



ZIMBABWE & BOTSWANA WILDLIFE SAFARI
November 3-15, 2017
TRIP REPORT Summary by Adrian Binns

Mana Pools, Zimbabwe

Our 12-day African safari began on the eastern edge of Mana Pools National Park in northern Zimbabwe. From our bush camps at Ruckomechi and neighbouring Little Ruckomechi, we enjoyed exploring a range of habitats teeming with wonderful wildlife. Elephants were among the first to greet us, as they roamed freely near the tents, even venturing next to the swimming pool! We kept a watchful eye and careful distance, in awe of the giant pachyderms. What a welcome treat!

Our camps overlooked the mighty Zambezi river towards Zambia's Rift Valley escarpment, providing excellent opportunity for relaxing afternoon boat rides. We drifted slowly up to wallowing pods of hippos, basking crocodiles, and African Skimmers loafing on exposed narrow sand strips. In steeply-eroded river banks, White-fronted and Southern Carmine Bee-eaters excavated their tunnel nests. The location helps keep predators at bay, but not all of them! On two consecutive afternoons we watched a Nile Water Monitor dig into the tunnels with its long sharp claws, and come out with a youngster, much to the chagrin of the parents.

We watched elephants trek through tall grasses of river islands, and cross channels to reach the opposite bank. We cheered when one struggling baby elephant finally made it across. One evening we were moored on a riverbank enjoying sundowners, when an inquisitive elephant approached to within feet of Jane who was seated at the front of the boat. It was a heart-stopping moment to be face-to-face with such a huge animal – so close we could count the eyelashes – but we had nowhere to go. Such an unforgettable experience is what Wild Africa and the true sense of wilderness is about. Excitement and wonder, always around the corner.

Wildlife drives through open savanna and riverine woodland showcased the dramatic landscape along this section of the Zambezi. Birds were plentiful with a fine mix of waders and sandpipers in floodplains - Saddle-billed, Yellow-billed and Openbill Stork, Long-toed Lapwing, Goliath and Squacco Herons along with Common Waterbuck. An African Fish Eagle flying by us was a majestic sight. Raptors included - Bateleur, Common Kestrel and Red-necked Falcon, the latter sighted in palms as was our only sighting of Collared Palm Thrush.

Winding our way through diverse habitats we encountered Broad-billed Roller, Tropical Boubou, Eastern Nicator, Meave's Starling, Long-billed Crombec, Blue Waxbill, Jameson's Firefinch, Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove, Greater Honeyguide, Grey Go-away-bird, Golden-breasted Bunting, Red-backed Shrike, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark, Grey-rumped Swallow, the striking Purple-crested Turaco, as well as both Senegal and White-browed Coucal.

Four species of hornbill were present: Southern Red-billed, Crown, Trumpeter and a family of three Southern Ground-Hornbill scouring the grasses. The most excitement was caused by a small flock of Lillian's Lovebirds, a species only found in the Zambezi valley, that we were able to track on foot through acacia scrub.

Natal Spurfowl rummaged around in front of our tent with Black-throated Wattle-eye, Ashy Flycatcher, Arrow-marked Babblers, White-bellied Sunbird, Green Wood-Hoopoes, Black-headed Oriole, Chin-spot Batis, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Black-backed Puffback, Yellow-bellied Greenbul and Meyer's Parrot seen in the camps.

Predators remained hidden during the daytime, except for a sighting of six sleeping Lions. Their prey seemed plentiful - small herds of Impala, Greater Kudu, Chacma Baboons and a large gathering of Buffalo. Big cats were active at night; on one evening game drive we followed a male Leopard as he walked inside an expansive thicket. We positioned ourselves near an opening and he eventually came out and lay down close to our vehicle, eyeing distant ungulates. We could hardly believe how relaxed he was, or our luck in seeing him. Suddenly, he got up and vanished back into the thicket. In his place walked a male Lion! In the African plains, cats are constantly competing with each other for prey, and the smaller one is not likely to tangle with the King of the Jungle!

Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe

From Mana Pools we flew over the Zambezi and Kariba Dam to Hwange National Park in eastern Zimbabwe on the border with Botswana. Hwange is Zimbabwe's largest reserve, holding one of the highest concentrations of wildlife in Africa, in particular buffalo and elephants. More than 45,000 elephants roam here (considerably more than the area should hold).

Our two camps within the Linkwasha concession, Davison's and Little Makalolo, were perfectly situated to witness wonderful wildlife, overlooking large waterholes. Open plains and pans ringed by short grasses attracted Southern Giraffe, Blue Wildebeest, Warthogs, and many more. Sable Antelope were exquisite-looking with deep burgundy coats, and long curved horns that arch majestically backwards. Many animals meant prime lion territory! Once the haunt of Cecil the Lion, his offspring now patrol this vast area, and we enjoyed multiple encounters with the big cats. Seven lionesses crouched in a row at the water's edge, lapping up a drink before being chased away by a tight-knit herd of fast-approaching elephants. Two male lions, fresh from a slumber, roared feet away from our vehicle, before heading out at dusk, joined by three lionesses and seven cubs. One evening, while sipping sundowners and watching lionesses on the far side of Linkwasha pan, we suddenly became aware of a male taking a drink just 150 feet away from our vehicle! Another heart-pounding, special safari moment!

We enjoyed two separate Cheetah sightings. One peaceful encounter we watched two brothers resting on a termite mound. Excitement abounded at another time when a troop of Chacma Baboons chased three Cheetahs, who in turn ended up flushing a family of feeding Warthogs and capturing the smallest one.

We were beckoned from a mid-day siesta to watch herds of elephants saunter in to the Little Makalolo waterhole. We positioned ourselves quickly behind a hide on the edge of the water, and became surrounded by the behemoths just a few feet away as they drank and bathed. Herd after herd tromped into the waterhole, some trumpeting their arrival. They were joined by Burchell's Zebra and Southern Giraffe, the tallest creature of the plains. It was absolutely exhilarating to be in the presence of these giants.

Noteworthy bird sightings in the area included Capped Wheatears feeding three youngsters near their underground nest hole, many Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Red-crested Koorhan, Red-chested Cuckoo, the gorgeous Crimson-breasted Shrike, Brubru, Bradfield's Hornbill, Dickinson's Kestrel, and Zambezi teak-mopane woodland specialists Arnot's Chat and Racket-tailed Rollers. The latter held us spell-bound with its unique display of rising up and dropping vertically head first before opening up into flight.

The common raptor was African Hawk Eagle, with White-headed Vultures, Wahlberg's and Tawny Eagle, Steppe Buzzard and Shikra also sighted. We did extraordinarily well with owls, including African Barred Owl, pairs of Verreaux's Eagle Owl and Spotted Eagle Owl. The night game drive highlighted Southern White-faced Owl, Small-spotted Genet and comical kangaroo-bouncing Spring Hares!

Toka Leya, Zambia

Transferring by bush plane from Zimbabwe to Botswana we had a brief one-night stay in Zambia at Toka Leya. Set within Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park on the banks of the Zambezi River, the beautiful tented camp is perfectly situated for a sundowner cruise towards Victoria Falls. Though one cannot get close to the falls, we enjoyed excellent views of Rock Pratincole, Water Thick-knees and boisterous White-crowned Lapwings standing along boulder-strewn rapids. We were delighted to tick two sought-after African specialities: Finfoot and Skimmer. The Finfoot moved among overhanging vegetation hugging the shoreline, while the Skimmer

loafed on sandbars with their well-grown chicks. In our well-positioned boat, we watched a colony of White-throated Bee-eaters zip over our heads and rest on bare branches, right before they headed into their burrows for the night. We were impressed by the strength of a herd of Elephants swimming across the mighty Zambezi.

Linyati, Botswana

Our African safari continued into Botswana, where we explored the famous Okavango Delta and Linyanti regions. The Linyanti concession, adjoining the western boundary of Chobe National Park, consists of mopane woodlands, riparian forest and ancient floodplains. After several years of drought, a seismic shift in the tectonic plates, and a decent summer rainfall, the Savuti Channel was once again flowing, which made our stay all the more most enjoyable.

Situated on the edge of the waterway, our Savuti Camp featured an elevated deck which provided wonderful views of the landscape and wildlife. African Pygmy Goose and jacanas foraged around emergent vegetation, and a herd of elephants tromped past the hide (blind) and through the shallow water. Tree Squirrels scampered amongst wandering Red-billed Spurfowl and Crested Francolin. Local trees hosted Bradfield's Hornbill, Jacobin Cuckoo, Bennett's Woodpecker, Black-collared Barbet, and an unexpected Blackcap, a Eurasian migrant, rare to Botswana.

Afternoon safari drives were most impressive with plenty of birds - Broad-billed Roller, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Giant Kingfisher, Red-backed and Magpie Shrike, Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Black Cuckoo-shrike, Arnot's Chat, Harlequin Quail, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Common Scimitarbill, Black-bellied Bustard, Mosque Swallow, and Southern Black Tit. Numerous Helmeted Guineafowl, dubbed "drama queens" by the locals, pranced around and vocalized full-throttle, contrasting with soft sounds of Double-banded Sandgrouse that flew in to drink at a waterhole. We stopped for a tree squirrel and hornbills sounding alarm calls from a bare tree; perhaps they saw a snake below them. The hornbill was holding a sphinx moth in its beak, probably a meal for its youngster, but after running out of patience, it decided to flick it up and eat it itself.

Driving around the tracks we encountered several larger reptiles, namely Leopard Tortoise, African Rock Python, Water Monitor and the more uncommon Rock Monitor, along with the expected Nile Crocodile.

Marshes hosted a great variety of birds and mammals. Reedbuck lumbered through the vegetation, scattering Long-toed Lapwing, Spur-winged Goose, Knob-billed Duck and African Darter. One disgruntled hippo came charging out of the water and chased our vehicle for about 20 meters as we floored it out of there – what an adrenaline rush to see one of Africa's most deadly animals so close!

Seasonal rains had begun early, and Impala were beginning to drop their young. Predators kept a watchful eye for vulnerable newborns, and we were not surprised to find two lionesses and four cubs snoozing behind our camp. Not too far away, we saw our first Wild Dogs finishing up the remains of an impala they had tracked down.

Red Lechwe, an antelope built with powerful hind legs to out-run predators through the water, were numerous. We saw a few Fawn-coloured Roan, a rare and endangered antelope that reaches the southern edge of their range in the Okavango Delta. We encountered the quintessential African animals - Southern Giraffe, Warthogs, Buffalo, and Zebra. It was a magical experience to find an African Wild Cat with her three kittens during daylight hours; this nocturnal cat is infrequent enough at night!

A night game drive highlighted Square-tailed Nightjar, African Wild Cat, Spotted Hyeana, Scrub Hare, Spring Hare and extended views of Lesser Bushbaby. The African night is rarely quiet... we heard African Scops Owl hooting, and elephants trumpeting, a sure sign that lions were harassing them.

On our last morning in the Savuti Camp, we spotted an Impala bolting out of view. Only the sight of a Wild Dog would cause it to do that. We quickly finished breakfast and jumped into our safari landcruiser to search for them. From the opposite side of the camp, we looked back and saw staff on the deck directing us to the four Wild Dogs they could see! The dogs were on the move, and we soon caught up and followed them along the edge of the marsh, until they crossed the wetlands and trotted out of sight.

Okavango Delta, Botswana

Our last leg of the 12-day African safari was spent deep in the heart of the Okavango Delta, at the beautiful Xigera Camp. The location accessible only via plane, is a short puddle-jump from Savuti. From the air we marveled at the vast, colorful wetlands, featuring large swathes of greens, beige and blues reflecting a tapestry of different habitats. Surrounded by papyrus swamps and wooded islands, Xigera provides wonderful opportunity to explore elusive areas of Africa. Indeed, one of our first sightings was a Sitatunga, a very shy and uncommon antelope.

Xigera is the most reliable place on the continent to see the much sought-after Pel's Fishing Owl. I was delighted to find a pair of these large, majestic, ginger-colored birds roosting above our tents. Lush vegetation teemed with birds - Crested Barbet, Kurrichane Thrush, White-browed Robin-Chat, Diederik Cuckoo, Swamp Boubou and Hartlaub's Babblers moved through trees, while a Western Banded Snake-Eagle circled overhead. Around the camp, cheeky Vervet Monkeys fearlessly snatched any piece of food left unattended. Banded Mongoose scurried through an obstacle course of fallen tree trunks, pausing only to dig up grubs along the way.

Though Xigera is known as a water camp, our visit was timed for the dryer season, allowing for safari treks along sandy tracks. We saw a variety of birds during these drives, including White-browed Scrub-Robin, Brown Firefinch, Chirping Cisticola, Martial Eagle, Striped Kingfisher, Pin-tailed Whydah, and Black Coucal. We witnessed Yellow-billed Oxpeckers pecking into the wound on a Zebra's back.

One evening we were treated to a show of traditional culture in a boma, with dancing, singing and mouth-watering local cuisine. After guests retired for the night, the nighttime sounds of the bush took over, and the noise became nearly deafening as lions fought with each other just outside our tent!

By late November, water levels in the delta reach their low point. However, we still managed to get in a motorized boat ride along the Jao channel, where wetlands teemed with waterbirds. There was so much to see - White-faced Whistling-Ducks loafing on higher ground, stately Wattled Cranes flying in to feed, a pair of Saddle-billed Storks picking in the grass, Purple Heron standing motionless, nervous Squacco Herons and African Jacanas taking flight as we neared, and a feeding flock of Great and Little Egrets, Sacred Ibis, and Marabou Stork. Pied Kingfishers perched on snags, while White-winged Terns tracked up and down the channel, picking off scattering small fish. A bull Elephant fed in the shallows, towering over birds around it.

A different kind of boat ride – inside a mokoro (dugout canoe) – provided a serene experience in tranquil delta waters. From this quiet vantage we spotted miniature Angolan Painted Reed Frogs, each with different patterns, and the minuscule green Long Reed Frog (if one can call 3/4" long) on rushes protruding around water lilies. We enjoyed a brief glimpse of a surfacing Smooth-necked Otter. A feeding flock of Little Egrets attracted a few Black and Slaty Herons, the latter a delta specialty! A nice surprise was seeing a Rufous-bellied Heron flushed by a running Red Lechwe.

Over our two-day stay we enjoyed extraordinary encounters with Leopards. One female lounged on a termite mound eyeing distant lechwe. We followed when she got up and walked towards a half-dozen Impala in a thicket. We held our breath, with prey and predator just meters apart. The Impalas went on high alert, sensing something, but not sure exactly what it was. Eventually the antelope moved on and the Leopard walked away to try elsewhere. Our second encounter was with a male, more ambitious in his pursuit as he moved from one patch of tall grass to another. The giant cat never managed to get closer to the wary lechwe he was stalking, as they kept their distance.

We had enjoyed a superb safari in southern-central Africa, with wonderful camp staff, drivers, and guides, delicious food, and outstanding camps. Wildlife was captivating with over 250 birds, 37 mammals and a dozen reptiles. I can't wait to return to this incredible region of the continent!