

Zambia's South Luangwa. It is becoming a habit.

December 13th 2004 – January 5th 2004

This was to be our 5th visit to Zambia and the wild South Luangwa National Park. It was also our 2nd “Kristmas at Kafunta” visit which is a nice habit. Access is difficult in ‘Green’ season so we stay in “South Park” at the lovely Kafunta River Lodge.

Zambia is two hours ahead of GMT. In the austral summer there is a slight lengthening of daylight hours giving maybe first light at 05.00 and dark at 18.45. The sun is virtually overhead at this time so it can be very hot and precautions against heatstroke or burning are necessary. This is also the wet/green season which can make for interesting driving. Happily the rain comes in bursts and the tracks soon dry out when the sun returns.

Entry requirements: - Zambian Immigration permits bona fide “Safari” tourists a free visa which is very nice.

Getting there, back and around. The Capital city is Lusaka which is a typical Ex Colonial African city complete with skyscrapers and green parks etc. We rarely visit such places. Seen one, seen em all! With increased flights into Lusaka and convenient internal connections we now come by Lusaka where Zambian Airways connects to Mfuwe and the trip takes about an hour. From there our Lodge will transfer us to the Camp.

Kafunta River Lodge is situated downstream from the main Park gate and contains 8 purpose built chalets that are too grand to be called “Bandas” as they are very nicely fitted out with self-contained bathroom facilities. Meals etc., are taken in a central communal Lapa where there is a bar, fire place and small plunge pool close by. The lodge overlooks the River Luangwa, where, depending on the height of the river many animals come to graze (or kill) right in front of the lodge day and night.

Daily Routine. The routine here is rise at 5.15 for a cup of tea and toast before going on a drive into the park for about four hours or so before returning for Brunch at around 11.00. Then rest, swim in the small pool or hot tub, or lounge about reading or animal watching. Elephants are regular visitors to the Lodge grounds and with the National Park just over the river anything can and often does wander by. The birding in the lodge area is superb from Turaco to Twin spot. At 15.30 more tea and cake before another drive which continues after dark to enable you to see creatures of the night such as Leopard, Civets and other nocturnal mammals and birds. South Luangwa is world renowned for its friendly leopards.

Books? Zambia is a bit of an ornithological oddity being neither South nor East Africa so you get spill over from both areas. No Regional Bird book fully covers the country. I carried “Birds of Africa, south of the Sahara” by Sinclair and Ryan and the driver/guide has SASOL Birds of Southern Africa. This latter was not really appropriate as several species are omitted and of course the ‘Range location maps’ stop at the Zambezi. As we were not touring I dispensed with a guide book.

The trip:- We were again flying with BA even though their recent switch of airports is bloody inconvenient as we now need to fly to LGW from IOM and then transfer by road to/from LHR. Check in Online opens at ETD-30 hours so this was done from home. This is a very useful tool and thoroughly recommended. (Even if running late, they know you are coming!!)

13th December 2004. Taxi to Ronaldsway for the afternoon flight and an on time(ish) arrival at Gatwick. Then transfer by National Express to Heathrow. Nice timings meant a short wait before boarding and we were on our way.

14th December 2004. A reasonable night's sleep saw us in Lusaka (LUN) at 6.50 with a 6 hour lay over for the connection to Mfuwe where we were met by self-appointed ‘Nephew’ Josephat. On the

way through Mfuwe Josephat took us to see his new Pub.

As we were staying at Kafunta for the whole trip I won't give a day by day diary but simply recount some of the 'highlights' as they happened. We shared the car from time to time with other people but mainly had the place to ourselves.



Our first 'guests' in the car were a Sicilian family who chattered a lot but were good company. We got very close to some elephants which I enjoyed but I am told that 'Momma' was a tad nervous. I re-assured her that all was OK provided they kept quiet or at least only whispered. Just after dark we met a lioness with two cubs



walking on the road which kept them very quiet indeed.

Next morning we found the lions on a freshly killed Zebra which really thrilled them. This got even better when a passing

party of elephants took a dislike to the lion's presence and drove them into the bushes with much trumpeting.



Another highlight the following evening was when we came upon a very distressed couple of female elephant and closer examination showed that the larger had just given birth to a wobbly little one. Mother was burying the placenta etc., whilst junior was struggling to his feet in his first attempts to suckle. I had



never seen this before but in order not to attract attention of predators we did not linger and moved off hoping that the little chap would make it through the night. He did as we were to find out later.

The weather turn bad for two days and drives were often curtailed or cancelled. mind so much as we had lots of days to for other guests who were not so lucky.



nights so our We did not spend but I felt

Well I felt sorry for some of them but not two chattering young Americans who did not appear interested in anything but each other. We all wondered why on earth they had bothered coming at all. Even a very realistic mock charge by a large bull failed to move them. Some folks.

We stopped for our usual “Sundowner” on Puku Ridge which was very nice. Very clear evening with the Machinga escarpment on the western horizon some 50 km away.



It was here that ‘we’ had the idea to return in the dry season and possibly walk through the park to the escarpment. Later in our stay I was asked by Anke and Ron what New Year Resolutions I had made and I answered that one was to walk to the Machinga which got Ron very excited.

Another event of note was when we parked up to watch lions by the small ‘pond’ near Big Baobab behind a closed car containing some Asian people eating their spicy food. This attracted a lion and it was funny to watch it sniff at the closed window and see the occupants leap way to the far side of the car. A missed photo opportunity!

Later we met two elephants with a very small tot at foot and we are confident that this is the one we met earlier in the trip just as he had been born.



During another sundowner we were on the airstrip when I spied a movement in the long grass and a short stalk got me nice views of a small serval who posed nicely before wandering off about his business. Josephat got a bit nervous about me approaching a Cat but this little guy was no maneater and was free to leave at any time! One afternoon when a drive was cancelled we were invited by a staff member to visit his parents at their village. This was very enjoyable indeed and unstaged. We were shown how to filter water for drinking and how to use a

car tyre and pipe to distil Sugar Cane into gin.

During our post brunch afternoon our attention was drawn to an elephant on the river bank who had two youngsters at foot. They were so alike they much have been twins which is very unusual indeed.



But the little ones were both suckling so were either twins or one had been adopted.

Being Christmas time we attended the usual carol service on the bridge at the park gates which is well attended by most lodge's staff and guests.



That's really it for this trip which was as enjoyable as always and I will conclude with a nice leopard and some unusual birds for any birders who may read this.



The birds above are Lesser (Allen's) Gallinule and Lesser Moorhen which I was pleased to get together. The other two are female Black-crowned Tchagras. To conclude is nice Slender Mongoose.

That's it for now.