

Tour Report

Zambia – South Luangwa Photo Safari

16 – 24 November 2022

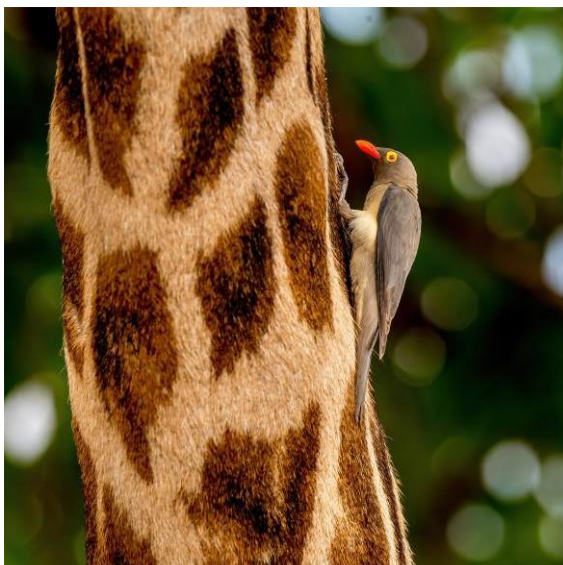
Hippo



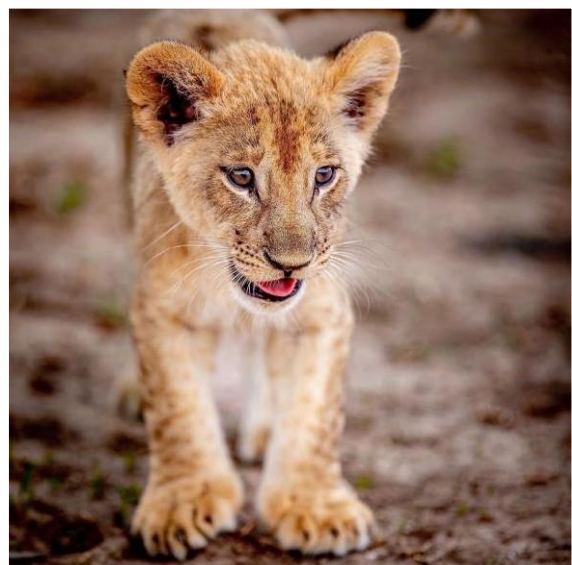
Southern carmine bee-eater



Red-billed oxpecker on giraffe



Lion cub



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Day 1: Wednesday 16 November 2022

Weather: Raining; 27° C

Ben Sutcliffe and myself were already in Zambia after guiding previous trips in South Luangwa, so we met the third group at Mfuwe airport after dropping off the other group at departures. It had started to rain hard with heavy thunderstorms, which considering the oppressive heat over the last two weeks made a nice change. The drop in temperature was perfect! Everyone was very excited to be here, despite the jetlag from the long outbound journey. We loaded the vehicles with luggage, then headed 40 minutes back to Flatdogs Camp and let everyone settle into their accommodation for an hour before meeting up for dinner.

Ben and I gave a group briefing on what to expect for the remainder of the week, telling them about recent sightings and the encounters we had had with the previous group. Everyone was in good spirits and enjoyed a good dinner before returning to their tents ready for an early alarm call tomorrow!

Day 2: Thursday 17 November 2022

Weather: Sunny; 32° C

Each day followed the exact same timings and format - an alarm call at 04:30, followed by a light breakfast before heading into the national park for 05:30.

We split the group into two vehicles: one with Ben and the other with myself then headed to the entrance of South Luangwa National Park just a short drive away. Our guide managed to get us in a bit earlier than the official opening time, which was nice! It didn't take long until we had our first glimpse of wildlife, as there was a group of impala close to the park entrance. They were on lookout and highly intrigued by something, but we were unable to identify what they were looking at. As they didn't give any alarm calls, we moved on.

The group then had their first sighting of a male puku and a carmine bee-eater that was perched on a branch - we spent some time getting photos of both of these. A short drive further on we saw two crowned hornbills feeding on the ground beside the track, they were tricky to get close to for portraits, however they were awesome to see and watch as they went about their day. As we headed towards Mfuwe Lodge we saw a troop of yellow baboons feeding large numbers of insects that had most likely come out after last night's heavy rainfall. A really young baby of around four weeks old was playing with its mother, while another was grooming her. Lovely sighting! We stopped off at Mfuwe Lagoon to see hippos among the green Nile cabbage; there were also a few Nile crocodiles basking in the sun beside the lagoon. Later on we saw two bateleur eagles perched in the distance, which excited the birders in the group.

Heading north into the reserve, we found a male and a female lion walking towards us up the track! The female was lactating, which suggested that she had some very young cubs hidden somewhere, as she hadn't been seen for a week or so, which gave us all some excitement in the knowledge that we might get to see them towards the end of the week.

Some time after our first lion sighting we saw two lionesses and one male. One of the lionesses was nursing three cubs - what a fantastic sighting! Another safari vehicle had got stuck in the mud and the guests had left the vehicle, which spooked the lions and put them on alert. We left soon afterwards so as not to disturb them anymore. Hopefully the lioness mum is now starting to show the cubs a bit more - which will be fantastic...!

We headed further into the reserve to the borehole where Ben and I had seen a buffalo kill yesterday with a lion family eating on it. The lions had moved on and left the kill for vultures to feed on. At the

borehole the group also had their first sighting of two Thornicroft's giraffes. After some driving around we came across three elephants, with one female nursing a calf. We spent a little while watching them before moving on for our morning coffee break. While driving we came across a fairly large water monitor lizard crossing the road which was great to see. We found a nice place to stop at 09:00 for our morning coffee and biscuits, while watching carmine bee-eaters along the riverbank before we returned to the lodge.

We set off at 15:30 after finishing off our afternoon tea and cakes. Heading south of the park we drove for around 45 minutes to stop at a carmine bee-eater colony where the birds were catching lots of insects in the warm afternoon sunshine.

After spending some time with the bee-eaters we went to a spot that the guides had found, where a Cape buffalo had got stuck in the black cotton soil at a small watering hole five days earlier. Sadly it was still very much alive!

We had a nice sighting of an African hawk eagle that flew in front of us and landed in a nearby tree, and came across a big male elephant eating leaves from the tree, which gave everyone some nice close encounters. We then headed to the riverbank and spent an hour photographing the carmine bee-eaters in flight. On the way back to camp we had our night drive. We saw a total of five genets at various distances, lots of hippos and two hyenas.

Day 3: Friday 18 November 2022

Weather: Sunny 30° C

Today we had another early morning, which kicked off to a great start with a nice sighting of three large male kudus. We spent some time with them, however it was tricky photographically as they were all in dense overgrowth. We continued and a short distance further on we saw our first elephant of the day, a nice large male eating leaves from a tree at a distance.

We then headed towards Chichelle via Zebra Loop to look for the lion family with cubs, as they had been last seen in that area. On the way we spotted a lone zebra crossing the road. We also found a swallow-tailed bee-eater perched on a tree, which was a nice sighting, and had sightings of a Thornicroft's giraffe, a huge flock of red-billed quelea and two crowned cranes feeding in an open area.

After driving around for a while we found the male and female lions, and stayed with them for a while but they were just sleeping and very inactive, although they did mate a couple of times before we moved on to see what else was around.

We then stopped off at Chipela Chandombo Lagoon for our morning coffee break where a few crocodiles were present, plus some hippos on the lagoon before we headed back to Flatdogs Camp.

After a short downpour we left camp at 15:30 and drove for 30 minutes to Nkwali Pontoon crossing to photograph carmine bee-eaters on the riverbank and hippos from water level. Just before stopping off along the river en route to the pontoon we had a herd of 20 or so elephants with a few little ones tagging along - really great to see!

Next, we had a great session with the carmine bee-eaters and stayed with them for nearly an hour, concentrating on portraits and in-flight photos before moving on to the hippos, which were just a short drive away. The hippos were really active, with lots of yawning and fighting. It was great to be able to get almost down to water level, as this made for some fantastic photos. While we were having our sundowners a young bull elephant came to the edge of the water to drink. This made the hippos a bit nervous and noisily vocal, but was another great sighting.

We soon headed further into the reserve to start our night drive. This was like an apocalypse of insects with thousand upon thousand of insects due to the heavy rains. The night drive was extremely tough with bugs flying in our faces all the time, but what an experience it was! We had some nice sightings of gennets, and two bush babies high up in the tree, one of which was fairly close. Considering the dense foliage and the number of insects, everyone managed to get a few reasonable images!

Day 4: Saturday 19 November 2022

Weather: Sunny 35° C

Another early start for the reserve and a glorious morning with birds singing and cicadas calling. We hadn't had a leopard sighting yet, which is apparently rare as leopard are typically seen on most game drives. Our first sighting was an impala with a freshly born calf which must have been born only a few hours earlier. This was tricky to photograph as she took the newborn away into the bushes when she heard the vehicle.

We visited a hippo carcass that had been found, although there wasn't much left of it by the time we got there. However lots of white-backed vultures were feeding on the hippo, which flew off when we arrived and perched on the surrounding trees waiting for us to leave.

We had had a very quiet morning so far, so we continued driving around and had a nice sighting of a couple of Thornicroft's giraffes, plus a few elephants, followed by a couple of sightings of an African hawk eagle and western banded snake eagle perched up in the trees. We found a young bull elephant, followed him to a spring and watched him drink the fresh water for a while. We then came across three male kudu - I think they were the same three males that we had seen the other day in the bushes, so very tricky to photograph. Two of them were play fighting and locking their horns. We soon left the kudus and had a nice close encounter with a brown hooded kingfisher. On our way back to camp we came across two young bull elephants play fighting and locking tusks - this was a lovely moment and the highlight of the morning.

Once again we left camp after tea and cake and headed into the park. We drove past an African crowned eagle that had killed a baby impala not long before and was eating it by the side of the road. We visited Mushroom Lagoon, where a few crocodiles were basking near the water's edge, and spotted a yellow-billed stork, a spoonbill and some hippos; we also heard a black cuckoo calling. Then we found two fish eagles perched high up but quite far away. We continued to the riverbank opposite Tamarind River Camp, where we saw a female lion sitting right at the water's edge. We got some nice images with the river and the landscape behind! The minutes flew by and it was soon time to move on.

Then we got a message from another guide to say that a leopard had been sighted. We got there five minutes too late and just caught the back end of the leopard disappearing into the bush, but it was great to see her - albeit briefly.

Day 5: Sunday 20 November 2022

Weather: Sunny 39° C

Another extremely hot day! Our morning drive got off to a good start with two bull elephants feeding on leaves off a mango tree. They were very close, but it was great to get some nice detail shots of their faces and tusks. We then headed deeper into the park to look for the lion family, in the hope that the three cubs would be out playing again, but more out in the open this time.

Sadly, we had no luck finding the lion cubs so we continued north and found another pride of lions with cubs that were around one year old – which gave us a few excellent portrait opportunities in the shade with much softer light. We decided to continue even further north in search of a small pack of wild dogs

that had recently been sighted in the area, knowing full well that it would be a matter of luck if we stumbled across them. We saw a small herd of Cookson's wildebeest on the opposite side of the river. It was tricky for photos as it was quite distant but still a very good sighting. Sadly, we were unable to find the wild dogs so we made the long drive back - around one hour in total!

In the afternoon we went back to see the lion family with the young cubs, and enjoyed it when Mum finally called the cubs out of the bush to suckle. The cubs played around for a while in the open, fighting; one was even biting mum's tail. This was unanimously voted the highlight of the trip so far, providing us with lots of incredible photo opportunities.

It was soon time to leave the cubs to enjoy their afternoon. We continued driving and came across a beautiful female African hawk eagle feeding on a crested guinea fowl at the side of the road, but sadly we spooked her and didn't manage any photos.

On tonight's drive we had some nice activity with one gennet, 35 hippos in total, and three Cape buffalos. The buffalo that was stuck in the mud was finally killed by two hyenas, which started eating it. We missed this sighting but Ben's group saw it and stayed with them for a while to watch. Sad about the buffalo, but at least it was finally put out of its misery after suffering for eight days!

Day 6: Monday 21 November 2022

Weather: Sunny 35° C

It was a good start this morning with two red-billed hornbills perched nicely with the sun behind them, which gave us a few nice backlit photos. After a short drive we found a hyena walking in the distance. We think it must have been one of the same ones that ate the buffalo last night as it had a huge stomach! Then we came across a nice big bull elephant walking down the track - very close and thus tricky to photograph. As we had had only very limited sightings by then, we decided to head north to look for leopards. On the way we saw a beautiful male waterbuck posing nicely on the edge of the Luangwa Wafwa River. Waterbucks have proved very difficult to photograph over the past few weeks as they were constantly running away, showing their pretty ringed behinds so it was great to get one posing so obligingly for us!

Eventually we moved on and headed to the Chikunto catchment area where we found seven wild dogs - six young ones plus a collared adult. Apparently their pack consists of nine individuals, but two of the adults were not around. This was a fantastic sighting as they have been very hard to locate lately. We were very lucky to stumble upon them, and everyone was delighted that they got to see them.

We eventually started to head back to camp and came across one male lion and five females walking through the open bush towards the camera - a really epic surprise. We got some great portraits of the male under a tree while a small group of zebra looked on. Not long after we saw a herd of ten Cookson's wildebeest - sadly they were too far away for photos but another great sighting. What a lucky morning!

In the afternoon we encountered a nice male giraffe up close with two red-billed oxpeckers eating mites, so we spent a little time concentrating on images of the birds against the pattern of the giraffe. Then we found a woodland kingfisher perched on a tree which allowed us to get really close without flying away, so we took some good portraits.

We spent a fairly quiet afternoon driving around looking for a good leopard sighting. Our guide, Malama, got a tip-off about a recent leopard sighting. We rushed to get there to find that the cat had caught a young impala and was enjoying its dinner, but was in really thick bush so photography was near impossible. However after around 10 minutes she moved into a little opening and sat down close to us giving the group some nice portrait opportunities.

On our night drive a leopard walked below us in the dry riverbed but disappeared quickly. Other than that we saw only one gennet, so it was a very quiet evening.

Day 7: Tuesday 22 November 2022

Weather: Sunny 38° C

On our morning game drive we found some baboons running across the road with lovely light fantastic for backlit images. I showed the group how to a) underexpose and b) expose for the highlights to create some lovely rim-lit shots. We continued to one of the boreholes where there was the carcass of a hyena that had most likely been killed by a lion. There were lots of marabou stork and vultures around. We then moved on to the second borehole where a male lion was feeding on a buffalo carcass. Although it was only 08:00 the light was already extremely harsh for photography, however we stayed for around 30 minutes to make the most of the opportunity before moving on.

Later in the afternoon we went to see if the lion cubs were out. We found mum fast asleep but she had obviously hidden the cubs away where we couldn't see them. We decided to move on so as not to lose too much of the precious afternoon light. So we headed back to the borehole to see the buffalo carcass and were greeted with three hyenas feeding in the mud. For me this was one of the highlights of the trip. We stayed until last light before moving on for our sundowners. The night drive was quiet, however we did see lots of gennets.

Day 8: Wednesday 23 November 2022

Weather: Cloudy 27° C

Today we were greeted by lots of yellow baboons on the bridge at the entrance to the park, then came across a young bull elephant eating leaves from a tamarind tree. A red-billed hornbill perched nice and close to the vehicle giving us a few good close-up shots before it flew away. We spotted a family of banded mongoose, but they ran off as soon as we stopped - before we could get any photos. It was a beautiful encounter with mum and two-month-old baby, which was extremely curious.

It was soon time to head back to camp to pack before we departed to Mfuwe airport ready for our flight home. What a fantastic trip it has been!