

Zambia's South Luangwa National Park - Nkonzi Camp

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd September – 1st October 2025



Leopard



Southern Carmine Bee-eater



Lion



African Savanna Elephants

Tour report by Linda Crook with input from Jean Holmes



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Tour participants: Nkonzi Camp guides with ten Naturetrek clients

Summary

Nkonzi Camp is set on the banks of the Mushilashi River, but the river is seasonal and only holds surface water in the wet season. In the “dry” it is a river of sand, although Elephants dig down to find water, and the pools they create are a lifeline for other animals.

During this safari the area was very dry, and it was difficult to see how the herbivores could find food; we did see some Elephants with their ribs showing. But lack of food for the herbivores means, potentially, more for the carnivores.

The camp is a forty-five-minute drive from the entrance to South Luangwa National Park. Although there are other camps and lodges within the park, none of them were near enough to Nkonzi to be either heard, or for light pollution to be noticeable. There is, therefore, a real sense of solitude in this remote location.

The camp runs entirely on solar power, and there is ample lighting within the tents and the communal area. The lanterns which hang from the trees on the paths to the tents lend a magical feel to the surroundings. There are two fans for each tent: one inside and one for outside. At night, the fan is sufficient to keep the temperature down for sleeping, but in the hottest part of the day not so much! However, we found the communal area cooler at this time, as there was a breeze blowing through from the river. There was never any problem recharging camera batteries and phones, although phones didn't get much use as there is no WiFi.

The tents rapidly became familiar: we had a comfortable double bed and a shelving unit for clothes, plus bedside tables and, through a zipped door at the back, the ‘en suite’: just rattan walls, but equipped with a flushing toilet, a hand basin and a shower. Water for the basin is supplied via two jugs, which are topped up as required. The shower is a ‘posh’ take on a bucket shower. A good-sized container of water is hoisted high into a tree and is connected to a proper shower head. You can request your preferred temperature for the water, but it only needs to be off the chill given the hot weather.

The staff were all very pleasant and helpful, and there always seemed to be someone on hand to advise or help. The camp manager, Bev, along with the barmen, Jacob and Jeffrey, and chefs Godfrey, Joseph and Bryan ensured their guests were well looked after.

We soon settled into the rhythm of the days at Nkonzi. At 5.00am someone slipped into the en suite via a back door, filled a jug with warm water, and gently roused the campers with a call. By 5.30am, breakfast was being served in the dry riverbed. There was cereal, fruit, yoghurt and toast made on a little wood fire in the sand, plus tea and coffee of course. By 6.00am, everyone was ready to drive out of camp on two safari vehicles for the first adventure of the day. There was a coffee/tea and biscuit stop after a couple of hours, in the shade of a large tree. Another tree was checked by the guide and pronounced safe to be used as a ‘convenience’. The morning drive ended at about 10.30am, by which time the temperature was soaring. After a welcome cold drink, there was an hour or so for showers, before lunch at noon. This was a single course, but was something different and delicious every day; our two vegetarians were well catered for too. A period of rest and relaxation followed lunch during the hottest part of the day. Each tent had two armchairs in the awning, and two sunbeds in a private outside space,

with the second fan, which was surprisingly effective. At 3.30pm it was time to reconvene for tea and cake, before leaving on the second expedition of the day. As the sun sank in the always blue sky, the groups stopped for sundowners at some scenic spot. The drinks were chosen back at camp, and provided with ice where required. The night drive, back to camp, was a time to be doubly alert, as the nighttime creatures often only gave fleeting views. There was a spotter in each vehicle, with a strong spotlight and exceedingly good eyesight for finding the birds and beasts. We arrived back at camp between 7.45pm and 8.00pm, and were soon enjoying a three-course meal, sometimes in the tented dining room, sometimes in the riverbed. The meal was followed by Naturetrek's signature (but optional – some preferred the bar!) 'tick list', recording all the mammals, birds and other creatures seen during the day. Bedtime was now not far off, and we were escorted back to our tents by one of the staff every night.

Day 1

Monday 22nd September

Our first flight left Heathrow at 7.50pm, giving most of the group time to travel up from around the country on the same day.

Day 2

Tuesday 23rd September

We arrived in Dubai at 5.50am, which was the middle of 'our' night, after the first of our two seven-hour flights, and landed in Lusaka in the early afternoon. The third flight, to Mfuwe, was in a small plane with the novelty of a propellor! This flight was only an hour, so we were soon in Mfuwe, where we were met by two guides from Nkonzi Camp. Night was falling as we drove in the safari vehicles towards South Luangwa National Park. The road was busy with cyclists (no lights!), walkers, and a few cars and motorbikes. Once in the Park, the road, corrugated and dusty, was deserted. A huge Hippo ambled along the side of the road, and there was a family group underneath a sausage tree. We also saw about twenty Impalas and a lone Spotted Hyena. Our first taste of African wildlife!

We arrived at Nkonzi Camp about 7.30pm, twenty-four hours after we had left Heathrow: we were warmly greeted by several members of the staff. After a welcome drink we had a briefing concerning camp rules, the chief of which was that, after dark, we must be escorted to and from our tents, because of the possibility of animals wandering into camp. We were then, indeed, taken to our tents. After a rapid shower, we were accompanied back to the communal area for dinner. As we were all tired after our long journey, and knew we would have a 5.00am wakeup call, we didn't linger for long after the meal, leaving getting to know each other until tomorrow.

Day 3

Wednesday 24th September

The sun was a fiery red ball just above the horizon as we walked down to the camp dining area for breakfast at 5.30am. At 6.00am, we divided between the two trucks, both of which had three rows of bench seats, so everyone could have a window seat, although there were no physical sides or windows!

It was still cool enough to be wearing a thin fleece when we drove out of camp, although that didn't last long! The two guides/drivers today were Gavin (the camp's owner) and Jabes. There was a steady stream of species to watch, photograph and record, both mammals and birds. The highlight for our group was, perhaps, the nesting colony of Southern Carmine Bee-eaters, whose nest holes lined the sand cliffs of the river. On this first drive we saw a total of eleven mammal species, including two Giraffes, one tiny Grysbok, Kudu, Puku and Lichtenstein's Hartebeest,

whose local name is Nkonzi! The birds were equally rewarding, with around thirty species seen. Highlights were four species of hornbill, three species of bee-eater, a majestic African Harrier-Hawk and many stunning Lilac-breasted Rollers.

The other group, led by Jabes, saw some variation in the species seen, but about the same number. They were impressed with his expertise as a guide, and his ability to communicate his knowledge about the local flora and fauna, from facts about termite mounds and animal tracks, to being able to spot something as small as a chameleon in a bush.

Both groups drove back into camp around 10.30am, and enjoyed ice cold water flavoured with either mint or cucumber; this was very refreshing, and by this time the temperature had risen into the 30s.

The afternoon drive was quieter, but African Fish Eagle and Black-bellied Bustard were good additions. There was one particularly massive Baobab tree which had to be photographed. Gavin thought it was between 800 and 1000 years old. As the sun slipped down towards the horizon, we stopped under a huge Tamarind tree for sundowners.

On our first night drive, we had excellent views of Four-toed Sengi, quickly followed by a Rusty-spotted (or Large-spotted) Genet. Our evening ended with two owls: Verreaux's Eagle-Owl and a very appealing Southern White-faced Owl. The other group saw a chameleon and a Pearl-spotted Owlet. It had been a hugely enjoyable and rewarding first day.

Day 4

Thursday 25th September

Jabes's group experienced a walking safari this morning. For reassurance there was Peter, from the National Park service, with his rifle, who walked ahead of the group. Jabes explained the little details they couldn't see from the truck, like scats and tracks.

Gavin's truck, with Bev riding shotgun, headed toward the Luangwa River, which, unlike the Mushilashi, retains water all year and attracts wildlife during the dry season. A major sighting was a Leopard with a cub, lying in the shade. Our first stop on the river was where there were lots of Hippos basking in the water, and a small group on a sandbank. New birds included White-crowned and Blacksmith Lapwings, and Wire-tailed Swallow. Further on, we stopped at a lagoon with a good range of mammals and birds. It was very hot by the time we headed back to camp, but we stopped to watch Vervet Monkeys, Arrow-marked Babblers and White-crested Helmetshrikes.

Again, the afternoon drive did not produce as many sightings as the morning. Wildebeest was a new mammal, and Lilian's Lovebird was added. The evening drive gave us Scrub Hare, two Sharpe's Grysbooks, another Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, Hippos and Elephants, and we had good views of all by spotlight. We returned to camp at 8.00pm so we went straight to dinner, which tonight was a *braai* (or BBQ) in the dry riverbed. It was an attractive scene under the stars, with lanterns and candles.

Day 5

Friday 26th September

Today it was Gavin's group's turn for a walking safari. There are strict rules about the colour of clothes: they must be muted neutral colours. On the safari vehicles, this is not deemed necessary. We soon saw a group of Elephants

quite a way away but at least one of them was holding its ears out showing us we weren't welcome in their domain. A single Impala came running straight at us, but what it was running from we didn't discover. A couple of times we came across Warthog, at a distance, but they didn't seem too bothered by us. We also saw Buffalo through the trees, and on Peter's instruction moved away quickly. There was plenty of Elephant dung about, but the interesting scats were Leopard and Porcupine. Leopard can be distinguished from Lion, Gavin told us, because it doesn't contain fur. Porcupine droppings are like little bullets! Hyena and civet footprints were seen in the sand. A new species of bird was a Greater Honeyguide. They have a symbiotic relationship with people, whereby the bird calls, the human follows, and is led to a bee nest. Once the human has opened it and taken their share, the bird can reap its reward.

On the afternoon drive, both groups enjoyed watching a pride of Lions relaxing in a dry riverbed: a male lying on its own, and three females with two cubs sleeping together. Everyone was rewarded with good sightings on the night drive: Grysbok, genet, sengi, galagos (bushbabies), Water Thick-knee and Scrub Hare.

Day 6

Saturday 27th September

Today was our 'full day' trip; we would not be returning to camp at lunchtime. Gavin did not join us today, but was replaced by Willie, a very experienced and likeable guide with an easy-to-understand style. There were plenty of new birds as we travelled into slightly different habitat: Bennett's Woodpecker, Black-crowned Tchagra, Green Wood Hoopoe, Golden Weaver and Senegal Coucal. The next highlight was a male Lion, more or less asleep under a tree. We were able to approach closely and watch as it flicked its ears and tail to dislodge troublesome flies. Later, we found another lone male, which Willie told us was the brother of the first, and part of the same pride. Jabes's group saw three male and two female Lions, so it was a Lion-filled day for us all!

The morning tea spot, on the Luangwa River, was the highlight of the day for Willie's group. As we arrived, we could see a large group of Buffalo in a green area, on the cliff, above the river. The cliffs are made of sand and, as we settled ourselves in, the Buffalo started to come down the cliff, sending up clouds of sand and dust. The Buffalo kept on coming until there were at least 500 walking across the riverbed to get to the water. Suddenly, something spooked them and they began to charge back to the cliff. Quite a few hadn't got as far as the water, and had to turn back thirsty.

Lunch was at another spot on the Luangwa River. We were made very comfortable, with picnic chairs, cold drinks and a delicious spread of food. There were plenty of animals, birds and plants to keep us interested while we sheltered from the sun during the hottest part of the day.

On the drive back to camp, we watched a Giraffe eating the strings of flower buds on a sausage tree. The method was to grasp the length of flowers at the top, then run it through its mouth; it was a very efficient method of picking lots of flower buds in a single movement. Many animals seek out these flowers but, of course, only the giraffes can reach the higher ones. The only new bird of the afternoon was a Common Scimitarbill.

Back at camp, we were all very glad of tea and cake, quickly followed by showers; then we went back to the bar for beers. Why we all felt so tired after doing little more than wielding binoculars and cameras can only be put down to excitement, and the heat. Dinner was a *braai* in the riverbed, but this time with traditional Zambian food, which we were all pleased to try and found very flavoursome.

Day 7

Sunday 28th September

Everyone seemed at ease with the camp routine, with no-one choosing to miss a drive. The weather on this trip was a constant: blue skies and hot temperatures. The first stop for both groups was a beautiful waterhole, where a good variety of birds were coming down to drink. Star birds were green pigeons, Red-billed Firefinch, Green-winged Pytilia and Laughing Dove. Watching the ever-present Helmeted Guineafowl added another dimension, given their rather comic antics. There were some old bull Buffalos enjoying the water, and we enjoyed watching them. It was an entrancing spot, and we could have stayed there all morning, but we had to move on. New birds en route were Martial and Wahlberg's Eagles, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Racket-tailed Roller and Black-backed Puffback. And along the way we were always renewing our acquaintance, and familiarity, with several species of antelope.

The word on the grapevine was that there was a Leopard nearby, so we were soon heading in a new direction. It was not hard to find, as there already a couple of trucks admiring it. It was a different animal to the one we'd seen the other day, with a much browner face. During the late morning, we rounded a bend and came bumper to trunk (almost) with a group of about eight Elephants about to cross the road. We stopped to watch them, but the mother, who was right on the edge of the road, was obviously unhappy, flapping her ears at us. When Willie restarted the vehicle, she, followed by her two young calves, came after us and chased us a long way down the road. Elephants are not to be taken lightly!

We stopped again at the lodge lagoon, where we had paused earlier on. There was a large troop of Yellow Baboons, with many youngsters. There was one very pale baby, which Willie said was only about two weeks old, who was very precocious; it ran up a sloping tree trunk and raced down again time and time again, with other, larger, youngsters joining in. It was very entertaining and interesting animal behaviour to watch.

Reinvigorated by lunch and a siesta, we set off on the second drive of the day, which was uneventful compared to this morning. We stopped at a waterhole on the river for sundowners. There was a group of Elephants to watch as they decided whether or not to come down for a drink. The night drives for both groups were more productive: we saw Scrub Hare, genet, galagos, Grysbok, Bronze-winged Courser and a new mammal, a Serval. The other group saw a Serval too, a Square-tailed Nightjar and a Spotted Hyena.

Day 8

Monday 29th September

It was, unexpectedly, colder this morning, and by 6.00am very little wildlife was stirring. We saw young Vervet Monkeys sitting sentinel at the top of small trees, and Willie pointed out the three-toed track of an Aardvark: this was the nearest we'd get to one! We revisited two of the lagoons, and were pleased to see some of the species again, plus a Malachite Kingfisher. At our coffee stop, on the Luangwa, the main spectacle was about fifty Nile Crocodiles devouring a Hippo. Apparently, when a Hippo dies, or is killed by crocodiles, they leave it to 'marinate' for a few days; this softens the thick hide. The crocs grab the Hippo, then roll to tear off chunks. It was a rather macabre, splashy affair, with tails and heads lashing to and fro.

We were already running late for lunch when we came across a couple of trucks that had found a Leopard in a tree. It was not as good as finding it ourselves, but it was not a chance to be given up just for lunch! We had to spend some time admiring and photographing the cat.

Jabes's group were delighted to watch a troop of Banded Mongoose and a Saddle-billed Stork catching a huge fish, only to be robbed by the local African Fish Eagle. In the afternoon, they found a Leopard to watch for a long time. Jabes thought he might be ready to hunt, so they followed, and saw it catch a baby Warthog right in front of them.

Day 9

Tuesday 30th September

We had the usual start to the day, but as it was our last drive, we were all keen to have 'last looks' at as many mammals and 'old favourite' birds as possible. In fact, almost the first mammal we saw was new: a Sun Squirrel. It was easy to tell from a common Smith's Bush Squirrel because of its bushy tail, compared to the skinny tail of the Smith's. The stars of the drive were seven Lions lying against the sandy cliff of the riverbed, in the shade. There were one male, four females and two cubs about six months old. They were fascinating to watch, even though there wasn't much action, other than one of the cubs sauntering off on its own to get a drink. The females were obviously alert in case help was needed, but the cub wandered back and slumped into the shade with the others. It was the equivalent of a child being allowed to go to the corner shop for the first time on its own.

Jabes's group watched a Martial Eagle fly off with a Monitor Lizard in its talons: it was quite a sight! There was an interesting debate between Jabes and a bird enthusiast client. They decided they had seen a Dickinson's Kestrel, which was unusual. Gavin looked at the photo and agreed with the decision. There were four new birds to round off the trip: Yellow-fronted Canary, Squacco Heron, White-headed Vulture and Black-headed Oriole.

We headed back to camp a little earlier than usual, as we had to shower and have our 'big bags' ready by noon. We did the final bird and mammal lists after lunch, and the group totals were 134 birds and 29 mammals, plus Nile Crocodile, Water Monitor, Praying Mantis, stick insect, crickets, assassin bugs and geckos, and many interesting trees and other plants.

We had all enjoyed a wonderful safari holiday in this remote and unspoilt area of Zambia, and we took home many wonderful memories, and hopefully some good photos.

Day 10

Wednesday 1st October

We returned home after a long flight.

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