

Tour Report

Zambia – South Luangwa Photo Safari

9-16 November 2019

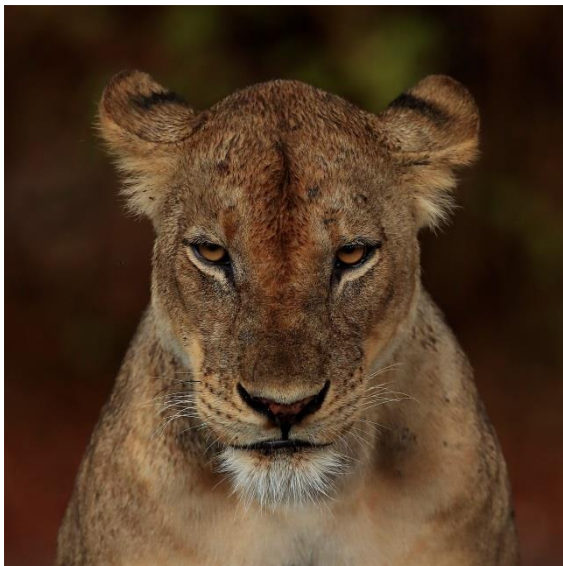
Crowned hornbill



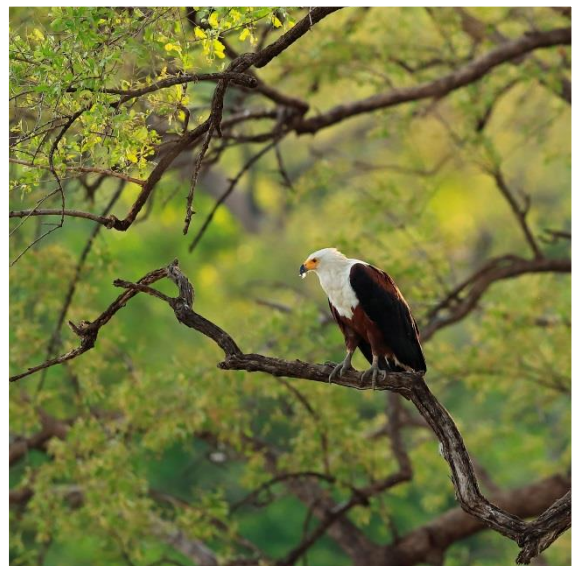
Leopard



Lioness



African fish eagle



Compiled by Bret Charman

Tour Leader: Bret Charman

Day 1: Saturday 9 November 2019

The group arrived at Flatdogs Camp after a long day of travelling from the UK (via Dubai) and after introductions everyone was shown to their rooms (tents) for the next seven nights. We reconvened for our first meal as a group and I gave a little bit of an introduction to the park and what we might hope to see over the coming week.

After such a long day, the group returned to their rooms for a well-earned rest, before the first of our early starts the next morning.

Day 2: Sunday 10 November 2019

We all met for breakfast at 5.30am after a 5.00 am wake-up call, to head out on safari by 6.00am. We drove along the camp's private drive, which can prove to be fantastic for game viewing, before heading across the bridge and into the Mfuwe section of the park. We headed north-east, escaping the busy Sunday morning rush in search of big cats, instead focusing on a general introduction to South Luangwa's wildlife. Very soon after passing through the gates we had already seen a herd of impala and a pair of Egyptian geese calling from the branches of a dead tree, as well as numerous southern carmine and white-fronted bee-eaters. As we continued, we came across a large herd of Thornicroft's giraffe and moved around to try and maximise the photographic potential on offer. We spent a decent amount of time with the giraffe, which seemed in no hurry to move, before eventually leaving them in peace and heading towards the western bank of the Luangwa River.

As we stopped on the river bank, we saw our first hippos up close, one of which was joined by a common sandpiper on its back. There were also carmine bee-eaters flying around, a distant African fish eagle and numerous wading birds along the river's edge. As we looked inland, towards the Wafwa Lagoon, we saw our first elephants of the trip, hiding under the shade of a large sausage tree and circling vultures overhead. Further along, a brown snake eagle posed at the top of a tall dead tree before we stopped for our first morning tea break.

We started to make our way back towards the park entrance and headed towards where the vultures had been seen. As we rounded Wafwa Lagoon we saw numerous vultures and three spotted hyena feeding on the carcass of a buffalo that had obviously got stuck in the mud and perished. Bizarrely, we even saw a saddle-billed stork feeding on what looked like offal from the buffalo, a behaviour I had never seen previously.

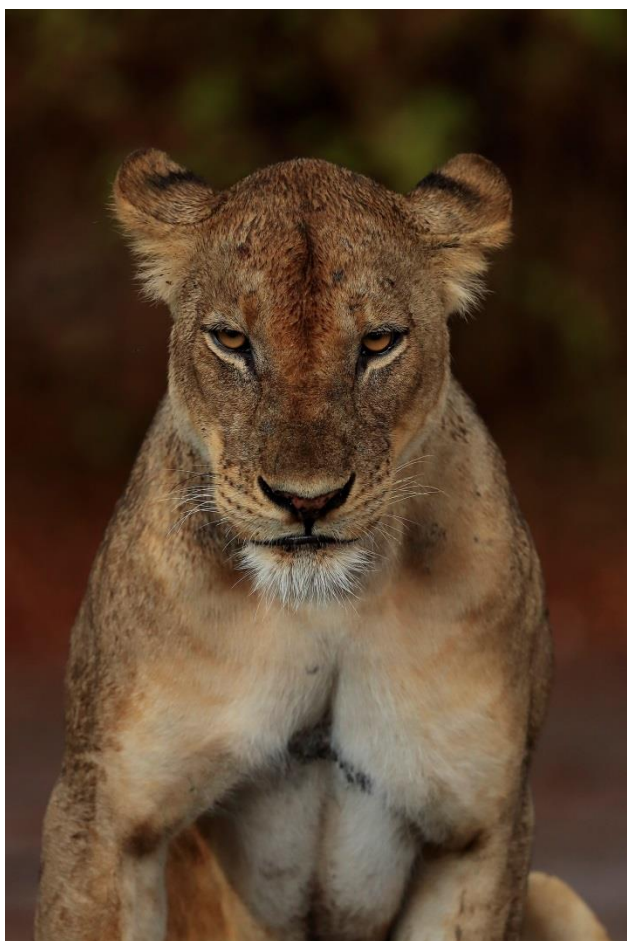
We returned to the comfort of the lodge, just as the heat of the day was starting to build, for a hearty brunch and then relaxed throughout the middle of the day.

With the previous group we had seen a pair of lions mating and had heard that they were still active in a similar area. We decided to head out early and see if we could find the amorous couple before anybody else showed up. On the way we were distracted by a number of female greater kudu browsing on the vegetation. By the time we arrived, there were already a couple of vehicles but it was then that the heavens opened. It was a mighty rain shower and all the vehicles disappeared, while the lions buried themselves away in some thick vegetation. Moments after the rain stopped, the two lions reappeared and decided to continue their courtship right in front of our vehicle. With some incredible soft light, we were able to photograph them mating and then drying themselves off. It turns out that lions, much like the domestic cat, are not fond of getting wet and do their utmost to dry themselves off as soon as possible. So for quite some time we had the couple to ourselves, but slowly more and more vehicles arrived and we decided to leave them for another day. We headed to the open plains for sundowners, which ended up

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being a rather muddy affair, before heading off on a night drive. It seemed that the rain had put everything into hiding and on this occasion the journey back to Flatdogs was largely uneventful.



Our second dinner proved to be more eventful as we were joined in camp by a couple of bull buffaloes which peacefully passed us by.

Day 3: Monday 11 November 2019

We were up bright and early once more, aiming to get in to the park before the others. However, the best laid plans often fall at the first hurdle and this was certainly true today. As we left the lodge, we came across a large herd of giraffe, including four young all of a similar age. It was a wonderful sighting and topped off by a much younger giraffe which came to join them. It is rather unusual to see so many young together and we spent plenty of time with them. As we moved on, we came across the two buffalo from last night's dinner, before finally making it into the park over half an hour later than planned. Distractions like this are always welcome though.

We headed back to the area where we'd seen the lions and found numerous birds searching for food in the remains of a shallow pool. Hammerkop, maribou stork, saddle-billed stork, African spoonbill and African fish eagle provided some great photography opportunities. We also came across a shikra in a tree (feeding on the remains of a small bird it had obviously caught) before we bumped into another vehicle. They informed of us a leopard sighting not too far away, so we turned around and headed off to see if we could find our first big cat of the trip. We found her shortly after, and what a beautiful cat she was. A young female, aged around 10 months (Lucy's daughter), she was sitting proudly on a high branch and posed for a prolonged period. The whole group was able to capture some excellent photos. As we headed towards the river to find a suitable spot for our morning tea break, we came across a large bull elephant walking across the open landscape. He was a little nervous, but we were able to stick with him for a few minutes as he made his way into the surrounding bush.

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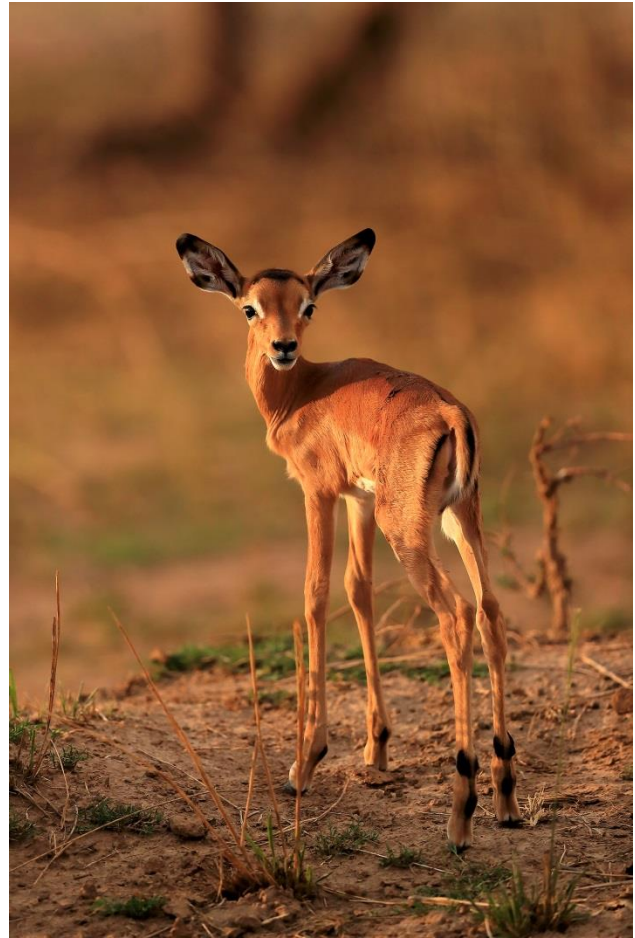
At our stop for tea we were treated to some great views of some perching little bee-eaters as well as numerous other birds making the most of the water.

After another much needed midday rest in the comfortable surrounds of Flatdogs Camp, we headed back out into the park once more. We had heard that the large pride of lions had been seen along the river and we headed to their last known location. We found them resting under the shade of a sausage tree and watched as they took an interest in a group of impala in the surrounding trees. We anticipated that they might try and hunt, but alas they were spotted with relative ease and an impala raised the alarm. Once the game was up the pride returned to its relaxed mood and we made our way along the river.

We stopped at a beautiful point and watched a small herd of elephant cross the river, photographed some young impala, a couple of small crocodiles and a myriad of bird species. We decided to stop for sundowners overlooking the river, watching the sun set as the hippos called. You really cannot get much better than watching the sunset over the Luangwa River, surrounded by such a stellar cast of wildlife species.

As the light faded away, we headed back to where we had seen the young leopardess earlier in the day. She was no longer on her high perch, but we quickly spotted her lying just a little distance from the road. Aided by the spotlight we helped the group get some fantastic shots before moving on in search of her mother. We found her right next to our vehicle when we had been looking on the other side of the trees. She then disappeared into the trees and, despite our best efforts (and a light rain shower), we were unable to relocate her. We then headed back towards the young female and came across her brother quite by chance. He quickly managed to give us the slip as well and, in searching for him, came across a greater bush baby in a tall tree. Some fantastic views followed before we moved on, bumping back into the young female once more. It was a leopard bonanza – we were tripping over them left, right and centre. As we approached the main gate, heading back to camp, we found a species of mongoose unfamiliar to me – the marshy mongoose. Finally, just as we were about to cross the bridge we caught sight of a porcupine down below us, before it quickly fled down into its burrow.

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It was an action-packed evening and the perfect example of why night drives in South Luangwa can be so rewarding.

Day 4: Tuesday 12 November 2019

This morning there were few distractions as we made our way to the park, being one of the first through the gates before heading back towards the river in search of the day's offerings. We came across hundreds of pelicans, storks, egrets and spoonbills feeding in a drying lagoon, before we heard the panicked alarm calls of baboons. We decided we should investigate, but typically the calls completely stopped once we were in the correct area. However, a few playful baboons and inquisitive warthogs were a worthy reward. We moved south-west along the river, doing our best to check the trees for any resting leopards. Our search proved to be fruitless and so we continued downstream. We came to a stop at an opening on the river and saw a large flock of Abdim's stork and some posing hippos in the shallow waters (we also came across a hippo resting on land, which we assumed had an injury or was not too well).

The highlight of the drive was undoubtedly a large group of elephants which graced us with their presence for a prolonged period. A magnificent, large male decided to take a closer look at us and decided he would alert us to the fact he was in charge. We gave him plenty of space and he quickly calmed down again before moving off into the bush. Another charming tea break location, in the shade of a large tree, provided welcome relief from the hot sun. It was then that we slowly made our way back to camp for another hearty brunch and restful afternoon. Before we could get back to the lodge, we were treated to the wonderful sight of a new-born giraffe, only a few hours old. Still a little wobbly on its legs we watched it suckle from its mother and she then went about cleaning it with her immensely long tongue. What an incredible way to end the morning; everyone was thrilled to see such a special moment.

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After another period spent escaping the worst of the day's heat, we headed out into the park once again. Not long after entering, we saw a group of kudu, but despite our best efforts they were not really in the mood to cooperate. We did, however, manage to photograph a number of young baboons with their mother before a huge male elephant made an appearance and wowed the group with an extremely close approach. We headed back to the 'main' road and passed by the lagoon of Mfuwe Lodge, where a stunning African fish eagle was sitting in the water, with a near perfect reflection in the shallow water. As we sat there waiting, we hoped it would eventually take off and provide the perfect subject for a photo. The group all managed to get some great shots, but for some reason the eagle never took flight and seemed content to sit there until darkness fell. In the end, we decided to move, yet the eagle still sat there as we drove away in search of another subject. It wasn't long before we heard about some excitement up at Wafwa Lagoon. Three different buffalo had managed to get themselves stuck in the mud when trying to drink, two of which had now been killed by lions, while the other was left alive a little distance away. We turned up to find three fully grown females, a lone male and five cubs of

differing ages. This was the other half of the pride we had watched the night before and I was very familiar with them by now.

We watched on for quite some time as the females and youngsters fed on the two carcasses, one of which seemed to be a pregnant female. It wasn't a pretty sight, but it was something few people get to witness and we were therefore privileged to see such a remarkable scene. As the light began to fade we headed to the river bank for sundowners. As we sat there, with the sun slowly setting, a hippo emerged on the opposite side of the river and started to nudge a large crocodile, before eventually forcing it to retreat into the river. Another rare piece of behaviour and certainly something I had never seen before. Within only a few minutes of the sun disappearing over the horizon, the moon began to rise above the trees to the north with a warm orange glow. It was all rather surreal.



Half of the group went back to the comfort of the lodge early, while the rest of us continued as per usual on the night drive. As we made our way along the Wafwa Lagoon we saw numerous scrub hares feasting on the fresh grass growth. It was then that we heard the alarm call of an impala, followed by a call of a disgruntled leopard, and we spent some time searching for the elusive cat. Despite our best efforts we

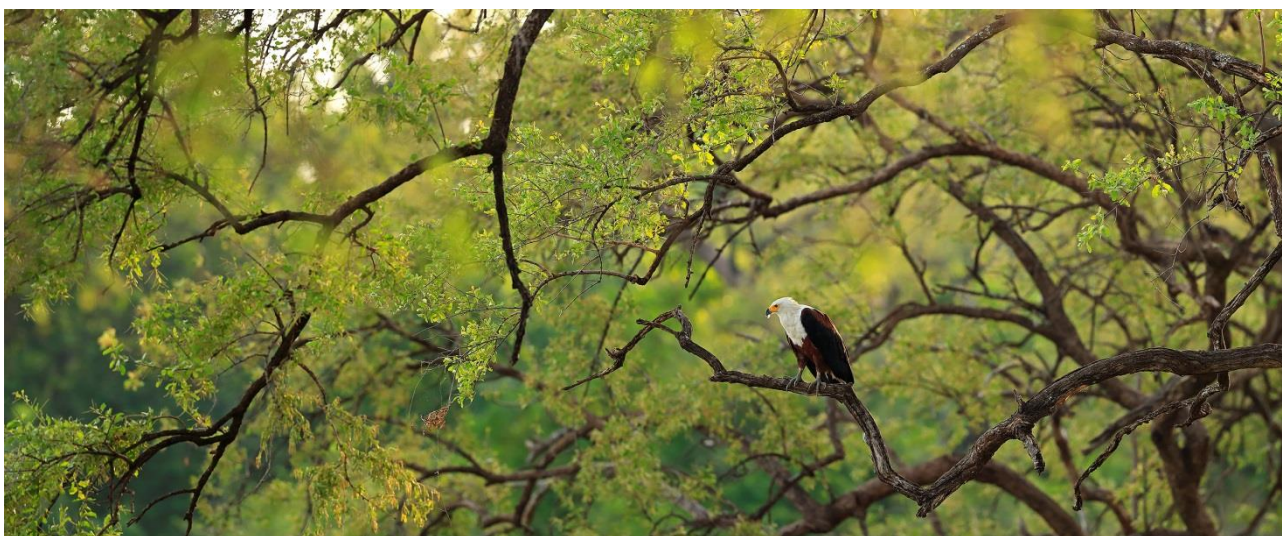
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never found the spotted target, but we did come across another spotted species, the African civet, which delighted us as it searched for food. We had some great views of genet on this evening's night drive, as well as another view of the lions as they fed upon the two buffaloes.

What a fabulous day we had once again in the magical surrounds of South Luangwa National Park. What a special place it is, and how special it is to spend such a lengthy period exploring its hidden treasures.

Day 5: Wednesday 13 November 2019

Our usual routine was now in full swing – everybody up for another early foray across the river and into the park. As we drove past Mfuwe Lodge we found the African fish eagle once again, but this time it was perched high in the trees, softly lit by the rising sun in a stunning setting. Although it wasn't a dramatic scene, the soft light, patterns of branches, lush leaf cover and the pose of the eagle all equated to a fantastic photography opportunity.



We continued to Wafwa Lagoon once more to check up on the lions. All but one were resting in what shade was available, desperately trying to digest their meal, while a lone female was feeding on the closer of the two carcasses. As the sun started to warm up, we moved on and found three hyena with a piece of what looked like hippo skin, possibly carrying it off to their den. This unusual scene provided another unique photo opportunity



before we headed back towards the river seeking the shade of ebony, mahogany and sausage trees. We hoped we might find a leopard draped along a branch, but instead we came across a handsome group of male kudu, an African goshawk and a very cooperative herd of Crawshay's zebra. There were also a couple of cooperative birds to photograph including white-fronted bee-eater and lilac-breasted roller. After another excellent morning we slowly made our way back to camp for a well-earned brunch and rest.

Another fantastic afternoon tea was once again the precursor to heading out into the park for another drive. We headed towards the aptly named 'Elephant Loop', but in fact the first highlight was a young male bushbuck posing atop of a bank before we came across a couple of different lizard buzzards, neither of which were keen to stop and pose. After a little while we started to see numerous elephants as they gathered to make the river crossing close by. It turned out to be an excellent drive for elephants. As we headed back west we saw a family group moving across the dry Mfuwe Lagoon and across the gully in lovely soft light. There was light cloud cover and the soft light was stunning. We were heading to the big baobab for sundowners, a fabulous 1,000-year-old tree, but on our way we were lucky enough to see an

African civet run across the road in front of us, before a perfectly posing tawny eagle sat high in a tree (much easier to photograph than the civet).

As the sun set over the horizon and sundowners were enjoyed, the group split once again. Half went straight back to camp, while the other half carried on for a night drive. I was the spotter as per usual and we quickly came across a flat-headed spitting cobra, scrub hares and large-spotted genets too. It turned out to be a bumper night for genets, with a staggering 16 counted throughout the drive. As we continued in search of other nocturnal species I spotted a small flap-necked chameleon, a green reptile on a green bush! We made our way back to where we had seen the leopards on the second night, finding two hyenas along the way (one of which was particularly obliging), before finding the young female leopard lying by another log. She was sitting close to where we had seen her the night before and, just as we were leaving, I spotted her mother sitting on top of a termite mound about 90 metres away. We slowly made our way back for dinner, but a white-tailed mongoose (our first of the trip) and numerous genets slowed us down. We got back to Flatdogs just in time as a rain storm was upon us. We had to eat under the shelter of the main building and forgo our candle-lit dinner under what was normally a starry sky.



Day 6: Thursday 14 November 2019

This morning's departure was our swiftest yet, with two bull elephants before we reached the park entrance. It wasn't long before we noticed some movement and quickly realised it was a hyena and she was watching something. It turned out to be a warthog with three piglets and within moments the hyena began to chase them. It charged after the family before the mother turned around and began to chase the hyena. Luckily for the warthogs, none were taken by the hyena which moved on without a meal. We were treated to a lovely view of a female elephant and her young calf suckling, but for the most part the drive was quiet this morning. Of course, we saw numerous impala, puku and a myriad of birds, including our first swallow-tailed bee-eaters and a couple of migratory steppe eagle. There was a fabulous posing lilac-breasted roller and red-billed hornbill too. As we slowly made our way back for brunch, we looked hard for any signs of leopard in a tree or on the ground, but alas, it seemed that everything was hiding after the previous evening's rain.

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After another fabulous afternoon tea, we headed out of the lodge but drove south, away from the bridge and entered the park down towards the Chinene Hills, driving through the river and on to the sandy shore on the other side. We stopped off quickly at a couple of carmine bee-eater colonies on both sides of the river before driving up towards Puku Ridge and Chichele Hill. It was a rather quiet drive, but we had the most wonderful sundowners with a colony of bee-eaters I had visited a couple of times before. We did our best to capture shots of the birds in flight; the challenge is not insignificant, but the rewards are high when you manage to capture one. As the sun set, and our sundowners slipped away, we split ways with half of the group – some returning to the lodge and the other half joining us on the night drive. As we passed through a gully, we saw what we thought was a wildebeest, but it turned out to be a buffalo at a funny angle. We continued, heading around Chichele Lodge, and then I spotted a distant pair of eyes. At first we thought it was a lion, due to the apparent size of the creature, but quickly realised it was an exceptionally large and very shy male leopard. He was obviously not used to cars and made his escape as soon as he could.



We headed further north, back towards the main entrance to the park over the ridge and saw countless puku, impala, genets and a white-tailed mongoose. Then, up ahead, along the river bank we saw a vehicle with a red spotlight. They were watching a leopard stalk a small herd of impala and a puku. We did our best to follow her, but eventually she disappeared into the bush. With time running out we knew we had best head out of the park, but before we'd got far there was another leopard, a different female entirely. We spent only a couple of minutes with her before we were forced to make a hasty retreat, back to the lodge. On the way we came across four hyenas, which looked as if they meant business and were on the hunt for an evening meal. Sadly, we didn't have much time to stay with them and had to move on. What a fabulous night drive we'd had – leopards galore and the exquisite colours of the carmine bee-eaters.

Day 7: Friday 15 November 2019

Today would be our last full day in the park, with a morning drive and an evening drive too. It started off brilliantly, with a crowned hornbill sitting high in a tree, calling away, against wonderful morning light. We headed southwards today, hoping to find some leopards, but first off we bumped into a lone male lion resting out in the open, in the shrinking shade of a tall tree. We continued and for some hours we searched high and low for a leopard, including the one we had seen attempting to hunt the night before. Sadly, there was a group of self-drivers resting out of their vehicles, just at the spot where we last saw it. No matter how hard we tried, our continued search was fruitless, except for a pair of elephants. As the day heated up, we started to make our way back to Flatdogs, hoping we might bump into something on our way. As we were making our way along the lodge's drive we found the newborn giraffe from a few days before. During our 'lunch' break, we headed off to Conservation South Luangwa and Project Luangwa to find out about the great work done in the valley, and to help support the community by buying some local wares.



Before we knew it, it was time for our final afternoon drive in the park and we went along a loop we had not yet explored, along the edge of Mfuwe Lagoon. We came across a herd of impala with a rogue kudu, which apparently has lived with them for many years, as well as a large family of baboons which provided us with some lovely photography opportunities. We then continued towards Wafwa Lagoon as we had heard there was a large lion lying near the carcass of yet another stuck buffalo. We arrived to find the lion fast asleep, a group of lionesses nearby under the shade of a small bush, hundreds of pelicans and maribou storks and a lone hyena cooling off in the mud. We slowly made our way along and quickly realised there was another group of lions lying under the shade of a larger tree nearby. We spent some time photographing the large male, before moving on to the tightly clustered group of lionesses and cubs. It was a lovely last evening in the park and soon it was time for sundowners.

As we went to set up for drinks, we heard the alarm calls of baboons and impala. It was obvious that there was a predator about, but try as we might we couldn't see it. After sundowners the group split once more, this time with four of the group joining the night drive and the other two returning to the lodge. Within only a couple of minutes we saw a leopard in another vehicle's spotlight and caught up. We positioned the vehicle so that we could let the leopard catch up with us. We watched her as she made her way through the thick vegetation, and then suddenly her relaxed demeanour changed. She was now in hunting mode and we switched our spotlight to the red filter and watched the drama unfold. Within only a few moments, the leopard charged at a couple of impala and managed to catch a baby; it was dead within only a couple of seconds. We then managed to watch the leopard carry her prize through the scrubby woodland, before we had to head back towards the park gate.

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Our fabulous guide, Geoffrey, then said there may well be the chance to see porcupine tonight as we followed a road nobody else was likely to travel down. Sure enough, maybe 10 minutes down the road we came across a pair of porcupines, quickly trying to escape the spotlight. It was another genet bonanza and yet another porcupine was spotted too. We were nearly back at the gate when a hyena appeared right in front of us and then walked right past a baby impala, as we all held our breath. Fortunately, despite sniffing the air, the hyena moved past the baby impala and instead made a half-hearted charge at a couple of adults. On this occasion it missed out on an easy meal. It also seemed to be a night of many hippos, with a score seen throughout the drive. What an incredible final night drive in the park, full of action and drama, nocturnal species galore and the expertise of Geoffrey always at hand.



Day 8: Saturday 16 November 2019

Our final morning in the park and we could have never expected to enjoy such an action-packed drive. It was a cloudy affair today, which meant the morning temperatures were a little cooler and the light levels lower too. It started off with a family of ground hornbills working their way along one of the dry lagoons,

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searching for food in the cracks. It was lovely to watch them go about their business, completely undisturbed by our presence. We moved along the edge of the dry lagoon and heard the alarm calls of an impala – we immediately investigated as we suspected there may be a leopard about.



Within only a few minutes there was a beautiful female leopard wandering across the landscape, not particularly happy that both impala and baboon were calling in alarm. Geoffrey positioned the vehicle perfectly, allowing the leopard space, but also giving the group wonderful photographic opportunities. I was actually too close with my 500mm lens and struggled to fit the cat within the frame. After a couple of minutes the leopard headed into some thick undergrowth and climbed in to a very dark sausage tree. With other vehicles now arriving, we decided to head off in search of other potential subjects. Just around the corner we spent a prolonged period photographing a lovely family group of vervet monkeys, quickly followed by an amazing number of carmine bee-eaters.

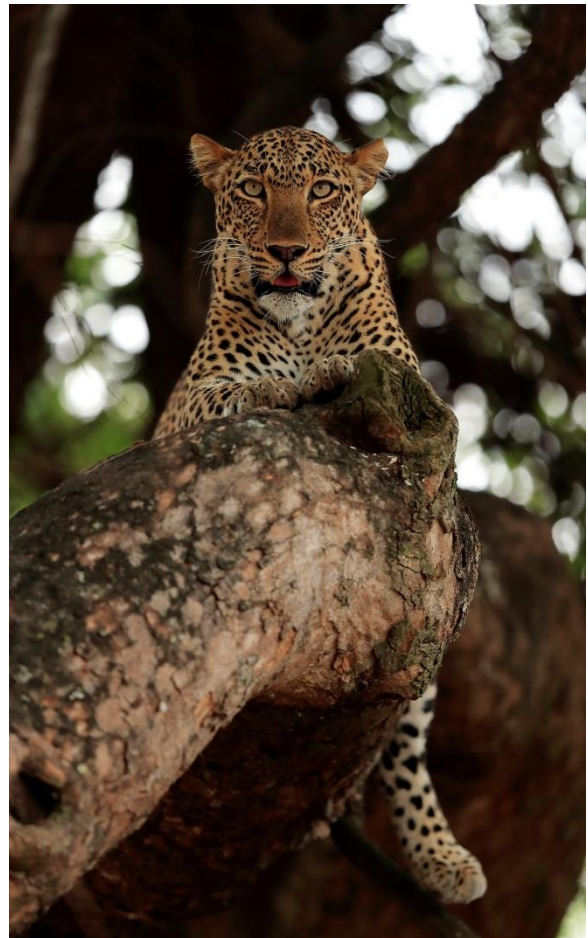
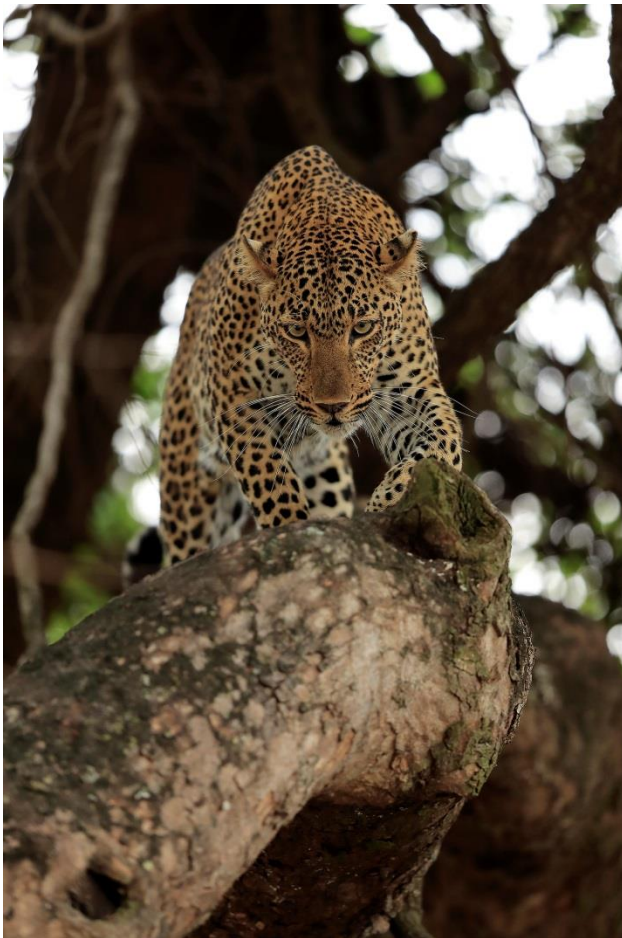
We moved on to one of the open areas to the south of the main entrance, when we then heard about another leopard. We arrived to find a female leopard (known as Lucy) resting in a tree. In fact she was fast asleep. We decided to move on and after our final morning break, we start to wind our way back to the park entrance. We came across a small herd of Crawshay's zebra and a pair of grey-crowned cranes before one of the group spotted a lioness in a thicket right next to the vehicle. Somehow, both Geoffrey and I had completely missed the sighting, and if it wasn't for the tour participant we would have never stopped. It was a remarkable sighting as the lioness had a killed a very young baby giraffe. It was a gruesome sighting and something I had never seen before.



It had already become quite a drive, one of our most successful of the trip , but more was to follow. We decided to leave the lioness in peace so as not to attract any unwanted attention and we head back for a last leopard fix. We arrived at the spot where Lucy was fast asleep earlier in the morning and she was still there, fast asleep. The only other vehicle present quickly moved away and we decided we would spend another few minutes to see if she would stir from her slumber. At that moment, an insect started to bother the leopard. She became unsettled and walked directly down the branch towards us. We were only metres away from this stunning leopard as she elegantly strolled along the tree branch before settling down again

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right in front of us. It wasn't long before she was fast asleep once more, but we left the park with big smiles on our faces – it was the perfect finale.



We arrived back at camp and really couldn't believe our luck. The group all returned to their rooms and it was time I packed up my bags too, for after three incredible weeks I was heading back to the UK. We reconvened in the afternoon for our transfer back to Mfuwe airport, where we boarded our internal flight to Lusaka. From here we caught our connecting flight to Dubai and on to the UK.

Day 9: Sunday 10 November 2019

All of the group flew back to the UK and our first season of photographic safaris in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park had come to an end. It was a roaring success and we can't wait for 2020..

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