

Fred and Elizabeth's visit to Zambia's South Luangwa Valley

4th - 20th October 2006

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Preliminary information etc.,

We (Elizabeth and I) are regular visitors to Kafunta River Lodge in South Luangwa having first gone there in 1999 with a Naturetrek Party and we are said to have visited every year since. We enjoy it so much that we have never been to any other part of Zambia, preferring the comfort of knowing where we are headed and thus avoiding possible disappointment. Having ventured around most of Africa this is quite conservative for me but I can live with that! (It is so good!)

Zambia is one hour ahead of GMT. Sunrise and sunset are around 6.00 which makes life easy. Summer temps can be high in the valley but cooler in the winter months of May-July. The rains come normally around early November but do not be put off. This is Zambia's "Green Season" when birds are in full colour, mammals are having their young and the bush is in full leaf. We have enjoyed two February trips and two over Christmas/New Year holidays. October is "suicide month" when it gets very hot prior to the rains and everywhere is tinder dry including most rivers. Conversely Flooding does occur around the turn of the year with the Luangwa and its tributaries becoming very full.

Entry requirements:- Relatively straightforward. A Tourist Permit is required and can be purchased on arrival US\$56. A waiver is possible to regular visitors. Local currency is the Kwacha but most tourist exchange is done in US\$. A beer (Mosi) costs around \$2.50, soft drink \$1.50. Airport snacks about \$5. If you need to overnight in Lusaka good beds can be had from \$30-\$40. There are also more up market places such as Holiday Inn but we have been quite comfortable in "Juls" when the need arose. There is also a very nice Farm called **Chaminuka** www.chaminuka.com 25km north of the airport who do an inclusive overnight complete with Transfers. This is a better bet than Lusaka (US\$200 pppn but it is good!) and comes with its own game drives. We use this on the return leg as there is no connecting flight with the BA departure of 09.00. This may change.

Getting there. The South Luangwa Valley is in Eastern Province and closer to Lilongwe in Malawi than the Zambian Capital of Lusaka. It is possible to fly Ethiopian to Malawi and then connect overland for a six hour drive to the Valley. We did this on the first three visits until a schedule change made B.A.'s direct flight from LHR more convenient. Other routes are served via Johannesburg in South Africa. Flying to Lusaka by BA is overnight with an arrival around 06.15 local. This connects with Zambian Airways departure to Mfuwe at 08.15. Having done the trip so often it is now second nature. I book all flights on the Internet direct with BA and then advise the owners of Kafunta River Lodge of our flight times and Mrs Anke Cowan does the rest. Kafunta@luangwa.com. We are met on arrival at Mfuwe (60 minute flight from Lusaka) and driven to the Lodge (45 mins. depending on birds & mammals encountered on the way). Then check in, wash, and brunch before a rest in the afternoon prior to the first Evening Game drive.

A word on Kafunta River Lodge. We only use this Lodge and its Bushcamp out of habit. There are other Lodges/camps in the area. On paper it may look expensive at \$200 pppn for peak season, much less in Green season. Unlike some other lodges Kafunta is open all year round. These prices do include all food, most beverages, Park Fees, use of vehicle and guides, laundry, airport and other transfers etc., etc., The only extra is alcohol. It could be done cheaper elsewhere but we feel the package compares well with lower tariff places to which you would have to add in car & driver/guide hire Park Fees etc.,

The established daily routine from here on is wake at 5.15 for a coffee toast etc., into the vehicles by 06.00 for the first game drive. A short stop at 08.30 for coffee/tea and then back to lodge for 10.30 before it gets too hot. Brunch and sleep or swim in Pool until setting off again around 15.30. This time a "sundowner" is taken whilst the vehicle is fitted with a spotlight for seeking out nocturnal animals and birds including the Park's famous Leopard population. South Luangwa is one of the few places in Africa where night drives are permitted. Similarly you can walk in the Park and adjoining Game Areas, with the appropriate escort so that you do not upset the wildlife, and this is very rewarding. Most if not all vehicles are open to the elements and the animals which gives clear close views of both. Take a sun hat and tie it on!! In parts of the park Tsetse can be a menace so avoid blue coloured clothes. I find they home in on scented body lotions, washes, Deet etc... Avoid bathing too (often) as this seems to help although your partner may not be too impressed. If you see your friends drifting upwind at least you know it is working!

Kit carried. I do not carry a telescope and rely on my Minox 10x42 Binoculars which serve me well enough. I also had my Fuji S5000 Camera with a good 10x Optical zoom and 1.5 converter and an adequate supply of re-chargeable batteries together with the requisite Charger. The Lodge is on 'mains' but beware erratic supplies. Because of Night drives it is useful if you fit your camera Hot shoe with a Parabolic Flash as the built in flash on most cameras is useless for this purpose. As most of the viewing is from Open Vehicles (or on foot) a tripod is just an encumbrance as is a long Lens.300mm is more than adequate. Wide angle for those cherished "Elephant moments!"

Books? Zambia is at a bit of a crossroads for Avifauna. My library consisted of "Birds of Africa, south of the Sahara" by Sinclair and Ryan. Newmans and other South African Books are fine but do not show distribution maps of Zambia.

Now to the trip itself:-

October 4th. From Home to London Heathrow airport. We took the afternoon flight to London Gatwick and transferred by National Express bus to LHR. The Lusaka flight boarded and left more or less on time at 19.15 for the ten hour journey. A couple of drinks and dinner still left some time to get some fitful sleep for the long day tomorrow.

October 5th. A big plus in using BA's flight is that it arrives at 06.15, usually, with time for Immigration etc., before connecting with the onward

flight for Mfuwe. As stated above we are therefore at the Lodge playing with elephants, etc., and ticking birds before Brunch. We are rarely disappointed. A warm welcome from the staff and into our chalet to be greeted by the resident Frogs etc., Don't bother trying to put them outside, they will just crawl back in. Better the Devil you know, they are cute and do keep the flies down. And it is their place not yours. At 15.30 take tea and biscuits and off for our first full drive. Ford the river, dry season only, and we have several good birds, Stilts, Stints etc., plus a friendly herd of buffalo and some giraffe. We were in London less than 15 hours ago. After sun downer, cold Mosi for me, we see Owls, Genets etc., and then a nice female Leopard. She is quite shy but we have her with us for some time. Leopard sightings are common but not guaranteed (we have gone 8 nights in a row without one) so a leopard on our first night is a big bonus!

October 6th. Another day of the same routine. Some nice Elephants are in camp which delays breakfast but who cares? Then into the park again with good views of Kudu and other game. Birds included Ground Hornbill, various swallows and Little, Southern Carmine and White-fronted Bee-Eaters. Around Camp we tick Ashy fly-catcher, Heuglin's robin, Terrestrial Bulbul, etc., The river bank in front is thickly populated with Herons, Storks, Ibis, Jacana etc., the first recorded Eastern Reef Egret was seen and photoed here a month ago. Angolan Pitta and Flufftails also lurk but are rarely seen. The Night drive gets us our second Leopard. A nice Tom up a tree with a kill. Not very high we think it will be tempting to any passing Lion. Sure enough when he goes for a drink to female Lions pass by and are then seen walking off with front half of a young Puku. Shouts of "Stop thief" are ignored. On the way back across the river we see another Leopard drinking but she makes off before we get close. Two nights, three Leopards! Very nice!

October 7th. Today we are to visit a community project about two hours or so north. This is reached via the Nsefu Sector of the Nat Park so we do a game drive there as well. This is a different geological environment and has Hartbeeste, and Wildebeeste populations. Worth a visit in its own right but we have other plans in the area. Mwanja Camp is one of three Bush camps operated under the "Comaco Scheme". (Community Markets for Conservation.). More details on Pdf if you require them. A nice basic Bushcamp style operation run by the Community for the Community. Very well set out in a hardwood clearing with simple but clean chalets (3) with open air self contained ablutions. We enjoyed this immensely and recommend a visit wholeheartedly. Most viewing is on foot so pick up an armed ranger/scout at the Nsefu exit. We had a very cheery lady called Veronica toting an ancient .303. Initially she steered us away from Elephants "very dangerous", but we got her on message and enjoyed some close encounters. We also had very close sightings of Eland and Buffalo which always add a dash of adrenalin to a walk! A nice European Oriole was one of the avian highlights. Night drive is permitted but the absence of local knowledge proved a handicap although we did bump into our elephants again.

October 8th. Another early start for another "Walk in the Park". This time we had some very interesting encounters with Elephants and my favourite Antelope the Bushbuck. We walked the River bank and watched various animals and birds come down to drink. No predators visible but that is not to say they were not watching us. After lunch we did an evening walk to the Carmine Bee-eater colony which was very impressive. 1,000s of birds coming and going like a pink cloud. The evening drive was less exciting although we did see several Grysbok, Genets etc., I am sure that given time and experience the game viewing at night will improve.

October 9th. An after breakfast start and a further drive through Nsefu sector where we had a very interesting elephant moment. We spotted a small herd drinking in the river and parked the car on the 'cliff' above and got out to take photos thinking we were safe as the elephants could not climb up the 20 foot near vertical bank. Wrong! Whilst using view finder for some snaps my peripheral vision noted a cow coming up to us. This prompted a rapid re think and return to the vehicle. The best photo, from the car, was lost to camera shake. Much head shaking etc., and she made her point quick firmly. The rest of the drive was highlighted by some very calm Kudu moments and a hot drive back to Kafunta where we took brunch before setting off to their Island bushcamp. This is some two hours or so south over a reasonable track through scenic countryside. Lots of elephants and birds to see on the way before driving the car over the river to the Island where the camp is situated. Much more rustic "Bush" atmosphere out here with prolific wildlife. We had pioneered Ron's first ever Camp back in 2001 when igloo tents were used and now they have flush wcs. etc., in temporary thatched reed structures on stilts. A walk was organised for the afternoon and we found a long dead Hippo providing a chew for Hyena. Sundowners were taken in company with a fine Bull Elephant. Then back to camp for dinner and beer.



October 10th. At first light we took the car over the river and then set off on a walk with Dangerous our scout from previous years. Several Hippo were around still not having finished their evening meal. Then a fine Bull elephant was spotted walking 'our' trail towards us. We stepped quietly back off the trail a few metres to let him pass. (Well, what would you do?) He came on slowly until exactly opposite when he sensed our presence and whirled round to face us with a loud "Harumph" with ears out and trunk probing the air. All was quiet for a moment as I think even our hearts had stopped beating! Then having decided we were no real threat he went on his way. We also continued calmly to visit Giraffe, Impala etc., and later whilst watching about 15 Purple Crested Turaco feeding on figs we gave right of way to about 100 Buffalo coming down to drink. Quite a walk! The evening drive got us more views of a Leopard stalking Impala. Four Leopards in six nights. A good score.

October 11th. We had a further adventure with elephants before brunch and our departure back to main camp with a puncture on the way when we had Waterbuck and Zebra for company and fine views of a female Bataleur in the tree above. After moving into Chalet 8 we had a rest before the afternoon's activity. As the evening sun light was very atmospheric and a family of Giraffe provided a good scene for the camera. We then had nice views of a young female lion "calling" for company and spent some time with her. After sunset we got another nice male Leopard making his way to drink at a pool. He was quite relaxed and we followed him for some distance and then took some nice pictures of him drinking and totally at ease. Five Leopards in seven nights.

October 12th. Lots of Elephant Kudu and Giraffe for company on the morning drive and good pictures of Retz's Helmet Shrike and perched Bataleur were the bird highlights. The best of the evening drive was having our sundowner with about 50 buffalo and two or three elephant feeding quite unconcerned close nearby. This was the first night without a spotty cat for company but we were to be more than compensated for this when a Pel's Fishing Owl showed up whilst we were dining back at Kafunta.

October 13th Our morning highlights were disturbing a big Elephant at his ablutions but by now you will be getting bored with this tale. Other highlights were a pair of Spotted Hyena having a mud bath as we had morning tea. We also noted a young elephant with what appeared to be a snare around his leg. Brunch at Camp was accompanied by bathing elephants in the pool below. In the afternoon we watched a family of elephants, including two very young ones crossing the river with just their trunks showing. After dark another young leopard was found but she was very shy and kept in the dry grass making a clear picture very difficult. She appeared stressed by our proximity and we left her in peace. Mr Pels showed up again at dinner. Six Leopards in nine nights.

October 14th A fellow guest had reported a small Owl outside his chalet each morning at first light so I went round and ticked a Barred Owlet. You will be getting bored by the routine so suffice to say that tonight's drive produced not one but **four** Leopards. The first three were heading together for

a drink but the pictures are too blurred to reproduce clearly and the drive was marred by a surfeit of vehicles turning up for their turn. We left them to it. We were rewarded by a further big male lying under a tree rolling and playing just like a housecat. He was quite tolerant. On the way out of the park we found some prowling Hyenas in the Headlights. Ten Leopards in ten nights. And it gets better.

October 15th. Ticked our only Hoopoe of the trip this morning and found Mr Kafunta (a local bull elephant who used to frequent the Lodge but who had not been seen for a couple of years.) I took his picture and confirmed the ID from records. Nice to see he is still with us. On the way back Mayem, our driver, found us a female Leopard in a Sausage tree. Nice pictures in daylight for a change. Not to be outdone, Charles, got us another at the start of the evening drive before dark. Two Leopards in daylight. Twelve Leopards in eleven days.

October 16th. A nice Verreaux's Eagle Owl in daylight was the highlight of today. Another nice leopard finished off the evening drive just as we were expecting another blank. This brings to total to a lucky Thirteen.

October 17th. A family of Lion, two males, three females and three cubs were found and studied while they slept. After dark we heard a Leopard calling and finally spotted him making his way through the bush. We manoeuvred and had long clear close views while he made his way right across open ground. While following him we bumped into a lioness making her way towards the scene to check it out but she was unlucky as there was no kill to steal. Our Leopard count finished at Fourteen with only one blank night. We are not always that lucky.

October 18th. Time to bid goodbye to the Valley but not before another morning visit to the Elephants. They obliged by turning up in force to drink at Mushroom Lagoon to bathe, drink and bully the Hippo. We stood and watched whilst we had our morning refreshments. A great way to end an excellent trip. We caught the afternoon flight to Lusaka spending our final night at Chaminuka but it was raining so hard we forewent the game drive. We were well content with what Zambia had provided.

October 19th/20th BA took us home on the 'endless' flight to LHR and have stopped with Joseph and Mary in Horley overnight we caught the morning plane to IOM.

Having fed in my tick list to the computer the final count is 526 of which 108 are completely new to me from Uganda. I am well content with that as some obvious birds such as Spoonbills were not seen. I was particularly pleased and impressed with Emmy's persistence and help in identifying some of the smaller and more easily overlooked birds.

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