mongoose.



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## Day 7

### Chilled Cats, & Sunset Giraffes

We kicked off the morning with a game drive, and it didn't take long for things to get interesting.

We found the same female cheetah from the night before, just a short distance from where we'd left her. She was cruising through the bush like she had somewhere to be— not exactly posing for the camera. At first, she headed straight into thick stuff (of course), which made getting a decent shot pretty much impossible unless you're into photos of tails and bushes.

Still, we stuck with her and hoped she'd come out into the open and she did. Eventually, she wandered into a lovely clearing just as the golden morning light hit. Perfect timing. That soft sunrise glow lit her up beautifully, and we got a few incredible moments as she sat grooming, yawning, and just generally being a total show-off in the best way. Honestly, we spent most of the morning with her and didn't mind one bit. It's mornings like this that remind you why you wake up in the dark and put up with cold camera gear and dusty boots.





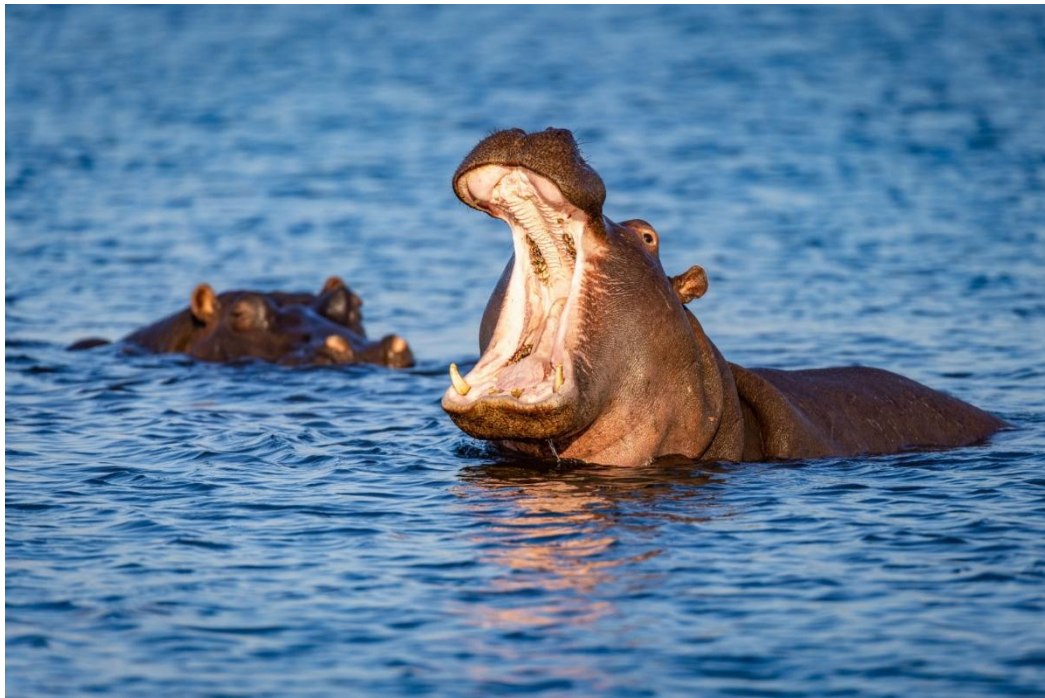
Our plan for the afternoon was to head to the reservoir to check out the hippos and crocs, then swing by the cheetahs again and see if anything was happening.

The hippos were doing exactly what hippos do: floating, grunting, napping, and occasionally giving us

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those massive territorial yawns that look great on camera. Always entertaining.



We spotted a croc too, chilling on a little sandbank. Not much movement, but the light was nice, and it made for a solid shot.



Next up, we rolled over to find the cheetah brothers. They were... surprise, surprise... still flat. Lying in the same spot, one of them blinked at us and proceeded to fall back to sleep. We were just about to move on when we got a radio call. The female cheetah was on the move again and in the open. So, off we went, chasing the action.

By the time we got there, she'd already had a go at some impala and disappeared into the bush again. A

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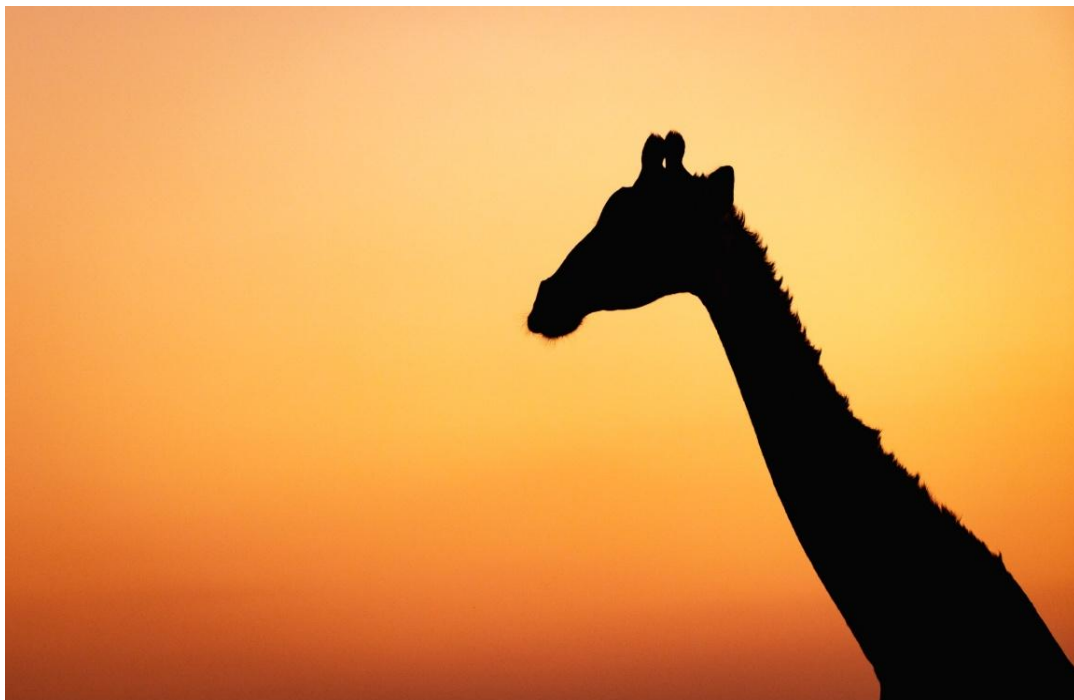
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couple of sharp eyes in the group spotted her slipping through the trees, but she was locked onto another group of impala and vanished.

With the sun starting to dip, we figured it was time to head back. But on a whim, we stopped by the cheetah brothers one more time... and finally, one of them decided to move! He stretched up onto a tree, gave us a little show, and then flopped back down, but hey, at least we got *something* before the light faded.



And just when we thought the day was done, we got one last surprise—a small group of giraffes, silhouetted perfectly against the orange sunset. Heads high, still as statues, and looking totally majestic.



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Not a bad way to wrap up the day. It wasn't nonstop action, but with golden cheetah light, hippo drama, sleepy crocs, and a giraffe and sunset, it turned out to be a proper good day.

**Thursday 26 June 2025**

### **Day 8**

Lions, Tracks & a Surprise Warthog

While four of our guests headed off to try their luck in the Scavenger Hill hide (which, sadly, turned out to be a total no-show, a rarity in that hide - but welcome to the highs and lows of wildlife photography), I set out on a morning game drive with one other guest, and it turned out to be well worth the effort. After dropping the others at the hide, we headed toward the river, following a sandy track that was absolutely littered with signs of life, everything from antelope to hyena tracks, and even some beautiful, fresh leopard prints from the night before.

We continued driving down the small track barely when BOOM, there she was. A lioness, standing casually on the side of the road, literally appearing out of nowhere.

We followed her for a while as she strolled down the track, eventually settling on a small mound, backlit by the morning sun. She gave us some great portrait opportunities.

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After a bit of posing, she stood up and continued walking. We managed to loop around ahead of her, lining up for some lovely shots as she walked straight towards us down the path.



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Then she suddenly veered off, clearly focused on something. She began digging into a warthog burrow, and, to our surprise, pulled out a warthog carcass. It was already dead (possibly cached earlier), and without hesitation, she dragged it into the bushes. Just like that, she was gone.

The rest of the drive was on the quiet side, but after a lion encounter like that, no complaints from us!

### **Afternoon Drive**

In the afternoon, we set off with hopes of finding more lions... but the cats weren't playing ball this time. Instead, we had a bit of fun with some white-fronted bee-eaters, always fun to photograph with their colour and constant flitting around.

Just when we thought the day might end a little slowly, the cheetah brothers decided to save the show. We found them in a great open spot, stretched out and relaxed at first, but they soon started moving around as the temperatures cooled.

A beautiful golden hour light turned into an epic session to close out our week in Zimanga.



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Friday 27 June 2025

## Day 9

Zimanga to London Heathrow

Our week in Zimanga has been amazing, action-packed with incredible moments from dramatic vulture action in the hides to close encounters with cheetahs, lions, elephants, and hippos on game drives. Some sessions were quiet, others full of activity but the variety of wildlife and photography opportunities kept us busy with some memorable encounters and memories.

However, sadly, it was our time to leave South Africa and after one last drive out of the reserve to meet our airport transfer, we made our way to Durban and started the journey back to London. Tired but happy, Zimanga, you didn't disappoint again



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