

Tour Report

Zambia - South Luangwa Photo Safari

12 – 20 November 2022

Lion cub



Hippo



Waterbuck



Lion



Compiled by Emma Healey

Day 1: Sunday 13 November 2022

The group arrived on time, and Chris (our guide for the week) and I were there to meet everyone at the airport. It's always lovely to see familiar faces amongst the group, so we said hello to our veterans and introduced ourselves to our first-time visitors, then loaded up the vehicle and headed for camp as the rain started to fall. On arrival, everyone checked in and went to freshen up, before meeting for dinner and a briefing about what was to come.

Day 2: Monday 14 November 2022

It seemed like this group brought the rain! After a very wet night, the sun came out giving a lovely soft warm light, which is often a lovely bonus following a storm. We set off for our first drive, with impalas and guinea fowls on patrol and elephants wandering across the plains. What a welcome.

We started off by driving to the river west of Wafwa and another vehicle mentioned there were two lions resting close to the river. We went around the gully and bushes, coming out at the top of the riverbank, and found two juvenile lionesses lying in beautiful, golden light. Positioning ourselves on a slightly higher ridge gave us some wonderful opportunities to photograph them. A young hippo had unfortunately died, and was being eaten by crocodiles slightly further up the river, so we made our way there to see what the progress had been overnight. There were fewer crocodiles around than the day before, but some were still feasting on the carcass.



We made a few stops for the group's first sightings of hornbill, tree squirrel, slender mongoose, little bee-eater and vervet monkey.



Moving on, we drove to a gully where we had heard the lions may have moved their cubs. We came across one of the large male lions reclining on the road. He looked very relaxed, briefly lifting his head up and then slumping down again. We looked around and spotted the collared female lion under a bush. She was known to have three older cubs, so it was likely that they would be close by. We moved to get a good view of the gully underneath where she was resting and spotted a cub lying on a tree stump. As we waited, she began to call the cubs and they came down into the gully. She walked around to meet them and brought them out into the open area of the gully. We spent around half an hour watching the cubs playing with each other and interacting with their mum. It's really lovely to watch this sort of behaviour. After a while the cubs fell asleep, as babies are known to do, so we moved on to see what else we could find.



We passed some grey go away birds, who let us know about their presence in the only way they can – their call sounds like “go away... go away!” We also spotted a harrier hawk circling above us and some waterbuck and buffalo grazing on the dry grasses.

We had our first sightings of elephant and buffalo herds on the plains, then noted a tawny eagle in tree and a saddle-billed stork on the edge of a lagoon. We stopped for a morning coffee, and some homecooked snacks prepared by the wonderful chefs, on the bank of the Chipela Lagoon. This site offered excellent opportunities to photograph wading birds, a buffalo skull on the bank, and other visiting wildlife.

We then drove back to camp, via Wafwa, to see if anything was braving the heat to drink in the mostly dry lagoon bed. We found a slender mongoose and an African hoopoe picking through the dirt on the road, but the light was too harsh for anything else, so we returned to the lodge.



After lunch, we decided to go back to where we had spotted the lion cubs to see if they were any more active. We found mother and young sleeping, with the male close by, so we travelled further south to see if we could find either of the leopards that had apparently been spotted earlier that day. After stopping briefly at Mfuwe Lagoon for a couple of malachite kingfishers and a fish eagle on the edge of the water, we went through Wamilombe and found a buffalo, stuck in the mud. It was still alive (four days after getting stuck!). Two saddle-billed storks were standing guard nearby, in a great position for photographs.

We travelled on using a new road, which goes through an area with red mopani leaves on the floor, and we saw lots of play fighting amongst the squirrels and baboons. As the sky began to turn a stunning red colour, we had a break on the riverside, overlooking some yawning hippos.



On our night drive, we came across lots of impala that were grazing on the plains. I also saw what looked like a slender mongoose with the spotlight, but of course it couldn't have been as they would be asleep, so we went closer and found that it was a leopard's tail!

It was a large male leopard, that seemed to have been trying to hunt the impala, but we had obviously given the game away. After enjoying watching it walk across the grass, we left the leopard in a bush and carried on. On our way back to camp, we spotted a flap-necked chameleon on the edge of a bush, a few genets hunting for food, and several baby impala, which had really started to pop up in recent days. At night, their mothers tend to leave them lying down close to bushes while they go off to hunt for food, in the hope that it keeps them safer. Fingers crossed they last until morning.

Day 3: Tuesday 15 November 2022

We made our way back to the gully where the cubs had been the day before, but there was no sign of them – it looked like the mother had moved them on again. A bachelor herd of elephants was using the area to grab some breakfast, so we spent quite a long time watching them eating the sausage tree leaves and the much more unappetising looking dried tree roots. As the sun rose, the heat started to increase and a couple of the elephants gave themselves a dry mud bath, giving us some great photo opportunities. Sometimes it's also good to take in the small stuff too, so we got closer to the sausage tree and photographed some of the beautiful red flowers hanging down.



Continuing towards the bore hole, we came across another buffalo stuck in the mud which was being watched over by some saddle-billed storks. Unfortunately, it didn't look like it was going anywhere, but we

also couldn't see any predators nearby, so we continued driving past the boreholes and into the bush. Driving through the scrub area, we heard Maeve's starlings alarm calling, so we got closer, and Chris spotted a black mamba snake sliding across a termite mound. We followed it for a couple of minutes until it crossed the road very quickly and disappeared into a termite mound. We waited to see if the snake would come out again, but unfortunately he was either eating or sleeping, so we decided it was time for a coffee. We were really pleased as it's only the second time this year that Chris has seen a black mamba, and the only time when in a vehicle, rather than on a walking safari, so we consider ourselves very lucky.

A passing vehicle (the 'bush telegraph') told us there was a lioness with a kill on the river bank a bit further north, so we drove towards it, passing a large herd of buffalo drinking in Chipela Lagoon. As we got to the location, we saw the lioness, looking very full, returning from the bank to get some shade from the strong sun. Stopping at the top of the bank, we grabbed some images of her walking towards us. We then drove back to the carcass, finding that most of it had been eaten, and that the remains were now being enjoyed by vultures.



In the afternoon, we decided to drive south to focus on carmine bee-eaters and hippos close to the pontoon. The sky was starting to look quite menacing, but we were hoping that the storm would pass us by. As we reached the riverbank where the carmine bee-eaters were nesting, the storm was clearly getting closer and we only had time for a few portraits before the light faded and the rain set in. The wind picked up very quickly, so we put on our ponchos and made our way to the rangers hut a couple of minutes away. They very kindly let us hide under their shelter to escape the worst of the storm. The storms at this time of year can come on fast and be quite intense, but they usually pass quickly. Sadly, a sausage tree on the edge of the bank by the carmine bee-eaters' nests didn't survive the strong winds and, during the worst of the rain, the bank gave way and it fell into the river. The lightning was very impressive, and we watched in wonder at the strength of nature.

Once the rain and wind had subsided, we made our way towards the pontoon, where the hippos were waiting. As had happened on the first morning, the light after the storm was beautiful and cast soft golden rays on to the hippos, helping us to create some gorgeous images. We spent some time sitting on the bank photographing the hippos, as well as a herd of elephants with two young calves. As the sun began to set, we crossed the river and had some sundowners.



On our night drive back to camp, we saw great variety of species, including a bush baby, four scrub hares, two white-tailed mongoose, four genet, one grey mongoose, and one elephant shrew. After dinner, the night watchmen showed us an African wood owl that was sitting in the tree by the bar. We were able to get a few shots of it by torchlight, before heading off to recharge our batteries for the following day.



Day 4: Wednesday 16 November 2022

The sky was beautifully clear as we left camp, with a light mist in some areas after the rain. The warm sunrise was casting some beautiful light by the road and, as we were driving out of camp, a troop of baboons crossed in front of us. This gave us the opportunity to practice some lovely back lit shots using the rim light on the fur of the baboons.



Whilst we were photographing a white-browed coucal and a banded snake eagle, we heard some baboons alarm calling around the elephant loop, so we rushed over to see what they were complaining about. There must have been a predator that had unsettled them, but unfortunately it had disappeared across the lagoon bed by the time we arrived. Passing Mfuwe Lagoon, we stopped to photograph a fish eagle drying off in the morning sun, along with kingfishers and some saddle-billed stork which were waking up and starting to hunt. We drove past the gully again, but there was still no sign of the lion cubs. They must have moved on, so we did too. We came across some young waterbucks enjoying some shade around a termite mound, and captured some great shots of them in the beautiful surroundings.



We then decided to go to the bore hole to see what had happened to the buffalo that was stuck in the mud. Sadly it had died, and a pride of lions were lying in shade nearby. Two of the lions were mating on a regular basis, while the others were taking it in turns to guard the carcass.



We spent some time watching the older male and the bigger female feeding on the carcass and guarding it from the vultures. In total, we sat for around two hours at the bore hole watching elephants drinking, lions trying to fend off vultures, and an approaching herd of buffalo. To have three of the big five in front of us at one time was amazing.



The sun got a lot stronger, so we tore ourselves away to find coffee and some shade, settling on a spot overlooking Wafwa Lagoon. We then drove back towards camp slowly, passing a few monitor lizards (none of which seemed keen to pose!).

As we entered the park in the afternoon, we followed the Riverside drive to see if anything was drinking from the water holes. Some banded mongooses were digging around the termite mounds and a warthog mum and her four piglets were digging up the roots - we were surprised, but they were very calm around the vehicle.

Two elephants then walked right in front of the vehicle towards the river, but there was quite a steep bank, so we weren't sure what they were going to do. It was such a surprise when one got down on its knees and managed to squeeze itself through a very narrow hole in the bank, making its way down to the water. The other elephant followed him down the ramp, with an equally inelegant method!

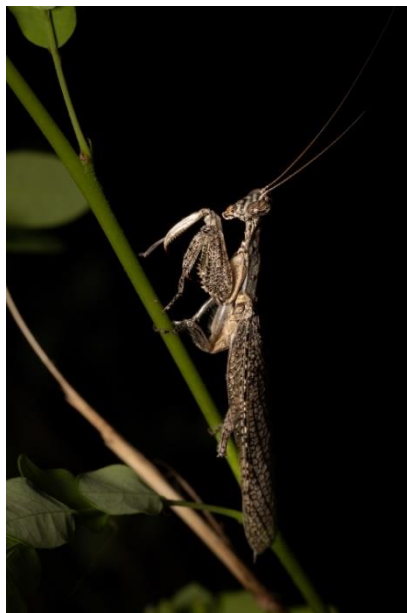
While observing the elephants crossing the river, after having a drink and refreshing themselves, I noticed a large jumping spider on our vehicle. It was the biggest one I had ever seen, so I grabbed my macro lens, encouraging the others to come and take some photos.



Soon we noticed lightning in the distance, but as it was quite far away and as the sky often threatens to rain, we continued our search for wildlife. We drove further south towards Wakumba, but as we reached the open plains, the rain started to fall (lightly at first). We put on our ponchos and decided to head north as the sky looked clearer in that direction. However, by the time we got to the main road near Mfuwe Lodge, the rain had really kicked in, so we went to shelter under the lodge's canopy and wait for the worst of it to subside. After snapping a few shots of a very soggy terrapin, the majority of the group was keen to head back. Back at camp, we dried off and enjoyed some more sundowners in the bar.



The great positive about rain is that it brings out lots of frogs and insects, including some lovely weevils and a 'tri-horned tree hopper' which dropped onto one of the guest's shoulders and then kept us (mostly me!) busy throughout our dinner ... so the macro lens made another appearance.



Day 5: Thursday 17 November 2022

This morning the sun was shining and the clouds had all retreated. We drove south through Wamilombe and on to Wakumba, via Katete and Mushilashi. Although wildlife was a little quiet after the rain, we still came across a nice variety of species, including elephant, zebra, monitor lizard, and a couple of lizard buzzards in trees.



In an area known to be favoured by leopards, we found a puku carcass on a tree and a hyena lying in a bush nearby. The leopard itself however was nowhere to be seen. We drove around looking for any signs of big cats, but after a while we decided to have a break under a tree. We chose a spot in sight of the puku carcass, just in case the predator returned to claim its prize. After our break, we made our way back to camp.

Driving along the road, we found some melba finches and blue waxbills having a bath on the edge of a big puddle. As we started the vehicle again, after watching the birds for a few minutes, a huge grasshopper flew up from the ground and showed off its incredible pinky-red underwings. The grasshopper had fantastic camouflage, but we managed to capture a few photographs once we located it on the ground. Passing more birds, including lizard buzzards that were clearly glad of the rain and the food that it brought with it, we headed back to camp for some brunch.



In the afternoon we decided to try and find the lion cubs, as we had heard they had been moved to a more open spot. As we approached, we spotted the mating pair from the previous day and the lioness mother. The three cubs were playing in the open and all six cats were very relaxed. We stayed for around half an hour, with no other people or vehicles in sight.



When more people turned up we left and drove around the area, where we came across a cuckoo, a Batleur eagle in a rare low tree branch, and a few Woolly-necked storks coming in to roost.



We returned to the lions and cubs as the sun was getting low and spent another 30-45 minutes watching the cubs playing, and the adults mating and interacting with each other.



Male lions are very territorial and possessive over their lionesses and can be quite aggressive towards cubs. Concerningly, in a break from all the mating, the male lion approached where the cubs were playing, but thankfully mum was on hand to set him straight and he walked away.



As the sun set, we drove to the bore hole to see if any hyenas had arrived at the site of the buffalo kill, but it was quiet, except for our first sighting of a prehistoric looking land monitor lizard. This was much bigger than the water monitors, and fast! It slowed for a couple of minutes, long enough for a few shots, before disappearing into the grass. Then it was time for a few more sundowners, before starting our night drive.



Although we had feared it may rain again, we were lucky, and the storm held off. We had a great night drive passing numerous frogs on the road which were busy eating some of the insects, as well as four genets, a white-tailed mongoose, a bushy tailed mongoose, two snakes mating in the middle of the road, and a very large black scorpion. We also saw a scrub hare and a mouse racing into the bush.

We noted that a number of hippos were out of the water. Since the rains there was more water available in other areas, so they were less reliant on the river.

Day 6: Friday 18 November 2022

On Friday morning we made our way south through the bush (the buffalo was still alive - day 6!) down to Wakumba. We stopped to take some pictures of kigfishers and carmine bee-eaters in flight by their nests, as the light was really good, before continuing further south.



Here we saw a couple of huge crocodiles - one by the river and one by a lagoon. Chris suggested that the big one was around 30 years old, but they can live to 90-100 years old, so we can only imagine all the things they might have seen. We made our way back to the site of the leopard kill and found the hyena in a drainpipe, hiding from the sun. While trying to perform an impressive three-point turn, Chris had an issue with a wheel going down a bank, so we were worried we may get stuck, but the guides' driving skills are second to none and he had it back on the road in a couple of minutes. We then went for a well-earned coffee break by the river.



As we drove back up towards camp, we passed a vervet monkey, sheltering from the sun, and a family of elephants with a month-old baby. We stayed for a few minutes and watched the elephants cool off with a luxurious mud bath - incredible behaviour to observe.



In the afternoon we went north towards Wafwa to explore a new area close to Chipele. With the leopards being a little elusive, we wanted to check a few other areas that were known haunts of these beautiful cats. Initially none were appearing ... until ... close to sunset as we were driving near the Big Bend, we spotted one sitting on the edge of a dry lagoon.

We got a few 'safety shots' 'then edged closer to see how near we could get. At first we thought it was a female, but as we got closer and it stood up, we realised it was definitely a male. Unfortunately, males are notoriously more skittish than females, and he was true to form, turning and walking into the bush and then even further behind it to an inaccessible area. Still, our first daytime leopard sighting was ticked off, so we went over to the river for sundowners with a stunning sunset backdrop.



We spotted a white-tailed mongoose, a few genets, a couple of elephant shrews, two chameleons, and lots of hippos stretching their legs out of the lagoons. As we were passing a termite mound, Chris spotted a pit viper coming out of a hole, so we reversed back just in time to see it climbing up the mound – what a spot!



Day 7: Saturday 19 November 2022

On Saturday morning, we decided to make our way south again. A hippo had died the day before in Mfuwe Lagoon and had been moved into a bush, where it was being attacked by vultures. We stopped briefly, but as there were no good photo opportunities we soon carried on.

Driving towards Wakumba, we passed giraffe, elephant, and some puku grazing and making the most of the cooler morning temperatures. Every day you could see a significant increase in the number of baby impalas and pukus. A crested purple turaco flew past us, and we tried to grab a few images but it flew further away. It was still a beautiful bird to see though. Southern ground hornbills also made an appearance, and Chris spotted a Verreaux's eagle owl in the low branches of a tree, so we stopped to get some shots. It was quite shaded, but this is always an incredible bird to see.



We stopped for coffee by the river in an area of scrub and had a couple of visits from smaller species, including a red-tailed skink and a tiny jumping spider. Out came the macro lenses! On our way back, the animals seemed to be making the most of the shade, and the hippos we passed were wallowing in shallow mud. As we returned to the lodge, we found a beautiful green spotted bush snake in a bush, so we stopped to photograph it. It was an excellent model for us, moving through the bush and posing in some openings. As we were so close to camp, a few of us hopped out of the vehicle and were able to take some closeup portraits.



In the afternoon, we drove through Elephant Lagoon, in the hope of seeing the crowned eagle. We couldn't see it in the nest, but as we turned the corner, we spotted another vehicle off to the right of the road, so we went around and found the eagle sitting in the higher branches of a tree. It had just killed a baby impala, and had been eating it by the roadside, but had flown into the tree when the vehicle came. It was heartbreaking, as the mother impala was standing on the other side of the narrow road calling for her baby. We took a few images of the eagle in the tree just as the rain was threatening to get heavier and then continued with our drive.



We passed Elephant Lagoon, where hippos, crocodiles, open-billed and yellow-billed storks, as well as various types of ibis, were enjoying the water. We drove on towards the river (past a very surprising scrub hare in the daylight) and found a lioness posing on the edge of the riverbank. We heard the lions had killed a buffalo - and they looked very full (and hot!) - but the one lioness was posing beautifully by the edge of the river, with a lovely background for photos. We drove around to the other side of the gully, and spotted another lioness lying fast asleep.



We then went in search of lion cubs. They weren't in the first location we tried, but someone told us where they had moved to and we got there just as the sun was setting. It was too dark really to take good photos, but it was lovely to see them to say goodbye.



Chris then showed us that there was no end to his talents by repairing our malfunctioning spotlight. That evening, we came across a bushy tailed mongoose, which posed for a while walking parallel to the vehicle. This was lovely, as they usually run into the bush quite quickly.

Continuing our luck with snakes, we came across an African rock python slithering under a tree, then saw hippos emerging from the lagoons. We also saw a scrub hare (possibly the same one as earlier as it was in a similar location).



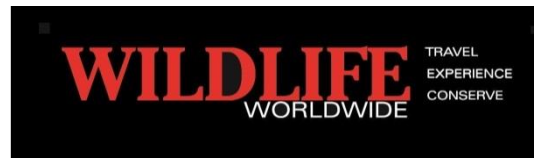
Day 8: Sunday 20 November 2022

The morning of our final drive, we discussed what everyone would like to focus on. As we had been struggling with leopard sightings, we decided to go further north to look for them, and perhaps catch a glimpse of some wild dogs. We made a quick stop, as there were some water bucks beautifully backlit in Mfuwe Lagoon, then continued north. We passed through some beautiful scenery, some of which was very different to what we had seen so far, passing the Nsefu sector on the other side of the river.



A squirrel alarm call alerted us to the presence of a large male lion hiding in the shade by a bush, so we stopped to admire him. He wasn't the same one we had seen before, and seemed to be on his own, looking intently at a warthog. Seemingly the lion felt it was too hot to hunt, so we left him to rest and continued further to a beautiful area called Kaingo. Despite not spotting any leopards here, we enjoyed some stunning scenery and had some fun with tree squirrels and some of the smaller residents on our way back to camp. It was then time for us to pack up our things and have a final brunch together, before making our way back to Mfuwe airport for our onward flights home. A lion-tastic week, with amazing experiences including lion cubs, baby elephants and buffalos galore.

Checklist



	Common Name
	MAMMALS
1	African civet
2	Yellow baboon
3	Cape buffalo
4	Thick-tailed bushbaby
5	Bushbuck
6	Elephant
7	Elephant shrew
8	Large spotted genet
9	Thornicroft giraffe
10	Hippopotamus
11	Spotted hyena
12	Impala
13	Greater kudu
14	Leopard
15	Lion
16	Banded mongoose
17	Bushy-tailed mongoose
18	Slender mongoose
19	Grey mongoose
20	White-tailed mongoose
21	Vervet monkey
22	Puku
23	Scrub hare



24	Tree squirrel
25	Warthog
26	Waterbuck
27	Cookson's wildebeest
28	Crawshay's zebra
	REPTILES
1	Black mamba
2	Olive grass snake
3	Puff adder
4	Green spotted bush snake
5	African rock python
6	Flap necked chameleon
7	Nile crocodile
8	Tropical house gecko
9	Water monitor lizard
10	Rock monitor lizard
11	Striped skink
	BIRDS
1	Bateleur
2	Lizard buzzard
3	African fish eagle
4	Crowned eagle
5	Tawny eagle
6	African marsh harrier
8	Yellow-billed kite
9	Brown snake eagle
10	Little sparrowhawk
11	Western banded snake eagle

12	Hooded vulture
13	White-backed vulture
16	Knob-billed duck
17	Great white egret
18	Yellow-bellied egret
19	Egyptian goose
20	Spur-winged goose
21	Hammerkop
22	Black heron
23	Green-backed heron
24	Grey heron
25	African sacred ibis
26	Hadedda ibis
27	African spoonbill
28	Marabou stork
29	Saddle-billed stork
30	Woolly necked stork
31	Yellow-billed stork
32	African jacana
33	African skimmer
34	Three-banded courser
35	Crowned plover
36	White crowned plover
37	Common sandpiper
38	Spotted thick-knee
39	Water thick-knee
40	Grey-crowned crane
41	Helmeted guinea fowl

42	Swainson's spurfowl
43	Cape turtle dove
44	Namaqua dove
45	Emerald -potted wood dove
46	White-browed coucal
47	Grey go-away bird
48	Lillian's lovebird
49	Purple-crested turaco
50	African wood owl
51	Pel's fishing owl
52	Verreaux's eagle owl
53	Pearl-spotted owlet
54	Square-tailed nightjar
55	Brown-hooded kingfisher
56	Giant kingfisher
57	Malachite kingfisher
58	Pied kingfisher
59	Woodland kingfisher
60	Broad-billed roller
61	Lilac-breasted roller
62	Little bee-eater
63	Southern carmine bee-eater
64	White-fronted bee-eater
65	Crowned hornbill
66	Southern ground hornbill
67	Red-billed hornbill
68	Bennet's woodpecker
69	Yellow-billed oxpecker

70	Red-billed oxpecker
71	Maeve's starling
72	African pied wagtail
73	Pied crow
74	White-browed robin chat
75	Red billed firefinch
76	Blue waxbill
77	Red billed quelea
78	Common swift
79	White-browed sparrow weaver
	MISCELLANEOUS
1	Praying mantis
2	Flat spider
3	Kalahari ferrari
4	Jumping spider
5	Tri-horned tree hopper
6	African honeybees
7	Scorpion