

Tour Report

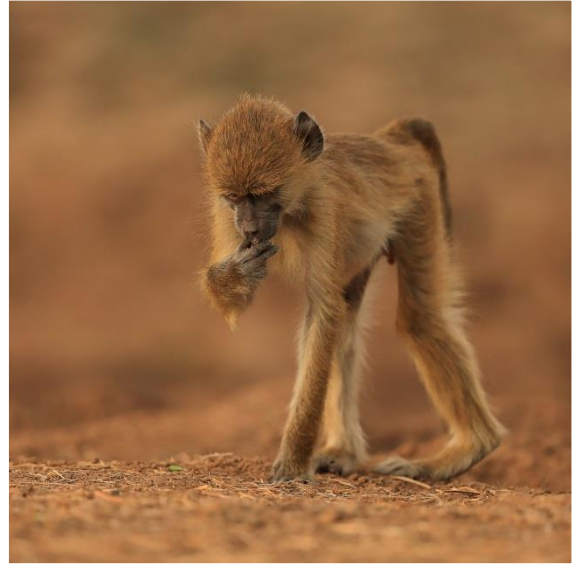
Zambia – South Luangwa Photo Safari

2-9 November 2019

Lioness



Yellow baboon



Southern carmine bee-eater



Female leopard with kill



Compiled by Bret Charman

Tour Leader: Bret Charman

Day 1: Saturday 2 November 2019

The group arrived in Mfuwe after their domestic flight from Lusaka. They were met on arrival by their guide for the week, Bwalya, who drove them to Flatdogs Camp (a journey of about 40 minutes). I greeted the group as they arrived at reception then we had a general briefing about how things worked at the camp, dinner orders were submitted and they were shown to their safari tents.

We had a lovely first evening meal together, and everyone was full of anticipation for what the following week might have in store for us.

Day 2: Sunday 3 November 2019

Being on safari in South Luangwa involves early starts – a 5am wake-up call followed by a light breakfast at 5.30am. We were joined by Bwalya before heading off just after 6am across the bridge and into the park.

Only minutes after entering the park we came across our first puku (a semi-endemic species of antelope) and impala too. A little further along the road we found some elephant feeding, one of which had a very young baby resting, fast asleep on the floor. There was also a lovely group of Thornicroft's giraffe which posed for numerous photos. We continued onwards down the track towards the river. Bwalya noticed a number of faint leopard tracks along the river bank and we tried our very best to find the cat, but to no avail, so we continued along the river until we came to one of the more open, grassy areas of the park's floodplain. Here there were numerous puku, impala and yellow baboon, while in the river hippos, crocodiles and numerous birds could be seen. A pair of southern ground hornbills walked along the opposite bank, searching for food and disturbing numerous white-crowned lapwings. On our side of the river, we were surrounded by both white-crowned and blacksmith lapwings, and little bee-eaters danced in the skies as they hawked for insects.

We decided to take our morning tea break and watched as a pair of ground hornbills flew first to a sandbar and then all the way across the river, providing numerous photographic opportunities for the group. A pod of hippos was spooked by what we could only assume to be a large crocodile, and for a few moments the river seemed to be alive with movement. Some 90 metres behind us, a lone hippo was sunbathing, trying to keep some wounds clean before it would likely find shade or water. We slowly headed back towards the main gate and heard that the young female leopard, whose tracks we found earlier on, had been seen in a tree above the track we had driven along. Sure enough, we found her high on a branch. Photography opportunities were limited, but it was lovely for everyone to see their first leopard on their very first drive. We returned to the camp shortly after for our brunch and midday break.

On our way out of the park we noticed a large group of vultures feeding not far off of the road – the same road we had driven along early in the day. It seemed as if the wild dogs might have run through and made a kill when nobody was looking.

After a lovely afternoon tea, we headed out into the park again at 3.30pm to find the young female leopard still in the same spot, but facing the other way. Within 10 minutes, other vehicles started to arrive and we decided to move on and come back later. We spent the next hour watching a troop of yellow baboons and impalas fighting over sausage tree fruits and the group was blessed with some great photography opportunities. Sometimes, it is all about sticking to a spot and seeing what happens. We then went back to find the leopard, but found numerous vehicles at numerous sites. It turned out that her mother was found in a very shady tree nearby and her brother was in the nook of a tree and termite mound.

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Due to the numbers of people, we made a decision to leave, but only after the young female came down and disappeared into a thicket. We moved along and after a little while a herd of impala went by at full sprint. We came to a sudden halt (next to a startled group of waterbuck) to give me the chance to quickly glimpse a couple of wild dogs in the distance. We did our best to catch up with them, but sadly they moved on too quickly. We did, however, find a group of banded mongooses before watching the sun set across the landscape. It was then time for sundowners, and we set ourselves up overlooking a dry lagoon. As our drinks came to an end, a pride of lions began to roar in the immediate proximity. I was to be a spotter on the night drive (something I have done many times before) and we very quickly found a white-tailed mongoose and our first genet. Just as I spied the genet, Bwalya and I also noticed a lone male lion lying out in the open. We slowly made our approach and quickly realised he was with the rest of his pride (although they were keeping out of sight for the most part).



We saw plenty more genets, a juvenile white-tailed mongoose and a couple of bushy-tailed mongoose, as well as bushbuck, impala, puku, elephant and hippo with the spotlight.

What a great first day in South Luangwa National Park, topped off by another fabulous dinner in the delightful surrounds of Flatdogs Camp.

Day 3: Monday 4 November 2019

This morning we stuck to the normal routine of a 5am wake up and a light breakfast at 5.30am. We headed off into the park to check on the leopards we had seen the night before. Unsurprisingly, all three leopards had disappeared without a trace and so we continued our journey southwards along the river.

We stopped to photograph a lovely group of puku and Crawshay's zebra in the warm morning light before heading onwards in search of other wildlife. An unexpected sighting of a Bennett's woodpecker provided us all with some good photography opportunities in a scrubby patch of forest before we headed back towards the river. A small group of crowned hornbill was seen just before a western banded snake eagle posed in a tree. We stopped for our morning tea on the Luangwa River's western bank, overlooking a colony of southern carmine bee-eater and numerous small crocodiles. A flock of Abdim's storks also flew overhead

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just before we stopped for tea. This was a new species for many of the group and, although not great for photography, it was lovely to see their arrival. We left our tea spot and quickly came across a pair of grey-crowned cranes feeding along the river's edge, one of which was particularly obliging for photography.



We started to make our way back to camp when we saw a lone spotted hyena walking across the open landscape before us, while a few elephants were heading to a dry riverbed. We arrived to find the elephants digging for and drinking water hidden beneath the sand. It was a lovely sight and another good opportunity for photography. We headed back for a well-earned rest and a delightful brunch.

We all met up together for afternoon tea at 3pm once again, only for Bwalya to tell us that he wanted to head out even earlier as a leopard had been seen with a kill. We wanted to be the first ones there and, hopefully, be rewarded with some great photography. On the way we were greeted by a family group of elephants with a very young baby, which was utterly charming. Continuing into the park, we found the kill had fallen out of a tree and was now on the ground, while the young female leopard was sitting in a tree which she is well known for frequenting. She had chosen a particularly awkward spot to rest in, and therefore the photography opportunities were rather limited. We decided to head over to the kill and see whether she would come down and feed before a hyena showed up. It wasn't long before we were caught in a heavy rain storm. It lasted for some 15 minutes or so and, even with our ponchos, we all got a little damp. However, it was all worth it in the end as the leopard came out of the bushes in front of our vehicle and paused for a drink from a newly formed puddle, before moving to her kill. We watched as she fed on the impala and photographed away before leaving her as the light was fading. We then headed to the river for a sundowner.



We had a lovely sundowner session with a hippo and her baby walking out across the sandbanks, crocodiles galore, our first spur-winged geese, and numerous other birds. As the sun disappeared behind the cloudy horizon we ventured off for another night drive. It wasn't long before we found our first genet foraging in the leaf litter. We set off further down the track to see a lone hyena running before it disappeared into the thick brush. As we got a little further down the road, we came across another hyena, this time with two large pups; we watched as they played and their inquisitive nature brought them to within a few yards of

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our vehicle. During the rest of the drive we found numerous genets, a scrub hare, bushy-tailed mongoose, white-tailed mongoose and many of the common diurnal species too.

What a great day in the stunning surrounds of South Luangwa, the valley showing off its magnificent wildlife once again.

Day 4: Tuesday 5 November 2019

We continued with our usual morning routine and this time headed north towards Wafwa Lagoon, just trying to find what we could. It started off with a bird bonanza on a drying lagoon with African spoonbill, intermediate egret, sacred ibis, saddle-billed stork, yellow-billed stork and black heron all feeding in unison. In fact the highlight must have been the black herons using their wings as umbrellas to help them fish. As we departed a lone African openbill stork joined the feeding party. As we turned northwards, a pair of grey crowned cranes put on a show from the top of a tree and on the ground, Lilian's lovebirds came remarkably close. We spied some green pigeons and a black-collared barbet, a monitor lizard posed perfectly on a tree and southern red-billed hornbills also posed for a few photos. Of course we saw species such as puku, impala, Crawhsay's zebra, elephant and countless other birds.

It was a delightful morning – we just took our time, really enjoying the cooler weather after the previous night's rains. After a very relaxed tea stop, and sightings of our first white pelicans, we slowly made our back to the lodge for another brunch session.



As the group was resting in their tents, doing their best to avoid the heat of the middle of the day, the weather took a turn for the worst. Large storm clouds started to build overhead and heavy rains were released upon the parched ground.

Being hardy Brits, we decided to head out into the park and do our best to find some wildlife. However, the rain was incessant and the skies were filled with thunder and lightning. Even with our rain ponchos, we all ended up a little on the damp side and instead of sundowners, we had rain-downers. One positive was sighting two newborn impalas, the first of many to arrive in the next few days no doubt. We also heard a lion roaring, deep in the bush; however, despite our best efforts, it managed to elude us.

With the temperature dropping and the group all a little on the chilly side, we decided to head back to camp for an early dinner and forgo our night drive.

Day 5: Wednesday 6 November 2019

We awoke to clearer skies once again today and headed off into the park full of enthusiasm. The morning started with a particularly unusual sighting – an elephant shrew, sitting enjoying the warmth of the morning sun, seemingly drying off after the previous evening's soaking. The group was able to enjoy some wonderful views and took some excellent photographs too. It then ended up being a brilliant morning for bird photography with white-browed sparrow weavers preening and posing, long-tailed starlings, red-billed

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hornbill, red-billed quelea, grey-headed sparrow and laughing dove also proved to be surprisingly cooperative. We worked our way along the rain-soaked landscape and found ourselves by some mightily impressive baobabs, both of which were coming in to full leaf and their flowers were clear to see. A lone bateleur was seen on a dead tree, before we saw another (or possibly the same one) overhead. Another vehicle was stopped and Bwalya started to talk to the guide. At that moment another vehicle pulled up behind them and one of the clients looked in the gully to the side and spotted a large male leopard lying in the cool shade on the gully floor. It was complete luck, but a lovely added bonus.

With spirits high we moved a little way down the road to find some shade for our morning tea break. We found another baobab filled with the busy buffalo weavers, constructing their impressive nests. As the baobab provided us with some welcome shade, a lone wildebeest moved across the plains in front – a very unusual sight in this part of the park. It wasn't long before a lone giraffe then appeared and when to drink from a solitary puddle – within a few minutes it was joined by an extremely young baby (less than a week old). It provided the perfect scene to end the day on, so we headed off back to camp for a well-earned rest.



This afternoon we decided to head further south and enter the park via an alternative entrance, crossing the Luangwa River at a ford point. We drove through the shallow waters, passed a carmine bee-eater colony and up on the sand bar on the other side. We had a plan to try to photograph a carmine bee-eater colony on the park side of the river. We worked our way along the river until we got to the colony I had previously visited. Sure enough the bee-eaters were there, but with fading light it was challenging to capture the birds in mid-flight. However, we were spoiled with a fascinating scene. A lone monitor lizard was attempting to climb up the river bank and daring to raid the nesting tunnels of the stunning birds. The birds took turns to mob the lizard as it worked its way along. They were successful to begin with but the determined monitor eventually managed to climb into a burrow and disappeared inside. This did mean we didn't get the carmine bee-eater shots we were really after, but the sighting was truly amazing. As we decided to stick to the same spot for our sundowners, we were joined by a small group of giraffe and watched as they went down to the river's edge and eventually crossed – a truly magical scene in one of the world's most beautiful protected areas. We didn't see another vehicle for nearly 3 hours.

We started our night drive and heard about a leopard in a tree. Sure enough, some 5 minutes from where we had been watching the sun disappear, a leopard was sitting in a sausage tree. Although the light had gone, with the help of a spotlight we had some excellent views and it wasn't very long before she was joined by a very inquisitive hyena. We enjoyed having the sighting all to ourselves and made our way back towards the river crossing point. We continued our night drive outside the park and saw our first grysbok and numerous greater bush babies, including one particularly good view. We even managed to keep our genet numbers up.

Arriving back at the lodge, we were treated to another fabulous meal, reflecting on what was yet another excellent day in the Luangwa Valley.

Day 6: Thursday 7 November 2019

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We started our drive with a magical view of two ground hornbills high on a tree, performing the most wonderful duet. The deep resonating sounds of their calls travelled across the landscape in a ghostly way, while the soft morning light illuminated their impressive forms. We continued along and were hoping to find lion, but to no avail. Instead we had the most wonderful sighting of a large male elephant wallowing in a muddy pool. None of us had ever seen such a large elephant literally roll in the mud, covering himself in the sticky substance, obviously enjoying himself immensely. What was more, he ensured that no other elephant could join him, for he always rolled or pushed them out of the way.



On our way back to the lodge we came across our first trumpeter hornbill – an impressive bird feeding on the fruits of the wild fig. At the same time, a purple-crested turaco also decided to make an appearance alongside one of its cousins, the grey go-away bird. What is always fabulous about the Luangwa Valley is that there is always something new to see: the variety of wildlife is simply superb.



The middle of the day was noticeably hotter again, and after another midday siesta, we reconvened for our afternoon drive. The plan today was to try to find some lion that had been seen that morning. We headed towards the location and passed a very obliging bushbuck and stopped to take photos before continuing.

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Bwalya and I were chatting about where the lions were when I noticed a leopard in a large open tree, the perfect spot for some stunning photography. At first we were blessed with some lovely soft light and everyone was able to capture some great imagery. As we sat there watching the leopard (all on our own), a huge herd of elephants started to move through the landscape. At least a couple of hundred gathered before crossing the river a little further to the north. Sadly, this meant that the lions had disappeared by the time we got to their last known location. However, we continued with our night drive after a lovely sundowner on the river bank.

We saw our first scops owl, flying between trees, and then heard the call of the Pel's fishing owl. In fact we were incredibly lucky and watched as two Pel's fishing owls, a mother and a youngster, called back and forth to one another. We saw more genet, white-tailed mongooses and plenty of impala and puku as we continued our drive, but nothing would really compare to seeing two Pel's fishing owls – the valley's most elusive species.

We headed back to camp after another hugely successful drive, spoilt with such remarkable sightings of elephant, the owls and the posing leopard.

Day 7: Friday 8 November 2019

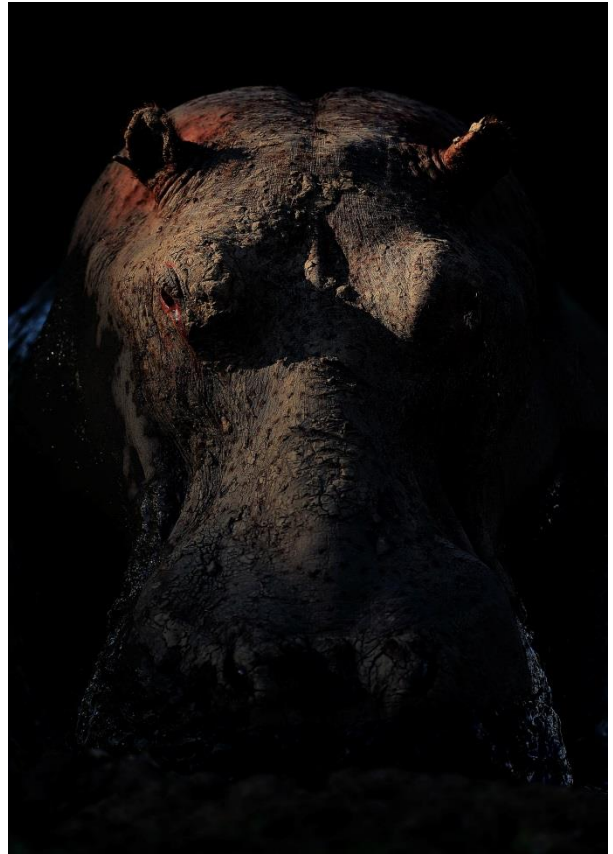
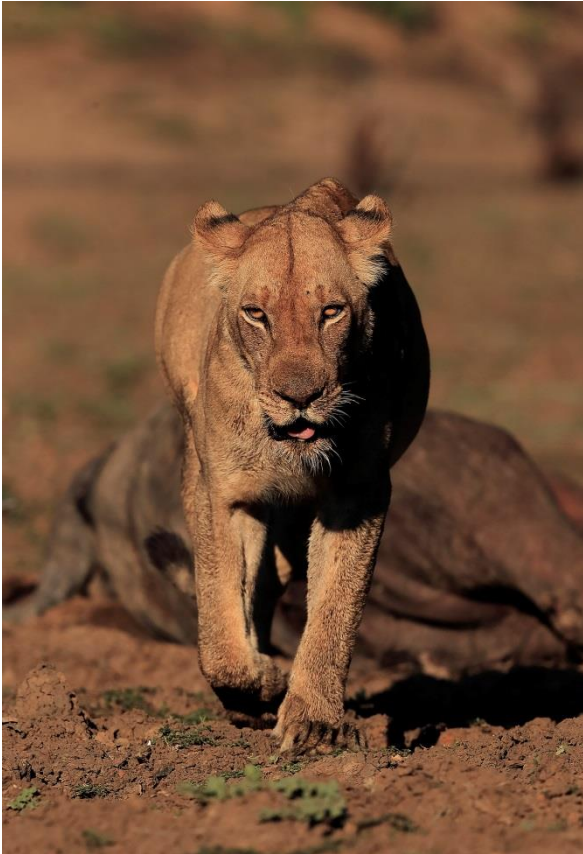
This morning we went out knowing that today was our last full day in the park. As we hadn't seen lions since our first night drive, the whole group was keen to get some good sightings. We started off with a beautiful southern carmine bee-eater, posing perfectly in the rich morning light only a few metres from our vehicle. We had further good views of African fish eagle and a crowned hornbill, both providing some good photography opportunities.

We headed northwards in search of our feline quarry, but to no avail. We searched everywhere we could and even came across a black mamba crossing the road in front of us, but the lions managed to elude us once more. We did eventually stumble across a herd of zebra who entertained us with their frenetic battles and civil disorder. There was a brief stop at one of the park's oldest, and grandest, baobabs before a tea break under a fabulous tamarind tree where we watched the world go by. As we made our way back to camp, we heard about some lions on a buffalo kill, which the camp manager, Lewis, had seen at first light (completely by chance and just out of sight opposite Flatdogs). We turned up to find nine very hot lions, a partially eaten buffalo bull and around 100 vultures, a mix between hooded and white-backed. After spending a little while watching the lions slowly move to better shade, we headed back for brunch once more.

We had yet another delightful afternoon tea, leaving even earlier than usual for our afternoon game drive. We knew the lions would still be at the site of the kill and so we wanted to be the first ones there. Just as we had planned, upon our arrival there were no other vehicles in sight and we watched as a lioness fed on the carcass, surrounded by hundreds of vultures. She eventually retreated into the shade for a drink before a young male decided he needed to guard the kill from the throngs of vultures. We watched as he repeatedly walked away from the kill and charged back as the vultures tried to feed on the buffalo. This happened over and over again and provided the most wonderful photography, with the light slowly falling in the sky. There was also an angry hippo, wallowing in the mud, that took offence at our presence, providing fantastic portrait opportunities.

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After our action-packed time with the lions, we moved back towards the river bank where Bwalya took us to a beautiful spot with a large colony of white-fronted and southern carmine bee-eaters. We spent around an hour watching this magical sight and enjoyed our final sundowners over the river. We headed off for a night drive and saw some eyes (most likely those of a leopard in a thicket), but as it was close to some people still on foot, we could never verify our sighting. Instead we continued and saw a number of hyenas heading towards the lions' kill, as well as our first civet. Of course, no night drive in South Luangwa would be complete without numerous sightings of genet. It was our last night drive in the park, but I am sure some members of the group will be back for more. It often seems that South Luangwa National Park takes a certain hold over you.

We had our dinner, knowing that we had one more drive in the park, most likely including a visit to the lions once again.

Day 8: Saturday 9 November 2019

Our final morning in the park started off with what was meant to be a quick visit to check on the lions. However, in the end, a 'quick' visit lasted for quite a while. One of the pride's males had appeared overnight (as had even more vultures), and he was busy mating with one of the mature females. Their antics kept us all entertained for quite some time and then we went round the corner to check on the kill once again.

After an hour or so we moved off in search of other wildlife, but for quite some time everything seemed to be staying out of sight. The first wildlife we really saw was a herd of female kudu and some zebra too, quickly followed by our first elephant and giraffe. We went to check on one of the well-known fruiting strangler figs and enjoyed wonderful views of purple-crested turaco and go-away birds feeding on the fruits. Some excellent shots were captured by the group as the birds chased each other around the tree.

Sadly as the day started to heat up, it was time to head back for the final time, but only after a farewell from a large group of buffalo as they passed by in front of us. Of course there were other distractions,

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including a warthog with three piglets, one of which was noticeably older than the other two – we assume the female had adopted from a female that had been preyed upon.

The rest of the day was spent packing and relaxing before the evening flight back to Lusaka. From there the group split, with one couple heading off to South Africa (after a night in Lusaka) and the others travelling back to the UK via Dubai.

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