

Zambia's South Luangwa NP

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 14 April 2014



Burchell's Zebras



African Wild Dog



Leopard



Servaline Genet

Report & Images courtesy of client Julian Thomas



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Day 1

Sunday 6th April

We arrived from the UK via Dubai and caught an internal flight to Mufuwe from Lusaka. I was surprised just how much wild country remained, with huge areas of mopane woodland and wooded savannahs. We were met at the airport by Josephat who was also our guide for the trip. Josephat had a comprehensive knowledge of the birds, mammals and ecology of South Luangwa, and with his extensive experience had a facility for anticipating where and when an animal might appear so we were very fortunate to have his services.

Late evening found us in Kafunta River Lodge, overlooking the flood plain of the Luangwa River. On the drive to the lodge we encountered two Servaline Genets crossing the road. A second mammal species presented itself at the lodge, with four Hippos in the lagoon below, to my surprise feeding on aquatic plants, rather than coming out to graze in true Hippo tradition. Returning after dinner to our room meeting Bushbuck on the lawn seemed preferable to bumping into a hippo! Kafunta River Lodge was a really nice place to stay with faultless accommodation and excellent food and is, in my opinion, a model of how responsible eco-tourism should operate, with a real commitment to supporting local communities and promoting the importance of conservation.

Day 2

Monday 7th April

Weather was mostly overcast, with some light drizzle and a very pleasant temperature throughout in the low 20s

No wakeup call was needed at 05.30, and after a quick breakfast, during which we scanned the flood plain, which was dotted with the most guaranteed new mammal of the trip, in the form of Southern Kob, or Puku, we made our first excursion into the park.

All images and film I had seen of South Luangwa had shown a sun-baked scene of desolation, but at this time of year, just after the rainy season, verdant green plains, dotted with lagoons with waterfowl offered a complete contrast to these images. Other mammals soon followed, with several groups of Thornicroft's Giraffe browsing in the mopane woodland, Yellow Baboons and Vervet Monkeys representing primates, Impala, which were easily the most common Antelope, Common Zebra, Hippos and African Elephants - many of which demonstrated the power of natural selection, being tuskless. A selection of water birds was seen in the marshy hollows and Pistia (water lettuce) filled the lagoons, the best sighting being of a male Painted Snipe accompanied by two chicks. Other waders were Palearctic migrants like Wood Sandpipers, Common Sandpipers, Ruff, Greenshank, and Black tailed Godwit, as well as resident African Jacana and White-crowned, Wattled, Crowned, and Blacksmith Lapwings.

Wetland species included African Darter, African Spoonbill, Yellow-billed, African Open-billed, Woolly-necked, and the majestic Saddle-billed Storks. Black headed and Grey Herons, Great and Cattle Egrets, Hammerkop, Egyptian Geese, Spur-winged Geese, Comb Duck, White faced Whistling Duck, Sacred and Hadada Ibis were also seen. A selection of colourful Bee eaters, Rollers and Kingfishers gave photo opportunities, with good pictures of Brown-headed and Woodland Kingfishers, Racquet-tailed Roller and White-fronted Bee-eater all being firsts. Other examples were Malachite and Pied Kingfisher, Lilac-breasted Roller and Little Bee-eaters. Raptors seemed surprisingly scarce, but we eventually accumulated a list of six, namely Bataleur, Hooded and White-backed Vulture, African Fish-eagle, and best of all a fine Martial Eagle being mobbed by a crowd of Crowned Lapwings, and a speeding Lanner Falcon was chasing waders. Food for at least the eagle would have been offered by Helmeted Guineafowl, Swainson's Francolin and Red-necked Spurfowl.

In the mopane woodland we had sightings of Jacobin Cuckoo, Black Cuckoo-shrike, and Black Tit, as well as Southern Grey headed Sparrow, Green Wood Hoopoe, Wattled, Meve's and Greater Blue-eared Glossy Starling, and Bennet's Woodpecker. Yellow-billed Oxpeckers scissored through the coats of Giraffe, while Red-billed Oxpeckers explored the ears of Impala. Palearctic migrants were represented by numerous Red backed Shrikes, and an equally dapper Lesser Grey.

The afternoon until three was given over to rest, but I was still able to view Puku mating, Tropical Boubou dueting and a few additions to the water birds below, such as African Spoonbill. We set off back for the park at 3.30pm. On the way we sighted the impressive Southern Ground Hornbill and the Lappet-faced Vulture, with Water Thick-knees among crocodiles on sandbanks in the river. At this time of the year weaver birds are breeding, and we could view the extravagant finery of Southern Red Bishops and Long-tailed Paradise Whydah.

In gallery forest along the Luangwa we watched an Elephant family with a playful young calf, but I missed seeing a Leopard that was briefly glimpsed as it slipped through dense cover. Any transient annoyance at this dip was soon forgotten as a view through the bins resolved a tangled black and white mass in mopane woodland into a pack of five African Wild Dogs on a kill. As we watched two others came running in. and we spent the next half hour watching them feeding, sometimes lifting up sections of their prey to show it was either Impala or Puku. As they fed their tails waved like banners, but unlike many canids they fed in silence. They were clearly becoming sated and wandering around before returning to the kill. We left the dogs to view a Leopard that even I could not fail to locate, as it was stretched out along the trunk of a dead fallen tree, right in the open. It did open its eyes to view a Spotted Hyena that wandered around, possibly suspecting the Leopard may have secreted a kill somewhere. As dusk approached our patience was rewarded as the Leopard stretched and got up, climbed further up the tree and gave the rasping coughing call before descending and passing within two metres of our vehicle, exhibiting all the insouciance of a top predator. After our sundowner, that was by now really more of a nightcap, we returned with the spotlight searching the areas around the tracks, and we were rewarded with sightings of a splendid African Civet, three Servaline Genets. Scrub Hare, another Spotted Hyena and numerous Hippos.

Day 3

Tuesday 8th April

The weather was a contrast to yesterday, with clear blue skies at dawn and patchy cloud developing by the afternoon. It was never oppressively hot, with low humidity and light breezes.

The day started early with a sighting of large numbers of Fruit Bats and a neat Greater Galago in the fig tree outside our room at 02.00. No additional mammals were seen in the morning, the species recorded being Puku, Impala, Zebra, Thornicroft's Giraffe, Warthog, African Elephant, Hippo and Bushbuck. In Mopane woodland a clan of White Helmet Shrikes worked the canopy, and a Striated Heron was the first of the trip for this cosmopolitan species. Two new raptors were the relatively uncommon; White-headed Vulture, and a soaring juvenile African Hawk Eagle. Other additional species were Emerald spotted Wood Dove, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, African Pipit, Southern Black Flycatcher, and Red-billed Buffalo Weaver. After the events of the previous evening I was quite content to relax, soak up the scenery of lush verdant bush and take pictures of common but spectacular species such as Swainson's Francolin, Bataleur, Wattled Plover, Southern Red Bishop, Jacana, and Yellow billed Stork. During the siesta time I was able to view large flocks of 100s of Collared Pratincoles over the flood meadow, and equally elegant and gorgeously coloured Southern Carmine Bee-eaters over the river.

As we set out in the afternoon we found four African Hawk Eagles soaring together, which would presumably indicate the presence of a territorial boundary. They flew very close, giving great photo opportunities, unlike two Lappet-faced Vultures high overhead. An area of marshland in the park held a pair of Grey Crowned Cranes amongst a range of herons, egrets and storks. Up to now we had failed to locate Cape Buffalo, presumably because at this season the herds are widely scattered, but a herd of 30+ was seen in grassland. The remaining 4th of the big five possible in South Luangwa was found in a largely somnolent state in a sandy river bed (Mushilashi Stream), with 13 Lions crashed out on the sand. There were six adult females, the remainder well grown cubs of circa eight months. One female was the most geriatric Lion I had ever seen, lacking most of her tail and covered with scars from a lifetime of encounters with Buffalo, but I suppose as long as she can drag herself to kills she can survive in a group of these social cats. One Lion did oblige by walking across to meet and greet the others but there was generally little activity.

As darkness fell we explored the thickets where I had missed the Leopard yesterday and this time had success with a mother and two small cubs found lying by the edge of a thicket. The totally relaxed mother sat and watched as the cubs played around her, or showed an adventurous side by exploring further afield. As the mother finally moved off with the cubs in tow we heard another Leopard call nearby, and a minute or so later the spotlight revealed a fine male Leopard on the prowl. On the drive back we saw Servaline Genet, African Civet, and finally some nocturnal birds, with Spotted Eagle Owl, Water Thick-knees, Mozambique Nightjar and examples of that highly desired duo of waders, namely Bronze-winged and Three-banded Coursers, with one and 13 respectively along the tracks.

Day 4

Wednesday 9th April

More overcast than yesterday still pleasantly warm with light winds

Over breakfast a Giant Kingfisher perched on the dead tree overlooking the lagoon, and Squacco Herons flew past.

As we set off for the park a Ground Hornbill was foraging by the side of the track, other birds included Green Wood Hoopoes, although I missed the African Crake scuttling into cover. Sadly I was unprepared as we viewed wildfowl on a lagoon when a Martial Eagle came rocketing in in a low level attack, but surprisingly failed to take any of the seemingly ungainly quarry of Spur-winged and Egyptian Geese. We were able to view this and a second Martial Eagle perched. Two new turacos were seen; the rather plain Grey Go-away bird, and the decidedly showy Purple-crested Turaco. Other new birds for the trip were Shikra, African Cuckoo, Crested Barbet, Lesser Striped Swallow, Barn Swallow, and Variable Sunbird.

In the early afternoon Lanner Falcon again menaced the waders of the flood plain and walking over this area I found Chestnut-backed Sparrow-larks. While from the lodge I was able to watch the deft way Open-bill Storks deal with Apple Snails. We drove through this area at the start of the afternoon excursion and in the grasslands, lagoons and scrub saw Goliath Heron, white stork, and Didric Cuckoo. We passed by the lodges pontoon bridge site, which allows faster access to the park when the wide and powerfully flowing Luangwa reduces to a sluggish trickle. Plain Martin and African Skimmer flew over the river here.

In the park a Banded Mongoose troop was seen again. Two new raptor species recorded were Lizard Buzzard and African Harrier Hawk. One of the Leopard cubs we saw yesterday had perhaps unfortunately shown at the base of a bush, which resulted in the unedifying spectacle of several vehicles surrounding the bush, although objectively these Leopards are so habituated it would be unlikely to do any real harm. Driving back a 'lifer' mammal was found in the form of two Bushy-tailed Mongooses - that bore a resemblance to a Pine Marten as they loped over the ground in mustelid style. Other sightings were White tailed Mongoose, Servaline Genet, two Bronze-winged Coursers, and Three-banded Courser.

Day 5

Thursday 10th April

Mostly overcast and pleasantly cool

Before dawn two White-tailed Mongooses were located foraging in short grass below our chalet with the spotlight. We went to a different area of the park with grassland dotted with scattered trees. Mammals recorded were Buffalo, Hippo, Giraffe, Waterbuck, Puku, Impala, Bushbuck, Vervet Monkeys and a large flange (as per Not the 9 o'clock News) of baboons foraging for roots in short grassland as well as giving each other the most thorough of grooming. A number of new birds were recorded, namely Wahlberg's Eagle, African Crake, Lilian's Lovebird, Lesser Honeyguide, White browed Robin Chat and Village Weaver. We then made a rapid traverse of the park to Lupunga Spur, as Wild Dogs had been found resting in a thicket, but sadly they appeared to have moved on by the time we arrived.

During the afternoon numbers of elephants could be viewed across the river, to be joined by surprising numbers of Hippos prepared to venture out of the water during the daytime, the usual selection of waders and water birds was on view, and I at least managed to photograph Red-backed Shrike and Pied Kingfisher. A flock of European Bee-eaters graced the airspace above the lodge.

Setting out in the afternoon we quickly found a very tame Racket-tailed Roller, Lizard Buzzard was seen, and a Slender Mongoose dashed from thicket to thicket, but from then on it was into the park where we were about to witness what was, for me at least, the wildlife experience of a lifetime.

As we manoeuvred along a track around Lupunga Spur I had the most fleeting glimpse of what looked like a white flag disappearing into a bush. Fortunately the 'search image' was indelibly etched into my mind from three days ago, and I knew I had seen the tail of a Wild Dog. We stopped the vehicle and could hear an extraordinary cacophony of squeals and yelps from the thicket as the wild dogs performed their equivalent of a Maori haka. This was the 'meet ceremony', where the dogs mobilise themselves into a hunting pack. From a vantage point we could view the dogs in the thicket as they played, made appeasement gestures and generally worked themselves into a frenzy. Suddenly they fell silent and one by one, like actors appearing on stage from the wings seven dogs emerged into the open, and we could appreciate what stunningly beautiful animals they were, surely more deserving of the name Painted Wolves than the more prosaic Wild Dogs!

Moving quickly the dogs were onto the road and made their way to a vantage point overlooking a vast expanse of flood meadow and the large herds of Puku and Impala. The quarry was immediately on edge with the predators at a distance where they would have been completely ignored, had they been Lions, and some began stotting (leaping high in the air, to communicate to the dogs that this particular antelope is too fit to be worth chasing), even before the Dogs made their move. Suddenly the pack moved forwards, fanning out into a 50m wide front as they accelerated from a canter into a full gallop. Ahead of them a melee of antelope scattered in all directions, many frantically stotting. I photographed a single Impala as it ran past, the images revealing the unbelievable contortions it threw its body into. However this attack by the most lethal predators on the planet was abruptly terminated as the dogs were brought up short by a water-filled channel and their innate fear of crocodiles. Thus thwarted, the dogs milled around, with a pair taking the opportunity for a mating (unlike most canids the dogs do not tie when mating). A decision was obviously made and the dogs, including the loving couple headed off in a new direction to vanish into the well bushed savannah.

Clearly nothing was going to top this encounter, but we finished the day with views of two splendid male Lions and one obliged by waking up and posing for a photo with a series of yawns that nicely showed his armament. Our sundowner was brought to a premature end as an elephant herd moved through our chosen spot. With the spotlight we met a Spotted Hyena carrying a Buffalo leg, and other sightings were Bronze-winged Courser, eight Three banded Coursers, four Square-tailed Nightjars, Scrub Hare and no fewer than six Servaline Genets.

Day 6

Friday 11th April

Clear blue skies in the morning, with patchy cloud by mid-afternoon, and the hottest day so far of the trip

We made a leisurely traverse of the park, viewing several Elephant families including one with a calf so young it was unsteady on its feet and had clearly not learned to co-ordinate its trunk. Other mammals included a fine bull Kudu crossing the road, this rangy animal being one of the most impressive of all antelopes. Just two new bird species were recorded, with African Paradise Flycatcher and a Thrush Nightingale pumping out its powerful song.

In the afternoon we went first to the Mushilashi stream, with our good fortune with Wild Dogs continuing, as we found the pack resting out on the sand. They may well have killed that morning as fresh looking blood was still on the necks of some, but they were obviously still prepared to hunt. Rousing themselves from this temporary halt they continued down the river bed to disappear into bushes on the far bank.

Josephat correctly anticipated they were heading for an area of salt pans as so were in place as the dogs arrived in this area. They generally moved in single file, but seemingly quite casually often grouping together and interacting. The antelope were certainly not casual, with all watching the dogs, and the Impala demonstrating the extraordinarily long flight distance by running off en masse while the dogs were hundreds of metres away. The Puku, however seemed slightly less concerned and the pack slowly approached a single Puku, gradually adopting the ears back, head down stalking mode. They were within 100m of this Puku when one decided on a freelance hunt and set off after another Puku, but without the others following. The pursuit could be tracked for about 1.5 km as they ran in a wide arc, and must have continued for several minutes more, as they returned to view on the far side of the pan. There were two Puku running in front of the dog, although the female was clearly the quarry. The tail chase continued with the dog putting in bursts of acceleration in an attempt to close the gap of 20 m or so. The other dogs would presumably have settled the issue if they had joined in the chase, but they did not and a very fortunate Puku evaded the dog in cover as we saw the dog loping back clean mouthed. The observation must have lasted an hour, ending with the dogs trotting off into the distance.

We did not have to wait long for our next predator sighting as a scan from the site chosen for our sundowner revealed a pride on Lions resting on the sand. Given the fading light it was no surprise these Lions roused themselves, and the whole group headed down the water course. There were only three of the prides six lionesses in the group. Anticipating where the Lions were heading we moved to a location where two bull Buffalo lay on the sand. The Lions duly appeared here, but the Buffalo roused themselves and slowly wandered off, long before the slow advance of the Lions had become anything like a serious hunt.

Heading back with the spotlight it was clear another vehicle had found a Leopard, and we could view the cat just resting in the open. Photos confirmed this was the same Leopard that we saw on 7th April. As we travelled back other sightings were Greater Galago, Servaline Genet, two Scrub Hares, Hippos, and a Four-toed Elephant Shrew, the latter evading my sight, with nocturnal birds represented by 13 Square-tailed Nightjars and 12 Three-banded Coursers. Two new raptors were seen at the salt pans, with Tawny Eagle and Ovambo Sparrowhawk both present.

Day 7

Saturday 12th April

Scattered cloud after a clear start to the day, and pleasantly warm

At 2.30am I could view a White-tailed Mongoose foraging on the flood plain as I searched for the Pel's Fishing Owl that has absented itself so far this week. Setting out for the park we viewed a juvenile Martial Eagle perched on a pylon. Additional bird species were Yellow-bellied Greenbul and Red-billed Firefinch, while other species included Crowned Cranes. It was interesting to see an elephant excavating a deep hole at the salt springs before feeding on soil. The list of expected mammals also included a Slender Mongoose, a fine male Bushbuck and five Greater Kudu.

As we drove back to the park entrance we heard a Leopard had been seen entering a thicket close to an Impala buck. We waited for some time, seeing nothing, but the existence of the Leopard was confirmed as we paused briefly close to the thicket, with the animal sneaking out of cover and almost flowing over the ground as it stalked.

Normally only a prey species would have the privilege of witnessing a Leopard stalking towards it, but this Leopard was determined to demonstrate just how well habituated to vehicles the Leopards in South Luangwa are and she slid under the vehicle. The Leopard remained under the vehicle for some time, but the Impala wandered well out of strike range so she emerged. With now having no intention to hunt the Leopard rolled over on her back, made a circuit of other vehicles that had by now arrived and prowled along the road and finally into cover.

During the afternoons excursion we viewed a Harrier Hawk that was attempting to rob the nest of Meve's Starlings in a hollow tree. The raptor totally ignored frenzied mobbing from the starlings as it carefully probed the cavity from various angles, but was ultimately unsuccessful. A party of Retz's Helmet Shrikes worked the canopy in Mopane woodland, vying for attention with colourful African Golden Orioles. Additional species were Yellow bellied Greenbul, Black Crake, Bennett's Woodpecker and a neat Three-banded Plover at our sundowner site at the Dead Luangwa Lake.

Travelling back with the spotlight I was pleased to see a Four-toed Elephant Shrew working its way through tangled vegetation, and other species were Spotted Hyena, two Servaline Genets, a pair of Bushy-tailed Mongoose and Greater Galago.

Day 8

Sunday 13th April

Once again White-tailed Mongoose could be viewed foraging on the flood plain, and Bushbuck around the lodge were calling in alarm, although I could not locate anything with the spotlight. It was overcast as we set out for our final excursion to the park, and little was seen through the mopane woodlands. Retz's Helmet Shrikes were seen as we entered the park, and other new birds such as African Green Pigeon, Senegal Coucal, and Brown-throated Weaver pushed the bird list above 150.

A cluster of vehicles indicated something of interest and this proved to be Lions on the move through long grass, and scrub, presumably the same pride of 13 we had seen several times in the last few days. It is always vastly more impressive to watch active Lions, and there was at least the possibility that they may have been prepared to hunt, as they were heading for an open area that on every other occasion we drove past in had been covered with Impala, Waterbuck, Buffalo and Kudu. On this occasion, as the Lions discovered when they emerged from the thicket the larder was empty. They scanned the area for a few minutes, then retreated to the bushes. By now the site was decidedly crowded with vehicles jockeying for position, so it seemed opportune to leave and go searching for Wild Dogs that had been seen moving along the bed of the Mushilashi stream.

Joseaphat had a real knack for anticipating the movements of predators, and once again took us straight to the dogs. On this last morning it was a real pleasure to have this pack all to ourselves. As they trotted along, sometimes stopping to drink from holes excavated by elephants it became apparent this group of six was different to the previous pack we had seen. There were just six dogs, but they were also much less vividly marked and much darker. We followed them for c1km along the river until they decided enough was enough and they crashed out in the shade of a riverside tree. During our coffee break several White-backed and two Lappet-faced Vultures circled low overhead, giving the best photo opportunities for these species, the mornings excursion finishing with views of two impressive bull Elephants feeding and drinking in a lagoon.

In conclusion a brilliant trip which exceeded my expectations in regard to predator viewing. To have four separate encounters with Wild Dogs, and to see a kill and two hunts was incredibly fortunate. South Luangwa does have the reputation of being one of the best places in the world to see Leopards and to have nine Leopard sightings in such a short visit would bear this out. The mammal list was extended because we were allowed to do night drives, and these also provided views of two sought after new birds, the Bronze-winged and Three-banded Coursers. The bird list was somewhat restricted because we were only based in one location, and most were widespread pan-African species, but some of these are still stunning to view, and the photographic opportunities were excellent.

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Lion snarling

Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

African Darter *Anbinga melanogaster*. Only one seen, flying along the Luangwa River on 7th April.

Green backed Heron *Butorides striatus*. A few examples of this cosmopolitan species were seen on most days around Kafunta Lodge.

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*. Just five seen, flying over the flood plain in front of the Lodge on 9/4.

Cattle Egret *Bulbulcus ibis*. Not particularly numerous, but 10-20 birds seen most days.

Great White Egret *Egretta alba*. Widespread on lagoons in the park, and along the river, with 10-20 seen daily.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*. Fairly common with 2-5 seen daily.

Goliath Heron *Ardea goliath*. Just one example of this impressive species was seen on a lagoon close to Kafunta Lodge on 9/4.

Black headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala*. Rather a smart species when seen well, it was slightly more numerous than Grey Heron, and usually in wetlands rather than grassland usually frequented by the species.

Saddle-billed Stork *Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*. This impressive species was seen daily, with some very tame individuals giving close photo opportunities as they waded small pools. Two active nests were found.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*. One seen on the flood plain below Kafunta Lodge.

Yellow billed Stork *Mycteria ibis*. Always a striking species in its rose washed breeding plumage, it was commonly seen on lagoons in the park, With 20-30 seen daily.

Woolly necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*. This species was seen daily in the park in small numbers, often seen soaring.

African Open billed Stork *Anastomtus lamelligerus*. This snail specialist was the most numerous stork in the park, with up to 50 seen daily. Birds in the lagoon at Kafunta Lodge allowed close study of how they skilfully use the components of their bill to extract molluscs.

Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta*. An expectedly common species in marshes and wooded channels, with up to 10 seen daily.

African Spoonbill *Platalea alba*. Up to 4 birds could be seen fishing in the lagoons from Kafunta Lodge, or as is typical of spoonbills, asleep.

African Sacred Ibis *Threshkiornis aethiopicus*. A common sight paddling around in wetlands, with c50 seen daily.

Hadada Ibis *Bostrychia hagedash*. Less common than Sacred Ibis but still c10 seen daily.

White faced Tree Duck *Dendrocygna viduata*. The most numerous waterfowl, with flocks of up to 150 on lagoons.

Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*. A common and noisy species on lagoons throughout the park, with c50 seen daily.

Spur winged Goose *Plectropterus gambensis*. Common on lagoons or perching in trees, with a20-50 seen daily. I was surprised this ungainly species had the take off speed and agility to evade a striking Martial Eagle.

Comb Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotus*. A fairly common species, typically associating with Egyptian Geese. c 10-30 seen daily.

African Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus vocifer*. This noisy and conspicuous raptor was seen daily, typically perched along watercourses.

Hooded Vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus*. Fairly common with 2-5 birds seen daily. They often associated with Lions, as apparently this species is prepared to feed on Lion faeces.

African White backed Vulture *Gyps africanus*. Vulture populations seemed reasonable in South Luangwa, and 5-30 were seen daily.

Lappet faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus*. This huge bird was seen in small numbers on most days, but just 1-2 birds per day.

White headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis*. This quite striking species is one of the scarcer African Vultures, and we just had sightings of a pair and a single bird.

Brown Snake Eagle *Circaetus cinereus*. Seen most days, usually perched overlooking open savannah, with 1-3 birds seen on 4 days.

Western banded Snake Eagle *Circaetus cinerascens*. This rather compact raptor is more of a woodland species. Three sightings were had over 3 days.

Bataleur *Terathopius ecaudatus*. One of the more common raptor species, and 3-10 birds were seen sailing by each day. One was swooping down to snatch scraps from the Wild Dog kill.

African Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides typus*. Just two juveniles were seen, but it was fascinating to watch one bird probing a hole in a dead tree, in a determined way in spite of vigorous mobbing by Meve's Starlings, although if this was their nest site the hawk failed to extract any nestlings.

Ovambo Sparrowhawk *Accipter ovampensis*. One seen at the salt springs on 11/4.

Shikra *Accipiter badius*. One soaring near the lodge, and another in the park gave a brief view as it skimmed between bushes.

Lizard Buzzard *Kaupifalco monogrammicus*. One example of this compact and smartly marked raptor seen on 11/4 near the Lodge.

Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax*. A pair was present at the salt springs on 11/4 as we watched the Wild Dogs hunt.

Wahlberg's Eagle *Aquila wahlbergi*. A raptor with a rather distinctive silhouette, with a thin tail and square wings, four birds were seen soaring on 3 days.

African Hawk Eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus*. Four examples of this dashing and powerful raptor were seen in mopane woodland. All were adults so one would assume this was two pairs at a territorial boundary. They gave superb views and photo opportunities as they circled low over the canopy. Two other adults and one juvenile seen on other days.

Martial Eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus*. This apex avian predator always looks the part, whether perched or flying in to attack. A shame my slow reactions meant I failed to capture an image of the eagle attacking waterfowl. We had five sightings, including a juvenile.

Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*. Birds were stooping at waders, but without success on two dates over the floodplain below the lodge.

Red necked Spurfowl *Francolinus afer*. A rather handsome game bird, single males were seen on three days, obligingly perched on fallen trees and calling.

Swainson's Francolin *Francolinus swainsonii*. Rather more numerous than the preceding species, with 5-8 birds seen daily, usually foraging alongside tracks.

Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris*. I always think this common species deserves study - it is quite a spectacular bird when viewed at close range, and the interactions of a flock are fascinating. Around 30 were seen daily.

African Crake *Crex egregia*. Two were seen, both brief views as they fluttered up in a marsh.

Black Crake *Amaurornis flavirostris*. Just one was seen, on a pistia (water lettuce) covered lagoon.

Allen's Gallinule *Porphyryla alleni*. A juvenile wandered like a jacana over the surface of a pistia covered lagoon.

Grey Crowned Crane *Balearica reglulorum*. A stunning species, 2-8 birds were seen on 4 days, with many very close to the road, at times obliging with dancing.

African Jacana *Actophilornis africanus*. One or two lily trotters were present on most of the well vegetated lagoons in the park.

Painted Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis*. We had superb views of this normally skulking species, as a male wandered through vegetation at the edge of pool, followed by two chicks, who although cryptic resembled everton mints on legs with their black and white stripes!

Water Thick Knee *Burhinus vermiculatus*. Fairly common in the park, with 1-4 seen daily, either standing by the edges of lagoons during the day, or on roads at night.

Three banded Courser *Rhinoptilus chalcopterus*. The two nocturnal courser species were for me the most desired of potential new species on this trip, and we were not disappointed. This was the most numerous, with up to 11 seen along the track from the road to the lodge, through mopane woodland.

Bronze winged Courser *Rhinoptilus chalcopterus*. This species was seen on three occasions along the track to the lodge, through mopane woodland. As the pair of birds were seen in roughly the same location each evening one would assume just two birds were involved.

Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*. It was usually possible to view a few birds on the flood plain below the lodge, but on 8/4 at least 150 flew hawked insects over the area in the graceful and agile flight of this species.

Blacksmith Lapwing *Vanellus armatus*. This widespread species was fairly common, often consorting with Wattled Plovers and White crowned Lapwings.

White crowned Lapwing *Vanellus albiceps*. A very eye-catching and noisy species, found in wet grassland, with c30 seen daily. I had only previously seen this species at Victoria Falls.

Crowned Lapwing *Vanellus coronatus*. Flocks were regularly seen, in drier areas than the other Vannelid species, and it was numerous around the salt pans with 50 birds present.

African Wattled Lapwing *Vanellus senegallus*. Another widespread species characteristic of wet grassland, with 30 birds seen daily.

Three banded Plover *Charadrius tricollaris*. Just one was seen on the muddy shores of the Dead Luangwa lake.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*. This was the most common Palearctic wader, with up to 60 seen daily.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*. A common Palearctic wader, with 5-10 seen daily in many locations.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*. A flock of 50 frequenting the floodplain at the lodge gradually reduced over the week.

Black tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* One bird associated with Ruff at Kafunta River Lodge.

African Skimmer *Rhynchops flavirostris*. One bird was seen skimming along the Luangwa River on two days.

Red eyed Dove *Streptopelia semitorquata*. Not particularly abundant with just a few birds seen.

Cape Turtle Dove *Streptopelia capicola*. A very common species throughout the park.

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*. Relatively scarce, with just a handful of birds seen.

Emerald spotted Dove *Turtur chalcospilos*. This attractive small dove was common in wooded and bushy areas, typically feeding on the ground along the edge of tracks.

Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis*. Just 4 examples of this tiny dove seen on 2 days.

African Green Pigeon *Treron calva*. One bird seen speeding between trees was a typical view.

Lilian's Lovebird *Agapornis lilianae*. Just one pair of gorgeous small parrot was seen on 10/4.

Grey Go away Bird *Corythaixoides concolor*. This can be one of the most characteristic species of dry bushland, but it was quite scarce in South Luangwa, with just two birds seen.

Purple crested Turaco *Tauraco porphyreolophus*. This species was quite skulking and hard to observe in trees, but the flash of crimson wings as it flew between trees certainly betrayed its presence, and three examples were seen.

Jacobin Cuckoo *Oxylophus jacobinus*. One bird found sunning itself on the edge of a bush on 7/4.

African Cuckoo *Cuculus gularis*. One bird seen in flight on 9/4.

Diderick Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius*. One bird was seen in bushes on the flood plain below the lodge.

Senegal Coucal *Centropus senegalensis*. The 'bottle emptying' call of this species was a characteristic sound of the bush, but only one bird was seen.

Spotted Eagle Owl *Bubo africanus*. Presumably the same bird was seen on two occasions in a dry river bed during night drives on 8/4 and 10/4. I was rather surprised not to encounter any other owl species, never mind failure to see the Pels Fishing Owl.

Square tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus fossii*. Quite commonly seen on roads and tracks during night drives, with a maximum of 8 on 11/4.

African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus*. About 20 birds frequented just 2 palms around Kafunta Lodge.

Little Swift *Apus affinis*. Large numbers frequented the Luangwa Bridge.

Horus Swift *Apus horus*. Some of the swifts seen along the river were this species, as photos showed a notched tail, rather than the deep fork of the White-rumped Swift.

White rumped Swift *Apus caffer*. Some 20 examples were seen with Little Swifts around Luangwa Bridge on 7/4.

Giant Kingfisher *Ceryle maxima*. One settled on the dead tree in front of the lodge on 7/4.

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*. An expectedly obvious species, and regularly seen hovering over channels and pools, with up to 8 seen daily.

Malachite Kingfisher *Alcedo cristata*. One to four examples of this diminutive species were seen daily in South Luangwa.

Grey headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala*. A few examples of this richly coloured species were seen daily, including one very obliging bird that was swallowing a cricket.

Brown hooded Kingfisher *Halcyon albiventris*. This was another species regularly seen in bushy areas, with up to 5 seen daily.

Woodland Kingfisher *Halcyon senegalensis*. This was the most common dry land kingfisher with 5-10 birds seen daily. We found one bird in an apparent trance, which did not fly when we drove right up to it, the suggestion being it may have swallowed some particularly spiky and intractable mouthful. Hopefully it would recover once digestion proceeded.

Striped Kingfisher *Halcyon chelicuti*. Two examples of this relatively dull kingfisher were seen in scrub on 12/4.

White fronted Bee eater *Merops bullockoides*. The most common Bee eater, usually seen in small groups (the species shows cooperative breeding). They were nesting in the river cliffs along the Luangwa River, with c50 seen daily.

Little Bee eater *Merops pusillus*. A common and widespread species several small parties encountered daily in savannah with scattered bushes.

European Bee eater *Merops apiaster*. We arrived back from our morning drive on 10/4 to find the airspace above the lodge full of the rainbow birds, but inevitably the flock soon moved on.

Southern Carmine Bee eater *Merops nubivoides*. This species was certainly not a dead cert, as the vast majority had migrated after completing breeding, but on 8/4 far carrying calls, very similar to European Bee eater revealed the presence of a flock of 20 of these gorgeous birds flying down river.

Lilac breasted Roller *Coracias caudata*. This common species provided a splash of brilliant colour throughout the park, with 10-20 seen daily.

Racket tailed Roller *Coracias spatulata*. We had very close views of this unobtrusive species of mopane woodland on two occasions.

Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus cyanomelas*. Parties of c5 birds were seen in Mopane woodland on 4 day.

Common Scimitarbill *Rhinopomastus cyanomelas*. Sadly the only 'rhino' to be seen in South Luangwa these days! Unlike Woodhoopoes these forage in pairs, and two were seen.

African Hoopoe *Upupa africana*. Just one seen in mopane woodland on 9/4.

Crowned Hornbill *Tockus alboterminatus*. Pairs were seen in riverine woodland in the park on three occasions.

African Grey Hornbill *Tockus nasutus*. A very common species in open woodland.

Red billed Hornbill *Tockus erythrorhynchus*. Rather less numerous than Grey Hornbill, but still a very common species.

Southern Ground Hornbill *Bucorvus leadbeateri*. This impressive and somewhat threatened species obviously maintains a good population in South Luangwa, with three separate families located, with one group of 4 adults.

Crested Barbet *Trachyphonus vaillantii*. One seen in flight on 9/4 was the only barbet of any kind seen.

Lesser Honeyguide *Indicator minor*. An easily overlooked species, except for the conspicuous white outer tail feathers, one was seen flying between trees.

Golden tailed Woodpecker *Campethera albingoni*. One seen on 7/4.

Bennett's Woodpecker *Campethera bennettii*. A nice example of this similar species was watched excavating in a tree hole on 12/4.

Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark *Eremopterix leucotis*. Pairs seen in the park and in the flood plain on the Luangwa, in sandy areas.

Brown throated Martin *Riparia cincta*. Small numbers seen over the Luangwa on two dates.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*. Small numbers were passing through most days.

Wire-tailed Swallow *Hirundo smithii*. The most numerous swallow, seen daily in small numbers around buildings and water courses.

Lesser Striped Swallow *Hirundo abyssinica*. Only singles seen perched on wires with Barn and Wire-tailed Swallows on two days.

African Pied Wagtail *Motacilla aguimp*. Common and confiding around pools and streams.

African Pipit *Anthus cinnamomeus*. Common on the grassy floodplain of the Luangwa, with up to 30 seen daily.

Dark-capped Bulbul *Pycnonotus barbatus*. Very common, its cheery short warble was a characteristic sound of the bush.

Yellow-bellied Greenbul *Chlorocichla flaviventris*. Two examples seen in riverside thickets.

White-browed Robin-chat *Cossypha heuglini*. Just one seen, which was singing from an exposed perch at the park entrance.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*. One singing from thick scrub, a location far removed from Finnish marshland where I last heard this species.

Rattling Cisticola *Cisticola chiniana*. Three birds seen on two days in bushy areas.

Tawny-flanked Prinia *Prinia subflava*. A few examples seen in long grass around marshes most days.

Grey-backed Camaroptera *Camaroptera brevicandata*. A few examples seen in the bushy areas around the lodge. The density of woodland birds around the lodge was actually very low, and one would suppose this is probably due to nest predation by the ever present Yellow Baboons and Vervet Monkeys.

Southern Black Flycatcher *Melaenornis pammelaina*. Two seen in woodland on 8th April.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*. One example of this Palearctic migrant seen along the Mushilashi stream.

African Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis*. A few birds seen in open woodland. None were males with full tails.

Arrow-marked Babbler *Turdoides jardineii*. Several parties seen or heard in bushy areas throughout the park.

African Golden Oriole *Oriolus auratus*. Two birds gave a flash of vivid gold as they flew between trees in Mopane woodland.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*. Perhaps surprisingly this was the most numerous Palearctic migrant, with up to 20 seen daily.

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*. This smart bird was seen quite regularly in open habitats, with 1-3 birds seen on most days.

Black-backed Puff-back *Dryoscopus cubia*. One seen near the park entrance on 7th April.

Tropical Boubou *Laniarius aethiopicus*. A pair frequented the bushes around our chalet, although they were typically secretive. Regularly heard elsewhere, as were Grey-headed and Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrikes.

White-crested Helmet-shrike *Prionops plumatus*. One party of 8 birds of this eye catching and social species were seen in Mopane woodland on 8th April.

Retz's Helmet-shrike *Prionops retzii*. Another social species of the canopy, and a new species for me, with two parties seen in mopane woodland on two dates.

Fork-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis*. A common species of woodland edge.

Black Cuckooshrike *Campephaga flava*. Three examples of this canopy species – one jet black male, and two yellow and black females.

Pied Crow *Corvus albus*. Common around the airport in Lusaka, but not seen elsewhere.

Greater Blue-eared Starling *Lamprolornis chalybaeu*. This species of open habitats provided a splash of iridescent colour as they followed grazing animals. Seen daily in fairly large numbers.

Meves's Starling *Lamprolornis mevesii*. This is quite a localized species, but was very common in South Luangwa.

Wattled Starling *Creatophora cinerea*. Small parties seen in two occasions, following grazing animals.

Yellow-billed Oxpeckers *Buphagus africanus*. This species was seen on Buffalo and Giraffes on a number of occasions.

Red-billed Oxpeckers *Buphagus erythrorhynchus*. Rather more common than the preceding species, and seen daily on Impala, Zebra, Buffalo and Giraffe.

White-browed Sparrow-weaver *Plocepasser mahali*. An abundant species in open woodland, and seen daily in large numbers.

Southern Grey-headed Sparrow *Passer diffusus*. A very common species in scrub and open woodland.

Red-billed Buffalo Weaver *Bubalornis niger*. Birds were seen around their nests in Baobab trees, or following grazing animals on a number of days.

Southern Masked Weaver *Plocenus velatus*. Just three birds seen on 7th April.

Village Weaver *Plocenus cucullatus*. Ten birds seen on 10th April in the park.

Red-billed Quelea *Quelea quelea*. Several tight flocks were seen hurtling over the savannah on a number of occasions.

Southern Red Bishop *Euplectes orix*. Males of this species in breeding plumage are an arresting sight as they perch up on stems of long grass, but just three were seen in the park.

Red-billed Firefinch *Lagonosticta senegala*. A few examples of this animated avian plum seen in the park.

Blue Waxbill *Uraeginthus angolensis*. Common along tracksides, with 10-30 seen daily.

Village Indigobird *Vidua chalybeata*. Small numbers of males seen perched up on bushes on 3 days.

Pin-tailed Whydah *Vidua macroura*. One of the eye-catching males was seen with some of the nondescript females on 9th April.

Long-tailed Paradise Whydah *Vidua paradisaea*. A blob trailing a banner, this species was quite common in the park with up to 5 seen daily. Two males were seen flying very high together, presumably in some sort of competitive assessment of each other's finery.

Yellow-fronted Canary *Serinus mozambicus*. Small numbers seen daily in the park.

Mammals

Warthog *Phacochoerus aethiopicus*. Fairly common in South Luangwa NP, with c20 seen daily.

Hippopotamus *Hippopotamus amphibious*. There are large populations of hippo in the Luangwa River and hundreds could be counted in rafts. Some hippos were seen in temporary pools and lagoons, which presumably would be vacated as the dry season advances. A surprising number of hippos were prepared to leave the river and graze during daylight.

Thornicroft's Giraffe *Giraffe camelopardalis*. Good populations of this sub-species, that has a very restricted range, were present in South Luangwa, with 5-30 seen daily. At night we could view the unusual sight of a herd of Giraffe settled down on their haunches as they slept.

Bushbuck *Tragelaphus scriptus*. The bush and scrubland that covers much of South Luangwa must offer ideal habitat for this species and 5-7 were seen daily, including 2 that visited the Lodge to feed on fallen figs. I failed to get pictures of any of the very handsome males.

Greater Kudu *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*. This elegant and rangy antelope was seen on three days, with a total of 7 animals, including two magnificent bulls crossing the road. It is probably much easier to see this species in the dry season, rather than in the wet season when the animals are more widely distributed.

Common Waterbuck *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*. Small numbers (1-20 animals) were seen daily.

Puku *Kobus vardoni*. This species was the second most numerous antelope species in the park, with c 200 seen daily. They were typically found in grassy swards close to the river. Mating was seen below the lodge. The species has suffered a big range reduction and is endangered or extinct in many countries like Tanzania, but Zambian populations are currently secure.

Impala *Aepyceros melampus*. This quintessential antelope was the most common antelope in the park with c300 seen daily, typically in bachelor herds, or large groups of does accompanied by a single buck.

Cape Buffalo *Syncerus caffer*. This species was seen in five days, most in one large herd of c150 animals that frequented areas around the Mushilashi stream, with isolated bulls or pairs of bulls standing around in truculent style in other locations.

Burchell's (Crawshay's) Zebra *Equus burchelli*. This variant of zebra lacks the shadowing in the white stripes typically found in southern zebra populations. It was seen daily in fairly small numbers – 6-30 animals.

African Elephant *Loxodonta africana*. There are still good populations of elephants in South Luangwa, and herds were encountered throughout the park. Many family groups had very small calves. It was noteworthy that the power of natural selection has led to a significant proportion of tusk-less elephants. One big bull spent the night outside our cabin eating every one of the figs that littered the ground.

Tree Squirrel *Paraxerus cepapi*. These active sprites were common around the lodge and in mopane woodland.

Southern Scrub Hare *Lepus saxatilis*. Not very common, with just two singles seen whilst spotlighting.

African Wild Dog *Lycaon pictus*. After failing to see this species after 2 weeks in Botswana I hardly dared hope we might see it in Zambia, let alone get the views we had. Josephat said he would normally expect to see Wild Dog perhaps 4 times a year so we were incredibly fortunate to see two separate packs of 7 and 6 animals, and to see a pack on a kill, and two, albeit unsuccessful, hunts.

African Civet *Viverra civetta*. We had very good views of this handsomely marked animal on two spotlight drives, as they foraged on the ground, close to the road.

Servaline (Large-spotted) Genet *Genetta tigrina*. This small carnivore was really quite common, and the species was seen on every night drive, with up to 6 seen in an evening. As always, an extremely lithe and elegant mammal.

Slender Mongoose *Herpestes sanguineus*. This diurnal species was seen on two occasions, typical views were of it running at speed, with the black tipped tail held high.

Banded Mongoose *Mungos mungo*. Two separate groups of this highly social carnivore were seen, c15 in each. One gave very good views as they sunned themselves on a log in the early morning, while the other group was seen dashing across the road.

White-tailed Mongoose *Ichneumia albicauda*. One example of this large, solitary and nocturnal mongoose was seen on a night drive, and I spotlighted 1-2 examples on 3 nights on the flood plain below the lodge in my futile searches for the Pel's Fishing Owl.

Bushy-tailed Mongoose *Bdeogale crassicauda*. This species is one of the relatively long legged dog mongoose group, and was a species new to me. Two singles were seen while spotlighting on 9th April, and a pair together on 12th April. They were all apparently rather shy and quickly fled into cover.

Spotted Hyena *Crocuta crocuta*. Four animals, all singles, were seen while spotlighting. One wandered around the tree which held a Leopard, possibly because it was trying to locate any kill the Leopard may have hidden away. Another padded along the road towards us, carrying the leg of a Buffalo calf.

Lion *Panthera leo*. The pride of lions that frequented the Mushalashi stream was seen on 4 occasions, thanks to their tendency to lie out on the sand of the river bed. There were 13 Lions in this pride, with 6 adult females, the rest were well grown cubs of c10-12 months old. As expected they were generally seen asleep, but they were watched setting out to hunt on the evening of 11th April, and they were certainly searching for prey on the final morning. Two splendid males were seen relaxing in the evening of 10th April.

Leopard *Panthera pardus*. We had an impressive run of Leopard sightings, at least partly because spotlighting was allowed in the park. The most stunning views were of the Leopard in the tree on the first evening, the mother and cubs on the second, and the amazing spectacle of a Leopard sliding under our vehicle during the morning of 12th April. As always its combination of stealth, power, balance and beauty makes it the number one animal for me.

Greater Galago *Otolemur crassicaudatus*. I spotlighted one in the fig tree outside our cabin after I heard it giving the loud croaking call, while another 2 were seen rather briefly in tree canopies on two night drives.

Yellow Baboon *Papio cynocephalus*. This rangy baboon, with its distinctively 'broken' tail was common throughout the park with large troops of up to 140 individuals regularly encountered.

Vervet Monkey *Circopithecus aethiops*. A similarly common species, and ever-present around the lodge, where they often fed in the fig tree.

Four-toed Elephant Shrew *Petrodromus tetradactylus*. I was very pleased to see one example of this curious mammal moving through the tangle of vegetation at the base of a bush on the evening of 12th April. Apparently they are much harder to see at this time of year with lush vegetation hiding their activities.

Epauletted Fruit Bats *Epomophorus sp.* Probably belonging to this group, large numbers of fruit bats visited the fruiting fig tree outside our cabin each night. They were very difficult to view when they landed.

Reptiles and other taxa

Several Nile crocodiles were seen along the Luangwa and channels on the flood plain, although none would compare with the truly massive ones that can be seen in places like the Grumeti River. Nile Monitors were also quite common, and a Terrapin, Geckos, day Geckos, Skinks and an unidentified snake were around the lodge. Matabele Ants on the move gave an impression of purpose and lethal power, albeit on a very small scale!



Impala & Red-billed Oxpecker