



Monday, June 14, 2010

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1.1. April 2006

1.2. Greetings all

Greetings from the valley. There were some showers in November, but most of the rains have fallen in the last month pushing the Luangwa river to its highest point, breaking the bank and finishing just two metres from the chalet steps at Kaingo. Erosion of the river bank can be a problem during the annual floods, but fortunately this year there has been very little damage in front of the camp - probably as a result of the bank protection mechanisms we put in place six years ago.

Boating up river to Kaingo Camp from Mfuwe bridge takes about two hours, the main concern being fallen tree stumps and hippos striking the propeller; both are normally easy to spot but one has to keep alert especially with crocs waiting and watching. As the waters are brown with silt it's also easy to misjudge the depth in places and run into a sand bank.

Wildlife sightings get better the further up you go, especially closer to Camp where the National Park is on both sides of the river. Apart from crocs and hippo, you tend to see buffalo wallowing in the shallows, elephants crossing or feeding along the banks, smaller game such as puku and impala and of course multitudes of birds including stalks, herons, fish-eagles, skimmers and migrants like the huge collections of red-winged pratincoles on the beaches.

By combining boating and short walks one is really able to get the feel of Luangwa Valley during the rains; everywhere there is growth and reproduction of life. Leaves are sprouting, fish are spawning, birds nesting, animals breeding, young growing and adults gaining weight – a lush contrast to the harsh times at the end of the dry season.

On river trips one can be rewarded with sightings of eland, wilddog, zebra, elephant, buffalo and even lion and leopard. The channels and streams that feed the Luangwa are full and these become the game-viewing roads and loops; most of the wildlife retreats to higher, sandier soils especially around Mwamba .

Some friends who live year-round in the valley just outside the Park to the north have to use a variety of forms of transport to get around, the most exciting being a micro-light plane. I took an early morning flight with John over the Kaingo/Mwamba area recently and was stunned by the beauty and proliferation that nature unfolded below us. From the air the extent of the surface water in lagoons and streams can easily be seen, but the main theme is colour – hundreds of shades of lush greens and

browns. It seems that all forms of plant-life are at maximum growth speed in these perfect hot, humid and wet conditions. There are green seas of grass-covered plains, huge swathes of riverine trees, impenetrable thickets surrounding primeval swamps and rich woodlands of mopane all growing, reaching for the sky. From the air it's easy to see how the wildlife responds – huge herds of buffalo, antelope and elephant spread out as far as the eye could see, making the most of the rich food around them; it is a great reminder of what a privilege it is to be able to operate our camps within the midst of this teeming ecosystem.

Looking back:

To regress slightly back to last dry season; both Kaingo and Mwamba Camps were very busy right through till the end (early November) – it was our best season to date and we had some good press from journalists from Sunday Express and African Traveler magazine in the UK, National Geographic plus National Geographic Traveler Magazine in the US and The Sydney Morning Herald in Australia.

Our **photographic hides or blinds** which add to the game-viewing options offered to guests at both camps were as popular as always. The wildlife sightings just got better and better as the season hotted up.

As the Luangwa shrank with the months, the hippo pods got closer and closer to the grass and reed structure making any visit to the **hippo hide** unforgettable, with its close-up sights and sounds of these giant amphibious mammals. Plenty of other wildlife also uses this location as access to water from the river and it's not uncommon to see elephant, buffalo and giraffe coming in to drink.

As the season progressed and the depth of the river dropped, the elephants started crossing anywhere they felt like. The long beach on the opposite side of the river from the **viewing platform** at Kaingo provided good views of animals drinking and on quite a few occasions good sightings of the female leopard that has her lair in the thickets across, not to mention the Nsefu pride of lions that often camped on the sandbank.

Last year we had several more guests opting for the **elephant hide** “sleep-out” option for those staying at Kaingo. Journalist Mike Unwin nominated his sleep out as the most spectacular night he had spent in the African Bush.

The **Carmine bee-eater hide** which is placed on a boat moored 10 meters from a busy nesting colony of these colourful birds provided a popular addition to morning drives. It is a great thing to be able to just sit quietly for half an hour and observe how a large crowd interacts – in this case a large crowd of awesomely beautiful chattering crimson-coloured birds.

The **last water-hole hide** along the all but dry Mwamba river produced some of the most fascinating game-viewing. At around about eight in the morning the herds of impala, buffalo, elephant, zebra, wildebeest etc stream down for a quick drink. The sheer variety of wildlife in one spot is astounding with bush-buck, wart-hog, baboon, guinea-fowl and a multitude of birds filling in the gaps. Of course the activity also draws the attention of the local predators and there were a number of ‘kills’ made as well.

We now have a bore-hole providing beautiful clean underground water at Mwamba Camp. This has also meant that we can keep a couple of water-holes full right in front of camp greatly increasing the amount of game and birdlife within sight of the camp. Mwamba is now even more of an oasis than ever before. We have built two new hides within the camp at Mwamba to take advantage of this and Jules has taken some stunning photos from both of them.

2005 was a great year for cats; there were cubs everywhere and as the season wore on sightings of the

various lion prides became as regular as clockwork. One count suggested a total of 52 lions (4 prides with the Mwamba group having swelled to 16) within our game-viewing range north and south – from the Luwi river to elephant bend (approx 30km). This figure includes the Nsefu pride which spent a lot of time our side. Even if guests were "lioned out" there would be leopards to follow or a kill to witness.

Photos tell the real story (I took the above on an afternoon drive in Oct) and its very worthwhile scrolling back to the monthly photographic newsletters that Jules prepared using shots she took while accompanying us on drives and walks.

Looking ahead:

After the generally good rains we are looking forward to there being plenty of additional offspring out there this year and can't wait to begin the season in May. This will be my 15th consecutive year at Kaingo and I am excited at the thought of the amazing new wildlife experiences that will unfold during the season; nature always has something to share that one hasn't seen or understood before.

There are new areas to explore north of Mwamba and we will be opening a track out as far as "Mwamba Sands", about 12 km from camp to access the great baobab forest and the sands area itself where there are reed-buck and hartebeest - 2 antelope we don't tend to see down at the river.

1.3. Hope to see you out there. In the mean time "salani bwino" – stay well.

1.4. Derek Shenton



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