

Tour Report

Zambia – Sacred Combe Safari

26 September – 8 October 2019



Compiled by Chris Breen & Simon Barnes

Wildlife Worldwide team

Chris Breen	Trip leader & organiser, Luangwa passionista
Simon Barnes	Wildlife aficionado, author, journalist, Luangwa passionista
Driving guides	Amon, Moffat, Bryan and Lloyd
Walking guides	Brent (Mwaleshi), Alex (Takwela), Amon (Tafika)
Scouts	Davis (Mwaleshi), Chisomu (Takwela), Amon (Tafika)

The Luangwa Valley

Luangwa is part of the Great African Rift - a continental fault that runs from the Red Sea down the length of Africa and accounts for the spectacular scenery in East Africa and the African lakes. At a certain point however, it divides and the arm to the east encompasses Lake Malawi and the western arm becomes the Luangwa Valley which runs largely north to south for around 400 kilometres at an average width of about 100 kilometres.

The Mchinga Escarpment is to the west and forms the western limit of the Luangwa Valley and in the east there is a similar though less well defined escarpment. The Valley floor is about 1,000 metres lower than the surrounding plateau.

South Luangwa National Park is the jewel of Zambia's national parks. It lies within the valley and comprises some 9,050 square kilometres of unspoilt African wilderness. Its eastern boundary is the meandering Luangwa River whose regular changes in course leave characteristic ox-bow lagoons which are one of the most scenic aspects of the park. Set amongst beautiful riverine vegetation of evergreen mahogany and ebony trees, these lagoons and the grazing lawns around them are a magnet to the outstanding wildlife of the park.

There are numerous large mammals here - elephant, buffalo, hippo, lion, crocodile, warthog, puku, impala, spotted hyena, greater kudu and eland are all common. Unique to the Luangwa are the Thornicroft's giraffe, Cookson's wildebeest and Crawshay's zebra, which are found nowhere else. And, the Luangwa Valley probably has the world's highest naturally occurring density of leopard.

Concentrations of wildlife along the riverine area increase throughout the dry season and are at their maximum during September and October. Buffalo herds of over a thousand and large herds of elephant are frequent sightings. Hippos collect in huge numbers, often several hundred strong, in the deep-water channels of the river, accompanied by unknown numbers of crocodile.

Norman Carr

Norman was born in Chinde on 19 July 1912. At the time, Chinde was a British Concession in Portuguese East Africa. At a young age he was sent to school in England which he didn't enjoy, longing to return to Africa. As a young man Norman was a self-proclaimed poacher hunting elephants without a license and relishing the prospect.

He served in the Kings African Rifles attaining the rank of Captain before returning to Northern Rhodesia in 1944.

On his return he was hugely influential in setting up national parks in Zambia, Malawi and to a lesser extent Zimbabwe. In Zambia, his vision of conservation through tourism led him to set up the country's first safari camp in the Nsefu area of the Luangwa Valley.



In 1950 he petitioned Senior Chief Nsefu - Paramount Chief of the Kunda people in the Luangwa Valley - to set aside a portion of tribal land as a Game Reserve and built the first game viewing camp open to the public in the country. Proceeds from this went back to the community and eco-tourism in Africa was born. His dream was to secure the future of this unique wilderness by ensuring that the local population would benefit through conservation of the wildlife and habitat of the Luangwa Valley.

Norman helped establish the Save the Rhino Trust in the 1970s, helped return two lion cubs (Big Boy and Little Boy - *illustrated above*) to the wild, and provided wildlife education to local children in the Luangwa Valley through the Kapani School Project, which has been running since 1986.

Norman, who Chris Breen was lucky enough to know and work for, was a man ahead of his time - he broke the mould and created conservation-based tourism and was the first to take people on foot into the bush to look at and photograph wildlife rather than hunt it.

Norman died at the age of 84 on 1 April 1997.

Day 1	27 September
Camp	Tafika
Weather	Cool in the evening
Wildlife highlights	Lions at the salt pan en route from the airport

What would you rather do or go fishing?

Try and get there before the guests. At least a day. Like a good warm-up before the big match: get your eye in, get your ear in, get tuned in to the sights and sounds of the Luangwa Valley in Zambia. So we – that's me and Chris, co-leader of the trip, founder and CEO of Wildlife Worldwide - put up for a night at the lovely Flatdogs camp near the Luangwa Bridge, and there we ate and drank with old friends. We felt part of things once again, for we have both been here many times.

The following morning we were out in South Luangwa National Park. We saw a small group of lions, a nice big male and four females. They too made us feel part of things. Familiar things, lions: what a miracle it is, to be able to speak of lions as familiar things.

But no matter how well you know the Valley there is always something unexpected. We came to a stretch of open water – Luangwa Wafwa – and there we were brought up short. Because there was a fishing party in progress, towards the end of the dry season, as these waters grow shallow, the fishing gets easier and easier. Then the birds come crowding in to exploit the resource, and it is the immense disturbance of the immense numbers that makes the system work. You could hardly see the water for the birds.

I counted them. Always count, because there is a certain magic in the numbers. I made it 220 white pelicans and 500 yellow-billed storks, plus ten African spoonbills and three marabou storks.

I don't know what triggered it. One of the marabous grabbed a fish – and all at once the full frenzy was on, the pelicans beating the water with their wings in unison, driving the fishes mad, and so beak after beak suddenly pointed skywards, transferring a fish from the immense trawl-net of the beak down to where it would do most good. I saw five storks in a row, each with a large fish athwart its beak.



Lord, this valley is full of wonders, full to the brim. Point of information: the answer to the question at the head of this blog is, of course, "one rode a horse and one rhododendron". Already it was clear that this would be a special trip. Better get to the airport and meet the guests.

Simon Barnes

Proflight arrived into Mfuwe at 1730 or so and Simon and I met everyone off the flight - tired after the long journey from London (via Dubai) but excited to finally be in the Luangwa Valley.

There were two vehicles waiting - one closed and one open - and having collected our bags we piled into the vehicles and headed for camp. Along the main road, with its simple shops, villages and schools, and then turning right and heading north, with the river some distance away on our left-hand side - the sun, by now was below the horizon and we were in African darkness.

The first of the two vehicles arrived into Tafika at about 1930 and the second half an hour or so later having been diverted by some lions on the way.

Tired, everyone was shown to their rooms and returned for a quick drink before dinner and a well-earned rest... before tomorrow's 0500 kick off!

Rate the following in order of importance: drink, shower, lion

I had to make a decision on behalf of our guests, and all I had done so far was say hello and welcome. I had to take a punt on what kind of guests they were and why they had chosen to come to the Luangwa Valley.

We were travelling in an open vehicle from Mfuwe airport to Tafika camp, a two-hour bounce in the dark along unmade roads, taking in a corner of South Luangwa National Park. I was riding up front with my old friend and colleague Amon Zulu, catching up and talking wildlife.

Our guests had been on the road for about 36 hours: getting to Heathrow, travelling to Dubai changing planes for Lusaka (no direct flights from London), then once again for Mfuwe, and now this last-straw run through the night. They were all in desperate need of stillness, running water, clean clothes and something nice to drink. And I denied them all these things.

A little crackle from the radio. Yes, still there. So, Amon asked: should we go straight to camp? Or take a 20-minute detour?

I thought long and hard. It took me about 1.5 seconds. "Let's go for it."

Lions. Ten minutes later, yes, we were looking at lions. There they were, lying about in the uncompromising way that lions specialise in. Blinking in the spotlight I trained on them, still quite full from yesterday's kill but visibly wondering if it was time to hunt again. Great big tawny lionesses, each paw like spiked mace, with golden eyes that can turn in an instant from sleepy contentment to furious action. One glance, one single glance seems to pierce your soul.

Weary, travel-stained, longing for the comforts of camp – but these guests had come here for something far greater than physical ease. They were longing also for lions, and longing still more for the sense of wildness that comes from breathing the same air as lions.

There was a different quality to the silence as we made the final bounce towards Tafika.

Simon Barnes

Day 2	28 September
Camp	Tafika
Weather	Unseasonably cool in the morning
Wildlife highlights	Lions almost everywhere!

Sausages that go bump in the night

Our guests were now all settled in the splendid riverside accommodation at Tafika. Chris and I were in staff quarters, but this time we were sharing a small house, and it was great. The walls of the separate rooms didn't reach the top – there was a metal roof high above us - so room-to-room conversation after lights-out was not a problem. "Hear that?"

A pause.

"Wood owl!"

It's a welcome-back sound: welcome back to the noisy African night, welcome back to the Luangwa Valley and its mysteries. These birds have a contact call that sounds a bit like Frankie Howerd looking through a keyhole: oo-oo-oo! Then the territorial call: mnemonic: now then, whoooo's a naughty boy? And so to sleep.

I was awoken twice in the night: the first time by a hysterical, not-quite-human screaming. It takes a day or two for your brain to make the necessary adjustments for the bush, but before I was back asleep I knew it was a bushbaby, to be precise, a thick-tailed galago. It gave me a slightly smug feeling about being back home.

I was rather less smug an hour or so later when a bomb hit the place.

It didn't actually explode, but the sound on that tin roof was apocalyptic. I jack-knifed up in bed wondering if the Four Horsemen were galloping across the savannah with the zebras. It wasn't until morning that I worked it out: it must have been a sausage. No, really, titter ye not, as Frankie would have said.

*The house stands under a sausage tree, a tree so called because it carries sausage-like fruit. A tree-full looks like an Italian delicatessen, immense cylinders hanging down all over the place. This is *Kigelia africana*, a rich and generous tree that can produce fruit weighing 12 kilos, 26 pounds. Useful tip: never stand under a sausage tree.*

A nocturnal sausage had hit the roof in the manner of a torpedo, with a sound like the clap of doom. Well, morning now and no damage done. Time to look for elephants.

Simon Barnes

We were woken up at 0500 and made our way out for a light breakfast at 0530 - the river in front of camp looking beautiful and the first birds of the day (and of the safari) beginning to reveal themselves.... brown-hooded kingfisher and African pied wagtail amongst them, hippos in the river, and just the general glory of the Luangwa beginning to show itself.

We had three game-viewing vehicles - so plenty of space to spread out! - with Amon, Moffat and Lloyd as our excellent guides.

As there had been a lion sighting the previous evening around the salt pan Amon and Lloyd decided to head in that direction, Moffat did the riverside drive. Everyone returned having had fabulous game viewing. The vehicles that headed out to the salt pan saw 16 or 17 lions (first three including a female with a collar, then another three - two of which were young males - and then ten all flopped in a heap under a tree as they had recently killed and eaten a buffalo. There were plenty of vultures on the buffalo carcass for those that went over to see it - hooded, white-backed and one white-faced. The vehicle on the riverside saw three or four (from a different pride).



Of course, it's not all about predators - between us we had some other amazing sightings including Cookson's wildebeest (though it had a badly damaged right hind leg), lots of warthogs, impala, puku, and even common waterbuck. Bird sightings included nearly 200 southern crowned cranes, Arnot's chat, wattled, crowned, white-crowned and blacksmiths lapwing, carmine, little and white-fronted bee-eater (and for some the call of European bee-eater migrating overhead), bateleur, brown snake and fish eagle and a host of other avian delights.



Then, it was back to camp for lunch and a siesta, and for those who wanted to, a tour by Isaac of his lovingly tended vegetable gardens.



Siesta was followed by afternoon tea and a freshly baked cake and then we headed out into the park for another game-drive. This time, the heat of the day had subsided and the colours subdued, but were perfect for photography. Elephants, giraffe, a selection of antelope, hippos and crocs were all on the list before we all arrived at a beautiful sundowner spot to be greeted by Bryan, Michelle and Alfred who had prepared a full bar with nibbles for us to enjoy as the final vestiges of daylight faded from the sky.

Back in our vehicles - and spotlights on - it was time to see what night-time mammals were out there to be enjoyed. No sooner had we turned on

the spotlights than three fully grown lions padded along the road, past the vehicles giving them a berth of perhaps two metres at most. A thrilling sighting.

One of the night drives then headed on elsewhere while two of the drives followed the lions to see what they were up to. No one was disappointed, with a dozen or so more lions being seen by some, and everyone seeing a range of the smaller mammals including genet, white-tailed, bushy-tailed and water mongoose.

Back at Tafika it was time for a quick drink in the bar before dinner and bed. More excitement tomorrow!

Two Mosis and three blind mice

Telling a Bob story is always a challenge. And on every trip to Zambia, there comes a time – there come several times – when Bob stories have to be told to our guests. He is the hero of a thousand camp-fire tales; he's also the hero of my first novel Rogue Lion Safaris, though I toned him down to make him believable.

That's part of the problem. If you tell the literal truth, Bob comes across all wrong. Because he was never an idiot. The story of him driving into the Bangweulu Swamp or setting the new Land Cruiser on fire certainly bear repeating: but they make Bob look like a clown.

The fact is that Bob was also a genius. He was a genius of birds, especially, of the sounds of birds. He shared his knowledge with me and with Chris, and with it, his great streak of wildness. Knowing Bob was one of the great adventures of both our lives. "Never mind where we bloody are!" he once told us, when we were either in Zambia or Zaire, but weren't at all sure which. "Just stop whe

He was great company, marvelously funny, highly intelligent, many-sided, and the best possible fun – and of course, it always came back to birds. We have both spent hours in the bush with him, usually in pursuit of a small brown bird – Codrington's indigo bird, for example - and it was all great. Some other time I'll tell you the story of Bob and the world's worst picnic, or the interventions of elephants in our hunt for the Angola pitta.

But not now. For I heard three distinct notes from the top of a tree and after a fizzing pause of perhaps 4.3 seconds Bob came bursting into my brain, forcing from me an involuntary cry: "Chinspot batis!" I hadn't heard the call for about 20 years, and it was as if I had Bob beside me again, prompting me.

I pointed the bird out to Chris, and he went through a very similar experience. Bob spoke to him, too, from across the years. "Three blind mice – listen!" That evening, back at Tafika, Chris and I raised bottles of Mosi, the excellent Zambian beer, clinked them musically together, and once again, drank to Bob's memory. I expect that somewhere out in the bush there's a small brown bird with a contact call that sounds just like two bottles of Mosi being clinked together. If we but knew it.

Simon Barnes



Crackle

Have you ever been cut dead? I mean, by a genius in that art? Someone you had a flirtation with once, you run into each other by chance and you smile and say hello and what you get is – absolutely nothing. A complete denial of your own existence.

You get something of that with lions in the Luangwa Valley. They are so accustomed to vehicles that they – and more importantly, the humans who sit in them gazing about at the fantastic prospect of the Valley splendours – become invisible. You haven't existed, you have never existed.

The vehicles, loud, smelly and bulky, are completely neutral. And we who sit them – we have no meaning. We are nothing. It is a position of absolute privilege. And ever so slightly unnerving, for the vivid one-way intimacy it gives, and for the perfect denial of yourself. You are a human, and humans were once a popular prey item of the species walking past you. But now you are not even protein.

Past us they walked, in the slouching single-file manner that lions use when they are going from a meal to a shade-tree at round about 8.30 on a fine October morning. They walked past us within stroking distance, one by one. You could hear the soft crackling of the dried yellow grass beneath their vast soft paws. You could hear the soft rasp of their breath.

And if their eyes strayed up at us, they were merely to check our non-existence: eyes that were great golden windows with a pupil -- round, like ours, not a vertical slit like the cat on your hearthrug – into which you could reread just about anything you chose.



These lions were full-bellied and peaceful, and therefore full of love for each other and for the world. They went lion by lion into the shade and flopped down to rest: and they were more relaxed than any other living creature on earth ever can be, because they are big and they masterful and they are together.

It was a morning of 16 lions. I counted. But the lions, they don't count the humans.

Simon Barnes

Day 3	29 September
Camp	Takwela
Weather	Unseasonably cool in the morning
Wildlife highlights	Lions on Riverside Drive

0500 wake up - not as cold as it was yesterday, but still long-sleeves weather which is unseasonal (but to be enjoyed as it is likely to change in a few days!). Breakfast by the fire and then out game-viewing in three vehicles - but for the early attendees to breakfast there was the treat of six or seven lions on the far bank. They weren't visible for long, but long enough for those that were out to get a good (but distant) view.

Today we had a slightly shorter morning drive, and those of us with Lloyd headed out of camp - passing a beautiful adult martial eagle - and along riverside drive. Lloyd was of the view that the lions from last night may well still be there - and needless to say he was right! We saw nine lions flopped out under the cool of a tree. These were nine of the lions that we saw in the big group yesterday morning - identifiable by the female that had either had a fight with another lion, or more likely been speared by a buffalo and had lost her right eye. The eye was weeping badly and there was also a significant puncture mark below the eye socket.

After spending a little time with the lions we headed out of the park to Lukuzi airstrip where we met Simon's game viewing vehicle and our two aircraft - one the Remote Africa Safaris Cessna 206 and the other a Corporate Air Beechcraft Baron. A short while after arriving, we were airborne for our flight to Mwaleshi airstrip in the North Luangwa.



This short, and beautiful 30 minute flight took us over the top end of South Luangwa (the Mupamadzi River), over the top of the corridor between the two parks and then down into North Luangwa National Park where we were met by Brent who runs Mwaleshi (which is about a 30 minute drive from the airstrip) and Alex who runs the new, and very beautiful Takwela which is about an hour away on the confluence of the Mwaleshi and Luangwa Rivers.

Whilst Alex and I then gathered up our group, Simon waited for the final flight to arrive before heading off to Mwaleshi.

Crossing the Mwaleshi River we saw a huge bull elephant upstream that had come to drink as well as a large congregation of yellow-billed storks, puku staying cool near the river and vultures circling overhead. But, of most excitement to one of the group was the sighting of a malachite kingfisher at the water's edge.

We crossed the river and went to where the vultures were coming in to land and there was a recently dead hippo covered in birds and two lionesses keeping watch under a nearby bush.

On from the hippo we made our way towards camp and then drove through the Luangwa River. As we then looped around behind camp we were 'greeted' by an angry family of elephants - two adult females, a youngster (seven or eight years old) with only half a trunk, and a year old baby that kept hiding under his mother's tummy. They were not happy to see us at all, and flapped their ears, trumpeted and generally tried to scare us away. Alex undeterred, spent time with them, revving the

engine occasionally, and not letting them push us out of the way, for fear that this would become habitual practice. Instead, he wants this family to know that we are actually alright, and that they have nothing to fear from us. What must they have witnessed in the past to make them as aggressive towards us as this?

We arrived into camp and, after being shown to our rooms, had lunch, siesta and then tea before heading back out for a short afternoon game-drive and sundowner. It is difficult to imagine a more perfect setting for sundowners - bright orange sun in the sky reflecting over the river, an elephant in the distance and birds all around.

After sundowners we made our way back across the river and (after a minor 'sticking' in the mud!) went back to the hippo to see if the lions were around. There was no immediate sign of the lions but a little bit of spotlight searching revealed firstly two females, and then three more, one with a tiny cub that spent much of its time snuggling up to its mum and suckling.

It was then back to camp for dinner and bed after a really amazing day.



Wot no rhinos? A ridiculously fine walk in the Luangwa Valley

It's different in the north.

We made the 30-minute hop by light aircraft from South Luangwa National Park in Zambia to North Luangwa National Park, a place that gets no more than 500 visitors a year. So naturally things are different. They still don't know what to make of us.

You'd think that the fewer the humans, the more the non-human animals would be at their ease with us: closer to Eden and all that. But it doesn't work out quite like that. The more the animals are used to humans as a neutral, non-harming presence, the more relaxed they are. And in the south park, lions and elephants are nothing less than blasé. Well, quite a lot of the time, anyway.

But when we made our first walk in the north park, things weren't like that. I was now based at Mwaleshi camp; Chris had gone to Takwela camp with the other half of the party. And right from the moment we started walking – Davis Ng'uni the scout keeping us safe – it was clear that the treaty between us and them had to be renegotiated every day.

And this was one of these days – they come often enough, but you never know when – that Luangwa throws absolutely everything at you. So when we walked into a group of elephants – well, there was a bit of a frisson. We stood still and calm and unthreatening and eventually, they allowed us a measure of trust.

Then we found ourselves doing the same thing with a herd of 400 buffalos: one male in his prime made a point of putting himself between the herd and us. If we did anything amiss, he was going to know about it first. But we didn't and slowly, one by one, all the buffaloes behind him lowered their heads and started grazing again. Not him: but it was still, in its way, a triumph: humans and buffaloes all enjoying their afternoon together.

Then, as we walked on, a brief encounter with a leopard: for me, in my station at the back of the line, just a subtle glimpse of a head and shoulders as the leopard dropped from a tree, merged with the ground – and decided not to flee. He was wary – a leopard can't be too careful – but by no means frightened. No need for panic.

And just as you'd thought the walk couldn't get any better, we found a small group of lions, four of them lying out on the far bank of the Mwaleshi River. They were the easiest beasts of the whole walk: they looked at us with golden eyes, and then dropped golden heads back onto golden paws to grab a little more sleep before nightfall.

Every walk makes the peace treaty between us and them a little bit more binding. But you never take a walk in this marvellous place without knowing that you are there on sufferance. And that is where so much of the beauty springs from.

Simon Barnes

Day 4 30 September

Camp Takwela

Weather October hot!

Wildlife highlights Mating elephants in the Luangwa River
Bat hawk over the Luangwa
Leopard on our night drive

The usual 5am wake-up was followed by toast and tea by the early morning fire overlooking the Luangwa and Mwaleshi rivers.

With our scout at the ready we headed upstream, past rooms two and three, to the crossing point and after donning our life-jackets we climbed into the canoe and Alex paddled us across the river.

It was a typically beautiful Luangwa morning! Carmine bee-eaters (and a few European bee-eaters overhead), black-headed oriole, a whole array of waterbirds and some elephants crossing the river. We even watched a group of five elephants bathing in the river and one couple mating - not something that is commonly seen.



After tea by the riverside we began to head back to camp but our way was blocked by the four 'angry' elephants that we had seen yesterday, so with Alex's guidance we watched and waited, keeping a safe distance from them. Danger averted, we were able to continue on our way, keeping close to the river until we got to the crossing point.

Back at camp we counted 55 hippos and 38 crocodiles immediately in front of the chitenge (dining room)!

Compulsory rehydration followed - it was a scorching hot day - and then lunch at 12noon, before siesta and then afternoon tea. We headed out by vehicle downstream - with the Luangwa on our righthand side and then crossed over to find a sundowner spot... as we crossed there were five fully grown male kudus each with huge horns returning to the woodland after having come to the river to drink.

We enjoyed sundowners with perhaps 100 hippos in view.

Our night drive was quiet - they sometimes are! - but



we had a fabulous sighting of a flap-necked chameleon which Alex spotted amongst the leaves of a small tree by the side of the track.

We were exhausted when we returned to camp, so had our dinner and then peeled off to bed.

Wild dogs? Funny, I thought, funny...

Many years ago, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, in the course of their 60s television programme Not Only... But Also, used to put on their cloth caps and morph into Dud and Pete. Funny, I thought, funny... so they always said, anyway, and on one of these occasions they talked about the problems they had getting to sleep at night. "You'll never guess who was in my bed? Bloody Jayne Mansfield! Wearing a shortie see-through nightie... I said get out of here! Get out..."

It was like that when we tried to go for a walk in North Luangwa National Park in Zambia. We were driving off towards a place where we were going to start a nice walk – with the scout David Ng'uni keeping us safe – and try and look for lions. But you'll never guess who got in our way? Bloody wild dogs!

Coming at us completely unexpectedly, in the way that dogs do. We stopped the vehicle and watched as the dogs finished their breakfast, which was a buffalo calf: how wonderful it is to see dogs, so exotic, and at the same time, looking as though they had just come bounding out of your own back door, ready to fetch a stick or two with their tails hard a-wag.

There were six of them, all sharing their meal with great joy, in the supremely sociable way that dogs live. And then three of them went bounding off, to our complete mystification. An enemy, lion or hyena? An antelope to chase for the second course?

But then the three came back more jolly than ever – and with them came eight puppies, their feathery white tails waving at the sky, and the grownup dogs shared their meal with the pups and there was a great romping scene of doggy merriness all over the bush. When dogs are jolly, the watching humans get the jollity full blast: we know dogs better than any other non-human creatures: we share their joys and want only to romp with the whole pack until we are all tired.

Eventually the dogs finished their meal and they pulled into deep bush to rest, and we were at last able to start our walk. And once we started walking, we had to change direction and find another route. You'll never guess who got in our way. Bloody elephants...

Simon Barnes

Day 5	1 October
Camp	Takwela
Weather	October hot with a light breeze & torrential rain
Wildlife highlights	The wildlife at our morning tea spot - distant elephant coming to drink & lion crossing the river

What's the collective noun for carmine bee-eaters?

I heard a leopard in the night: the roar that sounds like a saw. It's a good sound to hear: you congratulate yourself on picking it out, and you go back to sleep easily, because it doesn't have that menacing quality of a pride-chorus of lions. You rarely see more than one leopard at time, almost never more than two – mother and cub, or a pair of honeymooners – so the collective noun, a leap of leopards, is seldom necessary.

But all the same, it's good to know it. Zambian guides often have a liking for collective nouns, and enjoy bringing them into their expositions of the wildlife of the Luangwa Valley. A pride of lions is the most obvious one, of course. Another nice one is sounder: used here for warthogs, but more traditionally used for wild swine.

The favourite tends to be a dazzle of zebra. It gives a vivid idea of their fleeing selves, when it's hard for a pursuer to pick out a single individual. All you see is the swirling Bridget-Riley patterns of their speeding backsides; a sight with the sick-making potential of the old Vertigo prog-rock record label.

We had taken a morning walk along the Mwaleshi River in North Luangwa National Park. We had already crossed the river a couple of times: seldom more than ankle deep and no crocs at this time of year, because it's too shallow. And we stopped on a sandbank to admire a colony of carmine bee-eaters.

Carmine bee-eaters nest in lines of holes in the riverbank, and a colony looks like the gun-ports of a man o' war sailing into action; when they are excavating you can even see what look like plumes of smoke emerging from the holes.

They are the great glamour-birds of the Valley: cherryade pink with caps of eye-blinking azure. Impossibly, their bums are picked out in the same colour.

And they fly in and they fly out, and when they are alarmed they sometimes all fly out together. And that is a...

... a cannonade of carmines.

Simon Barnes



The sky was a fiery orange colour this morning at 0500, and the river reflected the colours beautifully. After we crossed the Luangwa by canoe we walked upstream along the Luangwa River, wending our way in and out of the woodland and bushes and checking on river activities as

we went... but even before we left camp Alex was telling the story of the ant lion lava - which can stay in lava form for up to three years and only defecates twice in its entire lifetime!

Impala, baboon, and some fabulous birds including chinspot batis, a woodpecker (which disappeared too quickly to be able to identify!) and selection of bee-eaters and of course the ever-present sound of hippos. As we walked along the riverside we saw a pair of distant hyenas lying like lions under a bush. We were heading that way so the likelihood is that we were going to get a better view of them - which we did.

After walking a fair distance we stopped under a huge Natal mahogany tree for tea on the bank of the river at big bend in the river. Our view seemed to extend for miles on end. It was cool, shady, breeze and beautiful - the sort of place that you sit for hours and hours on end without being at all bored. There were hadeda ibis, Egyptian geese, pied and malachite kingfishers all visible, and in the distance to our right a pair of white-headed vultures.



To our left on the far bank of the river we saw a big bull elephant emerge from the forest and come to drink. He was blissfully unaware of our presence. He drank for a while, and then had a dust bath before turning, making his way up the bank and then melting away into the forest. We are in a remote location here in North Luangwa - maybe this elephant has never set eyes on people...

Alex whistled to me to bring everyone to where he was standing (he had snuck off a little upstream). We all went over to him, and where the white-headed vultures had been (we saw them take off) a lioness was making her way across the river - slowly and purposefully as lions tend to do. She looked around, chose a place to go to and sat down to watch the landscape and the animals within it - her kingdom. This was one of the lionesses we had seen a couple of evenings back near the dead hippo, the lioness without the black tip to her tail.



As we watched we saw a young bateleur eagle overhead and then a pair of African hawk eagles, and heard the sound of a pair of fish eagles in the distance.

Our senses overwhelmed by the visual spectacle we made our way back to camp, leaving the lioness exactly where we saw her.

What a morning....

Lunch, siesta and afternoon tea (as is the tradition!) and then we headed out in

the vehicle across the Luangwa and downstream passed where we had had our sundowners yesterday evening. This is a most beautiful part of the Valley with winterthorn woodland and glades of flat-topped acacias. We drove close to the Luangwa with the river on our left-hand side and came across a group of ten or more elephants who had crossed from the far side of the river. They were quite a distance from us but almost immediately we stopped they picked up our scent and changed from their relaxed and 'lolloping' gait to 'alert mode' and gathered around the youngsters in the group until they were sure we were not a threat. Once decided, they continued on their way.

We passed a large carmine bee-eater colony on the far riverbank and our sundowner stop this evening was at a hippo pool containing 70 plus hippos. With dusk descending and drinks and nibbles in hand Alex shouted "bat hawk" as a raptor came passed at speed. Although known to be resident in the Valley (technically they are deemed to be 'common') they are rarely seen so this was a fabulous and unusual sighting. And, just for good measure the bat hawk made a second low-level pass very close by a few minutes later.

We were watching great strikes of lightning in the distance, but it was time to turn on the spotlight and head home so we thought nothing about the possibility of rain. The night drive was relatively uneventful until a leopard appeared from the right of the road. It looked as though it was probably a young female - Alex thought he may have seen it before - and, whilst it was cautious it wasn't especially nervous - though it did try to stay in the shadows, preferring that to the spotlight.

And, when the leopard had gone the first drops of rain began to fall... and they became heavier and heavier until we were completely drenched to the skin! The first rains appear to have come "barrel-rolling in" as Norman used to describe it but, they are about a month too early!

Soaked from top to bottom we arrived back at camp - the team at Takwela had brought in the sofas and covered everyone's beds and clothing with plastic to keep it as dry as possible. Pre-dinner we celebrated a number of 'firsts' with a glass of wine - the first rains, two of the group's first leopard, the first bat hawk... and any other 'firsts' we could think of!

Dinner followed, and then exhausted from an amazing day we all made our way to bed for the night. But that wasn't the end of it because we were all woken at 0130ish to the sound of more thunder and even more rain which went on for another couple of hours - sleep wasn't the easiest thing to come by with the sound of the heavy rain outside!

The roaring and the silence

At the end of the walk we sat on the banks of the Mwaleshi River in North Luangwa National Park. The idea was sundowners, but the sun was already as down as it was going to get; we had been delayed by kudu, three fine males with full triple-twisting horns.

But we sat and had the drinks anyway, even though it was now more or less dark. And it was – well, cool. Cool as in not hot. October in the Valley is supposed to be roasting: but this strange year it was almost gentle. There was even a little humidity: you could feel the sweat on your face, it didn't burn off in a single instant. And was there or was there not a rumble in the distance?

Brent Harrison, our guide, has a taste for the more contemplative ways of enjoying the wildlife of the bush. So as we sat with drinks in hand, just about able to make each other out, he suggested that we sit for a while in silence.

Rumble again, no doubt about it that time. Then the night-birds started up: I heard the voice of the fiery-necked nightjar: Good Lord – deliver us! Not a bird you usually hear in the Valley, so a small treat. The more usual Mozambique (or square-tailed) nightjar then struck up, churring a little like the European species.

Rumble. Rumble again, rumble and boom. Here was the sound of the thunder: and it came in two voices. The first was the kind of thunder that means lightning: the second, the kind that means lions. The thunder roared and the lions rumbled: a deep bass chorus that shook the earth and warned everything that lived to have a care and to be very careful.

I could distinguish two different kinds of nightjar and two different kinds of thunder: and in the darkness, as my companions slowly disappeared, I was lost in the sounds of the night. Then a scribble across the sky: and a flashbulb moment that revealed us all sitting, sipping listening. Then darkness again.

No one spoke. No one except the lions, and their friend the thunder. Heaven and earth, life and death, all seemed suspended in that thunderous moment. And then a damp gust bringing rain.

Simon Barnes

Day 6	2 October
Camp	Takwela
Weather	Overcast and fairly cool with thunder in the background
Wildlife highlights	Ayres hawk eagle Leopard on the night drive



Today was transfer day, but of course no one really wanted to transfer! We left Takwela a little later than planned, crossed the river by canoe and set off up the Mwaleshi to meet Simon and the other group for tea and cake under a large Natal mahogany tree. Walking over recently sodden ground isn't the easiest but it's very good for identifying tracks.... hyena, hippo, civet and others.

We could hear a pair of giant eagle owls calling so went deeper into the woodland to find them - which we quite successfully did. Sightings en route

included collared palm thrush, yellow-bellied apalis and collared sunbird. We arrived at the meeting place before Simon and his group - the same point we had tea yesterday morning, a fact which we were delighted about.

After tea, and the exchange of sightings and stories Simon said goodbye to his group (taking mine with him) and I said to goodbye to mine (taking Simon's with me) and we went our separate ways. Although not as hot as yesterday morning, the heat was rising and the vultures were getting up on the thermals and so was a mystery raptor which we later identified as Ayres hawk eagle.

Arriving into camp after crossing the river by canoe our new group were greeted by the camp team, we had a drink and everyone was shown to their rooms. Lunch and siesta followed.

Our first afternoon encounter was with a large group of elephants - mothers and aunties with young ones. This group wasn't as angry with us as others have been, but curious and gathered together to protect their young. We watched them for some time and they became more relaxed, but like other elephant groups we have seen, they weren't too happy when Alex switched on the engine to start moving away.

We drove through the Luangwa and as we came out of the river on the national park side we stopped to watch a lovely group of greater kudu and then we headed downstream parallel to the river through some beautiful woodland. Alex stopped as he could hear impala making an alarm call, and then looked round to see a dead antelope hanging from a branch in the tree next to us - we had obviously disturbed a leopard on a kill. Moving from beneath the tree we stopped a short distance and waited in case the leopard returned but without any luck, so we carried on for



sundowners. At sundowners Alex called as a bat hawk came swooping in overhead - two bat hawks in two days is surely a world record!

We headed back to camp with Chisomu spotting and went slowly towards the leopard tree as Alex had caught a glimpse of it climbing down the tree and disappearing as we approached with the spotlight. With the vehicle lights, and the spotlight, off we waited 50 metres or more away for perhaps 10 minutes or so and then slowly crept towards the tree, lights still off. Alex then turned on the spotlight and we watched a large male leopard walk behind a bush, come out the other side and then sit and star at us. It wasn't too worried about us at all (though concerned enough to come down the tree away from its kill) and after a few minutes it lay down on its side apparently unconcerned with our presence.... sometimes these sightings just require patience!

There is a time for reverence, you know...

Throughout human history there have been increasingly frenzied attempts to find things that separate human and non-human animals for all time. Tool use? No. Tool-making, then? No, not that, either. Culture? Sorry, no, that doesn't work. So what about religion? But some of the more intense studies of apes and elephants cast doubt even on that (Cynthia Moss and Jane Goodall for example).

I saw a small group of elephants standing quietly round a skull in North Luangwa National Park. It was the skull of an elephant. And they were just standing there looking at it. In a shared silence. No one was feeding, no one was socialising. Aware of our presence, they adjusted - and stayed exactly where they were. Because whatever they were doing, it mattered.

Had they just stumbled across this random elephant skull? Did they know this clump of trees of old, as a place of death, a place where one of their kind had died? Was this the skull of an elephant known to them? A beloved matriarch, dead from illness, from accident, from a bullet? Knowledge of death is sometimes thought to be another of those uniquely human things, but it didn't look like that to me. Here was a moment of reverence.

Every evening on a Sacred Combe Safari it is my practice to read out a brief chapter of my book about the Luangwa Valley in Zambia, which is called, unsurprisingly, The Sacred Combe. It's also about all those secret, sacred places of the soul.

That night when I was reading out a section on the human experience of reverence in wild places, a voice rose up so loudly I had to stop, and wait for my interrupter to finish. This happened three or four times in the course of the chapter, and soon more than one voice was calling: rising up and echoing along the wide, shallow Mwaleshi River. It seemed to me that there this time, there was a certain lack of reverence involved. I paused again, waiting, as ever, on their convenience. And then I picked up the thread as best I could.

Giving a reading, my fine phrases, heckled by lions.

Simon Barnes

Day 7	3 October
Camp	Takwela
Weather	Overcast and fairly cool with thunder in the background
Wildlife highlights	Lions at breakfast Hundreds of hippos in the river Lions - the brothers with manes!

There is something fabulous about seeing lions at any time, but something even more fabulous about seeing them from camp, at breakfast within minutes of getting out of bed! Alex saw them a fair distance away on the other side of the river lying on the sandbank. At first we thought it was a male and a female, but it then became obvious that in fact it was two fully maned males - brothers with a tight bond that are known to Alex as they are regular visitors to the area.

Our morning walk took us across the river and through the woods in the direction of the lions and we emerged onto the riverside as it was getting hotter and they were ambling out of the sun, up the riverbank and into the shade of the trees beyond.

Other sightings of note on the walk included a pair of African hawk eagles, giant eagle owl and a broad billed roller that probably came into the Valley on the recently rainy weather.

Although it was much cooler this morning it still felt as though rain was in the air and sure enough, we had a heavy shower over lunch.

This afternoon we headed out by vehicle and one of the group had said that she particularly wanted to get a shot of a hippo yawning so Alex drove to a gigantic hippo pod just downstream from the Mwaleshi/Luangwa confluence. There were a staggering number of hippos there and the cacophony was unbelievable. I started to count in blocks of ten but stopped once I went past 450



hippos - what a sight! Everyone got great photos of them yawning and a few of us recorded the sounds for use in future ringtones!

Alex was convinced that the male lions would still be at the bend in the Mwaleshi where we had seen them earlier in the day, so that was the next mission on our afternoon drive. True to form, Alex was on the money and the two males were there - brothers in arms. They are big maned lions in beautiful condition - one with a dark mane, the other a gingery colour. They weren't at all concerned about us being there and although the light was beginning to fade a little, we still managed to get some excellent photos of them.

We had thought that the leopard may still be on or near the kill in the tree, but we were unlucky on that one as the kill had gone and so had the leopard. Perhaps the leopard had moved it, or perhaps it had fallen out of the tree. Either way, the leopard eluded us on this occasion.

Lee-opard

You travel hours and days to get here. You spend two weeks walking, sitting, driving, thinking, looking, listening. And sometimes the thing you came here for – the experience you had been seeking for months, for years, all your life – lasts for perhaps three seconds. Or less. When you tell the story later to your dear ones, it takes 100 times longer to say it than it did to feel it. And yet it's perfect.

We were walking in North Luangwa National Park, and already a change had come over our guests. They had all found something bigger than the killer-shot, the close-up encounter, the rare sighting. The Valley had claimed them for its own, as it so often does. Now, as we walked, kept safe by the scout Davis Ng'uni, there was something rich to be found in very footfall.

The brief unseasonal rain had washed the air clean, knocked the dust from the sky and created long vistas of dazzling clarity, making every sense more engaged. And then Davis: "Lee-opard!" A fine three syllables that opened every eye to its fullest extent.

Movement. That's what gives it away, always movement.

I invariably walk at the back of the line, keeping the guests in pole position, better views, closer to our guide Brent Harrison. But even for those at the front, this was a fleeting moment: the leopard flowed down from the tree in the manner of a Slinky toy descending a staircase and vanished into the bush as smoothly as a stone skims across an icy pond.

And that was it. I have seen many leopards plain, for sustained periods of time, and many of these were less vivid than this tiny moment of vivid intimacy: the sensation of movement, the impossible flowing nature of the most elegant beast that has ever existed. I caught not a hint of colour, nor of the gorgeous pattern of the coat: it was just a shadow, frictionless, moving in a way that seemed beyond the limitations imposed by muscles and bones.

Simon Barnes

Day 8	4 October
Camp	Takwela
Weather	Hot and humid!
Wildlife highlights	Hundreds of hippos at sundowners

Another wonderful day, but with a very different pattern to it. We were woken up at 0500 as usual, and had our breakfast at 0530, but today we went out in the vehicle first thing to a spot about an hour's drive away on the bank of the Luangwa where we parked and then walked.



It was a relatively short walk this morning, but still a couple of hours long - African hoopoe, purple- crested turaco, African hawk eagle (one of my personal favourites!) and then back out to the riverside and along the river back to the vehicle - with open-billed and yellow-billed storks overhead.

Back in the vehicle we continued on downstream further and had tea overlooking the river at the edge of a magnificent and expansive glade of winter thorn trees. It was a long drive back to camp but well worth it!



This afternoon we decided to walk instead of drive - which was a really great 'call' from Alex and a lovely way to complete our game- viewing in North Luangwa.

We walked out from camp, up the Luangwa and immediately found a group of five male kudu on the sandbank, then puku and impala. We walked in through the woodland and out onto the river again having taken in some waterbuck and bushbuck along the way. Then it was across the sand to a beautiful sundowner spot that had been set up by the team from Takwela overlooking the river and its ever-present hippos.

As yesterday, the light this evening was amazing after the rain - no haze... it was as if someone had washed all the windows!

Meditating on the one-breath elephant

Here are two subjects to avoid when you are in conversation with me. The first is human exceptionalism, and the second is haiku. That's if you have any ambition of making this a dialogue. Once either subject comes up, I am likely to go spiraling off into a monologue: perhaps finding some great new overarching theory to confound the entire world. Or not, of course.

Both these subjects tend to dominate my thoughts when I'm out in the Luangwa Valley. I mostly keep them for the long free period that lies between lunch and tea, when the heat of the day enforces stillness on humans and elephants and everything else apart from the busy long-tailed glossy starlings outside my hut and the puku antelopes who find a survival advantage in using this inhospitable time to take the day's drink.

And so I sit and gaze and empathise. And sometimes I think about all the things that are supposed to divide humans from everything else that ever evolved on this planet, and none of which actually stands up as a hard and impermeable barrier: emotion, thought, problem-solving, tool-use, language, culture, understanding of death, awareness of self, consciousness, language, syntax, sport, mercy, magnanimity, individuality, personality, reasoning, planning, foresight, imagination, insight, moral choice, and on and on. As mentioned in a recent blog, Jane Goodall reports strange behaviour in chimpanzees that represents something of a religious awe. And how about sense of humour? A signing gorilla called Koko tied his handler's shoelaces together and then wittily signed Chase.

I picked up one of the haiku collections I had brought with me, and once again helped myself to the great masters – and mistresses - of the one-breath poems. As I did so I watched an elephant cross the Mwaleshi River just downstream of the camp, barely getting his ankles wet. He walked along the far bank until he was opposite my hut, and there he took to the shade, and meditatively - it was that kind of afternoon – browsed from a generous-boughed tree.

Mwaleshi elephant, the river that divides us, is very shallow.

Simon Barnes

Day 9	5 October
Camp	Tafika
Weather	Hot and dry with a couple of light showers
Wildlife highlights	Elephants walking through camp



There were a lot of aircraft movements today, as today was the day that we headed south and back to Tafika. Simon's group at Mwaleshi took the first flight from the airstrip and four of the group from Takwela took the second flight. The third flight brought the rest of us (the final three!) Back down south. There is something truly amazing about flying over this absolutely vast landscape looking at the twisting and turning

rivers below each one of which ultimately feeds into the gigantic Luangwa. It is raw and parched, scorched and beautiful.

We were all back at Tafika in time for lunch, excited to see one another again and recount our stories of being in the north and looking forward to what the next couple of days have in store for us.

Over lunch we could see the elephants making their way towards the Tafika waterhole and a couple of people wanted to go and sit in the hides after lunch so John escorted them. One of the group was with John in one of the hides and they had spectacular views of the elephants only a couple of metres away drinking and bathing, and, when they wanted to come out of the hide, their route was blocked by more elephants wandering through camp. At this time of year it is quite common to see the elephants in camp so vigilance is required at all times!

For some of us the afternoon and night drive was quite quiet - possibly because of the rain dispersing some of the mammals as water is now available for them elsewhere in the park than just the primary watercourses. But, one of our vehicles found a herd of 100 or more elephants at the Salt Pan, and then caught seven wild dogs playing - so it definitely wasn't a quiet drive for everyone!

The rain over the last couple for days cleared the air significantly, and the sunset was superb - we were even able to see the escarpment in the distance which at this time of year is very unusual.

As we returned to camp we had a brief glimpse of Sharpe's grysbok, a small nocturnal antelope, and then just outside camp a very unusual view of a thick-tailed bushbaby that just sat on a branch and was happy to be watched and photographed.

Miles and miles of bloody elephants

Our guests had gone ahead of us, all save one; who did the last leg with us. She, Chris and I were the last ones to fly out of North Luangwa National Park: heading by light aircraft down to the South Park where we would all spend the last couple of days. Below us the mad Luangwa River snaked its way southwards, thrashing from one side of the valley to the other as it has done across the millennia: a river untouched by the human hands.

I looked right, I looked left, I looked ahead. Was there no end to it all? And all at once I was filled with the most terrific surge of delight. A ridiculous grin seized me. It wouldn't stop; it hurt my ears it was so big. I turned to Chris and shouted above the sound of the engine, pointing idiotically out of the window at what lay below: "There's an awful lot of this place, you know!"



Chris got it. Well, of course he did. I've been travelling here for 30 years, Chris a lot longer: and we have done quite a lot of it together. We know how our minds work, at

least when it comes to the astonishing place stretched out beneath us.

So no words were necessary. Just the nod, the answering grin: a moment caught forever between a silly joke and revelation of eternity.

Later that day, in the South Park, we came across astonishing numbers of elephants. I counted at least 100. Then they saw the vehicle -- and more than half of them went striding off, tails extended in fright. That was strange. Not park elephants these: elephants had come for a visit from outside, and were deeply suspicious of us.

But all the same: so many of them. So many elephants, and so much room for elephants. Two vistas of eternity in a single day: well, I thought, as darkness fell in its sudden way -- that's Luangwa for you.

Simon Barnes

Day 10	6 October
Camp	Tafika
Weather	Hot
Wildlife highlights	Swallow-tailed bee-eaters Leopard in a tree

It was a fabulous morning in the park for all of the drives today with some wonderful wildlife sightings. I headed out with Amon and we decided that we would head to the Salt Pans which is where the wild dog were seen yesterday evening - running the gauntlet of the many tsetse flies in the mopane woodland and with probably less than 50% chance of success. There was lots to see on the way though including arrow-marked babbler, orange-breasted bush shrike, African goshawk, red-eyed dove and, best of all, swallow-tailed be-eater.

No luck with the dogs sadly, but the birds kept on coming - striped kingfisher, a staggering 50 plus go-away birds at a waterhole (the largest congregation that I have ever seen), tawny eagle, mosque swallow and a small family of three-banded coursers.

We stopped for coffee and cake and then headed off towards the riverside as the temperature was rising. In the second mchenja grove we spotted a pride of lions - the ones we had seen at the start of the trip with a female that had lost an eye, and then after spending time with them we began to head back north for Tafika. It is never quite so simple though



because Amon spotted an incredibly well-hidden leopard tucked into a thicket and lying on a branch peering out at us. He (we think it was a male) was draped over the branch panting furiously in the heat.

We left the leopard but within a few minutes we saw a group of five lions on the opposite bank of the river and then a large buffalo herd - a few hundred strong - on our side. They were also wilting in the heat and trying to find enough shade to protect them until the intensity of the middle part of the day dissipated.

For most of us the afternoon was slightly different to previous afternoons as we opted to go to the local village of Mkasanga to see and learn about the school and some of the aspect of village life.

We headed to Mkasanga School to meet some (all!) of the pupils as they sang and performed for us. Even though it was a Sunday, they were happy to come out and be with us. It was a riot of colour and sound as they sang, drummed and danced, families with little ones looking on and everyone full of smiles.

With the sounds of drumming and singing still ringing in our ears we went to another part of the village to learn about pounding and grinding millet - a necessary skill in these remote parts. Our final village stop was at a local church where a ladies choir was already in full voice to welcome us - Lloyd's wife being the leader of the choir. Not only did they sing for us, but they incorporated us into their semi-circle as they sang and danced. Once the final song was sung we re-boarded our safari vehicles, cameras in hand and were soon on our way to Chikwinda Gate and the national park - final sundowners beckoning.

Our night drive was quieter than some, but we managed to see a number of spotted hyenas before heading back to Tafika for drinks, dinner and bed after our day of walking, driving, singing, dancing and eating!

Good morning, Mr Elephant

We were back at Tafika in South Luangwa National Park and it was gone five, time for breakfast. Chris and I were back in our pleasant house in the staff quarters of this most excellent camp, which meant that there was a short walk to the river and the camp-fire and the food: past the vegetable garden and the kitchen, eventually to the public areas where the guest accommodation can be found.

"See you at the fire," I called and left Chris to his shower, walking perhaps a trifle blearily towards the cup of tea that would open my eyes a little wider.

I was alongside him and perhaps 15 yards away when I was aware of his presence. The most colossal bull elephant was watching me on my morning walk: well he seemed colossal, and I expect, had I got a tape measure on him, he would have been a pretty reasonable size.

At moments like these thought isn't much use to you. You just do. Some piece of me -- ancestral wisdom perhaps, or maybe it was 21st century folly -- told me to keep walking. Don't break rhythm, don't stop and stare, certainly don't retreat. So I continued with the same sense of purpose, even though it felt as if my legs had forgotten how to bend in the middle. The elephant continued with his own slow assessment of the day. I won't bother you if you won't bother me. Deal?

I was aware, without properly looking, that the elephant was looking at me, but without much interest. Who can blame him for that? He seemed quietly contest with life that morning. So, for that matter, was I. A few moments later, I was drinking tea, staring out, as I have done a thousand times before, at the morning vista of the Luangwa River.

Eventually Chris made it to the fire, cup of tea in his hand. "Did you see the elephant?"

"What elephant?"

Just another Luangwa morning.

Simon Barnes

Day 11	7 October
Camp	Tafika
Weather	Hot with a light shower
Wildlife highlights	Lions on the beach



Today was our our last day and what a day it proved to be. Not everyone decided to go on a drive with a few opting to go with Amon for their last walking safari of the trip. The walking group had a fabulous lion encounter with some snarling and growling from the lions in the grass.

Those of us that were on drives also enjoyed some magnificent final game-viewing which inevitably included lions though it was the large number of giraffe in groups of three, four and five, scattered along the river's edge that was probably most notable. We even had two young males urine testing a female (at the same time) to see if she was in oestrus - right in front of the vehicle.

There were also small groups of elephants all along the riverside that included bulls, females and youngsters of all ages.

We saw lions on the sand by the river and went down see them sprawling under the shade of a big fallen tree that was covered in detritus that had been put there by the river in the rains - it was as if they were lying under a huge sun umbrella. There was a tense moment when we realised that one of our wheels was lower in the sand than made travelling easy, but the lions weren't interested in us and moved away to the shade of trees and bushes higher up the sandbank - and a rescue vehicle didn't take long to arrive.

Our final sighting of note was of Pink Nose, a well-known female leopard in the area, who is incredibly obliging and not at all concerned about vehicles. She was in a mchenja (African ebony) tree by the road and had her head and paws peering over a branched which framed her beautifully

- it was almost as if she was standing on her tiptoes on a branch below and looking over the branch above.



Instead of returning to Tafika after game-viewing we all met under a gigantic fig tree by the side of the Luangwa for a lovely paella-style lunch and drinks before returning to camp to gather up our gear, shower and head off for the airport.

It's a fair run to Mfuwe town from Tafika - about an hour and a half - and once there we went to the headquarters of Conservation South Luangwa (CSL) to hear about their anti-poaching operations from two of the key members of their team - Eric and Ruth.

From CSL we drove through Mfuwe to Tribal Textiles for a little retail therapy before boarding Proflight to Lusaka at 1810. Once we arrived and gathered our baggage it was time to say farewell after what had been a most wonderful safari.

A golden farewell...

Last day. Last walk. Across the Luangwa River by canoe, and off by foot along the bank. Already in a somewhat elegiac mood.

Quiet, and cautious and in single file - and then a bowel-emptying, soul-filling sound: a growl. A lion's growl.

We knew they were there; I just didn't expect them to growl. We had walked in their general direction seeking this encounter. But not too avidly. We made it plain, from the direction we took, that we were not crowding them: no, we had an agenda that was taking us past the lions, not towards. And that makes all the difference. At least, it was supposed to. That growl was a warning: if I were you, I'd be very very careful.

So we were. That's why we were able to pause and savour the enigmatic shapes hidden in and under the bushes, and we could receive the glare of those golden eyes: six eyes in total; divide by two to get the number of lions.

Very subtle changes in the lions' body-language made it clear that they were making an adjustment. They no longer felt threatened. We were no longer growl-worthy. It was time for an accommodation. The tension went out of their muscles, of their eyes. Then one female turned her head away to look at something else, just for a moment, breaking the contact, breaking the tension. It was declaration of peace, or an acceptance of it.

So we stayed for a few minutes longer and then walked politely past the lions. Onwards: feeling between my shoulder-blades the golden ray-gun stare of three lions.

The previous night, around the dinner-table, we had each described our favourite moment of the trip: and one by one, each guest talked of some moment of quietness, of perfection, of one-ness. Not the great shot, or the great spectacular tell-yer-friends encounter – and we were hardly short of such things – instead, each guest described a moment of eternity. It was the supper of the nine poets.

Luangwa always gives generously: and to those who love it best, the Valley is especially generous. As we set off for the airport, I could still see, I could still feel those golden eyes.

Simon Barnes

Conservation South Luangwa

Created to protect Zambia's wildlife, and most particularly the wildlife of the Luangwa Valley, Conservation South Luangwa (CSL) - a non-governmental organisation - works in partnership with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW). They share the same goal - to stop poaching and eradicate wildlife trafficking in order to protect Zambia's valuable wildlife resources.

CSL operates anti-poaching patrols, uses detection dogs at roadblocks and border checks and actively engages with the local community - its headquarters are in the centre of Mfuwe village.

What started as a team of five dedicated staff fifteen years ago has now grown in to a team of 75 - and only one of the full-time staff is non-Zambian. The majority of the team are law enforcement personnel (there are presently 65 anti-poaching scouts), a team of human wildlife conflict mitigators, a veterinarian, a pilot, an operations manager, a CEO and an accountant.

Of particular note are the detection dogs which are increasingly being used to reduce wildlife trafficking by detecting wildlife contraband. Set up in 2014 in partnership with DNPW, the CSL Detection Dog Unit was Zambia's first sniffer dog unit that works to detect illegal wildlife products and firearms being used and smuggled within and out of Zambia.

Conservation South Luangwa is vital for the future of the Luangwa Valley and its wildlife. You may like to visit their website at <https://cslzambia.org>.

Chris Breen
October 2019

Mammal List

Lion
African wild dog
Leopard
African elephant
Cape buffalo
Puku
Crawshay's zebra
Common waterbuck
Greater kudu
Thornicroft's giraffe
Impala
Cookson's wildebeest
Warthog
Yellow baboon

Vervet monkey
Slender mongoose
Banded mongoose
Bushy-tailed mongoose
White-tailed mongoose
Water mongoose
Tree squirrel
Hippopotamus
Spotted hyena
Bushbuck
Large spotted genet
African civet
Black-tailed scrub hare
Grysbok
Thick-tailed bushbaby

TOTAL 30 species

Bird list

Hamerkop
Sacred ibis
Hadedda ibis
Glossy ibis
Grey heron
Black-headed heron
Green-backed heron
Goliath heron
Great white egret
Cattle egret
Little egret
Squacco heron
Saddle-billed stork
Yellow-billed stork
Open-billed stork
African spoonbill
Marabou stork
Spur-winged goose
Egyptian goose
White-backed vulture
White-headed vulture
Hooded vulture
African fish eagle
Bateleur
Martial eagle
Brown snake eagle
Western banded snake eagle
Tawny eagle
Wahlberg's eagle
Long-crested eagle
African hawk eagle
Ayres hawk eagle
Yellow-billed kite
Dark chanting goshawk
African goshawk
Gabar goshawk (dark morph)
Shikra
African harrier hawk (gymnogene)

Bathawk
Helmeted guineafowl
Red-necked spurfowl
Swainson's spurfowl
Black crane
Southern crowned crane
Black-bellied bustard
Black-winged stilt
African jacana
Water thick-knee
Three-banded courser
Blacksmiths lapwing
White-crowned lapwing
Spur-winged lapwing
Wattled lapwing
White-fronted plover
Three-banded plover
Painted snipe
Greenshank
Marsh sandpiper
Wood sandpiper
Little stint
Common sandpiper
Ruff
African skimmer
Double-banded sandgrouse
Cape turtle dove
Laughing dove
Red-eyed dove
Mourning dove
Green pigeon
Emerald spotted wood dove
Namaqua dove
Lillian's lovebird
Meyer's parrot
Purple-crested turaco
Grey go-away bird
Senegal coucal

White-browed coucal
Verreaux's (giant eagle) owl
African scops owl
African wood owl
Barred owlet
Square-tailed nightjar
Fiery-necked nightjar
African palm swift Böhm's
(bat-like) spintail Red-
faced mousebird
Malachite kingfisher
Brown-hooded kingfisher
Giant kingfisher
Pied kingfisher
Striped kingfisher
White-fronted bee-eater
Little bee-eater
European bee-eater
Southern carmine bee-eater
Swallow-tailed bee-eater
Lilac-breasted roller
Broad-billed roller Southern
red-billed hornbill Crowned
hornbill
African grey hornbill
Southern ground hornbill
Red-billed (green) wood-hoopoe
Common scimitarbill
African hoopoe
Crested barbet
Black-collared barbet
Greater honeyguide
Bearded woodpecker
Cardinal woodpecker
Golden-tailed woodpecker
Brown-throated martin
European swallow
Wire-tailed swallow
Lesser-striped swallow
Mosque swallow
Fork-tailed drongo
Pied crow
Fork-tailed drongo

Black-headed oriole
Arrow-marked babbler
Dark-capped bulbul
Yellow-bellied greenbul
White-browed scrub robin (Heuglin's)
Arnot's chat
Collared palm thrush
Moustached warbler
Tawny-flanked prinia
Southern black flycatcher
Rattling cisticola
Yellow-breasted apalis
Grey-backed camaroptera
Long-billed crombec
Chinspot batis
African pied wagtail
White helmet-shrike
Black-capped puffback
Brown-crowned tchagra
Black-crowned tchagra
Tropical boubou
Brubru
Orange-breasted bushshrike
Grey-headed bushshrike
Greater blue-eared glossy starling
Meve's starling
Wattled starling
Red-billed oxpecker
Yellow-billed oxpecker
Scarlet-chested sunbird
Amethyst sunbird
Collared sunbird
Southern grey-headed sparrow
White-browed sparrow weaver
Spectacled weaver
Red-billed buffalo weaver
Red-billed quelea
Jameson's firefinch
Red-billed firefinch
Blue waxbill
Common waxbill

TOTAL 162 species