

Tour Report

Zambia – South Luangwa Photo Safari

1 - 10 November 2022

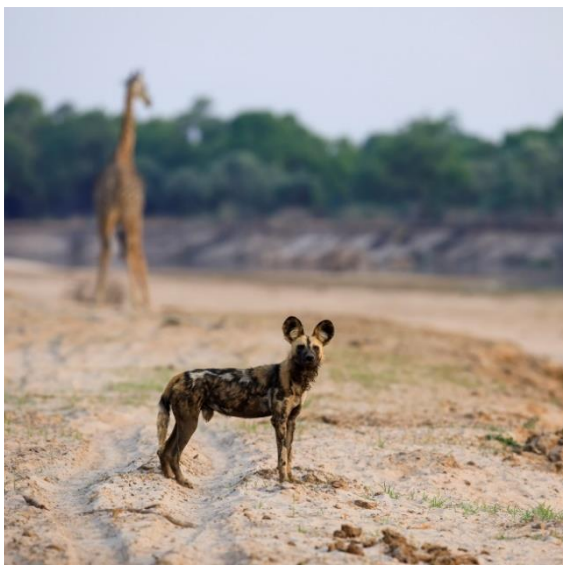
Leopard



Elephant



Wild dog



Southern carmine bee-eater



Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1: London Heathrow to Dubai**Tuesday 1 November 2022**

Sean and I met at Heathrow before catching up with most of the group at the departure gate. We boarded the flight on time, and indeed, we departed on time too. Our first stop was in Dubai.

Day 2: Dubai to South Luangwa National Park**Wednesday 2 November 2022**

We arrived in Dubai a little earlier than scheduled and navigated across the vast airport for our onward flight to Lusaka.

We landed in Lusaka half an hour late, having made up a little time en route. The staff at Lusaka Airport were exceptional, helping us with an incredibly smooth transfer through the terminal and collecting our bags for a rapid transit to the domestic terminal for our onward flight to Mfuwe. We departed on time, eager to touch down and start our stay in the Luangwa Valley.

Arriving at Mfuwe, we were met by our guides, Malama and Bwalya, for our drive to the comfort and hospitality of Flatdogs Camp. The group were given a quick overview of safety around the lodge's grounds before being taken to their safari tents. We reconvened shortly afterwards for an excellent first meal in the Luangwa Valley.

After a long day of travelling and a lack of sleep, we decided to retreat to our rooms for a well-earned rest.

Day 3: South Luangwa National Park**Thursday 3 November 2022**

We awoke as the sun rose over the Luangwa River, meeting at 05:30 for a light breakfast and heading out into the park for our first game drive. Outside the camp, we immediately found our first wildlife, a troop of baboons and herds of impala, and local puku close to the track. We continued up the bridge, where we stopped to admire the magnificent view along the river before heading into the park proper.

As we passed the lagoon at Mfuwe Lodge, a hippo pod was wallowing in the muddy water, and a saddle-billed stork was searching for fish as a small crocodile watched on. One of the vehicles saw a guinea fowl being eaten by a crocodile, and we then both moved on in search of another subject.

Along the dry oxbow lagoon next to Mfuwe Lodge, we found some buffalo moving across the arid landscape, a small herd of elephants, and some sparring impala. There were also some beautiful Crawshay's zebra, kudu and waterbuck. The birdlife at this time of year is exceptionally rich as residents and migrants abound in the park's trees and shrubs.

Moving on again, we found a lioness with three young cubs. There were only a couple of months old and still a little wobbly on their feet. One of the vehicles was treated with some excellent views, while the other only had some brief glimpses. One vehicle also found an elephant carcass and three lions sleeping nearby – one male and two females.

We moved along the edge of Wafwa Lagoon, which was nearly dry, where numerous birds were trying their luck in the shallow waters. A lone spotted hyena appeared as some buffalo came down for a drink before skulking off as hyenas typically do. We continued towards the river and eventually found the pack of local wild dogs. Numbering 24 individuals, this formidable pack was asleep under the shade of some trees as they tried to escape the heat of the rising sun.

We returned to the lodge for some brunch, cold drinks and an opportunity to refresh within the camp grounds.



With afternoon tea at 15:00, earlier than other guests at Flatdogs, we headed out into the park to find the wild dogs. As we turned off the main road, we found a young bull underneath a wild mango tree. He was relaxed as our vehicles sat quietly, but as another car arrived, he got a little flustered and mock-charged on our two vehicles.

Continuing into the park, one of our vehicles went to find the elephant carcass again, and as we arrived, there were hundreds of white-backed and hooded vultures all around. To our surprise, we found a collared lioness feeding on the elephant. She was soon joined by another lioness I recognised as 'Stumpy'.

We then returned to the spot where we had found the wild dogs earlier, only to find they had disappeared. A large elephant was nearby, so we surmised that they may have moved down to the river to keep cool. Sure enough, 24 wild dogs were enjoying the wet sand. We stayed with them as the sun set over the Luangwa River – hoping that they may start to hunt. The pups got up and played before a few elephants turned up, and the pack moved up in the bush. Along the river, we also saw our first African skimmers, hippos and, of course, the elephants.

Instead of enjoying a sundowner, it was more of a 'moon upper' and enjoyed some excellent drinks. We headed out with the spotlights to search for the park's nocturnal wildlife. We quickly found our first genet of the trip (sadly at a distance) and the wild dogs over near Wafwa Lagoon, alongside small numbers of puku and impala. One vehicle returned to the lions, where we briefly watched the cubs in the spotlight before returning to camp. Other notable highlights included elephant shrew and bushy-tailed mongoose.

Arriving back at the lodge, we enjoyed another excellent meal cooked by the fantastic chefs at Flatdogs.

Day 4: South Luangwa National Park

Friday 4 November 2022

This morning we headed southwards from the main road into the park, heading into the territory of numerous leopards, hoping we may get lucky with one of these elusive cats. As the sun rose, we visited

many of the numerous trees in the area, hoping to find a leopard in the perfect spot. We kept moving but to no avail.

We continued heading south and found a posing kudu, a handsome male with impressive horns. Heading back towards the river, we found a lovely family of elephants walking across an open patch of the landscape. They descended the bank to drink and bathe; as they approached the water's edge, an enormous crocodile made in their direction. For a moment, it looked as if the youngster would be attacked, but it changed its mind and moved to another area to drink. Instead, a sub-adult drank at the spot, and the crocodile tried its luck. Thankfully the elephant evaded its lunge, and the family quickly retreated up the river bank and away from danger.

We then found a few giraffe, which were very cooperative, as they browsed on the flowers and young fruits of a large sausage tree. Both vehicles met for morning tea in the shade of a tree just by the Luangwa River. With the heat building, we decided it was time to head north and return to camp for cold drinks and well-earned breakfast.

Meeting back for afternoon tea – where a delicious spread was laid out before us – we soon headed back into the park, hoping we may find our first leopard of the trip. Despite our best efforts, we were unable to find any leopard. We did find some tracks, but our quarry continued to evade us. We continued to Mushroom Lagoon where the Nile cabbage that usually covers the water had all but disappeared. Here a juvenile saddle-billed stork stood close to the water's edge, hippos bathed in the deeper water, and a few crocodiles kept their eyes open for an easy meal. It was here we sighted our first African spoonbills and giant kingfisher.

And so we continued onwards, leaving the lagoon behind and headed towards some lions that had been spotted earlier in the day. We had a magical evening photographing the lion in some beautiful warm light – a male and three females, and another male close by. The male sat with the females mated with one of them but did so by moving slightly down the bank limiting the photographic opportunities. Staying as long as possible, we made the most of the light before heading to a spot for our sundowners. We watched as hippos started climbing up, out of the river and into the surrounding bush in search of food.

Our vehicles separated for the night drive, hoping to cover as much ground as possible. Sadly there were no spotted cats again tonight, but numerous genets, white-tailed mongoose, a civet and bushy-tailed mongoose all put in appearances.



Day 5: South Luangwa National Park

Saturday 5 November 2022

We awoke to the sounds of lion roaring across the river and crossed the bridge, turning right after passing by Mfuwe Lodge, and within a couple of minutes, one of the group noticed a handsome bateleur eagle perched on a high branch just off the road. It posed in the soft morning light, but it was a little far for great imagery – nonetheless, it was a lovely way to start the drive.

We continued away from the river and into the thick bush, hoping to come across something different. Bwalya spotted some leopard tracks on the road as we rounded some bends. As we both looked down at the ground, one of the group shouted stop, and on a perfect branch, right next to the vehicle, a young female leopard was perched. We couldn't believe our luck. Coming away from the prime leopard territory had led us to this beautiful cat. Our other vehicle soon joined us, and we were treated to a private show as she kept her eye on a herd of nearby impala. We were joined by another vehicle from Flatdogs, but otherwise, we had the sighting all to ourselves. As it started to heat up, she realised she wouldn't have any luck with the impala and climbed higher into the sausage tree. With the sun beating down on us, we decided it was time to move on in search of other wild delights.

Heading towards the river, we found some elephant, including an individual lying on its side, but we continued searching for the African wild dogs. As we arrived on the bank, a group of giraffe were huddled along the water's edge, clearly watching something – it was the dogs as they played and rested around a shallow pool. The whole group could watch and photograph as these charming canids played along the sandy shore of the mighty Luangwa River.

With the sun continuing to beat down upon us, we decided to head back towards camp and to what was, of course, another fantastic brunch.



Reconvening for afternoon tea, it wasn't long before we were back out in the park again, working our way along the western bank of the river. We came across a lovely herd of elephants close to the main crossing point, providing some close encounters. As we neared the elephant carcass site, we decided to see how much had been eaten. Astonishingly, there was almost nothing left – the skin, feet, and skull were all that remained.

The lions were nearby, so we moved on – two tiny cubs (only a couple of weeks old) were in a thicket with their mum. Photography opportunities were lacking, but it was a wonderful encounter. The rest of the pride lay across the gully's other side, at a safe distance from these tiny cubs.

And so we headed back to the spot where we found the leopard. At first, there was no sign of her, but we noticed tyre tracks, and Bwalya spotted a vehicle in the thick bush. We drove around to find her sitting on the floor by the car. They kindly moved, and we enjoyed some excellent views before other vehicles arrived. To avoid stressing the leopard, we moved on again to find the dogs down on the beach again.

With heavy cloud cover and a difficult angle, it was limited in regards to photography, but it was an excellent way to end an exceptional day. We retired for a sundowner, only to be followed by the dogs. As darkness fell, we sat enjoying a drink with 24 wild dogs lying within 25 metres of us – all of us out of the vehicles enjoying our drinks. Cheers to another fantastic day in South Luangwa.

Our night drive back to camp was productive, with multiple sightings of genet, white-tailed mongoose and civet.

Day 6: South Luangwa National Park

Sunday 6 November 2022

We headed into the park bright and early again and went south towards Lucy's territory, hoping to find her. However, once again, she was nowhere to be found – it seemed she had gone walkabout. So we moved towards the river, where we found a lovely pod of hippos with a pair of youngsters play fighting around the

adults. We spent a bit of time photographing them before moving on in search of the park's wild delights. We found a little bee-eater perched just above the track. Posing perfectly, the group was treated to exceptional views and wonderful photography opportunities of this charming little bird.

Further down the road, we found a herd of elephants with a small baby. They were completely relaxed with us, and the whole group moved right past us. It was a wonderful encounter and magical to enjoy such a relaxed herd.



As we headed down along the river, we visited a colony of carmine bee-eater, where we sat above the river bank. We alighted from the vehicles and sat on the bank, photographing the birds as they flew to and fro from their nesting holes. Everyone was capturing some spectacular imagery as the birds flashed by, catching the sunlight.

Returning to the camp, we had another excellent brunch before retiring to our rooms for a well-earned rest. In the afternoon, we headed towards Wafwa Lagoon, where a leopard had been seen killing a warthog and dragging it into a thick piece of scrub. We couldn't see the leopard when we arrived, but we knew it was likely in there. Then the spotter Smart said he could see it deep in the shadows. One of our vehicles then heard an alarm call of a baboon in the distance, and we decided to head in search of the culprit. We could still hear the alarm calls as we made our way closer towards Wafwa. On arrival the alarm calls had stopped, however, there was a flock of guinea fowl which were alarming, and so we knew there was a predator nearby. As Bwalya looked through his binoculars, he noticed a leopard sat down next to the guineafowl – perfectly camouflaged.

The second vehicle had gone searching for the lions with the young cubs and were rewarded with incredible photographic opportunities. The females carried the young cubs while males and females were busy procreating. The lighting was exceptional, and their behaviour made it a moment to remember – everyone left the sighting with some outstanding images and headed towards where the leopard had been sighted.

By this point, the leopard had gotten up and started walking towards Wafwa Lagoon. Our vehicle positioned itself to ensure the leopard could walk freely by but approached at an angle that was just perfect for some portraits and walking shots. The leopard proceeded down the bank and started to drink from a pool. With a troop of yellow baboons calling constantly, the leopard drank for some time before deciding to head back up the bank. At this moment, both our vehicles were in the same spot, and we watched as she crossed the road and sat in the long grass nearby. We photographed her until she decided to move on, and we did the same.



We headed north in search of a spot for our sundowners and came across some waterbuck in beautiful light and a herd of zebra with the sun setting behind. We stopped for our 'moon uppers' on Puku Plain before heading back south for our night drive. The first subject was a white-tailed mongoose before one of the vehicles spotted a pearl-spotted owl. It was relatively quiet until we neared Mfuwe Lodge, where we spotted a beautiful genet. As we passed Mfuwe, we spotted a leopard to the side of the road and watched as he walked towards the gate, disappearing in the thick scrub.

Arriving at camp, the group regaled the wonderful encounters we had all enjoyed.

Day 7: South Luangwa National Park

Monday 7 November 2022

Heading into the park a little later than planned, thanks to an officious park guard, we arrived at the lagoon outside Mfuwe Lodge and were greeted by a family of banded mongooses. They were heading down to the lagoon for a drink, and after they disappeared into the undergrowth, we moved on in search of more subjects.

As we rounded the lagoon, a family herd of elephants were heading into the park, having spent the night stealing mangoes in the village. As they walked down the road towards us, we captured some beautiful images with the dust in the air.



Moving on, we found the lions resting close to where they had been in the previous days, and the rest of the pride were sleeping in the shade on the banks of Wafwa Lagoon – which by this point was little more than a large muddy puddle. We continued to the north-east, winding our way along the river bank where we found plenty of wild dog tracks, but the dogs remained elusive. One of the vehicles enjoyed a very handsome melanistic gabar goshawk before we headed away from the river to see vultures circling. We realised they were heading to a carcass on the plains. It was almost certainly a wild dog kill from early in the morning, and within only a few minutes of us being there, more than 30 vultures were squabbling before a lone hyena arrived on the scene. It was busy chasing off the vultures for a little while before many of the birds went searching for an easier meal.

The dogs were, in fact, at their usual haunt down on the beach of the river, cooling down in the shallow pools before some of them retreated into the shade of the trees. We captured a few images as they sat in the shade, as in the sun, the light was now a little harsh.

After another lunch, we headed south outside the park, heading down to the pontoon crossing point, where we spent a fantastic bit of time photographing a colony of carmine bee-eaters. We got down nice and low on the bank, lying on the floor, allowing us to capture some stunning images with fantastic depth of field. They were really relaxed, coming into land on a perch right in front of the group and everyone was able to capture some excellent imagery.



With the sun setting over the park, one of our vehicles crossed the river and found a family of ground hornbills, while the other vehicles stayed outside the park and alighted. They got down nice and low, close to the river's edge and photographed hippos as they squabbled and showed off their impressive teeth.

We carried on searching for leopard, instead finding some young kudu, and made our way to the planned sundowner spot when we heard about a male leopard in a nearby tree. We found him on the floor, having searched in the tree high and low. Both vehicles spent a bit of time with him using spotlights to capture some images, but we called it quits and continued with our night drive back towards camp. It was a quiet drive other than the leopard, finding a few hyena as we neared the main gate.

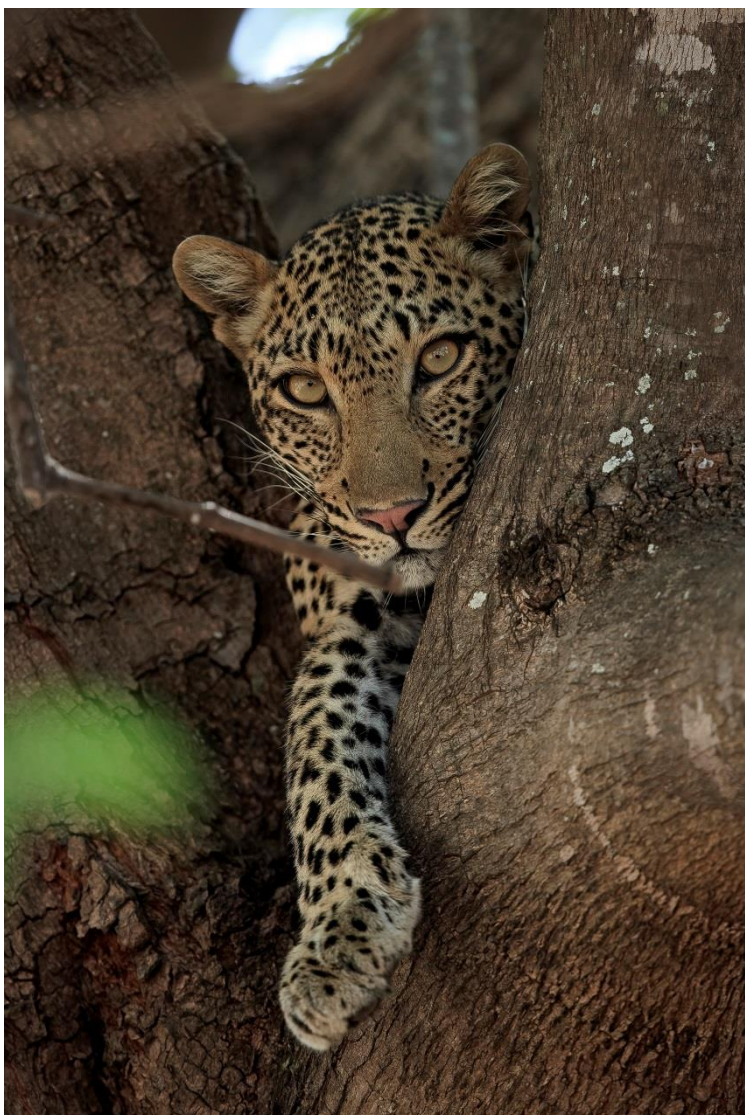
Day 8: South Luangwa National Park

Tuesday 8 November 2022

This morning we headed into the park again and headed north-east towards Mushroom Lagoon. There were numerous hippos in the shallow waters as well as a plethora of birds all around, such as saddle-billed stork, great white egret, African jacana and pied kingfisher. While we were stopped, a family of elephants appeared underneath the wild mango tree at one end of the lagoon. After a short stay, we moved to the plains north of Mfuwe Lodge, to the gully where the female sat guarding her tiny cubs. We only stayed a little while before leaving her in peace and splitting off in search of something to photograph. As we arrived at one of the borehole-supplied waterholes, a few zebra and impala were trying to drink as a lone hippo wallowed in the muddy pool. There was also a single hyena doing the same, trying to keep cool as the temperature rose. As one of the vehicles sat by the borehole, a brown snake eagle flying over with what looked like a squirrel in its talons.

In the meantime, the other vehicle had been exploring the area around Wafwa Lagoon and had found a leopard (thanks to vervet monkey alarm calls), hunting a family of banded mongooses. This is an incredibly rare sighting, and despite some very challenging photography, it was a sight to behold. The second vehicle headed to the same spot, but the leopard had disappeared by the time they arrived. Working their way

around the woods, Bwalya suddenly spotted the shape of a leopard walking through the thick scrub. With puku and impala sounding numerous alarm calls, the leopard hid behind a dead tree.



The vehicle that saw the leopard hunting the mongooses came across a pair of mating spotted hyena. The guides had never seen this incredibly rare behaviour before, and despite the oddity of the occasion, this was a real privilege.

With the light now getting harsh and the heat building, it was time to head back to Flatdogs for yet another delicious brunch.

Our last evening game drive was quickly followed by afternoon tea in the park. As we passed Mfuwe Lodge's lagoon, a stunning malachite kingfisher was perched up on the shore, only a few metres away, while a mixed flock of birds was coming down to drink. The hippos were wallowing, and the crocodiles were waiting for an easy meal.

We headed towards Wafwa again, where the leopard had been seen earlier. Malama and Sean took their group back to find the leopard, where once again, it was feeding on yet another banded mongoose. The poor family must now be severely depleted. The second vehicle, with Bwalya and Bret, saw numerous people with the leopard and headed straight to the beach in search of the African wild dogs.

The vehicle arrived to find the pack of dogs active on the beach, with a herd of Thornicroft's giraffe watching. There was a dead impala in a shallow pool, a fair distance from the river, and the wild dogs were trying to work out how to get it without entering the water. The dogs have a fear of deep water as they understand the threat the crocodiles pose to them. The impala had been in the water all day, so if there were any crocodiles, they would already have been feeding. The dogs were desperate to feed on the impala, but it wasn't until the wind blew the body closer to the shore that one dog finally plucked up the courage and waded into the water. The giraffes watched on the entire time, seemingly confused by what was happening before them. As soon as the dog had pulled the impala onto the sand, the entire pack joined in, and the carcass was butchered with incredible speed.



It was amazing how fast the dogs could pull apart the carcass, feeding in a frenzy. Within a few minutes, most of the impala had already been consumed, and the dogs started to play. It was an exceptional sighting, and both groups captured some spectacular imagery as the sun set over the Luangwa River. Even a herd of elephants came down to the water to drink and then cross the river as the dogs continued to play.

Our final sundowners were a time to discuss what we had just witnessed. As we set out on our night drive, a hyena was seen within only a couple of moments. Both vehicles headed away from the river, towards the borehole-fed waterholes where another hyena could be seen. On several occasions, it was a night of numerous genets and excellent views of elephant shrews. Another highlight for one of the vehicles was an incredible close encounter with the diminutive fiery-necked nightjar.

Day 9: South Luangwa National Park to Lusaka

Wednesday 9 November 2022

Our last morning in the park started by heading towards the river crossing, where the hippos were easily photographed close to the river bank. After a long night out on land, searching for food, the hippos were very lethargic, and we were restricted to water-level portraits.

Crossing the river, we found a family of elephants feeding under a large tamarind tree, stretching up to pick leaves from the high branches. The light was already getting harsh, but the close encounter was really special and seeing such fabulous behaviour was equally rewarding.

Heading northwards to Wakumba, a herd of bachelor buffalo posed beautifully for us, standing proudly out in the open – a bit of a rarity for buffalo. So as not to stop the buffalo from finding shade or water, we left them in peace and headed for our morning tea stop.



We continued north, back towards the main gate and found a pair of large bull elephants snoozing in the shade of a sausage tree. One of the two was actually resting one of its tusks on a branch as it slept – until the branch broke off, and it was awoken from its slumber. And so our final drive ended and we headed back to Flatdogs to pack our things before an afternoon resting in the comfort of the lodge's grounds.

We said goodbye to Sean, who was staying out for another couple of weeks, and at 16:00 we left Flatdogs and made our way to Mfuwe Airport for our short flight to Lusaka. The flight took off on time, and we landed with plenty of time to get the group to the International Terminal for their Emirates flight back to the UK. I said goodbye as I was spending the night in Lusaka, to then lead another tour in Zimbabwe.

Day 10: Arrive UK

Thursday 10 November 2022

Those of the group returning home arrived safely back in the UK after an overnight flight via Dubai. We had a fabulous trip, filled with some exceptional moments and world-class photography opportunities.