

Tour Report

Zambia – South Luangwa Photo Safari

13-21 November 2021

Female leopard



Wild dogs



Carmine bee-eater



Young vervet monkey



Compiled by Emma Healey

Tour Leaders: Emma Healey & Bret Charman

Days 1-2: UK to South Luangwa National Park

Saturday 13 – Sunday 14 November 2021

Emma and the group, most of whom had met at Heathrow and the others at Lusaka, were greeted at the airport by Bret, who had just said goodbye to the guests from the previous week, and we were shown to the vehicles for our 40-minute transfer to Mfuwe Lodge. The sun was setting on a very warm day as we drove through the village, and we entered the park at dusk. As we turned the first corner, we saw a car stopped on the side of the road with their lights aimed at the side of the road – where there was a small pride of around seven lions making their way across the road (our welcome committee as we liked to think!). As well as the lions, before we arrived at the lodge the group saw an elephant shrew, a spitting cobra crossing the road and a genet. What a welcome!

After a cold welcome drink and a warm introduction to Mfuwe Lodge from Amy from The Bushcamp Company, we were shown to our chalets before returning to the restaurant for dinner. As with most lodges/camps in Africa, you are not able to walk to your chalet or tent alone due to all the wildlife that roams freely in the area, so the fantastic night guards are on hand to escort everyone with their torches and big smiles. We all regrouped and sat together for a lovely braai (barbecue) outside on the terrace, overlooking the waterholes and listening to the sound of the baboons nearby while discussing our plans for the week with our three drivers – Effanuel, Manda and Michik – before heading to bed to prepare for our early start the next day.

Day 3: South Luangwa National Park

Monday 15 November 2021

After an early wake up at 04:30 and a light breakfast, or just a strong coffee, we left the lodge at 05:30 for our first safari drive. It's a week of early starts on safari, but it's worth it as this is when the wildlife is most active, and the light is at its best. The group split into three vehicles, each with their experienced driver/guide and we drove into the park. As we left the lodge, we were greeted by a troop of baboons on the road, playing and fighting. Among the young ones, we spotted an albino baby, which was enjoying some play time with its siblings and provided some good photographic opportunities to start with. The lagoon outside Mfuwe Lodge is home a huge variety of wildlife, including hippos, saddle-billed storks, yellow-billed storks, pied, giant and malachite kingfishers and spoonbills, as well as providing a refreshing stop for visiting mammals. A pair of fish eagles, Zambia's national bird, which mate for life, live around the lagoon and we caught sight of one with a huge fish that it had just caught. Not a bad start to our day.

Leaving the lagoon area, we drove south along the river. A family of banded mongoose foraging for food got a fright and ran away from the vehicle into the undergrowth – unfortunately they are never very keen to pose for photos! Around the corner we had our first sighting of a carmine bee-eater. At this time of year, these beautiful vibrant birds are visiting the area in huge flocks to nest in the sandy riverbanks and are one of seven species of bee-eater that are found in the park. The other ones most commonly seen are the white-fronted and little bee-eaters.



Two southern ground hornbills were walking around the woodland floor looking for insects and small titbits to eat. These birds are quite a sight, with their large size (they can be 90-120 centimetres in length and bright red prehistoric looking faces. They nest in tree cavities and can live to be an impressive 50-60 years old in the wild.

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Driving through the woodland, amid the chorus of birdsong, our guide heard the very distinctive call of a Pel's fishing owl. Keen to try and find it, we drove towards the sound and spotted the owl in the top of the tree. It was obviously talking to another one, which we then saw in another tree – a juvenile. Unfortunately, they were quite high up in the trees, hidden behind branches so quite difficult to get a good photograph of, but amazing to see nonetheless.



The call then came over the radio that some of the group had located the lions we had seen on our way into the park the night before, so we drove over to join them. There were four female lions lying on the bank in the sunshine, and two females and a male in the bushes, enjoying the shade. We sat with them for almost an hour enjoying the scene in front of us, and gradually one of the females started to move towards a small family of warthogs, looking for food in the sandy riverbank. Over the next 20 minutes or so, she slowly advanced, using the grasses as cover, closer to the warthogs. After a while, one of the other lionesses started to move closer as well, on the other side of the grasses. Both of them only moving when the warthogs were busy looking down at the sand and digging – you could tell this was a well-practiced routine. Unfortunately for the lions, another warthog came in and disturbed them, spoiling the lions' lunch. It was a shame for the lions, but very interesting to watch their strategic approach.

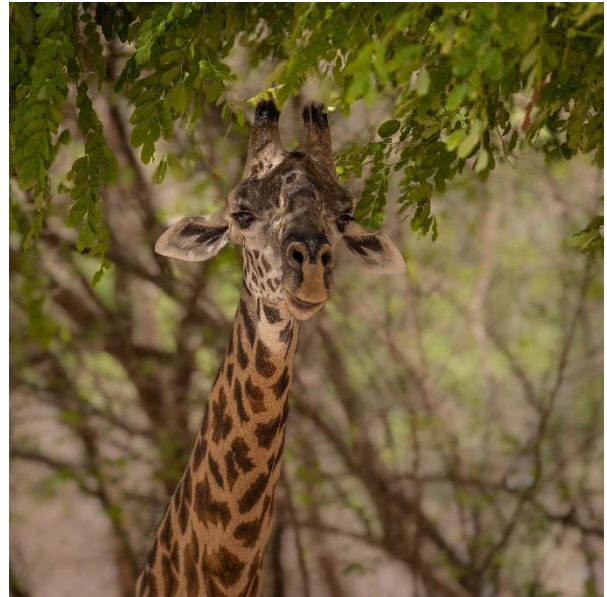


By this time, the heat was quite intense at around 42°C, so as the wildlife looked for cover and the hippos enjoyed the cool waters, we decided to head to a safe shaded space for a coffee break.

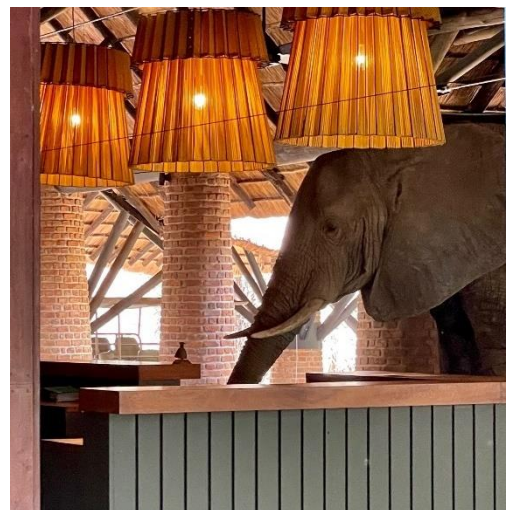


On our way back to the camp, we saw the usual mix of wildlife found in the area, including impala, with their many babies that are born at this time of year, puku, warthogs and a lone buffalo enjoying the shade of one of the bushes in the savannah. Usually buffalo are in herds, so perhaps this lone male had been ejected from the herd and was no longer welcome with its group. We also drove past the borehole, a small waterhole created by the Bushcamp Company to try and support/increase the wildlife that passes through the area. We

were thrilled to find a small family of hyenas and a hippo enjoying the cooling waters as well as two lions sleeping in the shade of a bush next to the water. As we approached the lodge, we were also treated to the sight of a small family of Thornicroft giraffe. The light was very bright by this point, so they were hiding under the shade of the sausage tree.



After a delicious brunch at the lodge, we had some time to relax and/or catch up on some sleep. Mfuwe Lodge is well known for its visits from passing elephants and it was our lucky day as a few elephants decided to visit the wild mango tree near reception as we were regrouping for tea before our afternoon drive. We were treated to some close-up views of the elephants eating the mangos and exploring the entrance to the lodge. It's not only elephants who visit the lodge, during the lunchtime break we had a large group of vervet monkeys and a family of warthogs including two tiny piglets.



After all these treats, and a refreshing drink and snack, we went out for an afternoon drive at around 3:45pm. Still quite hot at this point, it's a good time to go and see what we can find to hopefully then photograph in good light later on.

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Soon after leaving the lodge, we came across our first sighting of kudus – a small group of bachelors and our first grey-crowned cranes, Uganda’s national bird. Driving through the scrub, we heard the very distinctive mating call of the woodland kingfisher. Usually they wait until the rains come to start this behaviour, but as the rains are so late, they have had to begin early.



As we drove towards the edge of the river for sundowners, we were approached by a trio of elephants, including one very young one, who walked almost straight past our vehicle, flanking the little one to protect it from any possible risk. It’s lovely to be so close and watch this behaviour. Often in moments like this it’s best to put the camera down and either watch or video it on your phone to watch and remember later.

During sundowners, the wind, which had already been fairly strong, picked up and the sand started to be blown around ferociously – not the best day to have popcorn for sundown snacks – but with a lovely view surrounded by hippos, we still enjoyed it.

After our windy stop, it was the start of the first night drive back to the lodge. On afternoon drives, we are accompanied by a ‘spotter’, who stands next to the driver with a spotlight and, with incredible skill, spots wildlife in the dark. Luckily the wind started to die down as we drove and our first spot was a civet, followed by a genet, a scrub hare and our first leopard – a large male walking across the open plains – very exciting! A wonderful way to end our first full day.



We returned to the lodge, tired but very happy, for dinner and bed.

Day 4: South Luangwa National Park

Tuesday 16 November 2021

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Another hot, dry day as we left early to see what the morning had in store for us. Passing the lagoon, we spotted some pelicans leaving the smaller pond and stopped to watch a huge flock emerging from the lower pond, past the bank and then flying off.

Driving west this morning over the Katete Bridge, we turned off and visited a clay lick, where a mother and young baby elephant were bathing in the muddy water and enjoying the minerals from the clay in the earth. Looking away from the elephants, there was much more to see - around the edge of the water were four monitor lizards basking in the sunshine and a purple turaco nesting in the bush. We sat for some time watching this beautiful behaviour, until the elephants went off to enjoy some shade and we carried on with our drive.



Continuing our drive, as we came around the corner to Wakumba, our driver spotted a fresh blood stain on the edge of the road and some wild dog tracks. We'd heard that some dogs had been seen recently, but they'd left the area a few days before so we weren't sure when they'd come back. We explored the area trying to find them, eventually tracking the pack down under a large tree enjoying the shade and sleeping off their breakfast. It was a pack of 21 dogs, of which five are tagged and have four pups, all of which had a lot of white on their coats, making them look quite different. We spent some time watching them and photographing them with the lovely contrast of the dry, red, grasses before heading off for a well-earned morning coffee. We then drove back to the lodge, passing some cheeky baboons and an African snake eagle.



After lunch, we drove back out via a lagoon, where the hippos were wallowing in the mud and a pair of fish eagles were calling to each other. Around the vehicles some beautiful little bee-eaters were flitting between bushes and crowned hornbills were swooping between trees trying to cool off from the afternoon sun. Under the branches, the bushbucks were quietly eating and minding their own business – as usual.



We drove towards the river, stopping at a bank where the carmine bee-eaters were nesting. The noise and sight of these incredible birds is breathtaking and it's a hive of activity. It's a great opportunity to practice photographing birds in flight and to focus in on some of the individuals resting on the branches outside the bank before they take their catch in to feed the family.



As sunset was approaching, we drove back to Wakumba - the area we'd found the wild dogs in earlier - and found them resting in the tall grasses near the river. They were there until the sun got quite low and then they began to move, particularly the younger ones who were practicing their hunting skills by chasing the vultures, that had landed nearby. As we sat and watched them, we were also treated to some impressive murmurations by the red billed quelea, the flocks of which were so big you could hear their wings as they flew overhead. We watched the dogs playing and chasing the vultures and guinea fowl, until they ran off into the night to start hunting. At this point we had some late sundowners and then made our way back to the lodge on our night drive, where we came across elephant shrew, genets and some little bee-eaters huddled together on a branch for safety overnight.



Leaving the lodge this morning one of the fish eagles was sitting in a lovely spot by the road, in stunning morning light, so we couldn't pass by without taking a few shots. We sat and watched it for a while and it obviously felt the pressure of us watching so it dived into the lagoon, but unfortunately didn't catch anything so went on to another perch to build up the strength (and pride) to do it again.



We drove into the bush to Wamilombe, towards the area known to be the territory of a leopard known as Lucy. As we were driving in, we could see the impala were looking nervously in one direction and the baboons were making alarm calls, so we edged closer until we could see the direction the baboons were looking, and then slowly headed that way. We knew we were close and guessed it was a leopard, but we weren't sure until suddenly Lucy (the local celebrity) jumped down from a tree where she had just stashed a baby impala. We knew that Lucy had had some cubs, and unfortunately had lost one but still had a young male cub with her, so our excitement was piqued. We watched her walking along through the bush, until she came to rest at the base of a tree and started calling. A few minutes later, her barely 3-month-old cub came trotting out of the undergrowth towards her. They were obviously very relaxed – both with each other and with the vehicles, and after some bonding and playtime they walked around us and off into the bushes to find somewhere to shelter from the heat of the day.



As we drove on, we came across a couple of lionesses sleeping in the shade of the bushes and a snake eagle looking for breakfast. What a morning! And if that wasn't enough, instead of heading back to the lodge at the end of the drive, we were driven to an open space where we were met by a beautiful set up of tables, chairs and an open fire where the team were cooking a wonderful brunch for everyone staying at the lodge that week.



The heat this afternoon meant that a lot of wildlife was keeping out of the sun, so things were fairly quiet as we drove around the park. We found a group of waterbuck, male and female, enjoying some leaves and stopped to photograph some beautiful lilac-breasted rollers, which like to stop on dead tree branches and recover from the heat. We went to the riverbank for sundowners, near to the carmine bee-eater nesting bank so we were able to get out of the vehicles and spend time photographing them flying around and leaving/entering their nests.

On the evening drive, we were treated to another leopard walking across the plains towards the river. A couple of the spotters found chameleons in the bushes as well as other nocturnal species including a bushy tailed mongoose going into his tree trunk nest, genets and an elephant shrew.



Day 6: South Luangwa National Park

Thursday 18 November 2021

As usual this morning we started out driving along the other side of the lagoon by the lodge. As well as the often-seen fish eagles, there was a tiny malachite kingfisher looking for breakfast. They tend to sit quite low towards the water, so are not easy to photograph, but we got some shots before heading off to find more. Driving along the road, it was clear that the birds were enjoying the morning light and the birdsong was beautiful. Passing a dead tree stump, we saw an African hoopoe pair leaving their nest. We waited, in case they returned, but unfortunately, they had obviously gone off to find some food so we carried on.

Baboons and vervet monkeys are a common sight as you drive through the park and we came across a large group, some of which were resting in a tamarind tree – one making the most of the ripe fruit. White-crowned

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lapwings wandered noisily by the river warning others of anyone's arrival. I caught a shot of one as it scoped out the vehicle to see if we were bringing potential danger.



As usual we came across a great mixture of a lot of the wildlife that calls the park home including impala, bushbuck, waterbuck, buffalo, puku, elephant and giraffe. Early on, we stopped to watch a hippo wallowing in some thick mud, and spotted a juvenile fish eagle above him. As we were leaving, we heard the sound of a purple turaco - a rare bird - and looked up to see two of them in the top of the tree. Getting a shot was tricky but it was an amazing thing to see. The huge number of baby impala in the park can't fail to bring a smile to your face – they are very cute and the mothers tend to put them in groups, looking like a creche, to keep them safe. As babies, they have no smell so if they are on their own, they are in fact safer than being next to their mothers, so can often be seen lying on the floor by themselves while the adults eat the vegetation nearby.



From there we drove on through the bush, looking for the illusive leopards in trees, but without luck unfortunately. When we reached the riverbank, we were greeted by milky still water and crocodiles basking in the early morning sunshine. This enabled us to get some lovely reflections of them before the wind starting to move the water too much.



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We could see a large herd of giraffe crossing the river from our viewpoint and some of the group were closer, so had a first hand view of the incredible sight of the huge herd crossing towards them.

Some of the group had spotted a Pel's fishing owl earlier in the morning, so we drove to the area where they'd spotted it and our guide Effanuel managed to find it sitting in the top of one of the trees.

On our way back to the lodge, we came across a large herd of buffalo, somehow hidden by the bushes, but a few of them, including a bold young one, came to see what we were up to.



Driving out after tea in the heat of the afternoon was very warm - it was a sunny, hot day. A lot of the wildlife was sheltering from the sun, but as we drove past a waterhole, a gorgeous male bushbuck was having a drink. True to their name, bushbucks are usually seen among the low branches of trees and in the scrub, so it was great to see this one out in the open showing off the beautiful stripes on his legs and enjoying the water.

We drove towards mushroom lagoon, past a bachelor herd of male kudu with their stunning antlers on show. The lagoon is a popular spot for hippos and a huge array of birds and is covered in stunning green Nile cabbage, which can make for some really interesting images. The strong sunlight can make photography difficult in the heat of the day, but the hippos lie resting in the water, while African jacanas, egrets, storks and crocodiles explore the water looking for food.

We went to the riverbank as we heard that the dogs had been seen. As usual, the wading birds, like the plovers and water thick-knees were standing guard on the edge of the banks.



We found most of the dogs on the riverbank enjoying the cool shade of the trees, with some on the sand - all enjoying their relaxation time. We decided to stay and watch them and were rewarded with the younger pups playing with each other and play fighting on the sand. We observed some elephants walking towards the group out of the bush and on the bank, and the dogs moved fairly quickly towards the sand. The elephants followed them down and proceeded to confront the dogs very aggressively. The dogs retreated down the beach and eventually the elephants crossed the river, satisfied that their power had been maintained, allowing the dogs to carry on with their evening.

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We enjoyed some drinks accompanied by a beautiful sunset and full moon rising before starting our night drive.

Soon after leaving the sundowners, the spotter found a chameleon in the bush nearby. We tried for some images with the moon in the background, but unfortunately it didn't quite work out.

We were treated to some more nocturnal sightings, including a bushy tailed mongoose, hyena and elephant shrew. Close to the lodge, we came upon a huge herd of buffalo crossing the road, which enabled us to try a bit of creative photography with the light.



Day 7: South Luangwa National Park

Friday 19 November 2021

Another very clear morning – today was a scorcher (42°C)!

The radio call came early on that Effanuel's vehicle had found Lucy and her cub. We all headed in that direction to see whether we could get any shots in the good light. We came upon Lucy looking very relaxed, lying next to a bush and inside the bush, her cub was feasting on a baby impala. Unfortunately, it was tricky to get a good view from most angles, but it was wonderful to see the cub eating and watch the interaction between mum and cub. As more vehicles started to appear, we left them to it and drove towards the riverbank.



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We headed north-east towards Wafwa to see a small group of lions eating the remains of a baby hippo on the riverbank. The light was quite harsh and while some of the group got some shots of them with the hippo, others came a little later and watched the lions relaxing in the bushes after their big meal.

We spent some time next to a bank of nesting carmine bee-eaters, practicing getting some flying shots as these beautiful birds flew towards the nesting bank with their insect prey and banked into the sunshine, bringing out their incredible red colours.

We were close to where the wild dogs had been the night before, so the first vehicle to leave went in the direction they had been and to our delight, they were still lying on the edge of the beach in the shade of the bushes. We sat and watched them for a while, relaxing and trying to shelter from the heat, in the end cooling off on the sand. Unfortunately, they were too hot to play or hunt, so we left them to rest and went to have coffee by the lagoon and back to the lodge.

This afternoon we drove along the road to Wamilombe and were met by an older female giraffe standing in the middle of the road, with some red billed oxpeckers on her back. She was fascinated by us, as were we by her, so we turned off the engine and sat for a while waiting for her to move. When the sun is so bright during the day, it's a great time to do some black and white photography, and giraffes lend themselves really well to this with their shape and texture, so we had a go at this. Once she decided to walk on, we passed each other and we carried on, past a lagoon where the hippos were keeping cool, and a yellow-billed kite was keeping watch. We then drove on to the beach where the dogs had been to find them still there, so we spent some more time with them.



Some clouds started coming across the sky this afternoon, giving us and the wildlife a bit of a break from the intense sunshine. This was good as it reduced the heat but also gives more flexibility with photography and reduces the contrast caused by the strong light.

As we drove back towards the lodge along the riverbank, we came across a buffalo stuck in the sand, which obviously had a broken/injured leg so it couldn't escape. This is the darker side of safari and was very difficult to watch – three lions had found the buffalo and were starting to eat it while it was still alive. We stayed and watched for a short while, but it was quite distressing, so we continued with our night drive back towards the lodge. On the way back, we saw a good mix of civet, genet and a couple of scrub hares.

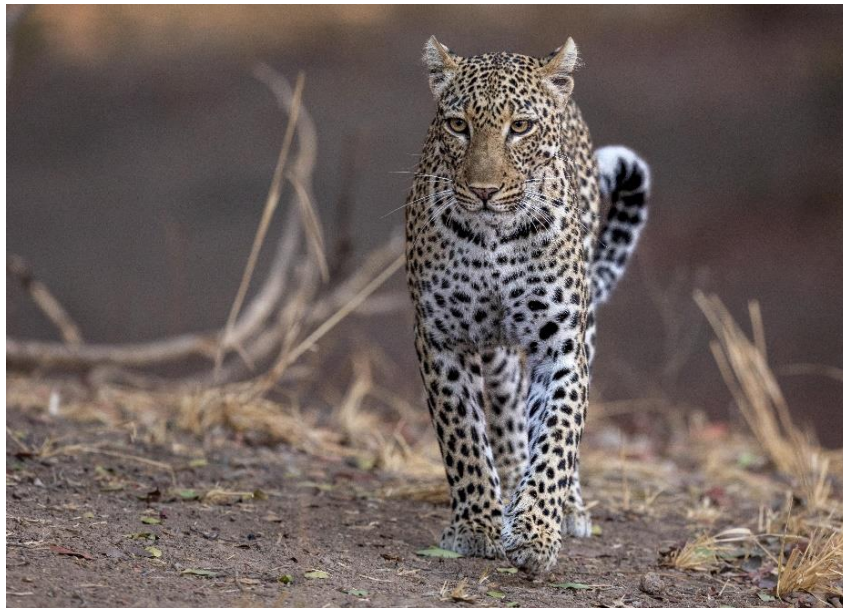
Day 8: South Luangwa National Park

Saturday 20 November 2021

Leaving the lodge this morning, it felt a lot moodier and the clouds were starting to loom quite menacingly above. As we turned out of the lodge, we heard the alarm calls of the baboons in the trees, so we slowed the vehicles and followed their gaze towards the far end of the lagoon outside the lodge. Sure enough, there was a leopard, who blended into her surroundings, drinking from the edge of the lagoon. She walked across the road, past the vehicles, and into the bush. Some of the group followed her round and saw her again further on as she looked for somewhere to shelter from the sun for the morning. She was confidently walking, with her tail raised, so she wasn't on the lookout for breakfast at that time. The guides identified her as Lucy's sister, who is around 3-4 years old – a beautiful big cat.

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We decided to go into the bush to see if we could find Lucy and/or anything else and came across a lone giraffe in the stunning morning light, so spent some time observing and photographing her.

There was lots to keep us entertained along the way, including elephants keeping cool by showering themselves with mud and sand as well as fish eagles and kingfishers looking for food. The sound of the woodland kingfishers' mating call has really started to punctuate the bird song and can be heard across the park.



We drove to the riverside, to the buffalo carcass, to see the three lions still guarding it, looking very full. Some vultures were close by, but whenever they got anywhere near it, they were chased away by the protective lions.

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While we were watching the lions enjoying their full tummies and resting on the sand in the morning sunshine, a huge flock of Abdim's storks riding the thermals passed by overhead - the first time they had been seen this season.

On our way to morning tea and coffee, we came across a female impala giving birth. You could just about see the sack hanging out, with some hooves visible, before she lay back down behind the trees and we left her to give birth in peace.



On our way back from coffee, we turned the corner and saw some of the wild dog pack coming towards us on the road, calling. The rest of the pack came from behind us and they reunited happily around the vehicle and then retreated back to the cool sand to recover from the strenuous hunt. We spent some time watching them enjoy the beach before heading back to the lodge for lunch.

The heat intensified during the early afternoon and it was feeling very humid. At 42°C, driving along in the jeep felt like somebody blowing a hairdryer towards you. Starting our drive after tea, we passed a small group of elephants, one lying down having a snooze in the shade, and another reaching for leaves off the branches.

Everything was very quiet as most things were sheltering under the trees, making the most of any shade they could find. We passed a pair of giant hornbills, waving their wings to try and cool down.

We got a call that Lucy had been spotted again, so we drove towards the spot to find her lying on the low branches of a tree, unfortunately quite well hidden from our viewpoints by the vines and branches. After a while waiting, she got down from the tree and disappeared into the undergrowth, so we decided it was time for sundowners on the edge of the beach.

As we were setting up, the wind began to pick up and the clouds started to look more sinister. The storm picked up very quickly and the wind started to blow some impressive clouds of sand across the river. Even the huge basking crocodile, who had been on the opposite bank retreated quickly underwater. The sundowners were packed away fairly quickly - after as much of the popcorn as possible could be eaten before it was blown away - and we all got into the jeeps just as the rain started. The storm was incredible! Forked lightning appeared across the dark clouds, strong winds blowing the sand across the river, followed by rain and hail. We retreated as quickly as possible back to the safety of the lodge to shower and freshen up.



For our final night, we had a delicious braai for dinner, with some drinks and a good chat, reminiscing on all the incredible things we've seen this week.

Day 9: South Luangwa National Park

Sunday 21 November 2021

The morning after the night before! Despite the amount of rainfall and standing water we observed last night, relatively few puddles remained. The thirsty land had soaked most of the water up and there was a different feel and smell to the ground as we drove through the park.

We drove back out to the river near Wafwa lagoon, where the remains of the buffalo lay and found the three lions still guarding it, but a group of around 10-12 hyenas closing in and circling the carcass. Later on, one of our group's vehicles witnessed the hyenas finally gathering the courage to take on the lions and winning the battle for some time with the carcass.



As we stopped, we had a really good view of a giant kingfisher, who was sitting on a branch on the bank also apparently watching the proceedings!

We heard over the radio that further south one of the vehicles had spotted Lucy and her cub, so we drove very quickly back to her area as everyone was keen to see her one last time. Unfortunately, by the time we

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arrived, the cub had been chased into the bushes by some elephants and Lucy had taken refuge in a sausage tree to shelter from the sun, where we could see her but she was hidden by some branches, so it was not great for photography.

We waited there for over an hour to see if she might come down, but she was obviously enjoying the rest. We had to get the group back to the lodge for their PCR tests, but we managed to get some lovely shots of her relaxing and enjoying some well-earned time in the tree. Some baboons spotted her on the branch after a while and rather than walking past, climbed up to get a closer look, making alarm calls but she was so tired she could only muster enough energy for a little growl before settling back down. It was a really lovely way to finish.



A final lunch in the sun on the terrace was finished off by an amazing song/speech by Ron, summing up the week to the tune of Gilbert and Sullivan, which blew everyone away. It was the perfect ending to a fantastic week with a great group.

All images by Emma Healey

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