

Zambia's South Luangwa National Park (Mammals)

Naturetrek Tour Report

15th – 24th April 2023



Wild Dog



Hippopotamus



Lions



Leopard

Tour report and photos kindly compiled by the group



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Tour participants: Ernest (wildlife guide), Zagwa (night-drive spotter), twelve Naturetrek clients

Summary

This report is compiled from the experience of the clients in one of two vehicles on this tour. This mammal tour of Zambia's South Luangwa National Park during the green season more than lived up to our high expectations. Thanks to our excellent guide, each day brought new habitats and species, and we enjoyed some memorable wildlife encounters. Among the predators, we were transfixed by Wild Dogs hunting and socialising; Lions on a kill or sleeping off their meal; Spotted Hyenas scavenging; and Leopards on the lookout, resting up or patrolling territory at night. We watched a frenetic pack of Banded Mongooses on the move and, at the other extreme, a graceful group of Thornicroft's Giraffes delicately browsing the tops of bushes. We had great views of Elephants, Crawshay's Zebras, Warthog, Impala and Puku. We admired the shy Bushbuck, handsome Waterbuck, magnificent Greater Kudu and a cantankerous solitary male Buffalo. The Baboon troops surveyed us with contempt at the Park gate while vervet monkeys foraged quietly nearby and Smith's Bush Squirrels scampered up the trees. Hippos were numerous in the extensive pools of water, often partly hidden among the Nile Cabbage; Crocodiles lay motionless on the banks, camouflaged as logs; Monitor Lizards remained still as stone as they warmed up in the sun. We had good views of both Civet and Genet in the spotlight at night as well as regular sightings of Scrub Hare, Four-toed Elephant Shrew, Bushy-tailed and White-tailed Mongoose and, just once, a Bushbaby. The tiny Flap-necked Chameleon was an unexpected spot.

And then there were the birds – too numerous to list here (see Appendix), we saw over 100 species of which the undoubted highlight was the rare and impressive Pel's Fishing Owl. Birds were everywhere, colourful and active, large and small, perched photogenically nearby, inviting your attention. From the huge but elusive Southern Ground Hornbill and Grey-crowned Crane to the more common Helmeted Guineafowl, Sacred Ibis, African Spoonbill, Yellow-billed and African Openbill stork, there were always birds to see. Raptors included African Fish Eagle, Snake Eagle, African Harrier-Hawk, Bateleur, Lizard Buzzard and Hooded, Lappet-faced, White-backed and White-headed Vulture. We marvelled at the spectacular colours of the Woodland and Grey-headed Kingfisher, Little and White-fronted Bee-eater, Lilac-breasted Roller, Greater Blue-eared and Meves's Starling; we admired the gorgeous Fork-tailed Drongo, White-breasted Sunbird and African Paradise Flycatcher; we enjoyed watching the tiny but self-important Southern Red Bishop; and we were always accompanied by the song of the Mourning Collared Dove and Cape Turtle Dove. Busy colonies of White-browed Sparrow Weaver greeted us every morning as we set off through the mopane woodland and nightjars delighted us every night as they flew in our spotlight.

Overall, our week-long stay at Kafunta River Lodge was magical - a perfect combination of luxury lodge and superb safari. The Lodge is beautifully situated in a remote and peaceful setting with wildlife interest on the doorstep and expansive views across the floodplain to the Luangwa river and the South Luangwa National Park. Everything is top class from the comfortable accommodation in private thatched huts to the spacious terrace and outdoor dining area with infinity pool and seating/viewing areas. The meals were delicious and varied, with care and attention paid to individual preferences. The staff are lovely and could not have been more helpful: the more they could do for you, the happier they were. They are undoubtedly a brilliant team dedicated to making sure their guests have a wonderful time. While the mammal sightings were the highlight for us, the whole experience was superb.

Days 1-2

Saturday & Sunday 15th & 16th April

Our holiday didn't really start until we arrived in Mfuwe even though by then we had been travelling for more than 24 hours – the Emirates flights from the UK via Dubai to Lusaka were long, but necessary. The airports were efficient and trouble free; the automated check-in at Heathrow took just five minutes and we were through to departure in about half an hour, leaving us with a long wait until the flight. The transfer to Proflight in Lusaka was straightforward: our baggage was collected quickly, and we were waiting in the departure area with an hour to spare. By this time, the twelve Naturetrek clients had spotted one another so we used the time making introductions and getting to know one another a little. The one-hour flight from Lusaka to Mfuwe on a small, propellor-driven plane was good fun, giving us our first glimpse of the Luangwa River and the National Park. We arrived late in the afternoon at tiny Mfuwe airport where we received a very warm welcome from Ernest and David, our guides from Kufunta River Lodge. The sun was setting, the air was warm and the sounds of Africa were around us. Although weary, we were looking forward to an exciting week ahead and the sight of two safari jeeps parked outside ready to take us on the last leg of the journey confirmed we were really on our way.

Ernest and David loaded us and our luggage into the vehicles: six guests in each, spread between three rows of stepped seats, a sun canopy overhead and plenty of room for us and our day sacks. The welcome gift of a personalised water bottle was a nice touch. It was a relief to breathe the fresh air on the one-hour journey from Mfuwe to Kafunta. Darkness had fallen so we could not see much of the countryside but there was plenty of activity in the villages we passed through. We left the tarmac for the last part of the drive and bumped over dirt tracks and through muddy puddles. The previous week had seen lots of unseasonal rainfall, turning parts of the track to a quagmire and slowing progress.

We received rapturous greetings when we finally arrived at Kafunta and were blown away by the beauty of the spot and the friendliness of the staff. After a few quick formalities, we were shown to our comfortable rooms in private thatched huts, each with a verandah overlooking the floodplain and across to the Luangwa river. The water was lapping the edge a few feet away and we could hear Hippos quarrelling nearby. Each time we wanted to go to the main Lodge after dark we had to summon a guard with a torch to make sure we didn't bump into one of the Hippos who come onshore to graze around the huts.

The rooms were spacious and the beds comfortable, protected by mosquito nets and cooled by a ceiling fan. The small fridge was well stocked, chilled drinking water was replaced daily and there were tea/coffee making facilities. Insect repellent was provided, although we didn't need it during our stay. There was adequate storage space, easy chairs and further seating on the verandah outside for relaxation and wildlife viewing. The bathroom was roomy with a good shower, toiletries and towels. Laundry could be left for collection in the morning and was returned washed and ironed in the afternoon.

We had a short time to catch our breath and freshen up before being summoned to dinner by African drums, setting the pattern for the week. All twelve Naturetrek guests ate together at one long table, and we enjoyed the first of many excellent meals, beautifully presented and attentively served by an army of smiling staff. There were just two other guests at the Lodge besides our party. We did not linger after dinner, being acutely aware of the early wake-up call ahead of our first safari drive the next morning.

Day 3

Monday 17th April

A gentle knock on the door at 5.15am announced it was time to be up and about, even though it was still quite dark. After a quick, continental-style breakfast we met our guides, clambered into the two safari jeeps and were away by 6am. It was full daylight by now and we had our first views of the surrounding landscape. The floodplain in front of the Lodge was deep underwater and the route out involved fording some substantial pools, all negotiated skilfully by our guide.

Further away from the Lodge, the tracks and roads became busy with local people heading out for a day's fishing or firewood collecting. The wet weather, combined with the impact of heavy trucks ferrying people to work, had rutted and damaged the dirt tracks so that progress was slow and rough. Our group of six quickly worked out that the further back in the jeep, the more uncomfortable the ride, so we were glad of the clear advice from Naturetrek to rotate seat occupancy – as the week wore on, we looked forward keenly to our turn in the front seats, and not just for the best wildlife viewing!

The 20-km drive to the Park gate took us through Elephant-browsed mopane woodland and more open marshy areas with standing water then scrubby patches at the edge of the nearest village. On our first day, it was all new and fascinating, although by the end of our stay, after the 28th repetition (!), we felt we knew every turn and pothole. The route went through the game management area that abuts the Park and is well-used by wildlife. Our guide pointed out fresh Lion prints in the sandy soil of the track not far from Kafunta and we soon spotted Puka, a small group of Elephants with a calf, and Impala in ones and twos. At the modest Park gate, where we paused while our guide checked us in, we were surrounded by a sizeable troop of Yellow Baboons going about their business unperturbed by the human visitors; Vervet Monkeys were less bold but no less interesting.

Once in the Park, the animals were more abundant and seemed mostly undisturbed by the vehicles and people. There were other tourist jeeps around, but we encountered them infrequently. We watched a lone Elephant feeding right by the track and, later, a small family group close by. An area of open water concealed Hippos and Crocodiles. We caught a glimpse of a Sharpe's Grysbok in the thick scrub and a Smith's Bush Squirrel dashing across the track. There were many Impala and Crawshay's Zebra, often grazing together, the Zebras showcasing the beautiful markings of their subspecies and the Impala the nervous grace of a key prey species; a beautiful Bushbuck completed the morning's tally of ungulates. Our first sighting of Warthogs was a typical view from behind with tails held high as they trotted away; by contrast a large Monitor Lizard remained motionless and well-camouflaged on some roadside deadwood.



From the outset, the birders in our vehicle were delighted by the sheer abundance of different species, all to be spotted, identified and photographed. There was so much to see that the 45-minute trip from the Lodge to the Park gate turned into a 90-minute marathon as each new sighting was inspected through binoculars. Birdlife was even more abundant in the Park and our guide was brilliant at spotting and identifying everything that crossed our path. The species list for day 1, roughly in order seen, included Great White Egret, Spur-winged Goose, Black-crowned Night Heron, White-browed Sparrow Weaver, Lilian's Lovebird, Yellow-billed Stork, African Grey Hornbill, Southern Red-billed Hornbill, Hamerkop, Meves's Starling, Woodland Kingfisher, Greater blue-eared Starling, Mourning Collared Dove, White-fronted Bee-eater, Blue Waxbill, African Openbill stork, Dideric Cuckoo, Wire-tailed Swallow, White-rumped Swift, African Palm Swift, Brown-hooded kingfisher, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, White-faced Whistling Duck, Egyptian Goose, African Sacred Ibis, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, Hooded, White-backed and Lappet-faced Vulture, Western Helmeted Guineafowl, Grey Go-away Bird, African Spoonbill, Grey-backed Heron, African Jacana, Tropical Boubou, Lilac-breasted Roller, Little Bee-eater, White-fronted Bee-eater, Martial Eagle, Bateleur, Collared Pratincole, Three-banded Courser, Water Thick-knee, Spectacled Weaver, Red-faced Mousebird, Saddle-billed Stork, Marabou Stork, Grey Heron, African Darter, Banded Snake-Eagle, Jacobin Cuckoo, Long-tailed Paradise Whydah, Fork-tailed Drongo and African Fish Eagle!



At around 9am, the two Naturetrek jeeps met up in open area of bush where the guides produced some very welcome coffee and cookies. This was a chance to look more closely at some of the plants and insects while stretching our legs. The vegetation was lush, the Park very green, the birds were colourful and active, and the wildlife looked well-fed and in good condition. Although the density of the vegetation limited the wider views and made it difficult to see some of the animals, this was offset by their abundance and the number of young. However, in the green season flooding limits accessibility and we were only able to visit a relatively small area of the Park. Our guide was expert at negotiating the flooded tracks and knew the area intimately, making sure we saw all the different habitats we could reach - bushy grassland, wood pasture, marshy swampland, riverine and wooded areas, standing water, lagoons and pools, plains and open savannah.

Following our coffee break, we wound our way back towards the Park gate and retraced our route from there to Kafunta Lodge. The access road at the edge of the floodplain was under water in places but the sight of a beautiful African Fish Eagle distracted us from the likelihood of getting stuck as we approached the Lodge. By the end of the week, the water had retreated back to the main river and the tracks were dry.

Once back at base we had time to freshen up before enjoying a substantial lunch served on the terrace overlooking the floodplain and across to the Luangwa river and Park on the far bank. There was wildlife interest on the doorstep with Hippos, Crocodiles, herons, geese, African Spoonbills and much more to be spotted while we ate. We had a couple of hours to relax and enjoy the Lodge facilities before reconvening with



our guide at 3pm to make a record of what we'd seen that morning using the Naturetrek checklists (see Appendix). Iced tea and coffee, sandwiches and cakes were on hand to help the task along. Once this was done, we headed out in the jeeps for our afternoon drive. This time, Ernest, our guide, was joined by Zagwa, our night spotter, who would be deploying the spotlight after dark to see what we could find.

The second journey of the day was much quicker and it was clear that our guide, Ernest, had a destination in mind. In the Park, we diverted off the main track and splashed along flooded trails until we reached a spot where a number of safari jeeps were clustered. We'd seen vultures in the nearby tree-tops so the sight of a Lion pride and



a half-eaten Buffalo wasn't a surprise, but we couldn't fail to be awe-struck in the presence of these top predators. We watched the male, three lionesses and seven cubs in fascination as they socialised after their meal; however, being in the midst of a group of jostling tourist jeeps was a new experience since the jeeps were normally widely dispersed and we mostly watched the wildlife on our own.

The Lions had clearly eaten well and appeared largely unfazed by the cluster of watching tourists, even when one of the jeeps became completely and noisily stuck in an adjacent boggy area. Park protocol is a limit of six jeeps gathered around any wildlife at any one time and to move off after five or ten minutes to allow others to take a turn; this was mostly observed but not always.

Having left the Lions, we enjoyed the magic pre-dusk time to watch the wildlife activity from the network of tracks. At around 6pm, we stopped in an open area to stretch our legs, enjoy our 'sundowner' drinks and nibbles and watch the beautiful African sunset usher in a night sky full of stars. One of our party had a small night scope, which allowed us to spot Elephant on the edge of the clearing, moving like giant shadows among the trees. When we moved off again, all eyes were on the beam of the spotlight as Zagwa swung it back and forth along our route. Before long, we spied our first mammal, a large spotted Genet, beautiful and graceful as it hunted among the vegetation; later we saw two more. A Four-toed Sengi or Elephant Shrew appeared briefly in the beam, then a Scrub Hare and several Bushy-tailed Mongooses, one of which we were able to watch hunting for insects. Another good spot was a Lesser Bushbaby that quickly climbed a tree and hid. Finally, our spotter found a tiny and well camouflaged Flap-necked Chameleon on a bush next to the track.

It was approaching 7.30pm and we were soon back at the Lodge where we were greeted by some of the staff, radiating enthusiasm and eager to know what we'd seen. By 8pm we were all seated back on the terrace where we were served a four-course dinner by candlelight. Time to mull over an amazing day but with one eye on the clock and the 5am start. Hippos and Baboons were noisy in the night – apparently a leopard walked through.

Day 4

Tuesday 18th April



The same morning routine but a quicker journey to the Park as our guide had intelligence that Wild Dogs had been sighted. We drove straight to the spot and, sure enough, three or four dogs trotted by the jeep shortly followed by an adult Spotted Hyaena then two younger Hyaenas, each tracking the dogs' movements. The two Kafunta guides worked together to find the dogs again using their knowledge of Wild Dog behaviour and following minor tracks. After 10 minutes of searching, we came across some of the pack bolting down an Impala they'd just killed before charging off again. A message from the other jeep directed us to a place nearby where the dogs had assembled in a remote spot. There followed a magical 20 minutes, with just the other Naturetrek clients for company, watching the pack of around 14 animals interacting with one another at break-neck speed. It was riveting to see them play, quarrel, mate, rest and socialise as if life was on fast forward. An extra highlight was an Impala blundering into the midst of the pack and narrowly escaping with its life, and a Hyaena skulking by to see what it could scavenge. The dogs eventually moved off in ones and twos, leaving us to reflect on how fortunate we'd been to watch these beautiful and rare animals at such close quarters.



We met up with the other Kafunta jeep by a huge 1,000-year-old Baobab tree where we stopped for our coffee break. A bees' nest in the tree, butterflies on the wildflowers, Hippos in the adjacent pool, Waterbuck on the opposite bank and a plethora of birds gave us plenty of interest. Moving off again, we encountered a big Elephant group including a calf and, further on, a bull in musth. There were lots of Zebra, Impala and Puku in this part of the Park and an abundance of birds to add to our list. What a morning!



After lunch, some relaxation and wildlife watching around the Lodge, it was back in the jeep for our afternoon drive. Several Southern Ground Hornbill with scarlet eye patches and wattles, standing about a metre tall, paced slowly through the mopane woodland; an African Barred Owlet peered at us from a tree. Inside the Park, we came across the Wild Dogs again as they streamed past the vehicle and dashed off. We drove back to the site of the earlier Lion kill, passing White-headed and White-backed Vultures squabbling over the remains of another small

kill. A large male Lion guarding a bigger kill under a bush was difficult to see but we had good views of another male who flopped down right next to the jeep and three lionesses sleeping off their meal out in the open.

On the way to our sundowner spot we passed a large group of Elephants scattered across some bushy grassland, including a mother and young calf; we enjoyed our drinks as darkness fell, surrounded by Zebra and Impala. Back in the jeep and just nearby we stopped behind another vehicle with its spotlight trained on a termite mound at the base of an Acacia tree. There, in the beam, we were thrilled to see a resting Leopard! We could see it clearly through binoculars but very soon, probably disturbed by the lights, it stretched and jumped down. We tracked its movements with the night scope but it didn't show itself again. The rest of the night drive was quiet, but we saw Scrub Hare and Bushy-tailed Mongoose in the spotlight. A huge emperor moth flew into the jeep attracted by the light and a nightjar flew around the jeep on the track back to Kafunta.



Day 5

Wednesday 19th April

An Impala skull and ribs on the track as we drove away from the Lodge this morning was a grisly reminder of predators on the prowl at night. At the Park, we were greeted by the Yellow Baboon troop and Vervet Monkeys busily starting their day. We drove a different route past lagoons and pools covered in bright green Nile Cabbage and home to Hippos and an abundance of water and wading birds. One or two Crocodiles were hauled out on the bank with Puku snoozing a safe distance away in the early morning sun. A Warthog family grazed on their knees and Smith's Bush Squirrels scampered up trees. A Monitor Lizard was sunning itself and a Slender Mongoose dashed across the track.

We wound our way down a narrow, overgrown track through puddles and mud. Turning into an open area we scanned a clearing and there was the unmistakable outline of a Giraffe, then more – one male, three females – grazing the tops of some bushes. Graceful, elegant and bizarre, the male splayed his legs to drink at a puddle then all four continued to browse.



These were Thornicroft's Giraffe, endemic to the Park and on our wish list. All credit to our guide for knowing where to look.

At our coffee stop by a beautiful pool, we watched a Woodland Kingfisher dispatching a frog it had caught before swallowing it down. A group of Vervet Monkeys groomed one another at the water's edge. As we moved off, a family of eight Warthog made their way slowly through some grassland by the track giving us great views of these often difficult-to-watch mammals.



Not long afterwards we spotted some movement on the side of the track as a Banded Mongoose dashed across.



More and more appeared, part of a group of around thirty individuals. They ran up and down a bank among trees at the edge of a lagoon, seeming almost to flow as they split into subgroups then reformed into a larger group. Some swam clumsily across a water channel then lost confidence and hurried back to the rest – they were the very epitome of indecisiveness. They were brilliant to watch and another highlight to add to our collection of excellent wildlife sightings.

Back at the Lodge, the floodplain was drying out rapidly revealing muddy channels and showcasing the geese, spoonbills, Sacred Ibis, storks and other wading birds. Unfortunately, the wildlife hide was still unusable but there was plenty to see from the terrace (or infinity pool or hot tub!). A baby Monitor Lizard hunted under the verandah of the hut and the resident Hippo grunted and sighed. The weather was perfect: sunny with a gentle breeze and some scattered cloud. It was hot in the afternoons and a little humid at times but mostly the temperature was lovely.

On our way back to the Park later on, we passed a group of people digging for sand for building work and a big truck being loaded with firewood. We see local people gathering firewood every day but mostly just in ones and twos. The mopane woodland and scrub is cleared of much of the deadwood in this way after the Elephants have broken branches or pushed trees over. Today, we passed a family group of Elephants with a young calf quite near to the Lodge in the woodland. Fishing is another daily activity with most people walking or cycling to their chosen spot.

Once in the Park, we headed down the main track past a big lagoon where our guide spotted a huge Crocodile on the bank, maybe 60 or 70 years old. We headed out to a different area on the way to a huge oxbow lake near to the Luangwa river. We drove through a closed woodland habitat with wet areas and then more open grassland dotted with Zebra, Impala, Puku, Baboons and Elephant as well as good numbers of strikingly beautiful Waterbuck, both young and adults. Birds were everywhere and the



water was full of Hippos and Crocodiles. We met the other Naturetrek jeep at a lookout point on the shore and watched a spectacular sunset while enjoying our sundowners and learning about Zambian culture from our guides.



Later on, the spotlight picked out nightjars swooping around the jeep as we drove parallel to the water. Further into the Park, and away from other jeeps sweeping the area with their own spotlights, we were lucky to find a Civet and watch it hunting for several minutes. The black and white markings on its coat and black mask over its eyes distinguished it from the superficially similar Genet. The drive home was very productive with sightings of Four-toed Elephant Shrew, Scrub Hare, Large-spotted Genet, and both White-tailed and Bushy-tailed Mongoose. On the approach to the Lodge across the floodplain, a nightjar landed on the bonnet of the jeep!

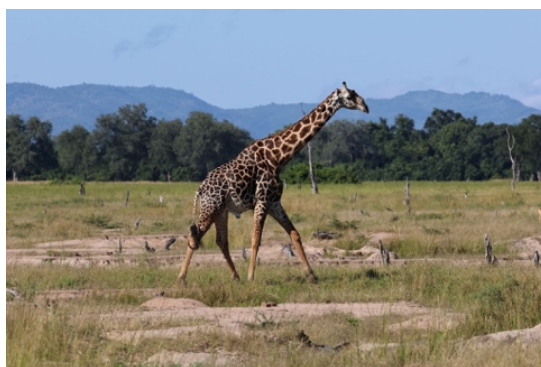
The meal that evening was a traditional barbecue and a chance to meet the chefs and kitchen staff, rounding off another brilliant day.

Day 6

Thursday 20th April

A fresher morning today after a little rain overnight. The drive to the Park was full of birds and birdsong and the air was clear and bright. We had good views of Zebra and Impala at close quarters as well as Puku and Elephant in the distance. We spotted a small Monitor Lizard and enjoyed our regular sighting of Hippos among the Nile Cabbage. Today our guide took us to an open savannah area reminiscent of east African rangelands; it was full of mammals including Elephant, Zebra, Impala, Puku, Warthog and Giraffe in the distance.

We watched a lone male Giraffe slowly striding across the plain to join the rest of the group and were pleased to spot a small group of Kudu to add to our mammal list, the spiral horns of the male unmistakable. As we drove closer to the Giraffe and watched a group of five grazing around a big bush, two Grey-crowned Cranes and four Black-bellied Bustards were exciting additions to the tally of birds seen.



We continued to the far side of the plain next to a marshy area where we watched six or more Giraffe grazing the trees and bushes. We were allowed to leave the jeep here to

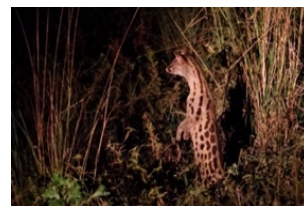
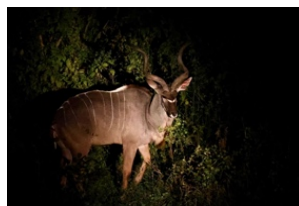
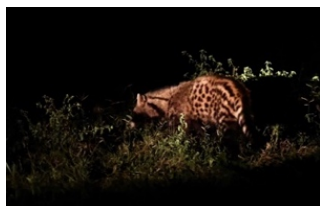


stretch our legs and enjoy our morning coffee surrounded by wildlife; it was wonderful to relax and enjoy this special place on foot for a time. As we headed back a little later, we had close-up views of a Warthog family as well as an Elephant up to its belly in a pool of water, enjoying the Nile Cabbage.

Back at the Lodge, more of the floodplain had appeared, the Hippo channels were clear to see, birds were probing the mud for food and Puku could be seen grazing the far bank. On our way out in the

afternoon we had good views of a African Fish Eagle as well as the usual abundance of smaller birds. In the Park, a male Bushbuck with splendid horns posed briefly for photographs and we drove past Warthog, Zebra, Impala, Puku and Elephant.

We made our way back to the Lion kill where vultures were picking at the bones. We found the pride resting not far away - two males, three lionesses and nine cubs – and watched them for a while but our views were constrained by other jeeps so we decided to come back later. We returned after our sundowner to find the unchanged, so we moved on.



We had to take the long way around as our forward path was blocked by other vehicles, but it turned out to be a good decision as we had our most productive night drive yet. We saw Warthog, Four-toed Elephant Shrew and Scrub Hare in quick succession then a tiny Flap-necked Chameleon. A couple of Genets were spotted and several Bushy-tailed Mongooses.

Not far from the Park gate, a Spotted Hyaena strolled across the track and then more excitement as a Leopard appeared in the spotlight curled up at the side of the track. It roused itself and walked down the track ahead of us before moving into the vegetation where it checked for scent marks and added its own. We continued to follow slowly and were able to watch the Leopard's unhurried evening routine at close quarters for ten minutes or more – a privilege indeed.



The excitement wasn't over as our spotter immediately found the rare and beautiful Pel's Fishing Owl high in a tree next to the track. An impressive bird standing about half a metre tall. A beautiful male Kudu with impressive horns paused briefly near the track completing a brilliant run of sightings over a short distance.

We saw more Bushy-tailed Mongooses outside the Park on the way to the Lodge and a terrapin ambled across the track. The final sightings were of nightjars fluttering in the light and a Hippo dashing in front of the jeep. Later that evening, after dinner, we had to pass cautiously by a Hippo grazing by the footpath to the huts. The splendid day was rounded off by the cheerful sight of fireflies dancing around on the verandah outside the room.

Day 7

Friday 21st April

The game management area between the Lodge and the Park is beautiful in the early morning sun and today we were lucky to spot a small group of Elephants in the mopane wood pasture alongside Puku and a troop of Baboons. The road was busy with people heading out fishing, to collect firewood or heading to work in crowded lorries. The big Baboon troop was spread out near the Park gate and we saw Zebra, Impala and a family of Warthog not far away. We are becoming familiar with the main routes in the Park and were pleased to see one or two Hippos covered in Nile Cabbage in their usual place in the big lagoon.



We were heading down a minor track en-route to the Lions when the call went up to stop – a Leopard was resting, superbly camouflaged, halfway up a tree. A stunningly beautiful animal and, according to our guide, the same female we'd watched in the spotlight last night. It was wonderful to watch her quietly in daylight as she dozed, stretched and snoozed. We moved off reluctantly once other jeeps came to see what we were looking at, giving others a chance to admire her.

We continued on our way to the Lions, pausing frequently to identify and photograph birds. We spotted a Water Monitor Lizard on a small bridge and admired the morning glory in bloom at the side of the track. Fresh Lion scats told us that we were near the pride and, sure enough, round the corner we found two lionesses and the cubs emerging from under a bush. One of the males was flat out in the sun; the second was a little apart, mating with one of the lionesses.



After watching them for a while, the area became busy with other tourist jeeps and we moved off to find somewhere for our morning coffee stop. Another Water Monitor Lizard was spotted high off the ground in a bush and a flock of Guinea fowl hurried past chattering noisily to one another. A juvenile Bateleur rode the thermals. The rest stop was in a lovely, peaceful glade dotted with Baboons, Impala and Puku, next to a large pool of water crowded with Hippos, waterfowl and wading birds.

The afternoon drive took us back towards the Luangwa river and oxbow lake where grazing animals congregate, including Bushbuck, Impala, Zebra and Elephant. We saw Grey-crowned Cranes in an open area dotted with termite mounds. The water was full of Hippos and Crocodiles and skeins of geese and ducks passed overhead, flying back to their roosts. We watched the sunset and enjoyed our sundowners as darkness fell.

Later, the highlight of our night drive was first one, then a second Spotted Hyaena, nose to the ground, searching for signs of anything to catch or scavenge. We had good views of both as they circled round the jeep in the spotlight. Just outside the Park, we saw another vehicle with its red spotlight trained on a Leopard, sitting alert. It moved slowly away as we ticked off our fourth sighting of the week.

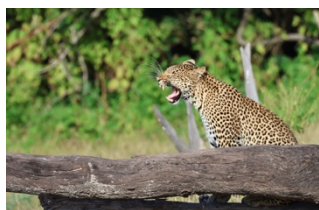


Day 8

Saturday 22nd April

The light was lovely as we drove through the mopane woodland accompanied by the chattering of the colonies of White-browed Sparrow Weavers that greeted us every morning. The Hamerkop was not in its usual position by the stream, but a procession of colourful and active small birds punctuated our drive to the Park. The water level has dropped dramatically over the week and there are now large mudflats near the Park gate. It was quiet in the Park and we watched Southern Ground Hornbills in the trees and made a leisurely circuit of some of the pools that teemed with life. From there we made our way steadily to the Giraffe plains, through grazing areas dotted with Warthog, Zebra, Impala, Puku, Elephant and the occasional Warthog family. We quickly counted ten Giraffes in the distance with Elephant, Zebra and Impala closer by, then excitement as a lone bull Buffalo emerged from some dense bushes just near the track. He looked tired and cantankerous but tolerated the oxpeckers giving his coat the once-over.

Suddenly, there was a cry of "There's a Leopard"! On our penultimate day in South Luangwa Park - famed for its Leopards - we had our best sighting in an open area of grassland on a beautiful, sunny morning in excellent light. We held our breath as the big cat walked over to a fallen tree and climbed to a vantage point, yawned, stretched and surveyed the surrounding landscape. The other wildlife kept its distance. The minutes stretched out as binoculars were pressed to eyes and cameras clicked. There was time to admire its beauty, marvel at its markings and watch its behaviour. After a little while, as the number of watching tourists grew, the Leopard casually moved away and melted into the nearby vegetation.



We drove over to watch the Giraffes, with Impalas, Zebras and Elephants in the distance. On this Saturday morning, the area became quite busy with around a dozen jeeps competing for the best spots to watch the animals. The Giraffes browsed calmly but moved steadily to the far side of the swampy area, as did the Buffalo. The Baboons were unperturbed and foraged nearby; a family of Warthogs moved away across the plain. After our coffee break, we retraced our route past the water lily pools, now in full bloom. The day had heated up and there were fewer animals to be seen on the drive out of the Park. A highlight was a herd of about a dozen Elephants

including young calves and adults with tusks browsing peacefully in an area of long grass, and then a lone Giraffe outside the Park gates.

When we returned in the afternoon, we saw a big herd of around 25 Elephants scattered over some swampy grassland. The Park was quite busy – we had to queue at the gate for the first time – so we avoided the popular areas and headed for the riverine habitat. Once again, we saw Impala, Zebra, Puku, Waterbuck, Warthog and more Elephant. There were plenty of Crocodiles and Hippos in the water and our last sundowner was accompanied by the sound of their quarrelling and complaining. Later, the spotlight revealed Elephant Shrews, Scrub Hares, White-tailed and Bushy-tailed Mongooses, Genets, and an Elephant at close quarters who didn't like the spotlight...

Day 9

Sunday 23rd April

The usual early morning routine saw us on the road at 6am. It was another beautiful day as we savoured the sights and sounds for the last time. We saw Puku and a small group of Giraffe in the game management area outside the Park then Whistling Ducks and Ground Hornbills near the river; many of the colourful smaller birds we've become used to seeing also put in an appearance. Once inside the Park, we spotted Warthog in the distance but there seemed to be fewer of the grazing ungulates. A terrapin crossed the track. The word was that the Lions were surrounded by vehicles so we chose to go to less busy areas. Among the birds, Hamerkop, White-backed Vulture and a tiny Malachite Kingfisher were nice to see. We stopped for coffee in a peaceful area next to a big lagoon where a huge Crocodile warmed up on a sandbank. We saw Kudu on the way out but all else was quiet, matching our subdued mood as we reflected on an amazing week of wildlife watching in the South Luangwa National Park.

Although our trip was all but over, we had one last ride in the jeep on the way to the airport in the afternoon with a planned stop at a local jewellery store that fashions items from reclaimed snare wire. The route took us through small villages and settlements where people were enjoying their Sunday afternoon, walking or cycling along the road or sitting chatting in the sun. It was interesting to get a flavour of rural Zambian life and add these colourful images to our store of wonderful wildlife experiences. A never-to-be forgotten trip.



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Species lists

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		17	18	19	20	21	22
Four-toed Sengi (elephant shrew)	<i>Petrodromus tetradactylus</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓
African Bush Elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vervet Monkey	<i>Chlorocebus pygerythrus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yellow Baboon	<i>Papio cynocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scrub Hare	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Smith's Bush Squirrel	<i>Paraxerus capapi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
Bushy-tailed Mongoose	<i>Bdeogale crassicauda</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Slender Mongoose	<i>Herpestes sanguineus</i>			✓		✓	
White-tailed Mongoose	<i>Ichneumia albicauda</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 ssp Crawshay	<i>Equus quagga crawshayi</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sharpe's Grysbok	<i>Raphicerus sharpei</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 thornicrofti</i>			✓	✓		✓
Lesser Bushbaby	<i>Gelago sp.</i>	✓					

Reptiles

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		17	18	19	20	21	22
Nile Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus niloticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Monitor	<i>Varanus niloticus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Rock Monitor	<i>Varanus albigularis</i>				✓		
Flap-necked Chameleon	<i>Chamaeleo dilepis</i>	✓			✓		

Birds

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		17	18	19	20	21	22
White-faced Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
Spur-winged Goose	<i>Plectropterus gambensis</i>	✓					
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-necked Spurfowl	<i>Ptemistis afer</i>			✓		✓	
Swainson's Spurfowl	<i>Ptemistis swainsonii</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
Yellow-billed Stork	<i>Mycteria ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
African Openbill	<i>Anastomus lamelligerus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>		✓				
Saddle-billed Stork	<i>Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis</i>	✓					
Marabou Stork	<i>Leptoptilos crumenifer</i>	✓					
African Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiomis aethiopicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hadada Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
African Spoonbill	<i>Platalea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</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>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Black Heron	<i>Egretta ardesiaca</i>		✓				
Green-backed Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>		✓	✓			
Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>					✓	
African Darter	<i>Anhinga rufa</i>	✓					
African Harrier-hawk	<i>Polyboroides typus</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Hooded Vulture	<i>Necrosyrtes monachus</i>	✓			✓		
White-backed Vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>	✓	✓			✓	
White-headed Vulture	<i>Trigonoceps occipitalis</i>		✓				
Lappet-faced Vulture	<i>Torgos tracheliotos</i>	✓					
Brown Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinereus</i>	✓	✓				
Western Banded Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinerascens</i>	✓					
Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓
Martial Eagle	<i>Polemaetus bellicosus</i>	✓					
Lizard Buzzard	<i>Kaupifalco monogrammicus</i>		✓			?	✓
Gabar Goshawk	<i>Micronisus gabar</i>				✓		
Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>				✓		
African fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓
African Crane	<i>Crex egregia</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>Venellus albiceps</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		17	18	19	20	21	22
Crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>				✓		
Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>			✓			
African Jacana	<i>Actophilomis africanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Three-banded Courser	<i>Rhinoptilus cinctus</i>	✓					
Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Double-banded Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles bicinctus</i>						✓
Mourning Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia dicipiens</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Emerald-spotted Wood Dove	<i>Turtur chalcospilos</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>				✓		✓
Cape turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
Purple-crested Turaco	<i>Tauraco porphyreolophus</i>					✓	
Grey go-away Bird	<i>Corythaixoides concolor</i>	✓			✓		✓
Levaillant's Cuckoo	<i>Clamator levaillantii</i>		✓				
Jacobin Cuckoo	<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>	✓					✓
Diederik Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx caprius</i>	✓					
Pel's Fishing Owl	<i>Scotopelia peli</i>				✓		
African barred Owlet	<i>Glaucidium capense</i>			✓			
Square-tailed Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus fossii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>	✓					
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-rumped Swift	<i>Apus caffer</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Red-faced Mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>	✓					✓
Lilac-breasted Roller	<i>Coracias caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey-headed Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon leucocephala</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
Brown-hooded Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>	✓	✓				
Woodland Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon senegalensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>		✓	✓		✓	
Little Bee-eater	<i>Merops pusillus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-fronted Bee-eater	<i>Merops bullockoides</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>		✓				
African Grey Hornbill	<i>Lophoceros nasutus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Red-necked Falcon	<i>Falco chicquera</i>		✓				
Lilian's Lovebird	<i>Agapornis lilianae</i>	✓			✓		
Brown-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra australis</i>				✓		
Black-backed Puffback	<i>Dryoscopus cubla</i>				✓		
Tropical Boubou	<i>Laaniarius major</i>	✓					✓
Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	✓					
African Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone viridis</i>						✓
Dark-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus tricolor</i>		✓	✓			
Wire-tailed Swallow	<i>Hirundo smithii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greater Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis cucullata</i>		✓				✓
Tawny-flanked Prinia	<i>Prinia subflava</i>	✓					
Arrow-marked Babbler	<i>Turdoides jardineii</i>			✓			
Greater Blue-eared Starling	<i>Lamprotornis chalybaeus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meves's Starling	<i>Lamprotornis mevesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-billed Oxpecker	<i>Buphagus erythrorhynchus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
White-browed Robin-chat	<i>Cossypha heuglini</i>		✓				
Collared Palm Thrush	<i>Cichladusa arquata</i>				✓	✓	✓
White-breasted Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris talatala</i>				✓		
White-browed Sparrow-Weaver	<i>Plocepasser mahali</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		17	18	19	20	21	22
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>	✓	✓				✓
Red-billed Buffalo Weaver	<i>Bubalornis niger</i>		✓		✓		
Spectacled Weaver	<i>Ploceus ocularis</i>	✓			✓		
Southern Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>		✓				
Village Weaver	<i>Ploceus cucullatus</i>					✓	
Red-billed Quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>				✓	✓	
Southern Red Bishop	<i>Euplectes orix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-winged Widowbird	<i>Euplectes albonotatus</i>		✓				
Blue Waxbill	<i>Uraeginthus angolensis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Village Indigobird	<i>Vidua chalybeata</i>				✓	✓	
Long-tailed Paradise Whydah	<i>Vidua paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
African Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla aguimp</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Yellow-fronted Canary	<i>Crithagra mozambica</i>				✓		