

Tour Report

Zambia – South Luangwa Photo Safari

8 - 16 November 2022

Lioness



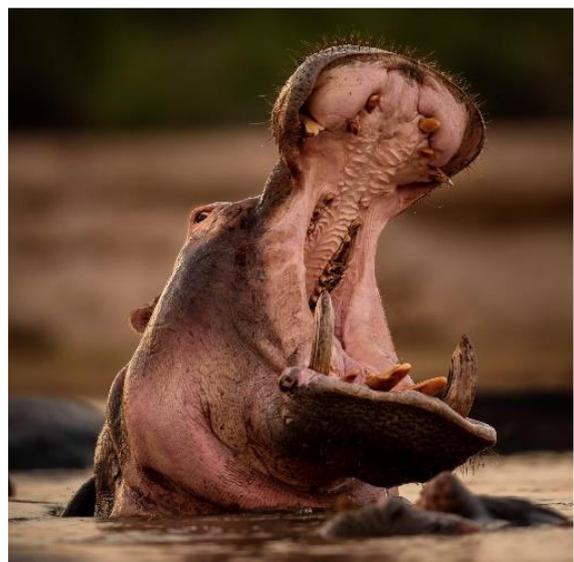
Elephant



Southern carmine bee-eater



Hippo



Compiled by Ben Sutcliffe

Days 1 – 2: Transfer to South Luangwa National Park**Tuesday 8 - Wednesday 9 November 2022**

Some of the group met up at Heathrow, whilst the majority met in Dubai and Lusaka.

After flying into a rather cloudy Mfuwe, we met our drivers and set off on the 40-minute drive to Flatdogs camp. Although it was dark, we still spotted some black storks and impala along the side of the road, which gave us a slight taste of what was to come.

Upon arrival at Flatdogs Camp, our smiling staff greeted us with a hearty dinner that felt well-earned after the long-haul flight. Later, we met up with our other leader, Sean Weekly, and he told us what we could expect from the week ahead. Shortly after this, we bid each other good night and headed to our tents for a full night before the 05:00 wake-up call, and the adventures began the next day.

Day 3: South Luangwa National Park**Thursday 10 November 2022**

After a quick breakfast consisting of a cup of coffee and a bowl of fruit, we gathered up our camera gear and headed out for our first game drive of the trip.

We didn't have to go far to see our first signs of this wonderful national park. Less than a minute after entering the park, hippos greeted us on the river, and white-headed lapwing, woodland kingfisher, white-rumped swifts and impala were on the bridge over the Luangwa River.

Further down the road, we were gifted with our first sighting of a raptor. Two African fish eagles - the national bird of Zambia - were sat up in a tree, one beautifully posed with the colours of the rising sun in the background. We assumed that these were a pair as this was the mating season, and our local guide Bwalya told us they mate for life.



Close to Mfuwe Lodge, there's a lagoon that would be completely dried out if it wasn't supplemented with water from the lodge. As a result of the water, wildlife was everywhere. Saddle-billed storks hunted for fish whilst striated and squacco heron marched over the mud islands searching for their next meal. Not only was the bird life here amazing, but the mammals and reptiles also joined the party. Hippos wallowed in the shallow water in addition to crocodiles, our first of many on this trip.

We soon got word of two very young lion cubs from our guide, so we decided to leave this haven of wildlife alone and make our way to see these wonderful cubs that were maybe a week or so old. They were down in a gulley, so we couldn't get any decent images, but it was still an incredible sight to see. We decided to head back to a small pride of adult lions we had passed.



These lions had killed a buffalo last night and were sticking around to guard it against predators such as hyenas or vultures that may want to take advantage of an easy meal. We stayed with these lions for a while, observing how they interacted with one another. Just as we were leaving them to rest, one female started to demonstrate hunting behaviour. A few seconds later, we discovered why. An unaware warthog had wandered into the area where these lionesses were shading themselves. We observed this increasingly exciting event until the warthog finally realised his mistake and walked briskly into the woodland.

After this incredible encounter, we continued to the river, where we got out of the vehicles for tea and cake. We stopped by a beautiful harrier hawk hanging upside down from weaver bird nests attempting to pillage them of their eggs or chicks. This was an incredible sight and one of my highlights of the day.



On the way back to the camp, we passed by the lionesses again and the lagoon outside Mfuwe Lodge. Here we had more highlights with malachite kingfisher, lilac-breasted roller hunting termites, pied kingfisher, blacksmith lapwing, white-headed lapwing, saddle-billed stork, and a beautiful water monitor.

As soon as we returned to the camp, we had a spot of lunch before resting in preparation for our afternoon game drive. After a well-deserved rest, we headed back out for our afternoon drive. We decided to head down the river and see if we could get a closer view of the hippos before they went out grazing for the night. Once we arrived at the river's edge, we were greeted by four baby hippos playfighting. They hadn't grown their teeth yet, indicating they were still very young. Nevertheless, it was an impressive spectacle with a hint of the cute factor.

Furthermore, we were lucky enough to see all three of the most common bee-eater species with carmine, white-fronted, and little bee-eater swooping around the vehicle at various points in our stop.

Once we added more images to our memory cards, we made our way further down the river for our sundowners. On the way, one of the guides with us for the night drive spotted a giant/Verreaux's eagle owl sitting on a shaded branch in a tree—showing us again how fantastic the local guides are here.

Sundowners over, we headed out on our night drive, the highlights being five genets (a nocturnal cat-like animal), flap-necked chameleon and elephant shrews. On arrival back to camp, we sat down for dinner and then ran off to bed in preparation for another amazing day in South Luangwa.



Day 4: South Luangwa National Park

Friday 11 November 2022

Today was yet another cloudy day, but this wasn't bad. The soft light compliments the fantastic landscape, and due to the lack of shadows, we got some brilliantly detailed portraits throughout the day.

We started our day on a high with a small group of elephants - our first proper sighting of elephant for this trip - with two babies. We felt privileged to see this amazing sight.



We then went on to check out a Cape buffalo spotted stuck in the mud the previous night. She was still alive and struggling to get out. A difficult sight to see but a stark reminder of the brutality of nature. Around this horrific scene, however, the birds were thriving as black-headed herons and hamerkop hunted for mussels and other tasty treats.

Further on, we met up with the same pride as yesterday, although they were relaxing under a bush, which isn't great for photography but good to see. Most of them were sleeping off a meal we believed they had hunted the previous night as they had very full stomachs.

We decided to leave the lionesses in peace and see what else we could find. It wasn't long until we came across yet another lion. This time a male. He was asleep when we arrived, and a couple of other vehicles were leaving when we turned up. Luckily once the other vehicles left, we were fortunate enough that he woke up just long enough for us to get some photos of him. It goes without saying that we were thrilled to get this opportunity. We later discovered that he had discovered a leopard kill and was guarding it so the leopard wouldn't return. We knew we had to return to this sight later that day, but for now, we decided to leave him sleeping.



Driving further into the park, we continued our search for the elusive leopard. During this search, we spotted an adult martial eagle sitting atop a tree. Unfortunately, this was too far for any decent images, but it was interesting to see. Moving on, a vast herd of Cape buffalo was wandering to the nearest watering hole. You could see how exhausted they were from the heat and constant movement. Our guide, Bwalya, said he thought there were about 300+ individuals in that herd, which was definitely a highlight of the trip. The other group also saw a couple of hyenas in the mud and raved about this over lunch. After a brilliant morning, we returned to camp for lunch and recuperated for the evening drive.

Our afternoon began with a crowned eagle nest, a huge spectacle that put the bird's size into perspective. Bwalya informed us that these eagles don't mate very often, perhaps only every 5-6 years. Not too far from this location, we were lucky enough to see a snake eagle with a kill, and the guests got some great images of this impressive apex predator.

Yet another great sighting was just down the road for us, a mother warthog and her four piglets both feeding, the adult from the ground and the piglets from their mother. We also spotted a small group of kudu.

After a brilliant scouting session around a waterhole viewing yellow-billed and saddle-billed storks, hippos, crocodiles, hadeda ibis, sacred ibis and African fish eagles, we heard birds alarming. Bwalya and I thought there was a predator in the area, so we raced to where the raucous was coming from. We stopped underneath a tree, perplexed as to where the cause of this commotion could be. The other half of the group rounded the corner just as a young male leopard jumped from the tree we were sitting under and ran into the bush—a missed opportunity but a step closer to an excellent leopard sighting.

We decided to return to the male lion who had pillaged the impala kill from a leopard. Just as we suspected, it was still guarding the carcass, albeit very lazily, as it was half asleep and upside down, enjoying the warmth of the evening sun.

As night fell, we swapped the sunglasses for a spotlight and returned to the park to see what we could find. It was an incredible night with a brief view of a genet, a wonderfully long session with a male lion repeatedly roaring in front of us, and a flap-necked chameleon. This afternoon had only heightened our love for this place, and we went to bed longing for the next day to start.



Day 5: South Luangwa National Park

Saturday 12 November 2022

It was a slow start to the day until we got to the edge of the river, where we encountered a male elephant with a missing tusk feeding from the leaves of the sausage tree. Our guide, Bwalya, said that this male was born like this, and after the heavy poaching of these elephants in the 80s and 90s, it has become more prevalent for elephants in Zambia to be born without tusks at all. Quite an astonishing and morbid adaptation.

As we moved further into the park, we came across a small family of warthogs; however, we didn't stay long because we got word that the wild dogs had been spotted not too far from our position, so we said goodbye to the warthogs and raced off to try our luck with the dogs. Spoiler alert, we found them! A family of 24 dogs, 14 adults and ten pups, all shading under a scattering of trees and bushes. Because of the overcast weather, we were able to achieve some great images.



After leaving the dogs to sleep, we stopped for some tea and coffee, overlooking the river for some wildlife spotting and to convene with the other half of the group. The highlights were Hippos, pied kingfisher, three-banded plover, and African fish eagle.

After a few hours of rest at the camp, we set out on our afternoon drive. We started this evening adventure with three elephants just a few metres away. The majesty of these animals is evident at this sort of distance, and further along, we were greeted by yet more elephants. It was an excellent start for the group.



We returned to the river, this time to a different clearing, searching for lions, where we saw a group of four females who had decided to rest on the riverbank. However, we didn't stay too long as we were informed of two leopards in the area. We rushed down there, and there they were, deep in the bushes, two leopards

staring at us through the thicket. Unfortunately, they were so deep in the bushes that we couldn't get any photos, but having our first proper leopard sighting was very exciting.

After our leopard sighting, we moved on. By then, the light was getting really good, and just as it was starting to dip below the horizon, we spotted a massive herd of buffalo, the same herd we had seen just a few days before. We got some really nice portraits of them in the golden light, and then it was time to meet the rest of the group for sundowners.



As it got dark, we packed up our drinks and headed back up the river, hoping to see the leopards in action. We saw a male and female lion drinking from the riverbed along the river. At that moment, the two leopards that the other group had seen just moments before appeared from a creek in the river bed and made their way back up the bank and into the bushes for safety, closely followed by our male lion. It was incredible to see these cat species so close together when they usually avoid each other at all costs. Lions can and have killed leopards in the past.

Soon the male lion lost interest in the bushes the leopards had disappeared into and returned to his female, who, obviously impressed by his show of bravery, instigated a mating session. Once this brief event ended, both lions collapsed exhausted on the riverbed. Lions tend to mate every 10-15 minutes in the breeding season to increase their odds of becoming pregnant with cubs.

Just as we thought things couldn't get better, one of the leopards from earlier made its way back across the riverbed. Lucky for it, the lions were too exhausted to do anything but watch, and the leopard disappeared unharmed into the darkness.

We ended the day on two genet sightings on our way back to the camp. After a quick dinner, we headed to bed to get some rest.

Day 6: South Luangwa National Park

Sunday 13 November 2022

Today started on a high with us seeing the mating pair of lions from last night resting by the side of the road. Suddenly, the female leopard got up, walked towards the male, and rubbed around him before finally laying down in front of him and once again, lions mated right in front of us.

After leaving the lions alone, we stopped by a flock of Lillian's lovebirds, a bird one of our guests wanted to get an image of. Eventually, we got some decent images of these flighty little birds, which is by no means a mean feat.

On our way further into the park, Bwalya and I heard the guinea fowl and impala's alarm calls - a sound that usually means there's a leopard about - we tracked the sound, and I pointed to the tree I thought the leopard was in. Sure enough, the female leopard we had seen the night before was sat up in the tree. Unfortunately, as we neared the tree to get a better angle for photography, she fled through the bushes, alarm calls following in her wake.

After a quick lunch, we returned to the camp with sightings of buffalo, elephant, bee-eaters, storks and mongooses keeping us entertained for the journey back.

We headed for some much-anticipated hippo and carmine bee-eater action in the afternoon. So many of us were looking forward to this afternoon because we were allowed out of the vehicles. This enabled us to get down low and on eye level with our subjects which has huge benefits to photography as it not only improves the general impact of the images but allows for some great-looking backgrounds and foregrounds.



We were treated to a great display from the hippos and bee-eaters and privileged enough to witness two herds of elephant crossing the river with the most beautiful sunset in the background. We then crossed the river and joined the other half of the group for sundowners.

During our night drive and our way back to the camp, we spotted two Western green natal snakes up in a bush and a white-tailed mongoose. What a fantastic end to yet another brilliant day.

Day 7: South Luangwa National Park

Monday 14 November 2022

One of our guests thought they had lost their phone during last night's sundowners, so we headed back to see if we could find it. This ended up being a fantastic decision as we had a brilliant encounter with two female hyenas, backlit by the rising sun. My first sighting of these on this trip (although other group members had seen them on previous drives). We also saw a small family of puku, which sat obligingly and allowed us to take many images of them. Plus, we found the phone later in the morning, so this was looking to be a very successful day and successful it was.



Later that morning, we saw two vehicles parked near a tree. With our anticipation heightened, we drove closer to investigate. A young leopard no more than eight months old sat on a termite mound under this tree; however, it soon jumped down. Expecting it to move across the road we got ourselves in position. It wasn't long before it crossed the road in front of the vehicle, allowing us to get some great views and images. This was a morning we were going to remember.



We ended this incredible morning with sightings of brown snake eagles and Southern ground hornbill.

During lunch at the camp, we organised a local band to show us some of their traditional music and dancing, with many of us getting involved. It was a lot of fun and a nice addition to the day, albeit very hot and sweaty. Some of us, including myself and Sean, got up and were taught how to drum some of the beats they were using. This was one of the guest's ideas, and it put us in high spirits before our afternoon drive.

One of the first (personally one of the most exciting for me) spots of the day was a crowned eagle on a nest. We had seen the nest previously in the week, but it had a bird on it this time. Soon after we arrived, it flew into a separate tree to pick out a twig and renovate the nest, ready for breeding. This was a very exciting sign as it meant that they would most likely breed this year.



Along a woodland track, we spotted two giraffes walking calmly down the small sandy track. We tried to get in front of them to get some shots from a front-on perspective via a smaller side track, but unfortunately, a vehicle behind them, spooked them, causing them to run a short distance in front of us. This meant we couldn't get the shots we were after; however, we did still get some nice images.

Further into the park, we encountered a large group of impala with so many babies it was hard to count. This made for some very cute images for the group and ones they were pleased with. White-fronted bee-eaters surrounded our vehicle as we tried to take photos of these acrobatic masters.

Increasing our search into the park, we came across many other species as the sunset. An adult and juvenile bateleur were sat up in the trees whilst a couple of African hawk eagles sat atop a dead tree further down the track. A group of zebra walking ahead of us in the red clay track made for some nice images, but by now the sun had almost set, so the light was getting trickier by the minute. Our last highlight of the afternoon before sunset was yet another hyena, this time a male walking a few metres away from the road.

After our sundowners, we set off for our night drive and were treated to more amazing sightings, including a Pel's fishing owl and a leopard drinking from the riverbed. The other group got there slightly before us and could see the journey this leopard took to get down to the river. Both encounters weren't great photographically but they still remained the cherry on the cake.

Day 8: South Luangwa National Park

Tuesday 15 November 2022

For our penultimate morning drive, we started strong with a family of four giraffe and three warthogs. But the sightings didn't end there. We went on to see a herd of zebra, African hoopoe and three big bull elephants. This really was starting to turn into a brilliant drive.

After moving further into the park, we saw our first white-headed vulture up in a tree off in the distance - a very impressive-looking bird both in flight and whilst stationary.

Soon after, we spotted a male lion walking towards us from out of the bushes on the right, closely followed by a small herd of buffalo. This caused the lone male lion to run across the road before us. There was no way he would risk a tussle with a herd of buffalo. This male will now stay on the outskirts of this herd until nightfall, when he can pick out a target during the night's confusion, and the buffalos won't have a chance to defend their young calves (a perfect meal for a lone male lion).

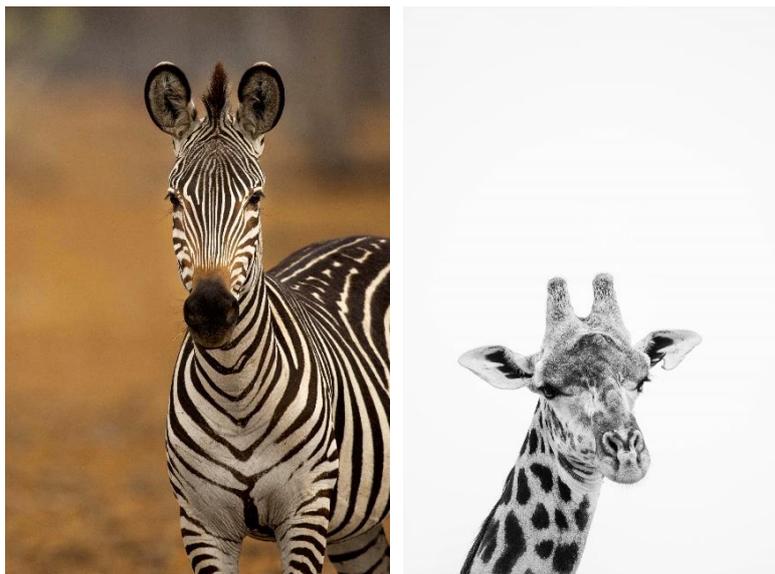
Just a few moments later, we were informed of a female lion on a buffalo kill, so we went to get a closer look. The rest of the pride was in the bush whilst this single female guarded her kill. It looked like a very recent kill, maybe just a couple of hours before we turned up, so she rested next to the buffalo until she felt ready to start her meal. Hooded vultures hopped around the carcass, feeding from the spilt blood trails on the sand.

At our break, we stopped off at Chipela Lagoon (the same place we chose to have our sundowners the previous night), and we watched as a herd of maybe 300-400 buffalo came down to the lagoon to drink.

On the way back to the lodge, we continued our bird spotting streak and ended up getting great views of grey crowned cranes and Southern ground hornbills as well as the regular sightings of elephants, warthog and impala in addition to many others.

As we headed out for our last afternoon drive, we noticed a storm was brewing, so we put on our waterproofs and headed out. The elephants were everywhere, excited that the rains were finally coming. They headed down to the river to bathe and drink the fresh rainwater.

Deciding that the best course of action was to head back to the lioness on the buffalo kill, we sped off, barely stopping because of the amount of ground we had to cover in such a short time. As we arrived at the kill site, we saw her posing beautifully and then the rain started to fall. Lightening flashed across the dark clouds, and thunder rolled across the sky. My first African storm. This was shaping up to be a brilliant afternoon. The lioness dutifully stayed guarding the kill until we left to see what else we could find.





Bwalya said we could then go and check out a leopard site that had been successful earlier today. So again, following a tip, we rushed over to the location. We could see the remanence of an impala kill hanging from a branch in the tree. But, unfortunately, no leopard. We decided to go and have the sundowners and check again once night had fallen.

After our last sundowners, we returned to the leopard tree, and sure enough, there he was. A very handsome young male leopard just relaxing up in the branches. Everyone got brilliant views, and we got some decent images to remember this brilliant encounter.

Moving on, we spotted an elephant shrew run across the road and into the bushes, so no photos this time, but a brilliant sight, nonetheless. Our next sighting got the adrenaline running though. Two honey badgers walked calmly in the road in front of us until they finally went to the side of the road, where we could get a long enough sighting for some images. After this incredible sighting, we returned to the lioness and her kill. As we drew up to the river bank's edge, we saw her rolled completely over, as relaxed as a domestic cat next to a fireplace. Now that the vultures had gone up to roost, she knew she could relax slightly, although she was very aware of her surroundings in case hyenas were to come along to see if they could get an easy meal.



Passing Mfuwe Lagoon, we saw two Pel's fishing owl and briefly a greater bushbaby, but as the bushbabies are very sensitive to light, it didn't hang around long. It was brilliant to see and a brilliant way to end our last full day.



For our last game drive, the light from the rising sun was beautiful, and when a troop of yellow baboons made their way across the track in front of the vehicle, it made for some great backlit images, a technique I love to use at every opportunity. The best thing was we hadn't even entered the park yet.

Once in the park, it wasn't long before we stopped again for a group of primates. This time the very charming and charismatic vervet monkeys were the subjects we decided to point our cameras towards. One particularly naughty individual caught our eye. This young male was determined to get away from his babysitter and explore the various bushes and tree branches the troop had decided to camp under. This resulted in many arguments between him and his 'carer' and made us laugh quite a bit. Not too far from the vervets were two stunning sightings of an African fish eagle and a crowned hornbill. Both of which posed briefly before moving on to continue with their morning activities.



We decided to return to where we saw the buffalo stuck in the mud yesterday. We were greeted by an amazing scene consisting of various vulture species; lions tearing away at the carcass, trying with as much delicacy as a lion could muster not to get stuck in the mud themselves; and a decent herd of elephant, that once locked eyes with the lions charged them, causing the female who was on the buffalo at the time to scarper and find shelter in the shade with the rest of the pride. After a brilliant and action-packed morning, we returned to camp for the last time.

Once everyone had packed and said their goodbyes to the staff. Sean and I jumped in the vehicles with the guests to make our way to the airport. On the way, we visited various shops that are part of Project Luangwa and help fund the brilliant conservation efforts in and around the park. After making the rest of the journey to the airport, we said goodbye to this group, and Sean and I stayed behind to wait for the third and final group.

This has been an amazing experience, and I can't wait to repeat it and maybe even better it next year.

Checklist



	Common Name
	BIRDS
	Herons, Egrets & Storks
1	Hamerkop
2	Goliath heron
3	Grey heron
4	Black-headed heron
5	Squacco heron
6	Green-backed (striated) heron
7	Great white egret
8	Cattle egret
9	African spoonbill
10	Sacred ibis
11	Hadedda ibis
12	Maribou stork
13	Saddle-billed stork
14	African Openbill stork
15	Woolly-necked stork
16	Black stork
17	Yellow-billed stork
	Ducks & Geese
1	Knob-billed duck
2	Egyptian goose
3	Spur-winged goose
	Raptors



1	Black kite
2	Yellow-billed kite
3	African fish eagle
4	Brown snake eagle
5	Western banded snake eagle
6	African hawk eagle
7	Crowned eagle
8	Martial eagle
9	Wahlberg's eagle
10	Bateleur
11	Hooded vulture
12	White-backed vulture
13	White-headed vulture
14	African harrier hawk
15	Red-necked falcon
16	Wood owl
17	African scops owl
18	Pel's fishing owl
19	Verreaux's (giant) eagle owl
	Guineafowl, Francolin
1	Helmeted guineafowl
2	Swainson's francolin
3	Red-necked francolin
	Cranes & Thick-knees
1	Southern grey crowned crane
2	African jacana
3	Water thick-knee (dikkop)
	Plovers & Lapwings
1	Three-banded plover

2	Blacksmith lapwing
3	White-headed (white-crowned) lapwing
	Waders & Terns
1	Black-winged stilt
2	Common greenshank
3	Ruff
4	Common sandpiper
5	Wood sandpiper
6	African skimmer
	Pigeons & Doves
1	Cape turtle dove (ring-necked dove)
2	Palm dove
3	Emerald-spotted wood dove
	Parrots, Lovebirds & Turacos
1	Meyer's parrot
2	Lilian's lovebird
3	Purple crested turaco
4	Grey go-away bird
	Cuckoos & Coucals
1	African striped cuckoo
2	White-browed coucal
	Swifts & Swallows
1	Palm swift
2	White-rumped swift
3	Red-rumped swallow
	Hoopoes & Woodpeckers
1	African hoopoe
2	Green (red-billed) woodhoopoe
3	Cardinal woodpecker

	Kingfishers, Rollers & Bee-eaters
1	Malachite kingfisher
2	Woodland kingfisher
3	Brown-hooded kingfisher
4	Giant kingfisher
5	Pied kingfisher
6	Broad-billed roller
7	Lilac-breasted roller
8	Southern carmine bee-eater
9	Little bee-eater
10	White-fronted bee-eater
	Hornbills
1	Southern ground hornbill
2	Red-billed hornbill
3	Crowned hornbill
4	Grey hornbill
5	Trumpeter hornbill
	Wagtails
1	African pied wagtail
	Drongos & Crows
1	Common square-tailed drongo
2	Fork-tailed drongo
3	Pied crow
	Flycatchers
1	Paradise flycatchers
	Boubous & Bulbuls
1	Dark-capped bulbul
2	Tropical boubou
	Starlings & Oxpeckers

1	Long-tailed (Meve's) starling
2	Yellow-billed oxpecker
3	Red-billed oxpecker
	Sparrows, Quelea & Weavers
1	Southern grey headed sparrow
2	White-browed sparrow-weaver
3	Red-billed quelea
	Firefinches & waxbills
1	Red-billed firefinch
2	Blue waxbills
	MAMMALS
	Primates
1	Yellow baboon
2	Vervet monkey
3	Thick-tailed bushbaby (greater galago)
	Lagomorphs
1	Scrub hare
	Rodents
2	Elephant shrew
3	Tree squirrel
	Carnivores
	Canines
1	African wild dog
	Hyaenids
1	Spotted hyena
	Felines
1	Leopard
2	Lion
	Herpestids & Viverrids

1	Slender mongoose
2	Banded mongoose
3	White-tailed mongoose
4	Bushy-tailed mongoose
5	Common genet
	Mustelids
1	Honey badger
	Ungulates
1	African elephant
2	Hippopotamus
3	Warthog
4	Thornicroft's giraffe
5	Cape buffalo
6	Bushbuck
7	Waterbuck
8	Greater kudu
9	Impala
10	Puku
11	Cookson's wildebeest
12	Crawshay's zebra
	REPTILES
1	Water monitor lizard
2	Western green natal snake