

Zambia's South Luangwa National Park (Mammals)

Naturetrek Tour Report

5th – 13th November 2022



African Wild Dog



Lion and cub



Leopard



Grey crowned Crane

Tour report & photos by Julie Evans



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Summary

Seventeen Naturetrek clients arrived in Mfuwe airport after a full day travelling via Dubai or Johannesburg to meet with our three guides from Kafunta River Lodge who also drove the large safari vehicles. Groups of five and six were travelling together and decided to stay together for the duration of the trip, travelling with John and Ernest. That left six of us, Richard & Geraldine, Donna, Heulwyn, Clare and myself to travel with David. This report only reflects the trip of our group of six, as there were no daily gatherings for checklist completion or comparing the days sightings for all three vehicles.

The sun had gone down but the temperature was still high as we drove through villages busy with many people walking and cycling, eventually reaching forest areas and arriving at the lodge. Even in the dark, Kafunta River Lodge looks amazing. Ten chalets surround a central gathering area with space for eating al fresco, facing out onto South Luangwa National Park. Built over a hot spring, there is a constant supply of water to feed both guests and wildlife. Tap water is safe to drink, although a little warm! After an introduction to the lodge from manager Kolo, we had time to freshen up before dinner in the open air watching the ghostly shapes of hippos eating only a few feet away.

Every day had the same structure

- Wake up call at 5.00
- Breakfast at 5.15
- Safari starting at 6.00
- Tea and biscuits in the park around 9.30
- Return to the lodge around 10.30
- Buffet lunch at 11.30
- Iced coffee and cakes at 3.30
- Safari starting at 4.00
- Sundowner drinks and snacks in the park at 6.00
- Return to the lodge around 7.30
- Dinner at 8.00
- Sleep and repeat!

Temperatures were very high at the beginning of the week with strong sunshine. By the end of the week it was more overcast, and temperatures had dropped slightly. Numbers are difficult - using the thermometer in the shade at the lodge, temperatures fell from 28 to 25. Using my phone when internet connection was available, the local temperature was 38 on Tuesday and 32 by Saturday. We saw lightning in the distance during dinner on Wednesday and there was a short rain shower on Friday afternoon. Rain is unusual here, flooding in the park occurs due to heavy rain upriver. During the rainy season, temperatures may drop to 18!

Safaris in the National Park were obviously the main attraction of this trip, and our group chose to add the afternoon safari every day. There are two entrances into South Luangwa, the main gate or a river crossing. Morning drives generally accessed the park via the main gate, using the 20 minute drive to spot birds and small mammals in the trees along the road. Afternoon drives used the river crossing. Although we were told that the water isn't deep,

it was still very disconcerting to drive into the river next to hippos and the occasional crocodile, especially as the vehicle was heavily leaning to one side!

Day 1

Monday 7th November

The first stop of our first game drive was on the bank of the Luangwa river to view a colony of Southern Carmine bee eaters. These amazing little birds dig two metre tunnels into the river bank to lay their eggs. They then catch bees, bash them to remove the stings and fly into the burrows to feed their chicks. When the rains come, they will return south for the summer. After spending time with the birds, we entered the park via the river crossing and spent time viewing and learning about some of the wildlife native to Zambia. This included Crawshay's Zebra (a subspecies of the Plains zebra, found only in Zambia), Spotted Hyena, Elephants and birds such as the African Fish Eagle, the colourful Lilac-breasted Roller and the Southern Ground Hornbill.

Back at the lodge we recovered from the heat and enjoyed a lovely lunch, communicated to us by the sound of African drums played by one of the staff. Elephants and Yellow Baboons provided our entertainment throughout the afternoon and we had our first view of a pair of beautiful Grey Crowned Cranes.

On our evening drives we were joined by Elias, a guide in training who would act as night-time spotter and sundowner barman. Our first focus today was Hippos wallowing in the river, occasionally arguing and jostling for space, and after a short drive into the park, two sleeping Lions. Following our sundowner drink we returned to the Lions and watched them for a while before driving through the dark back to the lodge, spotting Scrub Hare and Hippos along the way.

Day 2

Tuesday 8th November

This morning we entered the park through the main gate, getting wonderful views up and down the Luangwa river in the beautiful morning light. We started by watching Thornicroft's Giraffe, a subspecies found only in this park, distinguishable by its lighter coloured face. This was followed by a Lioness with two very young cubs, a Leopard in a tree and a pack of African Hunting Dogs - the second most endangered species in Africa. A morning packed with highlights!

Back at the lodge we spent some time in the bird hide, spotting not only birds but also a white Tree Frog and a monitor lizard. We also noticed a nest in one of the light fittings, and eventually saw both the male and female Scarlet-chested Sunbird that it belonged to.

This afternoon's safari started at the river bank watching Elephants on the opposite side. When it became apparent that they were going to cross the river, we got the vehicle into a good position and waited. It was tense! The herd crossed and climbed up the bank only feet in front of us, but one very small baby couldn't manage the climb so had to go back with his mother. They tentatively joined another herd and there was much thinking about what to do next! We drove along the bank and watched the Hippos yawning and African Skimmers feeding from the river surface until the herd made a decision and started walking in our direction. They crossed not far from where we were sitting, Hippos moving to let them through, and this time they all succeeded in getting across!

Day 3

Wednesday 9th November

Another morning drive, more Elephants! Also a sounder of Warthogs with young ones, some Cape Buffalo, several species of waterbirds, good views of Hooded Vultures and the usual Impala and Puku. So much to see!

At the lodge, Elephants and Yellow Baboons were out in force, all clearly viewed from the balconies of our chalets.

This afternoon just as we entered the park we had a sighting of a Cookson's Wildebeest - a subspecies that is only found in the Luangwa valley. We continued through the park and started to hear alarm calls from Impala and baboons. As we drove around a bend we found a young baboon seriously injured. David said this was most likely a Leopard attack, so we set off to find the culprit! We didn't have to go far. Just a few metres along the road, there was the Leopard lying in the long grass. We watched him move around for a while until he settled, now unseen by the Impala. They would soon forget his presence and he would be ready for a meal!

We moved away for our sundowner drink and snack - pizza and peanuts tonight! When that was finished, we went back to the Leopard. With the spotlight we were able to watch him go down the river bank and drink and then return to his hunting ground, where we left him to choose an Impala. Our return drive to the lodge found the usual Scrub Hare and another partial view of a Large-spotted Genet. One day we'll get to see the whole creature!

Day 4

Thursday 10th November

This morning's drive started with watching the fishermen. They use small carved boats to leave their nets across the river and then remove the fish by hand. They are always in danger from the Hippos and Crocodiles, but fish is the main protein in the local diet and fishing is a good way to earn a living.

In the park we found a pride of Lions, all sleeping with big round bellies close to the remains of the Buffalo they had killed and eaten the previous night. There was little activity so we left them to recover from their meal and continued through the park. After good sightings of Giraffe, Zebra, Puku and Impala we returned to the lodge.

Back to the Carmine Bee-eaters this afternoon. We went down the river bank using the same path that the Elephants had used earlier in the week, and watched the birds go in and out of their nests from a different perspective - but only after Elias had taken off his shoes to repair the sandbank footbridge that had been disturbed by the Elephants!

In the park we spent time watching a dazzle of Zebras rolling in the dust to get rid of parasites. We had a close sighting of a small herd of Buffalo, watching the oxpeckers remove flies from their eyes and nose. We sat in the vehicle relying on DEET to keep the flies off us! We also saw a bachelor herd of male Greater Kudu practicing their fighting skills.

Sightings in the dark tonight included a good view of an African Civet, a Banded Mongoose, several Hippo and a Scrub Hare.

Day 5

Friday 11th November

On our morning drive we returned to the scene of the lion kill, hoping to see scavengers. We were rewarded by three species of vulture - Hooded, White-backed and Lappet-faced. After spotting my favourite bird, the African Hoopoe, we found the Lionesses, all resting under the trees and a lone lion protecting the hiding place of the Lion cubs. Another new bird was added to the list, a flock of Lilian's Lovebirds, and we saw many flocks of Red-billed Quelea, known locally as locust birds because of the way they look in flight.

As the weather was cooler it was much easier to wander around the grounds of the lodge looking for birds, and most of us saw the Green-winged Pytilia, the Blue Waxbill, the Tropical Boubou and the Collared Palm Thrush.

At this time of year Impala calves are born, and we saw many new borns on this afternoon's drive. Calves have to be able to walk within 20 minutes of birth and after a few days can run faster than their mothers. We also saw Hyena, both before and after sunset and tonight, at last, we had a good sighting of a Large-spotted Genet!

Day 6

Saturday 12th November

The highlight of our last morning drive was finding the Wild Dogs again. They hadn't been spotted since our sighting on Tuesday, so we considered ourselves very lucky. We heard the calls of three different cuckoo species, a sure sign of the season changing as they only arrive for the rains. Because of the cooler weather, the park had been quieter while the animals adjusted to the change, so finding something new was a challenge! We took a different route and drove down an incline thorough a sandy valley. And we got stuck in the sand! We didn't have to wait long for Ernest to come to our rescue, and we were quickly towed out so we could return to the lodge.

This afternoon we found the Lions again, one of the females in clear sight walking along the road. We stopped by the river and watched hungry Crocodiles feeding on a dead Hippo, ripping off chunks of flesh and throwing it up in the air to catch it and eat it. And then we found a pair of Leopards, at a distance but in clear sight on the river bank. We watched for a while and then moved away. Our sundowner drink was interrupted when the Leopards started to move. We left the drinks untended and rushed back hoping they would move closer, but we weren't lucky this time. We were able to watch them in the spotlight for a while, but when they went out of sight we returned to our drinks.

During the return to the lodge, the spotlight highlighted a Thick-tailed Bushbaby climbing in a tree, a Porcupine and a Spotted Eagle-Owl. A great end to our last drive!

Day 7

Sunday 13th November

Not wanting to waste any time at all, we booked a walking safari for the last morning of our holiday. It will be fine we thought, it's cooler now. So we set out just before 6 o'clock, picked up our scout with his gun and crossed the river into the park. We learned about termite nests, we saw an Antlion and heard about its life cycle, and we spotted footprints of several animals. We watched the Elephants come back across the river, making sure we weren't standing in any potential paths. David explained about some of the plants and how they are used for local remedies and we saw birds of prey starting to soar in the thermals. And then it got hot, and walking became quite

uncomfortable! We stopped in the shade for tea and coffee and David sent Elias to fetch the vehicle to us. We just couldn't stand the heat!!

Back over the river one last time. All that was left was showering, packing and a last lunch before the drive to Mfuwe airport, this time in the light so we could see the villages along the way.

What an amazing holiday! Thank you Geraldine, Richard, Donna, Heulwyn and Clare for your company, and thank you to all the staff at Kafunta River Lodge, especially David for looking after us so well and sharing your knowledge and passion for the wildlife of your country.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Spur-winged Goose	<i>Plectropterus gambensis</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Knob-billed Duck	<i>Sarkidiornis melanotos</i>				✓		✓	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Natal Spurfowl	<i>Pternistis natalensis</i>						✓	
Red-necked Spurfowl	<i>Pternistis afer</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
Swainson's Spurfowl	<i>Pternistis swainsonii</i>			✓	✓		✓	
Yellow-billed Stork	<i>Mycteria ibis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
African Openbill	<i>Anastomus lamelligerus</i>						✓	
Abdim's Stork	<i>Ciconia abdimii</i>				✓			
Saddle-billed Stork	<i>Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Marabou Stork	<i>Leptoptilos crumenifer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
African Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hadada Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
African Spoonbill	<i>Platalea alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>			✓	✓	✓		
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓				✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-headed Heron	<i>Ardea melanocephala</i>		✓		✓			
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			✓	✓			
Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>		✓	✓	✓			
Pink-backed Pelican	<i>Pelecanus rufescens</i>		✓					
African Harrier-Hawk	<i>Polyboroides typus</i>			✓				
Hooded Vulture	<i>Necrosyrtes monachus</i>			✓		✓		
White-backed Vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>		✓			✓		
Lappet-faced Vulture	<i>Torgos tracheliotos</i>					✓		
African Crowned Eagle	<i>Stephanoaetus coronatus</i>						✓	
Brown Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinereus</i>					✓		
Western Banded Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinerascens</i>				✓		✓	
Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>					✓		
African Hawk-Eagle	<i>Aquila spilogaster</i>			✓				
Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>	✓			✓	✓		✓
African Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Crowned Crane	<i>Balearica regulorum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Thick-knee	<i>Burhinus vermiculatus</i>					✓	✓	✓
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		✓			✓		
Blacksmith Lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus albiceps</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kittlitz's Plover	<i>Charadrius pecuarius</i>					✓		
Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>		✓		✓	✓		
African Jacana	<i>Actophilornis africanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓						
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓	✓		✓		
African Skimmer	<i>Rynchops flavirostris</i>		✓		✓		✓	
African Mourning Dove	<i>Streptopelia decipiens</i>		✓		✓		✓	
Red-eyed Dove	<i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>					✓		

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Emerald-spotted Wood Dove	<i>Turtur chalcospilos</i>			✓	✓		✓	
Grey Go-away-bird	<i>Corythaixoides concolor</i>					✓		
Jacobin Cuckoo	<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>					H		
Red-chested Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus solitarius</i>						H	
African Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus gularis</i>						H	
Spotted Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo africanus</i>						✓	
African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>		✓					
White-rumped Swift	<i>Apus caffer</i>		✓	✓				
Lilac-breasted Roller	<i>Coracias caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Broad-billed Roller	<i>Eurystomus glaucurus</i>				✓			
Grey-headed Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon leucocephala</i>						✓	
Brown-hooded Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Malachite Kingfisher	<i>Corythornis cristatus</i>		✓		✓			
Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Bee-eater	<i>Merops pusillus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-fronted Bee-eater	<i>Merops bullockoides</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Southern Carmine Bee-eater	<i>Merops nubicoides</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
African Hoopoe	<i>Upupa africana</i>					✓	✓	
Green Wood Hoopoe	<i>Phoeniculus purpureus</i>				✓			
Southern Ground Hornbill	<i>Bucorvus leadbeateri</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Southern Red-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus rufirostris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Crowned Hornbill	<i>Lophoceros alboterminatus</i>					✓		
Trumpeter Hornbill	<i>Bycanistes bucinator</i>			✓				
Cardinal Woodpecker	<i>Dendropicos fuscescens</i>				✓	✓		
Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>					✓		
Lilian's Lovebird	<i>Agapornis lilianae</i>					✓		
Black-backed Puffback	<i>Dryoscopus cubla</i>			✓				
Tropical Boubou	<i>Laniarius major</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>			✓		✓		
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	✓				✓		
Dark-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus tricolor</i>					✓		
Yellow-bellied Greenbul	<i>Chlorocichla flaviventris</i>					✓		
Brown-throated Martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>	✓				✓		
Wire-tailed Swallow	<i>Hirundo smithii</i>				✓			
Grey-backed Camaroptera	<i>Camaroptera brevicaudata</i>					✓		
Meves's Starling	<i>Lamprotornis mevesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Yellow-billed Oxpecker	<i>Buphagus africanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-billed Oxpecker	<i>Buphagus erythrorhynchus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Collared Palm Thrush	<i>Cichladusa arquata</i>				✓	✓		
Scarlet-chested Sunbird	<i>Chalcomitra senegalensis</i>	✓		✓	✓			
White-browed Sparrow-Weaver	<i>Plocepasser mahali</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>						✓	✓
Red-billed Buffalo Weaver	<i>Bubalornis niger</i>						✓	
Red-billed Quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Green-winged Pytilia	<i>Pytilia melba</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Jameson's Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta rhodopareia</i>			✓		✓		
Blue Waxbill	<i>Uraeginthus angolensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
African Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla aguimp</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dusky Lark	<i>Pinarocorys nigricans</i>	✓						
Cape turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Black shouldered kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>					✓		

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	November						
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Four-toed Sengi (Elephant shrew)	<i>Petrodromus tetradactylus</i>			✓				
African Bush Elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vervet	<i>Chlorocebus pygerythrus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Yellow Baboon	<i>Papio cynocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scrub Hare	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cape Porcupine	<i>Hystrix africaeaustralis</i>						✓	
Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>		✓	✓			✓	
Bushy-tailed Mongoose	<i>Bdeogale crassicauda</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Slender Mongoose	<i>Herpestes sanguineus</i>			✓				
Banded Mongoose	<i>Mungos mungo</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Spotted Hyaena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>	✓	✓			✓		
African Civet	<i>Civettictis civetta</i>				✓			
Central African Large-spotted Genet	<i>Genetta maculata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
African Wild Dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>		✓				✓	
Plains Zebra - subspecies Crawshay's zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Hippopotamus	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Puku	<i>Kobus vardonii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
African Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer caffer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bushbuck	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Greater Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	✓			✓		✓	
Thornicroft's Giraffe	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Tree squirrel	<i>Paraxerus cepapi</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cookson's Wildebeest	<i>[Connochaetes taurinus, ssp. cooksoni]</i>			✓		✓	✓	
Thick-tailed Bushbaby	<i>Otolemur crassicaudatus</i>						✓	

Reptiles

Skink sp seen daily

Nile Crocodile, Monitor Lizard



Southern Carmine Bee-eater