

Tour Report

Walking in the Heart of Zambia

13 - 24 September 2023

Lappet-faced vulture



Crawshay's zebra



Wild dog



Leopard



Compiled by Chris Breen

Tour Leaders: Chris Breen & Simon Barnes

Day 1: London Heathrow to Lusaka

Wednesday 13 September 2023

Chris and Simon were already in Zambia's Luangwa Valley as the group were departing London for the heart of Africa on their overnight flight.

Day 2: Lusaka to Lukuzi

Thursday 14 September 2023

Most of the group landed in Lusaka and flew by charter to the small Lukuzi airstrip to the north of the Nsefu sector in the heart of the Luangwa Valley.



Two of the group (Jane and Graham) had stayed in the Valley the previous evening and did a game-viewing transfer with Chris and Simon north, along the west bank of the Luangwa River, through the national park until they reached the Tafika crossing where they were met by Macupa and Paul – two of the Tafika guides. After carrying their bags to the river, they transferred by boat across to the other side, walked up the sandbank, and clambered aboard the waiting 4-wheel drive and drove the short distance to camp. They were greeted with the customary refreshing cold towels and a cool drink before being shown to their rooms.

At 4pm they returned to the chitenge (a large open-plan dining and bar area overlooking a sweeping bend of the Luangwa River) for tea and cake before heading out game-viewing with Simon and Macupa.

Chris and Lloyd (another of the Tafika guides) headed off to the airstrip to meet the incoming charter at 5.10pm. It arrived on time with Larry, Lynn, Sarah and Anne-Marie, and after loading up the vehicle with their bags they all set off for a short game-drive before dark and before getting into camp. Lloyd was keen to get everyone into the park as there had been some excellent game-viewing in the previous days and he was keen to see if some of the 'specials' were still close-by. After quickly registering at the park gate and driving into the park we were all eyes open for wild dogs which had been seen regularly in recent days. We weren't disappointed. Precisely 40 minutes after touching down at Lukuzi we were watching 19 wild dogs (10 adults and 9 pups) playing in the short grass. Youngsters being youngsters, they were jumping on each other, rolling around and generally causing playful mayhem.

Darkness descended and we headed off to the riverbank for sundowners but were diverted as Lloyd saw a leopard on the way – we were still not an hour after the Lusaka flight had landed. Spotlight on, we followed it for a while – a beautiful young male. There were baboons calling in the distance – probably having seen another leopard – and our young male was heading in the direction of the calls. After 15 minutes or so we broke off for our first sundowner of the safari (after the sun had already gone down)!

This was the first time our small group had been together, so introductions were made all round – on the banks of the Luangwa – gin and tonic, and the local Mosi beer was consumed and then we headed off again with spotlights to see what else was around. It was no surprise that we were able to find (and watch briefly) the wild dogs, but we also found the leopard again, and spent a good period of time with him as he approached a tree that already had a leopard kill in it. He seemed a little wary about whether to climb the tree for the kill as, Macupa told us, that it was a kill made by one of the resident females. He was ‘stealing’ the kill. After a couple of attempts to climb the tree, he decided against it and headed off across the plain, and we headed back to Tafika for a drink and dinner... seeing 5-toed elephant shrew along the way. It was the end of our first afternoon (or short evening!) in the Luangwa.



For this relief much thanks, doggies

When you're leading a safari trip – to be accurate I was co-leading – you want a Big Sighting, and you want it early. If you do it properly, there's a great more to a good safari than Big Sightings but get one good and early and the pressure's off. The pressure's off the trip, the pressure's off the South Luangwa National Park. It's delivered – now we can all start to enjoy ourselves.

You know you're going to get Big Sightings eventually; the park can't help itself – but the sooner you get the first, the happier you are. It's wonderful if you can cop something brilliant while everyone's still trying to remember everybody else's names.

It took me more than 20 years to see wild dogs in the Luangwa Valley in Zambia. It took our guests a little more than 20 minutes. We arrived at Tafika, dumped bags and went straight out into the bush in vehicles: and there were the dogs. A pack of 19, eight of them pups. There have been changes in the park's ecology and – huzzah! – dogs are now much more frequent.

At first, they were all crashed out in the shade: a flick of a tail, a twitch of an ear, a blinking eye. But it was late afternoon and cooling and besides, dogs, not being lions, are always looking to get restless and doggy. And pups being pups, there's always another game.

So, one by one they were up and greeting each other: each dog fingerprint – different from any other dog ever pupped. Their tails are white flags that allow them all to keep in touch as they gallop through grass, their bodies black and tan and white, their ears startlingly undoggy, big and round like radar trackers. They're not closely related to domestic dogs, which are all descended from wolves: they have a genus all of their own.

And then they were off, the adults at a smart trot, the pups in a gambolling canter with what looked like massive grins of enjoyment on their faces.

This was going to be good trip.

By Simon Barnes

It was a 5am wake-up today, the sky was only just beginning to crack with the first vestiges of light. Breakfast of fruit, cereals and toast was served on the bank of the river with white-crowned lapwings displaying over the river and lions calling in the background... the Luangwa curtain was being drawn open and there was some wonderful game-viewing to be had. 6am and we were on our way.

As we headed towards the park we had some wonderful sightings of impala in the morning light, there were go-away birds at the tops of the trees and there was some debate in the vehicle about whether we were looking at a shikra or a little sparrowhawk. They are very similar birds, but the sparrowhawk has a distinctly yellow eye. It was in the distance, and it was difficult to tell despite our best efforts – so Chris took a photo, and it was concluded that it was a little sparrowhawk.

A few minutes later a (very) small owl caught our eye as it flew by. It stopped on a bush, and we watched as it surveyed the area. Pearl-spotted owl with its beautifully soft-looking feathers and distinctly large black 'false' eyes on the back of its head which provide a deterrent to any (hungry!) passing predators.



We could see a significant number of vultures in the air – we were first attracted by the sight of a hooded vulture circling quite low, but when we looked skyward there were vultures coming from all directions. This was near where we had seen the dogs yesterday, so we assumed that they made a kill. We headed over to where they were landing, and the dogs were there with the remains of an impala kill that they must have made less than an hour ago... there was already very little of it left. The guarding dogs kept looking up from the kill as vultures crept closer and closer, until they could take it no longer and they chased all of the vultures away and went back to feed. This was a pattern they repeated over and over again as they gradually finished it off. Once satisfied, they finally left and the vultures appeared en-masse... first the hooded and white-backed vultures, then lappet-faced, and finally white-backed. The sound of the vultures coming into land was incredible as they spilled the air from their wings at high speed, dropped their undercarriage and came into land military style. A pair of mosque swallows appeared overhead too.



We were hot and thirsty, so it was time to find a shady spot for a coffee. Today, our shady spot wasn't overlooking the river, but instead had a view of a nearby family of feeding elephants.

Coffee over, we headed in the direction of camp picking up (amongst other things!) 3-banded plover, southern crowned crane and greenshank. As we headed back to Tafika we had a sighting of half a dozen white helmet shrikes and a western-banded snake eagle perched atop a dead leadwood tree.

Back to camp to freshen up and have lunch, and after a siesta (and tea and cakes!) we were back into the game-viewing vehicles. Simon went directly to the park with Macupa and one group of guests while Lloyd and Chris when upstream to the carmine bee-eater colony with the other group. Parked at the edge of the riverbank we walked down some sandy steps fashioned out of the bank itself and straight into the hide. The sound of carmines was almost deafening, but we didn't stay in the hide for long as they had largely abandoned the stretch of

bank that hide was facing (which had been overtaken by white-fronted bee-eaters) in favour of another stretch behind the hide. We walked along the sandy beach to the other set of nest holes and watched as the carmines flew in and around the nests. At the moment it is only the adults in the colonies – the young will hatch and emerge in a couple of months. After a short while we left the colony and headed back to the vehicle and drove to the park.

Our route was blocked by two male elephants feeding right by the side of the track, we had African skimmers over the river and watched a little sparrowhawk fail to catch a red-billed quelea. Scimitarbill was next followed by a small herd of Crawshay's zebra after which we found ourselves in the park and once again with the group of wild dogs.

At sundowners on the riverbank, we met up with our other vehicle and watched as the river colours went from golden to red in the setting sun... a number of square-tailed nightjars were hunting insects over the top of the river.



We were looking for leopard but weren't very successful until we turned towards camp and found a female walking along the sand beach and heading to a nearby pool for a drink. She was distant but easy to follow and see. After drinking she came back up the bank and was calling quietly. Lloyd said that she had a cub that she had hidden in the thick bush but that hadn't been seen for a couple of days – there were plenty of wild dog around, and also a male leopard – and Lloyd was worried that the cub had been taken. It was quite upsetting to hear her calling and not getting a reply. We left her and went over to a tree where she had taken a kill yesterday which Lloyd thought might have a male leopard on it... and sure enough there it was. It was difficult to see and we weren't sure whether this was the leopard that we had seen yesterday, but Lloyd felt that it quite likely that this male had killed the cub.

After leaving the leopard we headed for the park gate to see the nearby hyena den and had wonderful views of hyena cubs – two sets – some only two months old, and a few that were three months old. We thought this would have been a great way to end the evening until, on the airstrip behind Tafika we found three lionesses. What a day!

The sadness of a leopard

We heard her before we saw her and that's not usual with leopards. Darkness has just fallen, and we soon had her clear in the spotlight – and more obvious even than her beauty was her distress. She was calling, a series of little rasps, soft and intimate, but every now and then she gave the fall leopard roar: the one that sounds like three or four forward-and-backward strokes of a handsaw.

She was looking for her cub, Lloyd told us, for he is on first name terms with all the local stars. The cub was three-quarters-grown and male, almost but not quite ready to strike out on his own. Perhaps now he never would.

The Luangwa Valley in Zambia is probably the best place in the world to see leopards. The guides know them well as individuals and the leopards themselves are well-accustomed to vehicles and spotlights and pay them no mind. So long as you don't use the light to help or to hinder the actual hunting, no harm is done, and the leopards bring almost daily delight to the people who visit.

But this wasn't an occasion of pure delight. As we followed her everyone in the vehicle was taken up with the human or pardine emotions of the unfolding events: willing her to come round the next bush and for the

leggy, spotty youngster to emerge and a great feline greeting to take place: a mother and child reunion, nothing less. Here was a strange and beautiful privilege: sharing the emotions of a leopard.

At length she returned to the tree in which she had cached her most recent kill, an impala she had shared with her cub – and there in the tree was an answering movement, a great flowing of spots and suppleness in the tree.

Joy was short-lived. This wasn't the cub but the resident territorial male, and he was not the cub's father. He had been helping himself to the delights left in the tree. He might have killed the cub himself, so might hyenas, so might lions, so might the nearby pack of wild dogs. Here even the carnivores are vulnerable.

The female turned and walked away from the tree, away from the big male. I am used to feeling all kinds of emotions about leopards, wonder, glory, humility and joy. But pity – that was a new one.

By Simon Barnes

Day 4: Mwaleshi, North Luangwa

Saturday 16 September 2023



Today was an exciting day. We got up for breakfast at 5.30am and at 6am Chris and the first group drove out to the airstrip for the flight to Mwaleshi in North Luangwa National Park where they were heading for Mwaleshi Camp. Simon and his group were going game-viewing first before heading to the airstrip at 9.15am and were heading to Takwela.

It was a beautiful morning for a flight – the air was calm and clear, and the views were wonderful. After a briefing from the pilot we

climbed aboard and headed north over the northern end of South Luangwa National Park, across the corridor that separates the north and south park, and into North Luangwa National Park where we landed at Mwaleshi airstrip. It was a flight of approximately 30 minutes and at 2,000 feet high it was possible to see hippos, elephants and antelope below. On arrival we were greeted by Moffat (our guide), Kennedy (our tea bearer), Devy (the scout) and Special (one of the camp staff team).

We jumped aboard the Landcruiser and took a short drive in the direction of the river where Moffat parked up and gave us a walking safari briefing. With water bottles, binoculars and cameras we set off for our very first walking safari.

One of the first things we came across was a couple of Cookson's wildebeest – one of the sub-species endemic to the Luangwa Valley. We spent time looking at a young bateleur, surprised a pair of double-banded sandgrouse, and then saw some significant signs of black rhino which set our minds racing as to whether we may be lucky enough to have an encounter over the course of the coming few days.

As we were watching a small group of greater kudu coming to drink and a large herd of impala, Kennedy noticed that in the distance there was a lion set under a large shady winterthorn tree on the other side of the river... just where Moffat had said we were going to have a coffee break! A closer look revealed a second one and we decided to get as close we could. As we approached we realised there were in fact four females enjoy the shade of the tree. It was a superb sighting.



We found another tree to have our coffee under (on our side of the river) and watched 50 plus wildebeest coming to drink. Coffee stop complete, we moved off and Devy pointed out three wild dogs further along the bank, in the direction we were walking. To get closer to the dogs we had to pass a very small hippo pool that seemed to be the wallowing home to perhaps 60+ hippos in a huge pile.

On the final run into camp we passed a sandbar with 30 or more spur-winged geese, and a couple of large male elephants feeding under a winterthorn. By the time we arrived in camp we were hot and in need of a cooling drink... which was ably supplied by the waiters. We were shown to our beautiful rooms with their incredible, and expansive, views out over the stunning Mwaleshi River and had time for a shower before returning to the chitenge for lunch.



After a (short!) period of down time we were back for tea and cakes before walking out of camp at upriver at shortly after 4pm. Two big male elephants eating under a big acacia tree on the opposite bank was our first stop, and then we realised that there were another two on our side of the river. There was a largish herd of Cape buffalo just upriver from us too and as we were watching them Kennedy noticed a large male lion in the distance on the other riverbank... but we also had the three wild dogs in view too. What an amazing afternoon it was proving to be!

We walked on further, skirting round the buffalo, and all the while keeping an eye on the elephants, to see if we could get a little closer to the lion. As we approached – it was in a lovely golden evening light – we noticed a further two male lions on the edge of the tall grass opposite us. We spent 20 or 30 minutes here watching the lions watching us.



In the distance (in the direction we had come from, but on the far bank) we could see the three dogs beginning to move, but something was stopping them from going up the bank – we don't know what it was, but they were barking at it, and were obviously uncomfortable with it. Another lion perhaps?

We were back in camp shortly after 6pm after a sensational couple of walks with incredible sightings and sat by the river with sundowners and chatted about how lucky we had been. A delicious dinner followed, we had coffee and tea by the fire, and then retired to bed early. Tomorrow is another day!

How to be an African fish eagle

This time I was in the co-pilot's seat. But fascinating as it always is to watch those dials and needles and hands doing their stuff, it was what I could see down and ahead, and what I could see out on the right – sorry starboard – side that held my attention.

The Luangwa River. The Luangwa River in Zambia, a river no one has ever tried to control or confine or reorganise. It has simply carried on thrashing its way from one side of the valley to the other for uncountable millennia. It's the wildest river in Africa. And it was why I was here.

I looked out at oxbows and meanders and bends, old courses now abandoned, new ones taken up just a few months earlier, many tributaries, almost all of them dry at the time of year, deep pools peopled with the brown backs of hippos. If you are a large mammal living down in this dry land – dry at any rate till the rains come again – you must go to the main river every day and drink. That's why both sides are currently packed with life: those that eat plants and those that eat the eaters of plants.

The Luangwa rises in the Mafinga and the Lilonda Hills and travels roughly south until it meets the Zambezi 770 kilometres away. That's as the fishing eagle flies: the total distance of the river's course is at least twice that, maybe even three, so wildly does the river wind.

We alighted as gently as a butterfly kissing a flower – a rather passionate butterfly, naturally – and we were off to Takwela, right on the edge of North Luangwa National Park. It was good to see Alex Phiri again: he drove us first across the Mwaleshi, a still flowing tributary, and then across the Luangwa itself: carefully easing the Land Cruiser through the shallows, pushing a decisive bow-wave across the river.

And then we had arrived, and I was sitting in the camp which looks out on – what else? – the Luangwa River, perfectly situated opposite the confluence with the Mwaleshi. The air was filled with carmine bee-eaters, the water below me rich with fishing birds. I was to be there for the next six nights.

By Simon Barnes

Day 5: Mwaleshi, North Luangwa

Sunday 17 September 2023

It was a busy night! The lions were calling for much of the night and there were distressed calls from buffalo, followed by excited calls from the hyenas. The lions had killed.

As the sun was rising and we were having tea and toast by the fire, Moffat said that as soon as we were ready, we would set off in search of the lions. We knew which direction the kill was in, but there was a nearby lagoon, and he was unsure whether they would be near the lagoon – taking a refreshing drink after eating – or at their kill. We checked the lagoon first and while we could see tracks, there was no other sign of the lions, so we headed into the mopane woodland which is where we thought the kill was, to see if we could find them there. It didn't take long before Devy (our scout) pointed out a male lion to us – it was about 25 metres away. We were with it for a while and realised it was the same



lion that we had first seen on the other side of the river yesterday evening... notable by a slight scar under its right eye. To the right was the belly of another lion, also a male, that got up when he heard us, and walked off, and a third that also moved away. The first male remained where it was for 10 minutes or so before moving deeper into the grass.

As we moved off, we saw a scarlet-chested sunbird in a nearby tree and then a white-bellied sunbird in the next tree along. Having had our fill of lions for the morning we walked towards a more open area, and the river, by walking across a grassy plain and through (and past) some tallish grasses. Devy stopped in a hurry and instructed us all to stand still as, up to our left on a slightly raised part of the bank was a much bigger male lion. It has been lying (very) flat and we had surprised it. It sat bolt upright and glared at us – we stood still – and it decided to go up the bank and off into the bushes at the back.



The three woodpeckers towards the top of a tree were all bearded woodpeckers and we then had a richly coloured Senegal coucal that (unusually) ascended to the top of a tree before flying down to a more normal level for a coucal. A small grey raptor was next, but unfortunately it was too quick for us to identify, and then a short distance away we could see a hyena enjoying the coolness of the river. He was lying on his back with his legs high in the air. He scrambled to attention as soon as he saw us and disappeared along the river and into the woods. But then we saw rhino tracks – a beautifully presented pug mark of a black rhino coming

down to drink (probably in the dark of night) and evidence that it (together with another black rhino) had slept in the sand. It is wonderful to know that they are in the park again after their decimation in the 1980s, and furthermore that they appear to be flourishing. Fingers crossed that we get to see one over the course of the coming days.

But the morning belonged to lions as we came across another sleeping heap of them further up the river. First, we just saw a back leg of a sleeping lion sticking out of the grass, then two back legs, then its belly, then another lion, and a third. We watched them for five minutes (at about 35 metres) before one of them got wind of us and growled which alerted the others that we were there. Kennedy said that they were from a pride of 13. They got up hurriedly – three cubs that went in one direction, one in another, three or perhaps four lionesses that went one way, and another three that went in a different direction. One stayed behind though, and spent a while glaring at us, and moving towards us slowly. She changed her mind quite quickly and ran after the others.

With lions out of our system (for now!) we walked to a shady winterthorn tree and had tea and coffee before seeing a pair of African hawk eagles, crossing over the river barefoot, and jumping on our game-viewing vehicle for the drive back to camp. An amazing morning's walking safari.

Once back we had a cooling drink and had time for a shower before lunch.

The rooms at Mwaleshi each have huge 'windows' overlooking the Mwaleshi River so spending a couple of post lunch hours in the room with binoculars (and a bird book nearby!) is no hardship – and even occasionally induces a siesta!

Tea and (orange) cake this afternoon was followed by a drive of about 30 minutes to get to the start of our walking safari – Wahlberg’s eagle was seen along the way. Our drive was through a parched and startlingly beautiful landscape created a few decades ago by elephant destruction of the mopane forest. It has left behind a dry and dusty ‘moonscape’ occupied by impala, warthogs and kudu. It is all the more stark in contrast to the nearby riverine forest.



We left the vehicle near the river – Kennedy stayed with it – and began to walk downstream keeping an eye on the ten elephants on the other side of the river that looked as though they were walking to the river to cross, and the lions that we could see on the other side. These were part of the pride of 13 that we had seen this morning, though we could only see four females and three cubs.

The outside temperature was beginning to cool off and we paused at the riverbank as two of the cubs came down to drink.

There were zebra and puku on the plain and the ten elephants upstream on the other side had become a gathering of more than 25 that went down to the river to drink and then cross. Kennedy arrived in the vehicle shortly after and took out the cool box. We enjoyed a cold Mosi and some freshly made popcorn.



Greenshank, common sandpiper, pied wagtail and others were working the river in front of us, and whilst the sky was turning pink the river was reflecting it back. There was a small family group of elephants downstream from us that was crossing from our side of the river to the other, and cattle egrets, and crowned cranes overhead.

The sun having set, we jumped back into the vehicle and, with Kennedy as our spotter, drove back to camp. A couple of elephant shrews were the first to appear, a very pale bushy-tailed mongoose, a white-tailed

mongoose and a pair of Sharpe’s grysbok.

Back in camp by 7.30pm the showers were hot and we got ready for another delicious dinner and paused to reflect on our amazing day.

The world’s most beautiful pig

When we go walking in the bush the scout goes first, carrying his gun, because his job is to keep us all safe. Second is the guide, whose job is to show us the wonders of the Luangwa Valley in Zambia. After that, the guests. Then me. Which means that I’m usually the last to see anything, and that rule counts double in wooded country.

We were in the generous riverine woods in North Luangwa National Park and Alex Phiri, our guide, had seen something and I hadn’t. So it goes. Then the angle changed, I had a new line through the tree trunks, and with it a brief glimpse – and it was a mammal I had never seen before. No little scrap of a thing either: this was getting on for a metre at the shoulder and around 100 kilos in weight. If only I could have had a proper view...

I have a lot to thank our guests for on every trip, but it's seldom for their bush skills. This time it was different: Alex led us round, covering a fair old distance, the guests walked soft-footed behind him and better still, didn't say a word. Our reward was a majestic vista dominated by a group of four bushpigs.

Bushpigs are supposed to be nocturnal, but maybe they're less so when there are fewer humans about. They like plenty of trees, while warthogs prefer open country. We watched them and they watched us – and the pigs were more interested than worried. The male stood between us and the rest: a fine beast with a reddish pelt and the most excellent white mane: as beautiful a pig as the world has ever made.

He was standing under a leadwood tree while he gave us a long and serious examination. A grey hornbill piped a little gentle background music. And then with decision but without hurry the party of pigs left us: better things to do than standing around watching humans all day.

I've been coming to the Luangwa Valley for more than 30 years and have lost count of the number of visits. On every trip I revel in the deeply familiar; and every trip brings me something new. One day, perhaps, I will have seen everything the Valley offers, but as St Augustine prayed for chastity, so I pray for completion: not yet, oh Lord, not yet!

By Simon Barnes

Day 6: Mwaleshi, North Luangwa

Monday 18 September 2023

We had breakfast as the sun was rising over the Mwaleshi – cereal, fruit and freshly cooked toast, together with tea, coffee or rooibos. A baboon was barking loudly from the back of camp – it must have seen a leopard and was warning any of the animals around to be on their guard.

We drove out of camp today, heading south and east for the Luangwa River (around 40 minutes' drive) where we started our walk. We parked under a huge shady tree and went directly to the edge of the river where a pod of hippos was watching us and calling. On the other side of the river were a couple of fishermen and a small colony of carmine bee-eaters.



It was a very different walk this morning with no lions or wild dogs and not many elephants, but we were walking in beautiful glades of winterthorn trees that followed the contours of the river. The laughing doves were perched in small groups at the tops of the trees catching the rays of early morning sunshine and there was a pair of palm swifts overhead.

Another baboon called loudly telling us about another nearby leopard – so we followed the calls and heard the impala

shouting at the leopard as well... but the leopard remained elusive. We stopped in the woodland and caught sight of one of Luangwa's most beautiful birds – a lilac-breasted roller – perched in the distance on a dead branch in the most magical beam of light.

As we continued on, the winterthorn woodland gave way to mopane scrubland fashioned by elephants, and a yellow-billed kite cruised overhead. We stopped on the bank of the Luangwa in a small ebony glade and

had tea and cake. We walked on and heard an unfamiliar call, but with Devy's help we tracked it down to a pair of grey tit-flycatchers. A new bird for the trip and a new call for us all.

Finally, we walked through a woodland of sausage trees – quite different from any of the landscape we had walked through thus far, and out the other side we came to a lagoon where we met the other half of our group - the camp team had set up chairs and tables for a beautiful brunch. Salads, kebabs, spareribs and sausages, freshly baked bread and cool drinks. What a lovely way to end our morning activity.



Brunch over we jumped into the vehicle and headed north-west to Mwaleshi – a journey of about 45 minutes. Back at camp we had a cold drink and then retired to our huts for a siesta. Cake this afternoon was a rather delicious ginger and marmalade flavour and was a good accompaniment to tea!



elephant crossing the river right in front of us.

Our walk was quiet with a few elephants and some antelope, but little else. There was quite a wind swirling and this was probably partly a cause of the lack of other wildlife... with the wind moving around it can make some of the animals skittish as they aren't sure where the 'unusual' scents that they are getting are coming from. But for all that, we looked at tracks, chatted about some trees and had a good look (at the river side) at some interesting waders – 3-banded plover, white-fronted sand plover, greenshank, wood sandpiper and others. And, as we made our way back to camp, we stopped to watch a mother and young

We had sundowners in camp, showered and had dinner before sitting by the fire and looking at the tremendous skyscape before us. It was the end to another lovely day in paradise.

Moorhens and leopards

By all means go looking for something. Just don't be surprised if you find something else. Sometimes instead of, sometimes as well as. It's a truth that holds good for most of life, I suspect – and it's unquestionably true of wildlife.

So we went looking for the birds of the bog. A rather wonderful raised-bog area lies a few miles from Takwela Camp on the banks of the Luangwa River in Zambia. It's dramatically different to the riverbanks and the riverine forest we'd been exploring, and as a result, it's full of find quite different birds.

This is quite good fun in list-building terms, but in terms of ecology and biodiversity and so forth it's enthralling – and we found rufous-backed heron and black crane and, just as interesting but rather less exciting, moorhen, the same species as we have at home in the UK.

And that was all very fine and we all had a nice drink as the sun went down and then we drove off in the dark with the spotlight. And almost at once we found a leopard.

There was no clue from the impala a hundred yards away from where the leopard sat, comfortable in the fork of a sausage tree. That meant they were quite unaware of his presence, though he was aware of them all right: gazing with the fascination of someone watching an unusually good programme on the television.

He was a young male, recently parted from his mother and doing his best to cope with an independent life. He had no immediate plans to set up a territory for himself and with it, opportunities to mate. It was all he could do to keep going from one day to the next, even if he was occasionally troubled by lustful thoughts.

He came down from the tree in the manner of a piece of silk sliding off a high shelf – and then set off in the opposite direction to the impala. No doubt he had his reasons. We watched his retreat in the spotlight; he walked as if the light was coming from him rather than us. Then we drove on across the eternal African night.

By Simon Barnes

Day 7: Mwaleshi, North Luangwa

Tuesday 19 September 2023

Today is 'change over' day, and those presently staying at Takwela are coming to Mwaleshi, and those at Mwaleshi are heading to Takwela... an 'on-foot' transfer interjected by coffee and cake!

We had a murky sunrise today for tea, coffee and toast and headed off on our walk at around 6.15am to the sound of cape turtle doves – the heartbeat of the bush. It was quiet – and quite likely that lions had come through at a certain point although there was no obvious sign of them other than that there was not a great deal of game around. The birding never fails to delight though with grey-back camaroptera, common sandpipers, 3-banded plover, saddle-billed stork, lesser striped and wire-tailed swallows all visible.

Whilst Moffat pointed out a few elephants in the distance, Graham spotted what we initially thought was a pair of lions, but which turned out to be a pair of spotted hyenas lying in the shade under a winterthorn tree.

Further on we had a tchagra (probably black-crowned) and then a terrestrial brownbul before we arrived at our meeting spot by the riverside. The other group were a few minutes behind schedule but arrived 10 or 15 minutes after we did.



After coffee and tea we swapped groups with Chris' group heading downstream to Takwela with Simon and Alex and, Simon's group heading upstream to Mwaleshi with Chris and Moffat. Just about the first thing that we saw as we headed upriver was a group of elephants drinking in the cooling Mwaleshi stream. Then it was shoes and socks off to get in the

water ourselves and head over to the other side before continuing our walk. The water was refreshing and cooling on our now hot feet and was a bit of welcome relief.

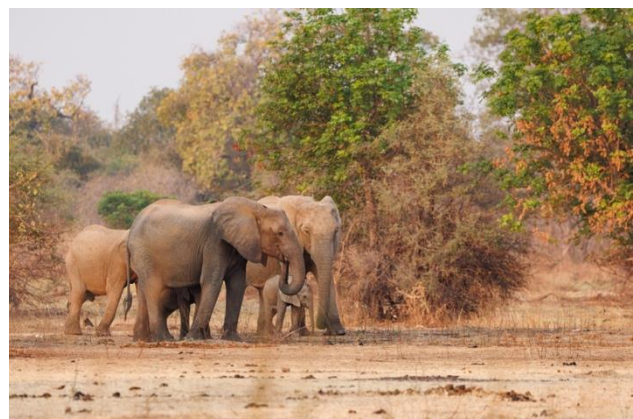
We passed a small team doing some repair work on the rhino sanctuary fence and could elephants and wildebeest in the distance. Devy and Moffat took us on a roundabout loop to get closer to them. It was

getting hot by now though and it was time to get back to camp, so we crossed the plain in front of camp, once again removed our shoes and socks and walked across the river to Mwaleshi Camp where a cold towel and a cold drink was waiting for us. A delicious lunch of chicken, salad, vegetable fritters and chips followed at midday and then it was time for a siesta.



It was Lynn's birthday, and true to form, the team at Mwaleshi came up trumps with a cake – but not before we had been given a tour of the kitchen. James proudly showed us his oven and also his 'hole-in-the-ground' where he bakes the bread and cakes. When he was asked what flavour cake we were having with tea he said he wasn't sure (!), but a few minutes later he appeared in the chitenge with the rest of the 'behind the scenes' team singing 'Happy Birthday' to Lynn. It was a delicious chocolate cake that was beautifully decorated.

Tea and cake over we set off upstream for our afternoon walk. It wasn't long before we came across our first elephant – feeding under an acacia tree on the plain. Of course it wasn't just one elephant, it was a mum and calf, and looking more closely there were elephants just about everywhere we looked – in pairs, small groups, down by the river drinking, feeding under the trees, and at least one pair play fighting. Is it any wonder that the Luangwa is known as 'The Valley of the Elephants'?



We walked further upstream with a view to getting to the corner with the sun setting ahead of us, but Moffat noticed a lioness sitting on the riverbank (same side of the river as us) in the far distance. Of course, she had already seen us – but as we were quite a distance away from her she wasn't concerned and continued to look out over the river. We walked ahead as far as we could to get a little closer and stopped on the riverbank to watch. We realised that further upstream there was a huge adult male – with a resplendent black mane – that was walking downstream towards the female. It took him some time, but he did get to the same part of the riverbank as the female and then he stopped

and lay down. She took no notice at first. Then she got up and walked towards him, but she stopped and lay down before she reached him. They stayed apart for some minutes and then she got up again and went closer to him. It was difficult to tell if she greeted him (though I suspect she did), and then she lay down again.

We had run out of time and light to stay longer and also get back to camp, so we had to turn around and head back towards camp before it got dark. Hopefully they will be around for us to see on our walk tomorrow.

Sundowners by the river was followed by a quick shower and a delicious dinner. We retired to our rooms at 9ish after another very successful day.

A quiet morning in the Valley

It's not always like that, you know. Action and hunting and punch-ups and kills and copulations. I know that's the sort of thing people like to tell you about when they are back from safari, and I know it's what you see on wildlife documentaries: as if all nature was a conspiracy of cruelties.

But that's like highlights of a football match, when you only get the goals and the sendings-off. We'd just had breakfast at Takwela Camp on the banks of the Luangwa River in Zambia, and then crossed the river by vehicle as the sun was climbing up the sky.

We set off walking through riverine glades of immense beauty and after a while, there were the elephants. So, we stopped and looked at each other for a bit and -- well, that was it really. But I'll give you a little more detail.

How far off were they? Maybe 100 yards. At first, they were unaware of us, intent on breakfast, the sound of ripped and crackling vegetation filling their enormous ears. Then they realised something was up, so they paused and looked us over: seven humans, standing still, making no threatening movements, thinking no threatening thoughts.

There were eight of them, mostly adult females, though there was a small calf as well. A female with asymmetric tusks – you could tell she was the matriarch from the authority and responsibility of her bearing, and from the way the others took their cue from her – was clearly thinking things through.

Eventually she started to eat again, and the other followed her lead. The calf turned to its mother – a different adult to the matriarch – and suckled enthusiastically. And we shared the air with the elephants and the elephants shared the air with us. We were all standing on the same bit of the planet and the bush around us was calm and still. After a long while we moved off and did so politely and but not sneakily. The elephants watched us go without pausing their breakfast. The whole world was at peace.

It's never something to presume. But always something to savour.

By Simon Barnes

Day 8: Mwaleshi, North Luangwa

Wednesday 20 September 2023

Another beautiful sunrise and another lovely breakfast by the fire overlooking the river. Fresh fruit salad, cereals, freshly cooked toast, and tea and coffee. Simple but excellent.

Today's plan was to jump in the vehicle and head upriver for half an hour or so before starting our walk. We crossed over the river, drove through the dead mopane forest (it is quite stark, but somehow incredibly beautiful) and had a pair of crowned hornbills, followed by a Wahlberg's eagle at the top of a tree. We could hear a lion calling not too far away so we decided to park up and walk to see if we could find him. We walked for some time without seeing any tracks, but we did see a young bateleur, a magnificent tawny eagle on top

of a superbly sighted nest (right at the top of a tree), a small group of banded mongooses in the pinkish early morning light, and a pair of crowned cranes overhead.

There was no sign of the lion though, so we returned to the vehicle and drove towards the river and saw a brown snake eagle on the way... and then we came across a male lion. It wasn't the one we had seen yesterday evening, but one we had seen with the other half of our group a few days ago, and recognisable by a scar under his right eye.



We watched him for a while and went to park up under a tree and began our second walk! Ever present carmines, a giant land snail, a pod mahogany tree and some (very fresh) rhino footprints. We also managed to catch a pair of young bateleur eagles and a white-bellied sunbird before stopping for coffee. During coffee we saw the biggest eagle in this part of Africa – a fully grown martial eagle and another pair of (fully adult) bateleur eagles.

It wasn't too far from our coffee stop to the vehicle but between us and the vehicle was a small group of elephants bathing in a nearby muddy lagoon. The elephants were a fair distance away but caught our scent on the moving breeze and, clearly without intent, they came charging towards us. We needed to retreat quickly, looking over our shoulders to see how far away the elephants were... but they got relatively close and changed direction as they had flushed two male lions from the grass one of which was now running off at high speed. The elephants had forgotten about us and were more intent on getting rid of the lions. One of the lions disappeared and the other stopped and hid under an acacia nilotica bush.

We recomposed ourselves and went over to see the male lion who by this time was enjoying the shade of the bush! It was an invigorating experience.

We got back to the vehicle but detoured to see what was in the muddy lagoon and added grey heron, sacred ibis, yellow-billed stork, African jacana, blacksmiths lapwing and hamerkop to the morning's list.



It wasn't long before we were back in the vehicle and heading downstream to camp, a cool drink, lunch and a siesta.

We decided to meet for tea 15 minutes early to give us a little more time to head upstream to where we had been this morning as we thought there might be some other lions up there as well. Initially we found our male lion under the same bush as he was when we left him this morning. He was looking hot, and in need of something to fill his belly. He was pretty relaxed with us, but got up and began walking towards the river, and once at the water's edge he lay down again. We parked up and did a walking 'loop' upstream. We could see a huge cloud of dust on the other side of the river and a big herd of buffalo – the lions preferred prey (here in the Luangwa Valley at least).

Shoes off, we crossed over the river to get a little closer to the buffalo and looped back round to opposite where Moffat had parked the vehicle. Shoes off again, we walked back over the Mwaleshi River and had sundowners with the male lion sitting 100 metres or so away. He did a loud, rumbling, guttural call as the sun was going down... and one of his fellow lions responded from afar.

Back in the vehicle and spotlight on, we retraced our steps stopping for a bushy-tailed mongoose on the way back to camp. It was the end of (yet) another tremendous day.

Breakfast with the angels

I'm always the first up, drinking my rooibos tea by the river waiting for the carmines to rise. The sun, too, though that wouldn't be quite as bright. I was at Takwela Camp, which stands on the banks of the Luangwa River in Zambia; just opposite was the confluence with the Mwaleshi and just below was a colony of carmine bee-eaters.

One carmine bee-eater might be the most beautiful bird you will ever see in your life, but you're not very likely to see one. You're more likely to see a couple of thousand. As the sun got up our guests came to join me – and so did the carmines.

Let me try and describe one. The main colour is clearly unnatural, like that of the cherryade I used sometimes to drink in pubs when my parents wished to keep me quiet. The second colour, found on the cap and what we ornithologists call the bum, is a retina-hurting blue, a shade I remember the women wearing around Dal Lake in Kashmir.

Add to that a sleek, slim build, pointed wings, a neat slightly decurved bill and a single elegant streamer that flows from the tail, and you have as fine a bird that has ever taken wing. They fly in neat curves and glides, hawking for insects as they do so. Got it? Now multiply by 2,000.

After breakfast we were to take a walk on the far side of the river. Alex Phiri, guide and camp manager, took the boat directly underneath the colony before we got there: a thousand or so holes in three or four parallel lines in the sheer bank on the river.

It looked like the side of a sailing ship, a man-o'-war about to fire a broadside: but instead of cannonballs we had a cannonade of carmines: a massive explosion of colour as all the birds came out at once. I was wondering, perhaps a trifle fancifully, if this wasn't like being transported into the vaults of heaven when I felt a soft blow above my left eye. One of the angels had shat on the brim of my hat.

By Simon Barnes

Day 9: Mwaleshi, North Luangwa

Thursday 21 September 2023

After our breakfast we set out on foot directly from camp, but before we left we were treated to a pair of grey-headed bush shrikes in the tree next to the chitenge. As we walked out we saw go-away bird, a pair of Meyer's parrot, yellow-bellied greenbul and a large group of spur-winged geese on the sandbank on the other side of the river.

We paused at the riverbank to soak in the atmosphere of the Mwaleshi – the clear water flowing downstream, Egyptian geese calling, turtle doves and red eyed doves calling (the pulse of the park), a grey heron flying overhead, elephants in the woodland and a leopard calling on the far side of the river. It was just another normal day in the Luangwa. Luangwa at its best.



We saw a little sparrowhawk fly into a mopane tree but we had to exit the woodland due to the number of elephants around us... so we walked down to the river's edge and crossed over. There were elephants near the riverbank and a pair of hippos on the sand by a 'busy' hippo lagoon, and a pair of lions on the other side of the river – male and female though probably not the pair that we saw yesterday.

The light was quite magnificent this morning and it shone gloriously on the zebra and puku – there was a hyena cooling himself in the river too. In a

nearby tree we could hear vervet monkeys alarming and Moffat was sure that there was a leopard close by, but unfortunately the long grass prevented us from seeing him (or her!).

Sitting in a shady spot under a small collection of palm trees, with a coffee in hand Larry said *"I've seen the animals closer from a vehicle, but nothing compares to this..."* ... I couldn't agree more – the walking in Luangwa seems to get better and better with each walk!

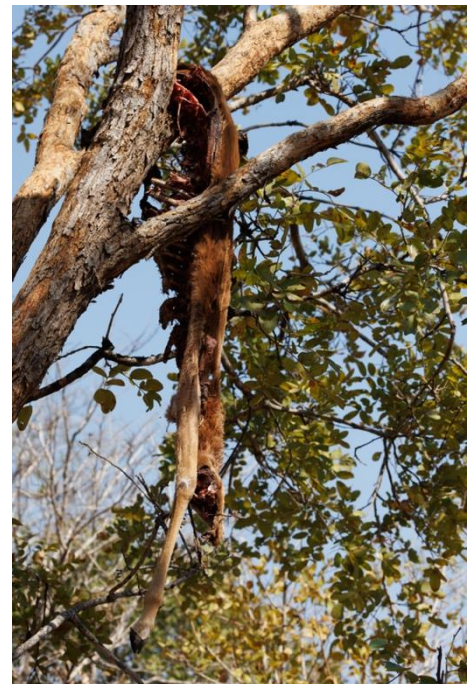
There were vultures circling overhead in increasing numbers and they began to come to the ground not all that far from us so we decided to investigate. Tracking through the bush we found a pair of hyenas and then saw an impala carcass in a tree. It wasn't very well protected from the elements so that vultures and other raptors could easily see it. The leopard needs to do better next time! White-backed and hooded vultures, a young bateleur and a yellow-billed kite were all in attendance.

We left the impala carcass and headed back to cross the river but paused to watch a family group of elephants coming to forage in the shade of some trees. We thought they were going to cross the river but they had other ideas. As we watched them a big herd of impala, and another of wildebeest came to the river to drink.

It was time to head back to camp, so we took our shoes off and forded the river observing a big-horned kudu and a bearded woodpecker as we returned to camp.

A cold shower to get rid of the dust followed by another delicious lunch was the order of the day, and then it was time to return to our rooms (or private hides!) to write up some notes, look at photographs, and have a siesta.

Tea consisted of carrot cake this afternoon which seemed to be very popular! We jumped into the vehicles and drove down to near the confluence of the Mwaleshi and Luangwa rivers spotting an Africa hoopoe on the way. We parked under a tree and walked down to the Mwaleshi River, and then downstream towards the confluence where Vil had set up wonderful sundowners with chairs in the river – it was a splendid location (and occasion) which everyone enjoyed.





Back in the vehicle we headed back north towards Tafika with Kennedy shining the spotlight as we went. Genet, hyena, scrub hare and (spectacular sighting of) porcupine occupied the earlier part of the drive, while a sighting of a splendid female leopard (that was very uncertain about the vehicle) took up most of the latter part of the drive. She was a beauty! We watched her for 5-minutes or so and then left her as she was a little uncomfortable about the light.

It was then back to Mwaleshi for a quick shower before sitting down for dinner at 8pm.

Going with the flow

I once had a fancy for putting together an autobiography in the form of rivers. It would have the Thames, for my time as a Londoner. The Liffey, for my love of *Ulysses*. The Avon, for student years when I was seldom more than ten minutes' walk from Clifton Suspension Bridge. The Waveney, where I learned to canoe.

And of course, the Luangwa: of course, the Luangwa River in Zambia, a river I first saw 34 years. I was back besides it again, at Takwela camp in North Luangwa National Park, seeing that our guests had the drinks they deserved, gins and tonics and Mosi beers, while making sure that the sun was coming down in the right place, a little behind and beyond the Mwaleshi River.

It had been a nice afternoon walk through incomparable glades of umbrella thorn, perhaps the most African of all trees. We had seen the tangerine-colours of the enormous and improbable Pel's fishing owl. Two male kudus with exquisite, twisted horns watched us out of sight. On one occasion we deferred politely to a group of eight elephants who clearly had the right of way.

Perhaps I should put the Mwaleshi in the autobiography too, for the first night I spent on its banks years ago, sleeping in a one-man tent and revelling in the greatest concert of lion music I had ever heard: a night that confirmed for ever my mad love for this mad place.

The sun had sunk out of sight in its brusque Africa way and darkness was rising with equal swiftness. Our guests retreated to their huts, but I stayed on for a second Mosi, reluctantly accepting that this river project might be of more interest to the writer than any potential reader, however indulgent.

Takwela stands opposite the confluence of the Luangwa and the Mwaleshi: a T-junction of wild waterways. I heard the triple-piping of a greenshank, last call of the day from a bird that loves the beaches and sandbanks of these rivers, and then a guffaw from a hippo yet to leave the water for a night's foraging.

But now I could hear nothing but the sound of the Mwaleshi flowing to the Luangwa and the sound of Mosi flowing into me.

By Simon Barnes

It was a very different morning today as we were heading back down to the 'big city lights' (!) of Tafika. We had breakfast in camp and had packed up and left by vehicle shortly after 6am to head for the airstrip. We didn't have long to wait for the flight to arrive and thankfully the two big bull elephants that were on the runway had moved off by the time the plane came in to land. It was a lovely flight south with magnificent views over the Luangwa to our west – it's endless ribbon of ox-bow lagoons clearly visible.



Macupa met us at Lukuzi airstrip, and we headed straight to the park to see what we could see. A soaring martial eagle was the first of the big birds that we saw, and then we drove into a glade of African ebony trees to spend some time with a group of elephants that were feeding on the fruits.

There were some zebra beautifully framed by a fallen tree so we spent some time photographing them and then watched a pair of ground hornbills foraging for frogs. Green-winged pyillia and a cardinal woodpecker attracted our attention and then we stopped by the river in the shade of a tree for coffee and biscuits.



Steven (another of Tafika's guides) came past and mentioned that there were both lions and wild dog nearby, so we headed off to see them before returning to camp. The lions were doing what lions generally do which is sleep soundly beneath a bush (there were four females) – they were in superb condition and appeared to be well fed. En-route to where we thought the wild dogs where we came across a giant eagle owl posing high in a tree and then we got to the dogs. At first there were 13 visible, then 14, 15 and ultimately 17 – two of the 19 in the pack must have been at rest under a bush and were invisible to us.



As we left the dogs, we caught sight of a large monitor lizard as it was crossing the road... but it was moving towards to the dogs, so we watched and waited. It got to the tree that most of the dogs were lying under, and a couple of the young dogs pricked up their ears. They were looked at the lizard, yapped quietly and some of



the adults came over to see what all the commotion was about. The young ones were jumping and yapping and getting terribly excited, but they weren't sure what to make of the lizard at all. The lizard stood his ground and the dogs backed off.

We drove back to Tafika via Kawere Lagoon where there were a number of elephants, and a couple of them were wallowing in a huge mud pool, so we stayed and watched them. Then there were a series of alarm calls, first baboon, then puku, then impala, and they went on and on... they must

have spotted a leopard. We went in search of the leopard and are pretty sure which bush it had retreated to, but it was too deep to find... maybe later!

On arrival at Tafika we had a cool drink (the favoured drink of Malawi shandy!) and then went to our rooms before reappearing for another excellent lunch. Whilst some took an afternoon siesta, others took a little time to send messages home, or quietly watch the male elephant feeding in camp, or the family of elephants drinking in the river on the far bank of the river.

This afternoon turned into the maddest wildlife afternoon, and it began shortly before afternoon tea... buffalo appeared on the other side of the river, clearly preparing themselves to come down to drink. Not one or two, but a huge herd that emerged from the woodland on the opposite bank. A couple of us were sitting on the side of the river watching and photographing them coming in their droves. A couple of them almost got to the water, but they must have caught our scent on what was quite a strong wind, and they became spooked. They turned and charged back into the woods. We went to tea, sat and watched and they began to emerge again, this time with a little more confidence. They walked right down to the river's edge and then along the sand bank to a safe drinking place. Not 10 or a hundred, but probably a herd of about 700 buffalo. The herd kept on coming and coming – it was a classic African sight, but one that isn't seen very often.



Afternoon tea became a fairly elongated affair (for all the right reasons!), and it wasn't until nearly 4.30pm that we were able to get in the vehicles and head off for our afternoon drive... there was far too much wildlife around to go into the national park!



Once aboard, we headed for the lagoon at the back of camp and had black-winged stilts, sacred ibis, common and wood sandpiper, open-billed stork, an Egyptian goose with (nearly) grown up chicks, and a group (a 'business' in fact) of banded mongoose!

In the park the light was stunning, so we stopped to photograph the small group of Crawshay's zebra that was in the middle of the road – beautifully framed by a dead tree. It was a short stop and we headed off to Chimbwe Lagoon where the dogs were seen most recently.

We knew where the dogs were, so after a quick check on the lions, we went to where the dogs had been, and we weren't disappointed. There was a group of nearby elephants who were making a terrible racket. They were shouting and shouting at the dogs that appeared to be (rather optimistically!) trying to track and chase one of the young elephants but they were massively overwhelmed by superior elephant 'fire power'. However, there is no doubt that the elephants were rattled because every time they got a scent of the dogs they began trumpeting again and charging round to chase the dogs away.

The dogs paused, regrouped, and then headed off in the direction of the river where they could see antelope on the beach. We followed them as far as we could and watched as the adults left the young pups at the back of the beach and went tearing off after a group of puku. The puku were largely trapped by the river behind them and as the dogs spread out the end result was inevitable as the dogs grabbed one of the puku and killed it. Their hunting and killing style is pretty merciless, but with the number of dogs in the pack it is at least quick, and within a couple of minutes the puku was 'in the past tense'. Some of the pups then went to the kill, and for some it appeared that meat was taken to them. They looked interested in possibly hunting again but it didn't happen which may be as a result of the pup with a birth defect.

Lloyd was telling us that one of the nine pups was born with a slightly crippled leg and can't move nearly as fast as the others so it can't keep up. The pack have tried to move away from the area a number of times, but the youngster barks and they all return. They think that the youngster also has very poor eyesight as it struggles to see where the others are when it is able to keep up. Sadly, the likelihood is that it will be taken by a hyena, perhaps a lion, or even a leopard. Pretty sad as it is a very beautiful young animal.

Having had our fill of the incredible dogs we went to find a sundowner spot for a quick drink before turning on the spotlight and heading back to camp. The first mammals we saw with the spotlight were the dogs (!) who appeared to be heading back towards Chimbwe Lagoon and the resting area that they've been using for the past few days.

A beautifully posed genet on a log was next and then four lionesses moving along the beach (in the general direction of Tafika) looking like they were hunting. Our final sighting of the drive was of three hyenas drinking at Kawere Lagoon before arriving back in camp in time for a beer and another delicious dinner.



So this elephant walks into a bar...

It was five in the morning. I could tell that from the light in the sky and the sound of feet outside my hut. Before their owner could wake me with a soft-voiced "good morning" I got in first: "Morning! Thank you!" I was mildly surprised not hear the usual response: "You are most welcome".

The footsteps continued, all around my hut, and now they were many. That's because they were elephants: seven of them, three adult females, two sub-adults and two little ones. Well, they were most welcome. They

fed from fallen fruit before drifting away in that uncanny elephantine way. I dressed and went to the river for breakfast.

It was my last morning at Takwela Camp in North Luangwa National Park and at such times everything tends to get a little elegiac. Our guests had a lie-in that morning, no need to get up till six, but I wanted to sit by the Luangwa River drinking rooibos tea. It was important – essential – that I watched the river flow. And counted the birds.*

On these trips we're always setting off into the bush to seek marvels, sometimes by vehicle and sometimes on foot. But in a way, you don't have to bother. Plenty of it comes to you.

We flew back south down to Tafika, the main camp. Now I was sitting beside Luangwa 100 miles or so further south, wondering what sort of cake we would be having for tea... and then the buffalo arrived. They were coming down to drink on the opposite side of the river. While they were doing so a bull elephant walked up the bar 50 yards away – no, the barman didn't ask "is this some kind of joke?" -- and then moved away unhurriedly.

I watched the buffalos: more and more and more of them. Like the holes in Blackburn, Lancashire I had to count them all: and there were 700 of them: a great black crowd of massive uncompromising life. By then it was time to go for a drive: I hoped we would see as much on the road as we saw from camp.

**African fish eagle, carmine bee-eater, tropical boubou, purple crested turaco, little egret, cattle egret, greenshank, pied kingfisher, brown-hooded kingfisher, white-crowned lapwing, emerald-spotted wood dove, puffback, long-tailed glossy starling, palm swift, black-collared barbet, cape turtle dove, African pied wagtail, black-headed bulbul, orange-breasted bush-shrike.*

By Simon Barnes

Day 11: Tafika, South Luangwa

Saturday 23 September 2023

After a quick 'poll' at dinner yesterday evening it was clear that everyone had enjoyed the walking so much that they wanted to walk today, so with a scout at the ready all of the guests on the trip went out for a walk. However, as a walking safari can only accommodate six guests Simon and Chris had to stay behind. The walk, led by Macupa, began with a short drive north from Tafika, followed by a river crossing. It was clearly a success, and everyone returned very happy having had sightings of (amongst other things!) western-banded snake eagle, and an impala killed by a group of dogs on the western side of the river.

With the central part of the day at leisure and a good selection of delicious food at lunch, we turned to the afternoon's activities. Whilst a couple of the group were keen to get into the park (with Simon), the rest of the group took an all-important visit to Mkasanga village just north of Tafika. Mkasanga is where almost all of the Tafika team are from (guides, waiters, mechanics, cooks etc, etc, etc) and for whom the national park, its wildlife, and the safari industry in general, is an essential lifeline and a route to continuous prosperity. This is an afternoon 'activity' that over the years everyone has always enjoyed, and today was no exception.

Lloyd and Paul took us first to Mkasanga School where we were greeted by four of the teachers (who are actually 'sponsored' by Tafika), and we were then invited to the Deputy Headmasters office to meet the Deputy Head, who told us a little about the school. It presently has 696 pupils (split approximately evenly between boys and girls). Both Paul and Lloyd attended the school, Paul's three children currently attend the school and Lloyd's children also attended the school. After a brief talk and 'Q&A' with the deputy head we went outside where some of the teachers had organised school children of varying ages to 'present' to us.



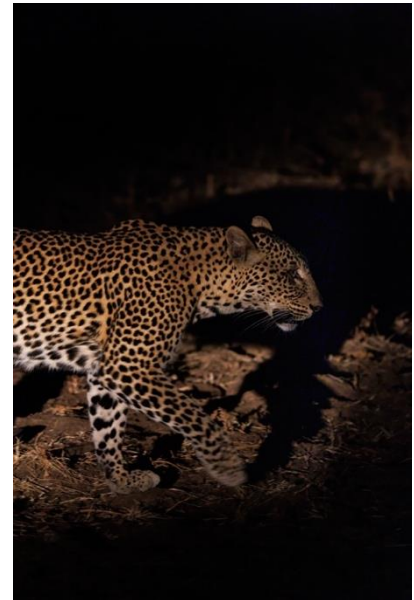
First, they sang a 'welcome' song, and then there were poems about hope, prosperity and the importance of wildlife and conservation – it was an interesting, enjoyable and inspiring 20 minutes or so. Each of our group was then invited to come forward and tell the young people our names and where in the world we were from.

After saying farewell to the school, we walked across the road to the church where

there was a choir – led by Lloyds wife – singing in beautiful harmony. Again, we were invited to listen to the singing and participate in dancing with the singers if we wished. The choir sang us three or four songs and then sang as we left to jump into the game-viewing vehicle and head into the park.

By 5.10pm we had seen red-necked falcon (a new bird for the list!) and were well on our way to a beautifully sited sundowner spot - to meet up with our other vehicle - with (yet) another sumptuous view of the Luangwa River. As it was our final evening together there were a couple of bottles of bubbly to set the evening off on the right footing!

Sundowners consumed, one of the group disappeared behind a bush only to find that 100 metres or so away a female leopard was up and moving. There was no danger but was the cause of some amusement on his return! Both vehicles then turned on spotlights and we watched her head off on her nightly hunt. We were with her for 20 minutes or more. Lloyd told us that this was the female that had lost her cub to the aggressive male that we saw before we headed up to North Luangwa and that she had begun to stray into another leopard's territory. She was continuing south so we left her and headed north to Tafika. Sightings on the way back included genet, civet, bushy-tailed mongoose, scrub hare and a thick-tailed bushbaby.



A beer at the bar was followed by our final night's dinner under the stars with lots of banter and fun tales of our safari.

When she walks

It was our last night. At the end of a game of Russian billiards the balls are no longer returned, and every successful shot counts double. That's what it's like that on your last night in the Luangwa Valley in Zambia: everything you see seems twice as meaningful as it was before.

We stopped on the banks of the Luangwa River for sundowners; I'll be getting sentimental about the beer I drank if I don't keep a hold of myself. It got dark in that brisk tropical way and as we climbed back into the vehicle, we picked out a leopard in the spotlight. A female, slim and elegant.

And she walked and we followed and eventually she walked where we could follow no more and -- well, that was it really. Except of course it wasn't. Because it was the most beautiful thing any one of us had ever seen in our lives – and then we had to double it, because this was the last night.

What a walk. That elegant walk: but always with menace. A dancer's walk: a dancer that kills for a living. That lovely black and gold coat lit up by the spot. You may remember the 1990 film Pretty Woman, in which

Richard Gere stars with 21-year-old Julia Roberts. He was once asked for his favourite scene. He replied: "Any one when she walks."

We drove back to Tafika in a rather elegiac mood, and on the way found a tiny antelope called Sharpe's grysbok, a marsh mongoose, a flap-necked chameleon, an eastern grass snake, a roost of tiny birds called tawny-flanked prinias and a nice genet.

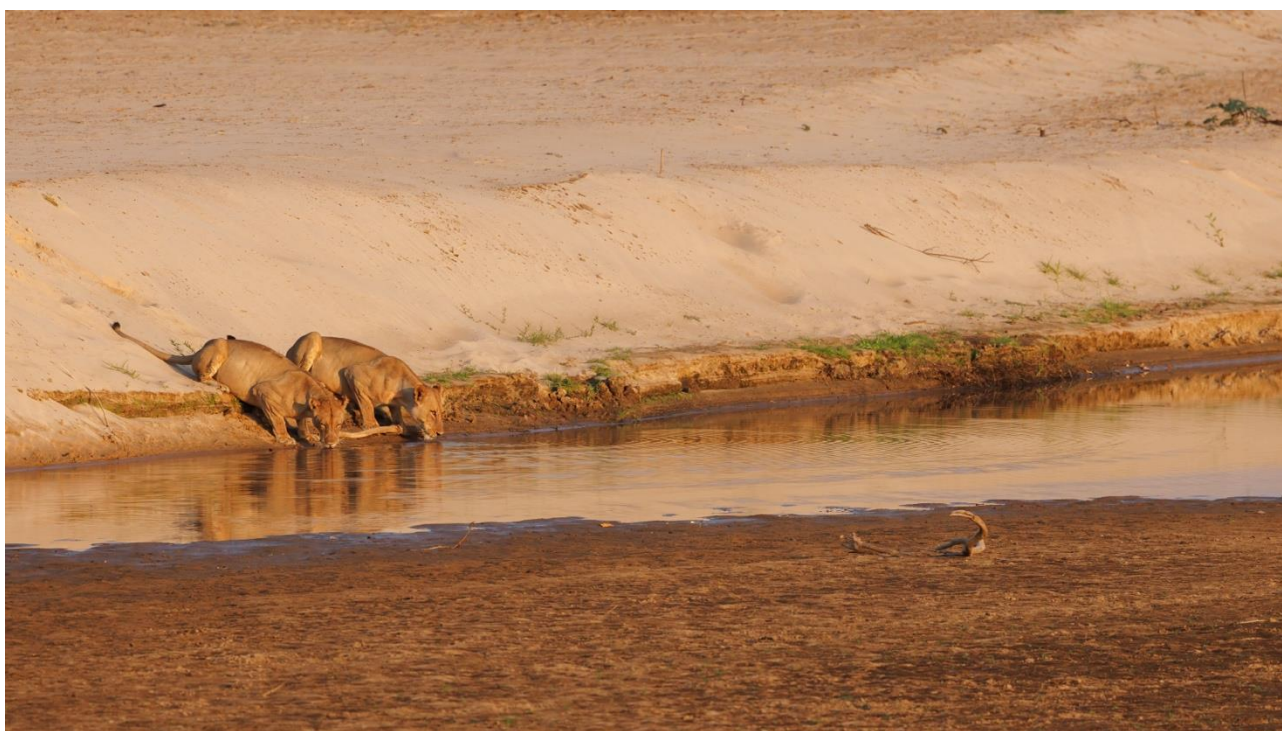
And all the time that image of the leopard seemed burnt into my retina: the river behind, the bush before and there she was. Walking.

By Simon Barnes

Day 12: Tafika, South Luangwa

Sunday 24 September 2023

Sadly, today the trip ended for us all, but not without some wildlife spotting first. Two of the group went to the hide at Kawere Lagoon with Simon and Lloyd, while the rest of the group went game-viewing with Chris and Macupa. First however, both vehicles went upriver to see a group of lions on the sand bank that had killed a young hippo last night. The BBC film crew were there to record the action and we were able to watch



from a distance. The early morning light was truly magnificent and the reflection of the lions drinking in the water and then walking across the stream to (near) the kill was superb. There were four females and a single (maned) male who, needless-to-say, was attending to the kill whilst the females lay in wait.

The hide visit included sightings of elephants, puku, impala and an impressive herd of around 200 buffalo. The game-viewers on the other hand had little sparrowhawk, lilac-breasted rollers too numerous to count, Meyer's parrot, brown sake eagle and lesser masked weaver amongst other birds, as well as some lovely elephant encounters, buffalo, zebra, all the usual small antelopes and a pair of large male kudu with resplendent horns. We were all back at Tafika shortly after 10am – it had been a tremendous final morning's activity and we were all sad that the trip had come to a close.

Simon and Chris left camp at around 1030 as their homeward flight was a little earlier than the rest of the group, and as they headed off, the group were able to enjoy the exceptional vista at Tafika for a couple more hours before their charter flight from the nearby Lukuzi airstrip directly to Lusaka to connect with their homeward flights.

A note on weather: Throughout the trip the weather was consistently hot and dry – generally between 32-35deg C. On some days there was a mid-afternoon wind that kept things cool.



Checklist for Sacred Combe Safari



This species list is set in taxonomic order based on the 'Comprehensive Field Guide to the Birds South of the Sahara' by Ian Sinclair and Peter Ryan. The species listed are all those that may be seen in Zambia's Luangwa Valley and are not split by season.

	Common Name	Scientific Name
	BIRDS	
	Hamerkop, Herons & Egrets	
1	Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>
2	Goliath Heron	<i>Ardea goliath</i>
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
4	Black-headed Heron	<i>Ardea melanocephala</i>
5	Yellow-billed (Intermediate) Egret	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>
6	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
8	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
9	Black Egret	<i>Egretta ardesiaca</i>
10	Rufus-bellied Heron	<i>Ardeola rufiventris</i>
11	Green-backed Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>
	Flamingos, Spoonbills & Ibises	
12	African Spoonbill	<i>Platalea alba</i>
13	Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>
14	Hadedda Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>
	Pelicans & Storks	
15	White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>
16	Marabou Stork	<i>Leptoptilos crumenifer</i>
17	Saddlebill Stork	<i>Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis</i>
18	Openbill Stork	<i>Anastomus lamelligerus</i>
19	Yellow-billed Stork	<i>Mycteria ibis</i>
	Ducks & Geese	
20	African Pygmy Goose	<i>Nettapus auritus</i>
21	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>
22	Spur-winged Goose	<i>Plectropterus gambensis</i>
	Kites, Vultures, Buzzards & Eagles	
23	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
24	Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>
25	African Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>
26	Hooded Vulture	<i>Necrosyrtes monachus</i>
27	Lappet-faced Vulture	<i>Torgos tracheliotos</i>



28	White-backed Vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>
29	White-headed Vulture	<i>Trigonoceps occipitalis</i>
30	Brown Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinereus</i>
31	Western Banded Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinerascens</i>
32	Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>
33	African Harrier Hawk (Gymnogene)	<i>Polyboroides typus</i>
34	Lizard Buzzard	<i>Kaupifalco monogrammicus</i>
35	Gabar Goshawk	<i>Micronisus gabar</i>
36	Dark Chanting Goshawk	<i>Melierax metabates</i>
37	Black Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter melanoleucus</i>
38	Shikra (Little Banded Goshawk)	<i>Accipiter badius</i>
39	Little Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter minullus</i>
40	Tawny Eagle	<i>Aquila rapax</i>
41	Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Hieraetus wahlbergi</i>
42	African Hawk Eagle	<i>Aquila spilogaster</i>
43	Martial Eagle	<i>Polemaetus bellicosus</i>
	Kestrels & Falcons	
44	Red-necked Falcon	<i>Falco chicquera</i>
	Guineafowl, Francolin, Quails & Crakes	
45	Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>
46	Swainson's Francolin	<i>Francolinus swainsonii</i>
47	Red-necked Francolin	<i>Francolinus afer</i>
48	Black Crake	<i>Amaurornis flavirostra</i>
49	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
	Cranes, Bustards & Thick-knees	
50	Grey (Southern) Crowned Crane	<i>Balearica regulorum</i>
51	African Jacana	<i>Actophilornis africanus</i>
52	Water Thick-knee (Dikkop)	<i>Burhinus vermiculatus</i>
53	Three-banded (Heuglin's) Courser	<i>Rhinoptilus cinctus</i>
	Plovers, Lapwings & Snipes	
54	White-fronted Plover	<i>Charadrius marginatus</i>
55	Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>
56	Blacksmith Lapwing (Plover)	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>
57	White-headed (White-crowned) Lapwing (Plover)	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>
58	Crowned Lapwing (Plover)	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>
	Stilts, Sandpipers & Terns	
59	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
60	Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>
61	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>

62	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
63	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
64	African Skimmer	<i>Rynchops flavirostris</i>
65	Double-banded Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles bicinctus</i>
	Doves	
66	Red-eyed Dove	<i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>
67	African Mourning Dove	<i>Streptopelia decipiens</i>
68	Cape Turtle (Ring-necked) Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>
69	Laughing (Palm) Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>
70	Emerald-spotted Wood Dove	<i>Turtur chalcospilos</i>
71	Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>
	Parrots & Turacos	
72	Meyer's Parrot	<i>Poicephalus meyeri</i>
73	Lilian's (Nyasa) Lovebird	<i>Agapornis lilianae</i>
74	Purple-crested Turaco (Lourie)	<i>Gallirex porphyreolophus</i>
75	Grey Go-away-bird (Lourie)	<i>Corythaixoides concolor</i>
	Cuckoos & Coucals	
76	Senegal Coucal	<i>Centropus senegalensis</i>
77	White-browed Coucal	<i>Centropus superciliosus</i>
	Owls	
78	Wood Owl	<i>Strix woodfordii</i>
79	Pel's Fishing Owl	<i>Scotopelia peli</i>
80	Verreaux's (Giant) Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo lacteus</i>
81	African Scops Owl	<i>Otus senegalensis</i>
82	Pearl-spotted Owlet	<i>Glaucidium perlatum</i>
83	Barred Owlet	<i>Glaucidium capense</i>
	Nightjars	
84	Square-tailed (Mozambique) Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus fossii</i>
	Swifts	
85	Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>
86	Bohm's (Bat-like) Spinetail	<i>Neafrapus boehmi</i>
	Mousebirds	
87	Red-faced Mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>
	Trogon & Hoopoes	
88	African Hoopoe	<i>Upupa africana</i>
89	Green (Red-billed) Woodhoopoe	<i>Phoeniculus purpureus</i>
90	Common Scimitarbill	<i>Rhinopomastus cyanomelas</i>
	Kingfishers & Rollers	
91	Malachite Kingfisher	<i>Corythornis cristatus</i>

92	Brown-hooded Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>
93	Striped Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon chelicuti</i>
94	Giant Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle maximus</i>
95	Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
96	Lilac-breasted Roller	<i>Coracias caudata</i>
	Bee-eaters	
97	Southern Carmine Bee-eater	<i>Merops nubicoides</i>
98	Little Bee-eater	<i>Merops pusillus</i>
99	White-fronted Bee-eater	<i>Merops bullockoides</i>
100	Blue-cheeked Bee-eater	<i>Merops persicus</i>
	Secretarybird & Hornbills	
101	Ground Hornbill	<i>Bucorvus leadbeateri</i>
102	Red-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus rufirostris</i>
103	Crowned Hornbill	<i>Tockus alboterminatus</i>
104	Grey Hornbill	<i>Tockus nasutus</i>
	Barbets & Honeyguides	
105	Black-collared Barbet	<i>Lybius torquatus</i>
106	Greater Honeyguide	<i>Indicator indicator</i>
	Woodpeckers, Pitta & Broadbill	
107	Cardinal Woodpecker	<i>Dendropicos fuscescens</i>
108	Bearded Woodpecker	<i>Dendropicos namaquus</i>
	Swallows & Martins	
109	Brown-throated (Plain) Martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>
110	Wire-tailed Swallow	<i>Hirundo smithii</i>
111	Lesser Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis cucullata</i>
112	Mosque Swallow	<i>Hirundo senegalensis</i>
	Wagtails, Longclaws & Pipits	
113	African Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla aguimp</i>
	Cuckooshrikes, Drongos & Orioles	
114	Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>
115	Black-headed Oriole	<i>Oriolus larvatus</i>
	Crows & Ravens	
116	Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>
	Tits, Creepers & Babblers	
117	Arrow-marked Babbler	<i>Turdoides jardineii</i>
	Bulbuls, Nicator, Thrush & Robins	
118	Dark-capped (Black-eyed) Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
119	Terrestrial Brownbul	<i>Phyllastrephus terrestris</i>
120	Yellow-bellied Greenbul	<i>Chlorocichla flaviventris</i>

121	White-browed (Heuglin's) Robin-Chat	<i>Cossypha heuglini</i>
	Apalis, Eremomelas, Prinia & Hyliota	
122	Yellow-breasted Apalis	<i>Apalis flavida</i>
123	Tawny-flanked Prinia	<i>Prinia subflava</i>
124	Burnt-necked Eremomela	<i>Eremomela usticollis</i>
	Flycatchers & Batis	
125	Ashy (Blue-grey) Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa caerulescens</i>
	Shrikes	
126	Black-backed Puffback	<i>Dryoscopus cubla</i>
127	Brown-crowned (Three-streaked) Tchagra	<i>Tchagra australis</i>
128	Black-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra senegalus</i>
129	Tropical Boubou	<i>Laniarius aethiopicus</i>
130	Brubru	<i>Nilaus afer</i>
131	Orange-breasted Bush-shrike	<i>Chlorophoneus sulfureopectus</i>
132	Grey-headed Bush-shrike	<i>Malaconotus blanchoti</i>
133	White Helmet-shrike	<i>Prionops plumatus</i>
134	Retz's (Red-billed) Helmet-shrike	<i>Prionops retzii</i>
	Starlings & Oxeckers	
135	Meve's Starling	<i>Lamprotornis mevesii</i>
136	Wattled Starling	<i>Creatophora cinerea</i>
137	Yellow-billed Oxecker	<i>Buphagus africanus</i>
138	Red-billed Oxecker	<i>Buphagus erythrorhynchus</i>
	Sunbirds	
139	Scarlet-chested Sunbird	<i>Chalcomitra senegalensis</i>
140	Yellow-bellied Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris venustus</i>
141	White-bellied Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris talatala</i>
	White-eye, Sparrows & Weavers	
142	Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>
143	Red-billed Buffalo Weaver	<i>Bubalornis niger</i>
144	White-browed Sparrow-weaver	<i>Plocepasser mahali</i>
145	Village (Spotted-backed) Weaver	<i>Ploceus cucullatus</i>
146	Southern (Vitelline/African) Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>
	Quelea & Widowbirds	
147	Red-billed Quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>
	Firefinches & Waxbills	
148	Green-winged Pytilia (Melba Finch)	<i>Pytilia melba</i>
149	Red-billed Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta senegala</i>
150	Blue Waxbill (Southern Cordonbleu)	<i>Uraeginthus angolensis</i>
151	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>

This species list is set in taxonomic order based on 'Smither Mammals of Southern Africa. A Field Guide' by Peter Apps

	MAMMALS	
	Elephant Shrews or sengi	Order: Macroscelidea
1	Four-toed Elephant Shrew	<i>Petrodromus tetradactylus</i>
	Rodents	Order: Rodentia
		Suborder: Hystricognathi
2	Porcupine	<i>Hystrix africae australis</i>
		Suborder: Sciurognathi
3	Tree Squirrel	<i>Pareaxerus cepapi</i>
	Hares	Order: Lagomorpha
4	Scrub Hare	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>
	Elephants	Order: Proboscidea
5	African Elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>
	Odd-toed ungulates	Order: Perissodatyta
6	Crawshay's Zebra	<i>Equus burchelli crawshayii</i>
	Hippopotamuses	Order: Whippomorpha
7	Hippopotamus	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>
	Pigs & Hogs	Order: Suriformes
8	Bushpig	<i>Potamochoerus larvatus</i>
9	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>
	Ruminants	Order: Ruminantia
	<i>Giraffes</i>	
10	Thornicroft's Giraffe	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis thornicrofti</i>
	<i>Alcelaphines & allies</i>	
11	Cookson's Wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus cooksoni</i>
12	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>
13	Roan Antelope	<i>Hippotragus equinus</i>
	<i>Dwarf antelopes</i>	<i>Neotragini</i>
14	Sharpe's Grysbok	<i>Raphicerus sharpei</i>
	<i>Reedbuck etc</i>	<i>Reduncini</i>
15	Puku	<i>Kobus verdani</i>
16	Common Waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymus</i>
	<i>Buffaloes</i>	<i>Bovini</i>
17	African Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>
	Hoofed mammals: antelopes & other ruminants	
	<i>Spiral-horned bovines</i>	
18	Bushbuck	<i>Tragelophus scriptus</i>
19	Greater Kudu	<i>Tragelophus strepsicercus</i>
	Carnivores	Carnivora

	<i>Hyaenids</i>	
20	Spotted Hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>
	<i>Cats</i>	
21	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>
22	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>
	<i>Dogs etc</i>	<i>Canidae</i>
23	Wild Dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>
	<i>Weasels etc</i>	<i>Mustelidae</i>
24	Honey Badger	<i>Mellivora capensis</i>
	<i>Genets & Civets</i>	
25	Rusty spotted Genet	<i>Genetta maculata</i>
26	African Civet	<i>Civetticus civetta</i>
	<i>Mongoose</i>	<i>Viveridae</i>
27	Slender Mongoose	<i>Herpestes sanguinea</i>
28	Banded Mongoose	<i>Mungos mungo</i>
29	Marsh Mongoose	<i>Atilax paludinosus</i>
30	White-tailed Mongoose	<i>Ichneumia albicauda</i>
31	Bushy-tailed Mongoose	<i>Bdeogale crassicauda</i>
	Primates	Order: Primates
32	Thick-tailed Bushbaby	<i>Otolemur crassicaudatus</i>
33	Yellow Baboon	<i>Papio cynocephalus</i>
34	Vervet Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus pygerythrus</i>