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ZIMBABWE AND ZAMBIA

Date - September 2022

Duration - 22 Days

Destinations
Bulawayo - Matobo National Park - Victoria Falls - Victoria Falls Private Game Reserve - Victoria Falls National Park - Livingstone - Livingstone Island - Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park - Mana Pools National Park - Matusadona National Park - Lake Kariba - Hwange National Park

Trip Overview

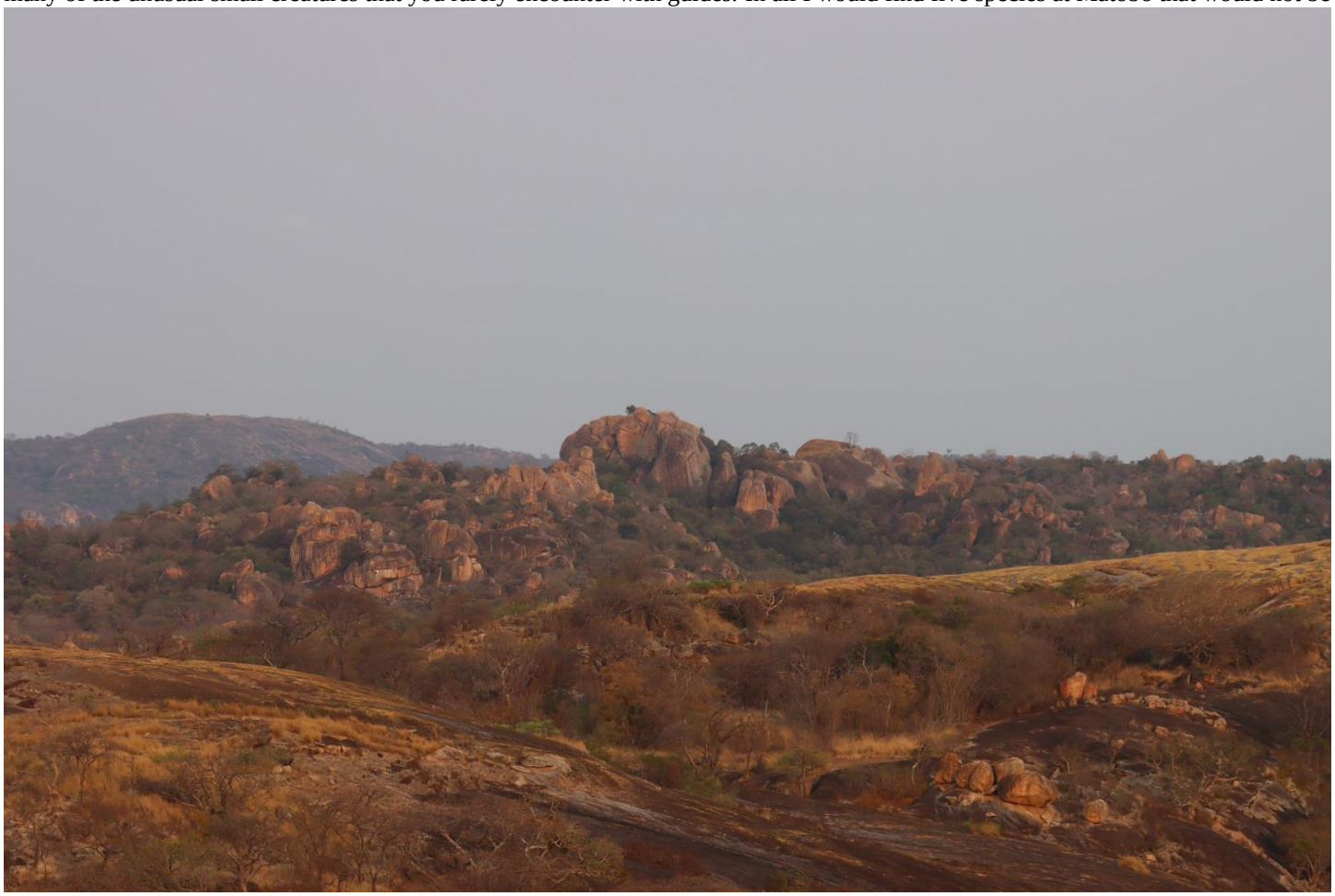
Despite being one of my favourite wildlife regions in Africa, and consequently the planet, I have somewhat neglected Southern Africa in recent times and a number of my regular operators are no longer in business, particularly since the global coronavirus pandemic. As such, I am currently working on multiple new options and this return to Zimbabwe after a thirteen-year absence was the first of several research expeditions planned across the region. I intend to visit both Zambia and Namibia in 2023 and am already finalising a long trip to Botswana the following year to include the Central Kalahari, the Okavango Delta, Linyanti and Chobe National Park, which is arguably the finest safari circuit on the continent. It is certainly the one that I always recommend if someone asks for just one option, but there are countless possibilities in this magnificent part of the world and some of the best can be found in Zimbabwe. This

tour would include many of my old haunts, at least in terms of major destinations, as I largely attempted to select new lodges, based more on location than whether I had used them previously. Whilst some were marginally more accommodating than others, I would probably use them all again and my only real concern was a general lack of spotlighting opportunities, as there was none at all at a couple of the camps, on the riverfront at Mana Pools for example, and at others the guides were either not allowed or did not want to spend long out at night, which is an issue I have experienced all over the world. The more luxurious the accommodation the worse the problem can be unfortunately, as it is considerably easier for a lodge to offer their guests a brief spotlighting drive back to camp each evening, than to arrange a guide to take them out again after dinner and many tourists simply have no idea what they are missing at night. This was not overly the case in Zimbabwe, where some of the national parks do not permit spotlighting, and often when we were able to drive at night, we were only allowed to do so within our concession area, which is becoming a significant problem in its own right. There have always been private concessions, generally leased on a long-term basis by the more exclusive safari operators, which basically only the wealthy can afford to visit, but in certain reserves they are creating far too many of these restricted areas at the expense of regular tourists. This issue is by no means restricted to Zimbabwe, but these private camps are usually in the premier wildlife areas, both in terms of potential sightings and spectacular views, and I have heard countless stories of tourists missing major species because they were not allowed to access an area where the animals in question were known to be visible. I have experienced the situation myself of course, from both sides of the issue, and even on this trip we encountered a new concession at Mana Pools, in a section of the park that the camp I was staying at had been using for their guests for more than twenty years. They had no idea that this area was now beyond their safari vehicles and it was simply a matter of us noticing a new sign saying that we were not allowed to venture beyond that point, which, I am pleased to say, our guide completely ignored. Like so much else, the entire situation is driven by profit and greed, with governments and luxury lodges working together to inflate prices and extract as much revenue as possible from the ever increasing number of tourists who can now afford these premium camps. For the rest, in many of the major reserves across the region at least, it is now a case of visiting the dwindling areas of national park that remain affordable and that everyone can access, although this of course creates its own issues, in terms of tourist numbers and the way in which these wild animals are being

observed. As it was, and given that I am fortunately able to visit some of these exclusive concessions, these issues did not have a significant impact on my tour and I encountered more or less everything expected in this part of Southern Africa. The limited spotlighting opportunities almost certainly cost me an African civet sighting, but in truth I was probably unlucky not to see one regardless of the restrictions, and I would have had a far better chance of a brown hyena at Hwange National Park, where night drives are not permitted beyond the concession areas. Of the rest, I missed nyala at Mana Pools and gemsbok at Hwange, and although I would have obviously preferred to have seen these impressive antelopes, their absence did not detract from a fabulous return to this intoxicating part of what has always been my favourite continent.

Matobo National Park

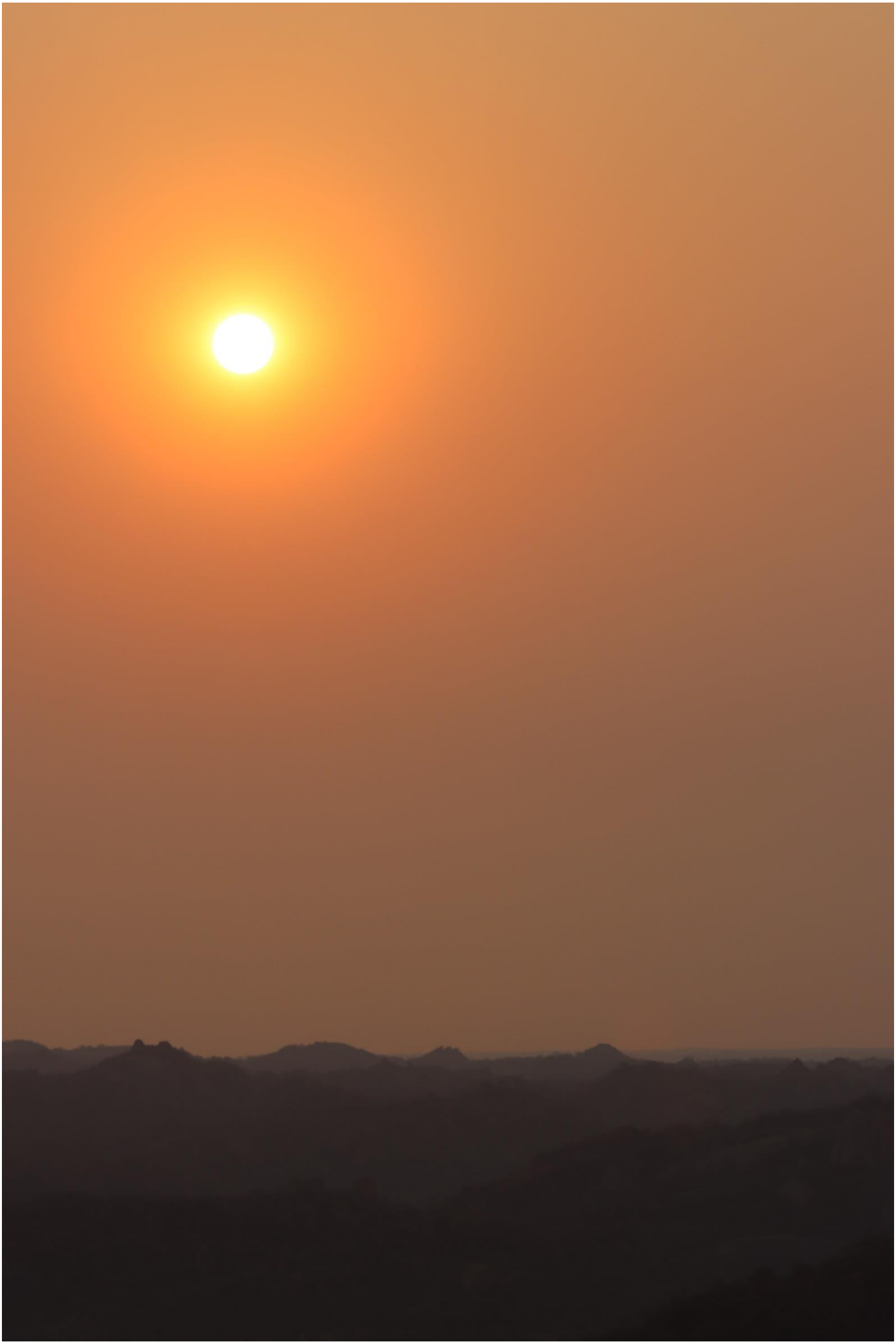
Although I was only able to include the distinctive hills and imposing granite outcrops of Matobo at almost the last moment, and even then only for two nights, this picturesque reserve is where I had the most fun, largely because I had my own vehicle and was able to explore independently. This basically means where I want and for as long as I want, which is why this section of the tour includes so many of the unusual small creatures that you rarely encounter with guides. In all I would find five species at Matobo that would not be



observed elsewhere and one of these was in the type of utterly bizarre circumstances that perfectly highlights exactly why I love what I do. Having collected my vehicle at Bulawayo airport and driven the short distance south to Matobo, I had already found a few animals when the hire car got stuck in some deceptively deep sand. Whilst there are a couple of four-wheel drive tracks at Matobo, this was not one of them and a standard vehicle should have been fine for the main park routes. That it was not, was largely due to the fact that even the primary circuits are not always well maintained and although I spent an hour or so attempting to dig and manoeuvre the car out, the situation was hopeless. I had already dropped my bag at the only lodge in the park, but they were not expecting me back until around 8pm and I had driven a long way from the area in which I thought they might search if I did not return on time. To further compound the situation, there was no phone signal and unless I wanted to spend the night in the car, my only remaining option was to walk for assistance. Fortunately, I always carry any important equipment with me, which meant that I had my spotlight, and as it was already getting dark as I set out, I decided that I may as well make the most of the opportunity and do some spotlighting on the way. Within less than an hour I had seen a lone bushveld gerbil and two southern lesser galagos, at which point I caught a glimpse of the eyeshine of a much larger creature, partially obscured in the vegetation. I worked my way towards it as stealthily as you can with a spotlight, which in reality is not very stealthily at all, and from the way that the animal slowly edged away without ever running, I knew that it must be a predator. There are no lions or cheetahs at Matobo and it did not appear to have the characteristic loping gait of a hyena, but it was that sort of size and it was only when I got to within about 50 metres that I could make out its spots, again through thick undergrowth and now with the assistance of my binoculars. As much as you cannot ever believe you are going to walk straight into a leopard after getting your car stuck within about four hours of landing in Africa, this large cat was always the most likely option, as the leopard population at Matobo is apparently the densest of any region in which these supreme predators occur, primarily as a result of the equally abundant rock hyrax numbers, which in some cases make up around half of their diet. I was eventually able to get a reasonable view of this entirely unanticipated first carnivore and at this point I had more or less forgotten that I was meant to be looking for help and was basically just spotlighting. I would go on to find both common duiker and springhare before the next surprise of the evening arrived in the form of heavy and decidedly unseasonal rain. I was very quickly soaked and considering the fact that I was carrying a camera, 400mm lens and bulky flash, spotlight, binoculars, phone, wallet, and car keys, all whilst dressed in a t-shirt and a pair of shorts, I began to concentrate more on finding shelter than wildlife. Mercifully, I was not far from what appeared in the dark to be a tiny deserted village and quickly took cover in a small outbuilding to escape the worst of what was clearly developing into a full-blown storm, which is where a couple of locals noticed my light and came to investigate. After explaining my predicament and roughly where I had abandoned the car, they gestured for me to jump on their tractor, whilst they went in search of something to tow the car out of the sand. Eventually the three of us set off and although the tractor had a small roof, it may as well not have done in terms of the rain, which was now torrential and was blowing directly into our faces as we inched our way forward. I think that it probably took longer to get back to the car on the tractor than it had taken to leave it on foot and even if that was not the case, it definitely felt like it, with forks of lightning illuminating the dark night sky and claps of thunder resounding across the heavens. It is often at these truly disastrous moments, when you cannot imagine how a situation, or indeed your life, can get any worse, that the gods decide to even the score slightly and your only mammal target for the entire destination, in this case a jameson's red rock hare,

suddenly appears out of the carnage and into your path. I have lost count of how many deeply traumatic disasters have been transformed into absolute triumphs in this manner and although I clearly pointed out this extraordinary turn of events to my two bemused companions, they rather bizarrely appeared more interested in getting me back to my car before the roads washed away, than they were with the rare bunny I had made so much effort to show them. I guess that sharing a tractor ride in a biblical storm, with an apparently demented tourist screaming ‘red rock hare, red rock hare’ between ferocious clashes of lightning, was probably not how they imagined their evening was going to unfold, but we did finally make it back to the hire car and after several attempts, they were able to pull me out of the sand with the aid of some old wire they had found before we departed. At no point did they ask for payment and although I did insist that they take something for their unbelievable efforts on my behalf, they were basically just happy to give up their evening to help someone in trouble, which is precisely what I have experienced all over Africa and why I have such a deep affinity for the vast majority of the people who live on this exceptional continent. I have known their genuine warmth and generous hospitality throughout my life and it was almost no surprise that when I returned to my lodge at approaching midnight, the staff were waiting with a hot three-course meal, having spent several hours searching for me in the rain. When you hear so called civilised westerners criticising or dismissing Africans, with absolutely no idea how their own forebears have exploited this region over the years, remember this evening as the true face of African hospitality and having not eaten since I left England, I can never face aeroplane food, it was difficult to express just how grateful I was for their kindness. It had certainly been an eventful start and even on the drive back having been rescued, I spotted an adorable southern giant pouched rat in the middle of the road, several typically absurd springhares and a magnificent verreaux’s eagle-owl. It was clearly going to be a memorable stay and I could not wait to explore further, although hopefully this time with the luxury of a car and some dry clothes. In all I had just over a full day remaining before I was due to move on to Victoria Falls and this included a guided white rhinoceros trek early the next morning. Matobo is home to both species of African rhinoceros, but the rarer black variety are protected in a separate fenced area, which you require

special permission to enter. I would have ordinarily organised this, but, as I have already touched upon, this section of the tour had been included very much at the eleventh-hour and there was simply no possibility of making this work. I might have still tried on my arrival, but I had already arranged to visit a reserve with black rhinoceros at Victoria Falls and those lucky animals would have horns, as both species have sadly had their horns removed at Matobo, to hopefully ensure that these defenceless creatures are not slaughtered by poachers. Although I entirely understand the reasoning behind this decision and support anything that will guarantee their safety, it is still difficult to see these majestic animals maimed in this way, particularly when you understand just how gentle they actually are. Even black rhinos are nowhere near as aggressive as people tend to suggest and I have seen them sleeping alongside the guards protecting them, in exactly the same way that your pet dog would sleep beside you in bed at night. I have actually dedicated a great deal of time to both species and make a point of attempting to include one or the other on every trip, as they have now disappeared across much of their former range and it remains essential to support their conservation wherever possible. At Matobo I spent a couple of enthralling hours with two females and a five-month old calf, following them slowly on foot and then sitting within a few metres as they settled down to sleep in the shade. The rest of my stay was spent exploring the boulder strewn hills and huge granite kopjes that the oldest national park in the country is famous for and this dramatic landscape is also the final resting place of the controversial British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes, who colonised 'Rhodesia', now Zambia and Zimbabwe, towards the end of the 19th century. His grave overlooks what he personally described as a '*View of the World'* and I can certainly vouch for the remarkable panorama, as I trekked up on two occasions, not so much to visit the grave, but to admire the jaw dropping sunset and to look for an eastern rock sengi, which I had been informed could be found at the summit. I was advised that a modicum of patience might be required, but in reality a single animal turned up within about twenty minutes and I spent about as long watching this rocket-fuelled elephant shrew darting all over the rocks. After the red rock hare and southern giant pouched rat from the previous memorable evening, this was the third of five mammals that I would observe only at Matobo. The next was a rock hyrax, which I could actually only see here on this trip, and the last, but by no means least in my opinion, was a greater cane rat, which I chanced upon whilst spotlighting around one of several dams in the area. Most of these were productive in terms of a number of sightings, but I was especially thrilled with the cane rat, which may just be the most endearing rodent on the planet. It was also a great view, initially in the middle of the road in my headlights and then sitting silently among the reeds when I attempted to get closer with my spotlight on foot. In all, I would observe 22 different mammal species in less than two full days at Matobo and they were only part of the story at this lovely old reserve. A giant plated lizard and a substantial python, with what looked suspiciously like another greater cane rat in its stomach, were the undoubted reptile highlights and the diverse birdlife included a pair of martial eagles, a brown snake eagle and a soaring verreaux's eagle, to go with the eagle-owl of the same name. The only real surprise at this point, was failing to see a klipspringer in a reserve that could have been designed for them. Indeed, I had been told that these nimble rocky specialists are usually observed around the lodge, but I was not successful until my final morning, when I departed at first light to look specifically for them and eventually found three, as well as my first greater kudus, a group of four females drinking at the edge of the same cane rat dam. I would have been happy enough with that, but Matobo had one more surprise in store for me, a white rhinoceros sleeping serenely with its head resting on its front feet, again, just like my dog. It would have been difficult to imagine a more idyllic way to end what had been an outstanding stay and I set off on the 460 kilometre drive to Victoria Falls, almost as reluctant to leave as I was excited to move on.



Victoria Falls

If you include my brief foray into Zambia, I technically visited three reserves at Victoria Falls, but most of the wildlife activities took place at the Victoria Falls Private Game Reserve, which had been selected largely on the strength of its black rhinoceros population and also as my accommodation for all three nights. My room overlooked an open patch of savannah with a small waterhole and each morning I would sit and watch giraffe, greater kudu, bushbuck, common duiker and impala strolling out of the woods to drink. I had not visited what is a relatively large and impressive reserve previously and of the 26 mammal species that I would encounter on this leg of the tour, 23 were seen here, including the first elephants, lions and buffalo. The rhinos were all observed from the vehicle and

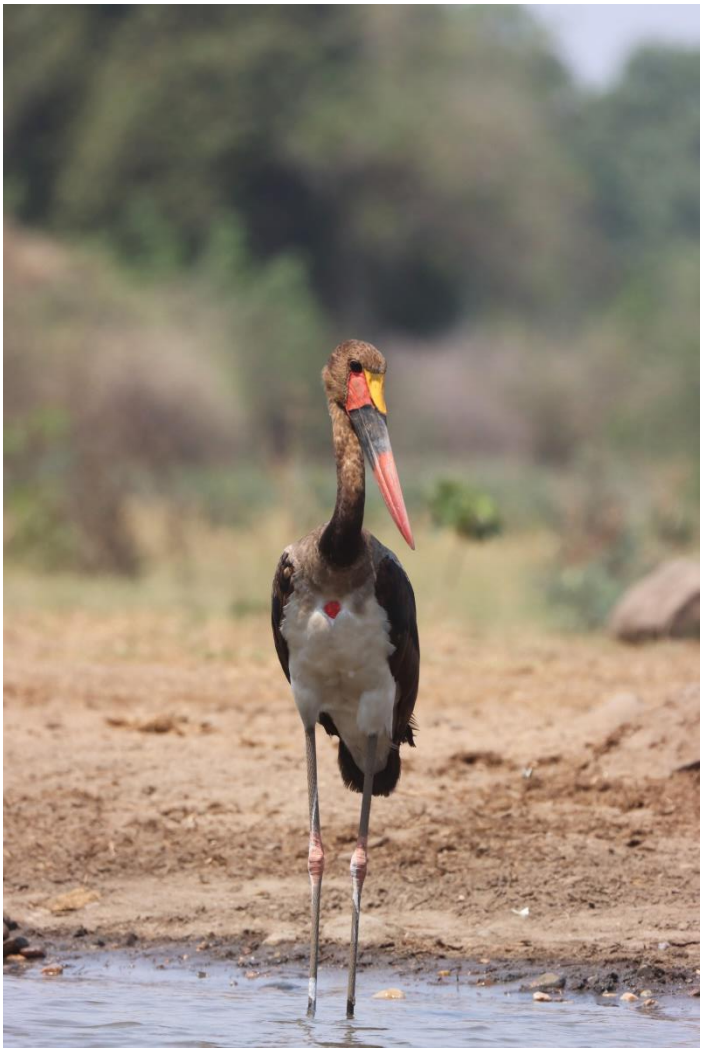
although it is never quite the same to search for these scarce animals in a fenced private reserve, where they are far easier to find than in authentically wild conditions, the sightings themselves were excellent and of course the conservation of these critically endangered creatures is far more important than how they are seen. That said, it was wonderful to be able to photograph them with their horns, not least because you know they are being sufficiently well protected for that to be possible, and in all I would encounter six of these imposing beasts, including a mother and her young male offspring. Those sightings took place over basically three game drives at this private reserve, one each in the morning and afternoon and an extended night drive that produced the only common genets until Hwange and a superb view of a magnificent leopard, sprawled across the road without an apparent care in the world. I would have arranged more, but I also wanted to evaluate several activities for future guests and my one day across the border in Zambia included a thirty-minute microlight flight over the falls and an afternoon visit to the Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, principally for a second opportunity to observe a white rhinoceros on foot. For those who are not aware, Mosi-oa-Tunya translates as The Smoke That Thunders and it would be hard to imagine a more appropriate description of this natural masterpiece. The name alone conjures the enduring mystery and enthralling spectacle of one of the most powerful waterfalls on earth and as soon as I see the smoke of the spray billowing through the air, and hear the thunder of the falls themselves, I somehow feel as if I am returning home. At more than 1,700 metres wide and 108 metres deep at a certain point, Victoria Falls is officially one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World and the microlight flight over the falls is, in my opinion at least, the number one tourist activity in all of Africa, particularly if you take the extended flight to include Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, which I always do. The view of the falls from the air, in an open cockpit

with the wind in your face, is utterly spellbinding and as you fly further down the mighty Zambezi, you begin to notice herds of elephant, buffalo, giraffe and zebra. You can even make out pods of partially submerged hippopotamus, as well as crocodiles basking on sandbanks, and occasionally white rhinos are glimpsed from the air, although this is not common and I had already arranged to search for these gentle giants on foot. I would encounter ten in all, including a large male within maybe three metres at one stage and a pair of mothers with five and six-month-old calves, which we made a point of staying further away from. All of the rhinos had their horns and this would be my last opportunity to spend time with a much maligned and heavily persecuted creature, that I would urge everyone to try to see in the wild and to please help protect. Squeezed between the two main events in Zambia was a visit to Livingstone Island, which, as you might expect, was named after the 19th century missionary and explorer David Livingstone, who was the first chronicled European to view Victoria Falls. He did so on the 16th of November 1855, when members of the local Makololo tribe ferried him by canoe to this now famous island, which sits at the top of the falls in the heart of the Zambezi. This breathtaking first view of the waterfall that he would name in honour of his reigning monarch Queen Victoria, clearly had a profound effect on Livingstone, who would later recount in his *'Missionary Travels'* journal:

'No one can imagine the beauty of the view from anything witnessed in England. It had never been seen before by European eyes; but scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight.'

The historical significance aside, the highlight of the tour is the opportunity to swim in Devil's Pool, which is perched on the very edge of the falls, a short distance from Livingstone Island. Although the shallow pool is safe to enter when water levels are low, as they were during my September visit, as you approach, it looks as if there is nothing to stop you being swept over the edge to your certain doom. To some it is the ultimate infinity pool, but to others it is too terrifying to even contemplate and I always tell visitors to

spare a thought for their guides, who spend most of every tour balanced just a few inches from the actual edge of the hundred or so metre drop, as they photograph their guests. Whilst this activity merely looks dangerous, there are several others at Victoria Falls that really will test your nerves, including some of the best white water rafting in Africa, as I can personally testify, and a nerve-wracking bungee jump from the bridge between Zimbabwe and Zambia, which I have no intention of ever personally testifying. My final day at probably the adrenaline capital of the continent would be spent in far more sedate fashion, with a morning safari at my lodge back in Zimbabwe, followed by lunch at the celebrated Victoria Falls Hotel, where I spent most of my time sitting on the lawn with a large troop of thoroughly entertaining banded mongoose. From the colonial splendour of a bygone age, I took the short walk to Victoria Falls National Park, which, unless you are in a microlight, has the best views of the falls from either side of the border. There are several points of interest along the undemanding trail and much of the park is made up of rainforest, which does not occur anywhere else in the region and exists purely as a result of the constant spray from the falls. This would be my final view of this iconic African landmark and my brief visit ended in equally classical fashion, with a tranquil sunset cruise on the Zambezi, where the sun drops away across a backdrop as timeless as the continent itself.



Mana Pools National Park

From Victoria Falls I would fly directly to Mana Pools National Park, again in traditional safari fashion, on the first of several Cessna flights connecting the various parks across the country. There is nothing quite like flying over a new reserve in a little wobbly fixed-wing aircraft and as you land on the remote dusty airstrip, the guide from your camp will invariably be waiting to greet you. The anticipation at this point is almost tangible and I was even more excited than usual, as Mana Pools is one of the premier national parks

in Southern Africa and I had not visited for almost two decades. As such, I would spend longer here than at any other destination and my seven-night stay would be split between two lodges in highly contrasting areas, with three nights on the fertile floodplains overlooking the Zambezi, and of course Zambia, and the final four further inland towards the arid wild areas of Chitake Springs, where I camped on my last visit. The lodges had been chosen specifically to complement each other, as night drives are not allowed on the floodplains, but they are permitted elsewhere, albeit only for a short period before dinner, and are usually fairly productive despite their brief duration. In addition, whilst the first camp was situated on one of the most famous rivers in Africa, the second was perched directly above a fabulous waterhole, with a hide situated on the edge for incredible eye level views of anything approaching to drink. However, for all of my careful planning, I arrived to terrible news, not so much for my tour, which was insignificant in comparison, but for the animals involved, as a guide had shot an elephant a couple of days before I landed and this would have disastrous consequences for the vulnerable African wild dogs that this park has always been famous for. I actually know the guide involved and, as such, was not at all surprised by the incident, as he has a reputation of approaching animals on foot with his guests and this tragic event occurred within a short distance of a wild dog den, when apparently another group of tourists startled the elephant and it consequently charged. To be entirely fair, I am only repeating what the head guide of another camp told me and have no way of accurately assessing the situation or the dangers involved. However, whether it was necessary to shoot the poor elephant or not, and it very rarely is, is actually almost irrelevant, as the fact is, neither party should have been this close to a wild dog den in the first place. The guide involved should certainly have known better and as a result of what was clearly an unnecessary disturbance, the wild dogs abandoned their den and apparently their newborn pups. I say apparently, in the slight hope that perhaps they were able to move the pups on with them, as no one was able to confirm the exact situation and wild dogs are notoriously protective of their young, which are even allowed to eat first after a hunt. This behaviour is almost unheard of among large carnivores and although the pack had clearly fled the area, no new tracks were observed during my entire stay, it is feasible that the pups escaped as well, depending on their age. If not, the survival of the pack is everything and even if the traumatic event itself had not driven the dogs away, so basically a charging elephant and gunshots literally metres from their den, a host of predators feasting on an elephant carcass undoubtedly would have. One of the issues at Mana Pools is that visitors are not only permitted to self-drive, they have the freedom to walk anywhere without a guide and almost every bad experience that I have first-hand knowledge of over the years, either in terms of an animal or tourist being harmed, has been as a result of people getting too close to a wild animal and pressurising it, intentionally or otherwise. These ill-fated incidents are all too often actually caused by guides and whilst the highly experienced one involved in this calamity was very quick to blame the tourists walking alone, the inconvenient truth on this occasion, is that if he had not chosen to approach a vulnerable denning site with his guests, the entire sorry episode could not have occurred. Either way, it was an unpleasant return to this iconic reserve and the absence of wild dogs rather haunted my initial stay on the Zambezi, despite the heavenly setting. The reality is, that in the absence of nocturnal activities, lions and wild dogs have historically dominated the Mana Pools floodplains and with one now missing entirely and the other proving difficult to see well, we only had three lion sightings in basically the same number of days, this would prove to be the least productive of the two camps. That is not to say that my stay here was disappointing, far from it, as the landscape is simply ravishing and there can be few more memorable destinations to watch an array of equally

sublime wildlife, including herds of elephants constantly crossing between Zimbabwe and Zambia, pretty much directly in front of my room. The area is also home to several magnificent old bull elephants, which regular visitors know by sight and name, and a healthy population of eland, an enormous spiral-horned antelope that I would fail to see elsewhere. Much the same would apply to my brief glimpse of an Egyptian mongoose, or more appropriately a grey mongoose as it is known in this part of the world, and I would also encounter my first spotted hyena and honey badger in this enchanting little patch of paradise, both in daylight. My camp was in an especially delightful setting on the river and would often attract elephants in the late afternoon heat, either on their way to or from the refreshing waters of the Zambezi. One young male would routinely tarry to feed on the trees surrounding the luxury camp tents and on

one memorable occasion he almost bumped into me as I returned to my tent from lunch. He probably surprised himself as much as me and although I instantly stopped to allow him right of way, I could see that he was at least slightly agitated by my unexpected presence. Unless something is actively hunting you, which you would probably never live to know about in any case, that is the beauty of spending time with animals in the wild, as they will invariably warn you if they are unhappy, either in obvious and aggressive fashion or more subtly in terms of their body language and perhaps a minor deviation in behaviour. In this case, my anxious visitor was shaking his head and trunk from side to side, which is a relatively clear indication of his distress and prompted me to take a seat on a nearby fallen tree, from where I watched him feeding serenely until he decided to move on. These intimate natural

moments are priceless to me and over time you realise the more you are prepared to observe, the more you will see, which is not quite as obvious as it sounds, until you have spent years learning exactly what it means. To further illustrate the point, on my final morning drive before changing camps, my guide and I heard the distant alarm calls of a group of impala, which we both eventually decided, having located and watched the increasingly restless antelopes for several minutes, were serious enough to warrant further investigation on foot. Their behaviour was indicative of a leopard moving through the surrounding area and as we stopped and scanned different vantage points, this was the predator that we were both fully expecting to spot. Fortunately, and this is exactly what I mean in terms of the more you will see, nature is anything but predictable and instead of locating the anticipated leopard in my binoculars, I watched a caracal walking calmly through the rapidly dispersing impala. It was only a brief view, but it was unobstructed and this was the second African trip in a row where I had chanced upon this elegant cat, after a fairly long absence previously. That recent encounter had taken place earlier in the year at Zakouma National Park in Chad and although that was a much longer sighting with photographs, we would have missed this latest animal entirely, had we not taken the time to stop and pay attention to the distressed impala. It was certainly an appropriate way to end the beginning of my return to Mana Pools and my second camp was in a concession area some 40 kilometres from the river, which I would not see again until I moved on. I have already discussed some of the issues regarding these private concessions, which only paying guests can access regardless of the movement of wildlife, and at Mana Pools you really do now risk the possibility of not seeing a wild dog unless you include one of the concessions they are known to occur at or at least visit. Most serious operators are aware of this and will include at least one private area if their guests are hoping to see these iconic dogs, which is usually the case following the superb 2018 BBC documentary series ‘Dynasties’, which told the extraordinary story of Tait, the elderly matriarch of a pack of wild dogs at Mana Pools. Narrated by the doyen of wildlife broadcasters David Attenborough, the episode in question is actually entitled ‘Painted Wolf’, itself an adaptation of painted dog, which has been adopted by several conservation groups in order to distinguish these striking animals from domestic canids, following decades of persecution. Whichever name you prefer, the paint reference is entirely appropriate given their distinctive appearance and Tait’s story once again highlights just how remarkable these exceptionally courageous creatures are, particularly in terms of their incredible loyalty. Driven from their own territory by a larger pack, Tait had to try to ensure the survival of her own pack, including a new litter of pups, in a perilous section of the park dominated by lions and hyenas. Coming towards the end of her natural life, Tait is eventually killed by the lions, but only after leading her pack to safety and a final stand in which she and her partner, a younger male that could have easily left her and escaped, refuse to run from their significantly larger adversaries. Outnumbered and outgunned, their heroic end is not played out on screen and instead you see Tait’s pack returning to its former territory, now led by her daughter Tammy. Tough to watch of course, but it is the nature of things and the programme did help to provide a more considered and sympathetic view of a largely misunderstood species, in part due to the seemingly vicious way in which they take down their prey. In truth,

although they are bloody and traumatic, wild dog kills are quicker than those of many predators and they hunt as a pack simply because most of their prey is more substantial than a single dog. The one downside of the largely positive documentary, is that now everyone wants to see a painted wolf, especially at Mana Pools, and this has created its own problems in terms of these endangered creatures being disturbed, particularly around their dens, where they are far more vulnerable and as I personally experienced on the Zambezi floodplains. No dens were known of at my second camp, but a group of three dogs was being seen intermittently and it was thought that one of the three might be a pregnant female. If that was the case, there was the possibility of them choosing a den site nearby and this would in turn greatly increase my chances of encountering at least two members of the small pack, as the matriarch would remain underground until her pups were old enough to surface, which is usually around three weeks. They are fully weaned by about five weeks and are old enough to travel with the adults between eight and ten, at which point the den, where they are of course most at risk, will be abandoned. So finding a den site can feasibly provide you with an almost three-month window in which to observe the remaining adults, all of which are now restricted to the general vicinity. Hunts can still involve relatively long distances, but these intelligent canids typically settle where their prey is abundant and it is not unusual to be able to spend several days with the same pack in these conditions. Indeed, they are not overly concerned by people away from their young, at least if you maintain even a reasonably respectful distance, and I have experienced a large and inquisitive pack approaching to within about five metres whilst I was out walking, which was as memorable as it sounds. Given that I am unlikely to ever rival that magical event, I basically had four days remaining to find a wild dog in a reserve renowned for them, as they would be much more difficult to track down elsewhere. Fortuitously, and to my immense relief, I did not have to wait beyond about half an hour of my first short night drive, when I heard on the radio that one of the other camp vehicles had spotted all three dogs. I could see their headlights in the distance and as we approached, I could just about make out my first African wild dog at Mana Pools for the best part of two decades. I would eventually see all three on that first evening, mainly walking and running along the dry Rukomechi riverbed, but they were not the best views and I was grateful to spot them again the following night, when they were clearly hunting. There were only two on this occasion, which possibly indicates that they had now selected a nearby den, and they were both now moving with an intent and purpose that had been missing the previous evening. As such, we lost them for a short period and within the ten minutes or so that we searched, they killed an impala, albeit in a most uncharacteristic and frankly macabre manner. Instead of the ill-fated antelope being eviscerated, as I had expected, we came across the bizarre sight of its head wedged between the thick lower trunks of a small acacia, with its tongue lolling and its neck evidently broken. In its desperation to escape, the terrified animal must have hit the tree with such force, its neck snapped and its head was so firmly stuck, the two dogs were unable to pull the carcass free. They took turns trying, with one tugging

furiously at the dead weight and the other watching for more dangerous predators to appear and snatch their prize or even worse if they dallied just that moment too long. Their urgency by this stage was almost tangible, but instead of accepting the obvious defeat, these resourceful dogs adopted a new approach and began tearing away the flesh from the underbelly and hindquarters of the impala, to at least salvage part of the meal. Eventually, having feasted on what they could as rapidly as possible, they disappeared silently into the night, both departing at exactly the same time, without any obvious communication between the two. Sadly, we were already well past the time that we had to return to the lodge and were not consequently privy to the final chapter of this absorbing tale, which would undoubtedly involve a much more powerful animal simply ripping the carcass from the tree. As it was, when we returned the

next morning, there was nothing left and no sign that anything had even died on that spot, which must be the case for almost every inch of Africa. Given the risk involved, the wild dogs were unlikely to go back and this was more or less confirmed the following morning, when they were both out hunting again. They were actually spotted at the lodge waterhole, but we had already left to check on the carcass and had to quickly return. Fortunately, for me at least, they were still harassing impala around the lodge and for the next half an hour or so I was treated, and I do mean treated, to several exceptional encounters in the early morning light, including both animals walking and resting just a few metres from the vehicle. Admittedly it would have been nice to have spent time with a larger pack, but every wildlife experience is different and having seen these compelling creatures on the first three days of my stay, and in such contrasting circumstances, I could have absolutely no complaints. I would hope to see them at Hwange National Park as well, as this is the site of the Painted Dog Conservation visitor centre, which is one of the wildlife charities that Wild Globe supports. If you would also like to assist with their essential work, which includes anti-poaching units, a rehabilitation facility for injured and orphaned dogs and community development and education programmes, you can make a donation at their website www.painteddog.org. Although this arid region of the reserve is not as traditionally attractive as the alluring banks of the Zambezi, it has its own wild charm, with plenty of gnarled baobabs and a lodge overlooking a marvellous waterhole, against an equally impressive backdrop of open savannah. Indeed, the setting is so idyllic, that it is almost impossible to tear your eyes away and I spent more or less every waking moment, when I was not game driving that is, either scanning the distant landscape or savouring the altogether different eye level perspective from the hide at the edge of the waterhole. This hide would actually provide some of the best sightings of my stay and the most memorable was late at night when the ground began to shake and you could hear the rumble of a distant train across the plains. As the low rumble grew to an almost deafening crescendo, a vast herd of buffalo came stampeding out of the night and charged down to the water's edge to drink greedily after an exhausting day in the searing heat. There must have been 300 animals in all and for the next hour or so each of them jostled and pushed their way to the refreshing lifesaving water, just a few metres from where I was sitting utterly absorbed. This was one of the great buffalo experiences of this or any tour and when you take into account the wild dogs that I watched here early one morning, most of the major species encountered on the concession, would also be observed at this one waterhole, including elephant, lion, leopard, spotted hyena and even a pair of resident eagle owls. Talking of residents, I should perhaps mention Poppy, a ridiculously sweet leopard with a penchant for eating guinea fowl, at least one a day I

was reliably informed, and drinking from the lodge birdbath, which I can personally testify to. Poppy was spotted, she can appear almost anywhere at any time, on several occasions and whilst she is by no means tame, she is entirely unconcerned by our presence. The same could not exactly be said of her mother Venus, a much larger animal and clearly less relaxed around people than her offspring. Venus was incidentally the first leopard seen during the day and I would ultimately observe more carnivores, thirteen in all, at Mana Pools than anywhere else, partly because we were allowed to spotlight here, albeit briefly before returning for dinner. That said, even a short period each evening can make a massive difference to a trip and in addition to some of the species already mentioned, my four short night drives would produce multiple savanna hares, the first large-spotted genets, a trio of southern lesser galagos in a single tree, a cracking view of a honey badger and a selous's mongoose, which I was delighted to take a reasonable reference shot of. I missed African Civet, which are seen fairly regularly around the lodge, but you cannot expect to see everything and, the horrible elephant incident aside, I was more than happy with my return to this very special part of the world.

Matusadona National Park

Much the same could be said of my return to the Zambezi, albeit after a significantly shorter absence, as Matusadona National Park is situated on the banks of Lake Kariba, which in turn is fed by a river winding inexorably east almost 2,600 kilometres from northern Zambia down to the Indian Ocean via Mozambique. Its beguiling waters had now been the backdrop to three of my first four destinations, but the Lake Kariba setting was slightly different, if no less scenic, as the lake itself is not natural and was created by the construction of the Kariba Dam in the late 1950s in order to generate electricity to parts of both Northern and Southern Rhodesia,

basically colonies of the British Empire and now Zambia and Zimbabwe. Officially opened by Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother in May 1960, at more than 223 kilometres long and up to 40 kilometres wide, Lake Kariba is the largest artificial lake and reservoir in the world and its creation resulted in the forced resettlement of around 57,000 of the local BaTonga people, often with severely detrimental consequences, and the death of a literally immeasurable number of animals. In fact, the national park really only exists as a result of the dam, as thousands of creatures, including massive herds of elephant and buffalo, made their way towards the safety of the Matusadona hills on the southern shore of the lake. Countless others headed for higher ground inland, as they would have done during the annual floods, but on this occasion there would be no seasonal reprieve and a host of helpless animals found themselves marooned on rapidly diminishing islands as the lake continued its irresistible rise. More drowned than we can ever know, but the tragedy would have been far worse, but for the heroic efforts of a small group of game rangers who between them saved 6,000 individual animals on both sides of the rapidly increasing burgeoning lake, often in extreme conditions and using the most primitive equipment imaginable. Basic rowing boats, tranquiliser guns, rope, wooden crates and even nets ingeniously fashioned out of nylon stockings to avoid harming the animals, were all utilised as part of the largest rescue of wildlife ever attempted and the handful of dedicated men involved spent more than five years living deep in the bush. Appropriately named Operation Noah, Rhodesia's Chief Game Ranger Rupert Fothergill was responsible for a rescue mission fraught with danger, as already terrified animals desperately attempted to escape the very men charged with saving them. Whilst many of the rescue efforts took place within the confines of small islands, with massive animals stampeding through the undergrowth in blind panic, no stranded animals were ever abandoned, regardless of their size or the difficulties involved in trying to subdue and transport them. Indeed, as soon as a creature was discovered, Rupert and his valiant team would do everything possible to transfer it to the safety of the mainland and over the course of this extraordinary campaign, more than 50 black rhinos were saved, as well as elephants, buffalo, lions, leopards and an array of antelope. The importance or value of an animal was never considered and baboons, warthogs, hyraxes, porcupines and snakes were just a few of the supposedly less significant species ferried to safety, the highly venomous black mambas in pillow cases for obvious reasons. Even insects were rescued and in a strange way the almost superhuman efforts of this small team of black and white Africans working tirelessly against insurmountable odds, somewhat masked the inexcusable attitude of the colonial authorities, who, in stark contrast, were fully prepared to allow a multitude of living creatures to die in the name of progress, many of which starved to death on isolated islands before help could arrive. In his book, *'Rupert Fothergill: Bridging a Conservation Era'*, Keith Meadows describes the complicated and harrowing rescue of a single elephant:

'For five hours he had been swimming, and he was a long way from any land now. And he became frightened. The aching tiredness brought fear, for it was becoming almost impossible to keep his head up and the tip of his trunk clear of the water. The tip had taken on a pale, almost bluish pallor. And the old bull began to flounder, the confusion and fear amalgamated into panic. His tusks were beginning to pull him down. At first the old bull fought, smelling the smell of man, desperate against this new enemy as well as the water. But he was exhausted and his struggles diminished. The rangers improved their initial rope supports around the huge head,

manoeuvring their launch so that the elephant was up beside the bow, tusks pointing ahead, away. The trunk was held aloft so he could breathe. And slowly, very slowly so as not to create too much of a bow wave, they guided the elephant back across the flooded country to dry land.'

Sadly, for every animal saved in this traumatic fashion, hundreds more perished and to put a rescue operation that saved 6,000 lives into some perspective, in the twelve years preceding the construction of the dam, 300,000 animals had been shot in Southern Rhodesia, simply to control tsetse fly numbers. Hunting had already been banned in the area that most of the animals were either released on or driven to at the beginning of the process and in 1963 Matusadona was declared a game reserve, principally to provide a home for the fortunate few displaced by Lake Kariba and not killed by it. It would officially become a national park twelve years later and at one stage was considered to be one of the most important reserves in the region, certainly in terms of its thriving black

rhinoceros and elephant populations, as well as apparently the highest density of lion in Africa. As was ever thus, the lions were attracted by the equally impressive buffalo numbers, as the new lake had completely changed the ecology of the area and where there had once been woodland, there were now vast tracts of largely continuous grassland along the shoreline. This bountiful savannah would support a wealth of large grazing mammals, but sadly not for long, as the golden era of Matusadona was extremely short-lived and within roughly two decades of woeful management, widespread corruption and rampant poaching, the park was barely recognisable. By the turn of the last century, most, if not all, of the rhinos had been killed, elephant numbers had been devastated and the lion population was barely sustainable. The years of neglect and exploitation were still apparent during my stay and Matusadona clearly remains a shadow of the momentous sanctuary it once was, predominantly regarding both the diversity and density of the resident wildlife. However, there is hope on the horizon, as the non-profit conservation organisation African Parks assumed management of Matusadona in November 2019 and they have a largely excellent record in terms of the regeneration and protection of the areas they are responsible for. In all they currently manage 22 national parks and protected areas in twelve countries, their aim is to reach 30 by the end of the decade, and for each they have a long-term objective, which basically involves restoring these once abundant reserves and conserving them for future generations, including the local communities who can actually benefit the most from the regions they need to help protect. If you care to visit their website, www.africanparks.org, where you can also support their critical conservation work, you will find details of each management plan, including the following vision for Matusadona:

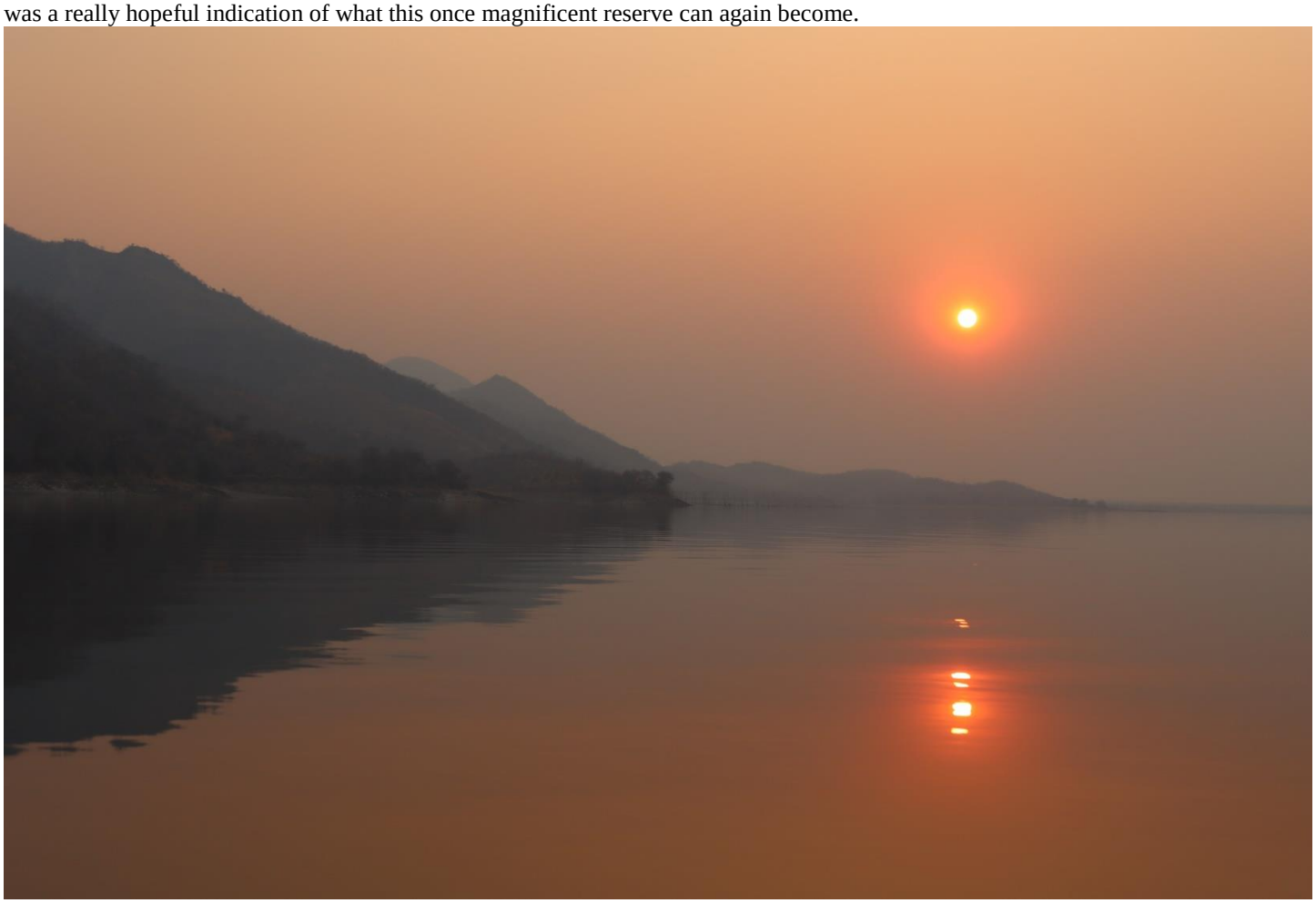
'An extraordinary opportunity exists to protect and develop this unique park to support both people and wildlife. Through effective management, infrastructure, engagement with local communities, rigorous protection, several species reintroductions, and well-managed and developed tourism, the reserve will be restored to Zimbabwe's premier elephant and rhino sanctuary.'

According to the same website, a remnant black rhinoceros population still endures at Matusadona, but my local guide was either unsure whether that was actually the case or, entirely understandably, did not want to discuss the whereabouts of such high risk animals. Either way, the permanent reinstatement of this critically endangered species remains a priority and I was also informed that there are plans to release more cheetahs, as again there is apparently a small existing population. More than 200 zebra have already been reintroduced and access roads will be created to help address the constant poaching threat, which will in turn provide visitors with the opportunity to reach currently inaccessible herds of eland, kudu and sable. Meanwhile, the number of rangers patrolling the park has been doubled and they now have a plane at their disposal, which will allow them to monitor a significantly larger area and to respond far more effectively on the ground. As I would testify during my three-night stay, Matusadona is still very much a work in

progress, but when you consider the way in which other African Parks reserves have been transformed over a relatively short period, and I have visited several in recent years, the future of this formerly significant national park is once again encouraging. From a purely personal perspective, I thoroughly enjoyed my time here and my lodge was situated in another simply jaw-dropping setting. This was neither an accident or an exception of course and it is barely possible to remember anything even approaching an ordinary view throughout the tour. On this occasion I was overlooking the lake and one of several astoundingly evocative stretches of drowned forest, which appears as beautiful in death as it must have been in life, perhaps even more so. Whilst I would never choose a luxurious camp over a productive wildlife location, I do spend a great deal of time researching every lodge, as you cannot control the animals that your guests will encounter, but you can control their view and in many cases the setting will be the difference between an outstanding trip or a merely successful one. This is particularly the case in an area where the wildlife is not abundant and although Matusadona remains a compelling mix of expansive floodplains, mapone woodland and the rugged hills after which the park is named, it cannot currently rival other reserves in the region as a safari destination, including those in neighbouring Zambia and Botswana. That said, the potential to do good here is immeasurable and the visitor experience will undoubtedly improve as the park receives better protection and densities increase. Even in its current somewhat neglected condition, Matusadona was responsible for some of the highlights of the trip and when you consider that more than 2,000 hippos live along the shoreline, a few of those involved these semiaquatic giants, usually grazing contentedly beside the camp in the late heat of the day and the best light imaginable. The

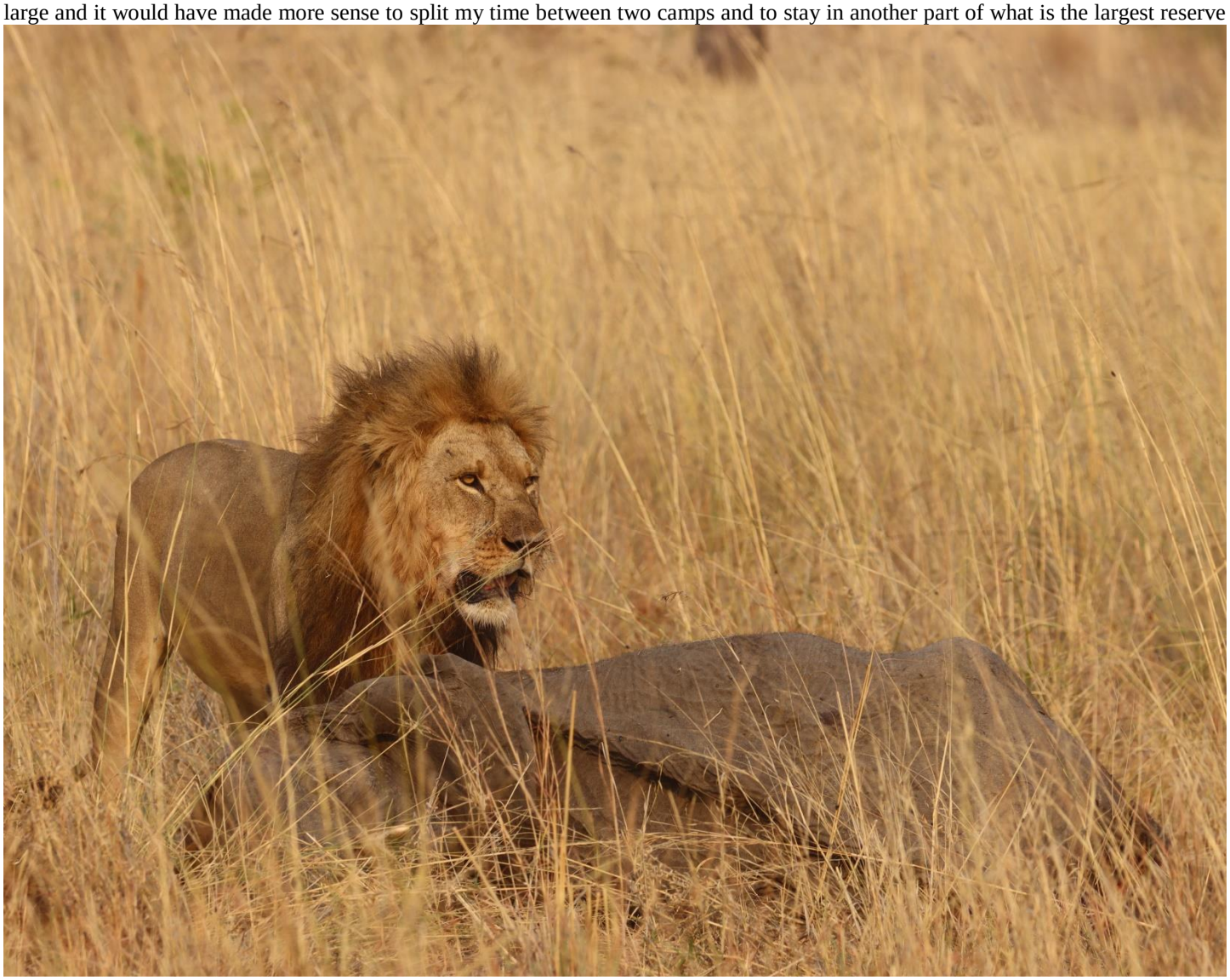
elephant sightings were similarly memorable, with several imposing bulls emerging from the adjacent woods at roughly the same time each afternoon to begin their slow methodical march down to the lake, where they would drink and bathe as joyously as only elephants can in the water, even the old grizzled ones. I was also lucky with lions, as the population remains low here and many visitors depart without seeing the one iconic animal that the guides are always so desperate to show them. I would encounter fourteen members of a pride of eighteen in all, the rest would have no doubt been scattered around, but I have to admit that I was more hoping to chance upon a spotted hyena by this stage, as my hyena sightings had been decidedly ordinary and I knew that with far fewer predators, I had a better opportunity at Matusadona. This did thankfully prove to be the case and having arranged to leave as early as possible specifically to search for this one animal, my guide and I both noticed a pair in the distance at first light. There turned out to be three in all and as we slowly approached, they just mooched around in characteristic hyena fashion, taking turns to slumber intermittently before beginning the journey back to the safety of their den, as the sun climbed higher in the sky. At one stage we were within just a few metres of the boldest, but none of the three were perturbed by our presence and this would not only be by far the best hyena encounter of the tour, it would be the last. Given the limited game driving opportunities, and there really are very few routes for visitors to explore, most lodges offer a variety of boat excursions and one of the best departs from the peninsular that my camp was idyllically situated on. Instead of heading out across the massive lake, perhaps to one of the many islands, it actually takes you south until you reach the mouth of Sanyati Gorge, which cuts directly through the towering walls of the Matusadona escarpment. The journey begins in an eerie fashion, as you sail through the haunting remnants of a forest lost in time, with a horde of bleached branches pointing eternally towards the heavens, like an army of spears raised in defiance against their fate. The gorge itself is no less dramatic, with hippos jostling for position in the shallows and massive crocodiles lounging along the sandy riverbank. The redolent calls of the fish eagles cut through the silence and occasionally a herd of elephants will add their own iconic exclamations to this traditional African chorus, usually as they rush down to the water and their happiest time of the day. My guide mentioned that a number of other species could be observed from the boat and although we did also encounter vervet monkeys and baboons, my aspirations did not extend a great deal beyond a bush hyrax, which I knew were occasionally spotted along the rugged canyon walls. I had no success on the first of my two cruises in this enchanting part of the reserve, which actually marks the eastern boundary of the national park, and my guide seemed surprised when I mentioned the possibility of trying again. He was clearly not optimistic, but in truth it barely mattered, as this was my last afternoon at Matusadona and I had nothing to lose, particularly as I was about to move on to one of the most arid regions in Zimbabwe and this would be my last opportunity to spend time on the water. As it was, there was no sign of the hyrax on our journey down the Sanyati, but on the way back, I asked my guide to stop and check an obscure shape that I had picked up in my binoculars at almost the very top of the steep gorge. Sure enough, it was one of three hyraxes and although he shook his head at how I had managed to spot such a tiny creature at distance from a moving boat, I declined to mention that I had simply scanned every single rock we passed. Another trio of small mammals were far easier to find, as three southern lesser galagos had made their home among the rafters of the camp bar and every evening these cute little bush babies would take turns to come out and stare down at the guests, before bouncing around the bar and disappearing into the night. I would only see the trio together on my

final night, which I considered to be a highly fitting way to end what had been an immensely enjoyable stay. In addition to a nice array of general wildlife, including an impressive variety of waterbirds, in all I encountered eighteen different mammal species at Matusadona, which was the lowest total of the trip. However, when you consider how inaccessible the reserve currently is and the massive recovery operation that still needs to take place, not to mention the fact that night drives are not currently permitted, I was more encouraged than disappointed. There is clearly significant work to be done here, but the park is now in good hands and my visit was a really hopeful indication of what this once magnificent reserve can again become.



Hwange National Park

As much as I enjoyed my time at Matusadona, it was no hardship to move on to Hwange National Park, a favourite old haunt of mine, which I had not found time to visit since 2009. I had decided to spend my entire five-night stay at a lodge I already knew and had used on several occasions, largely to see if it was still suitable for guests and also because it was situated on its own concession, which meant night drives, albeit not in the best areas of the park. In hindsight, this was a mistake, as the concession was not actually that large and it would have made more sense to split my time between two camps and to stay in another part of what is the largest reserve



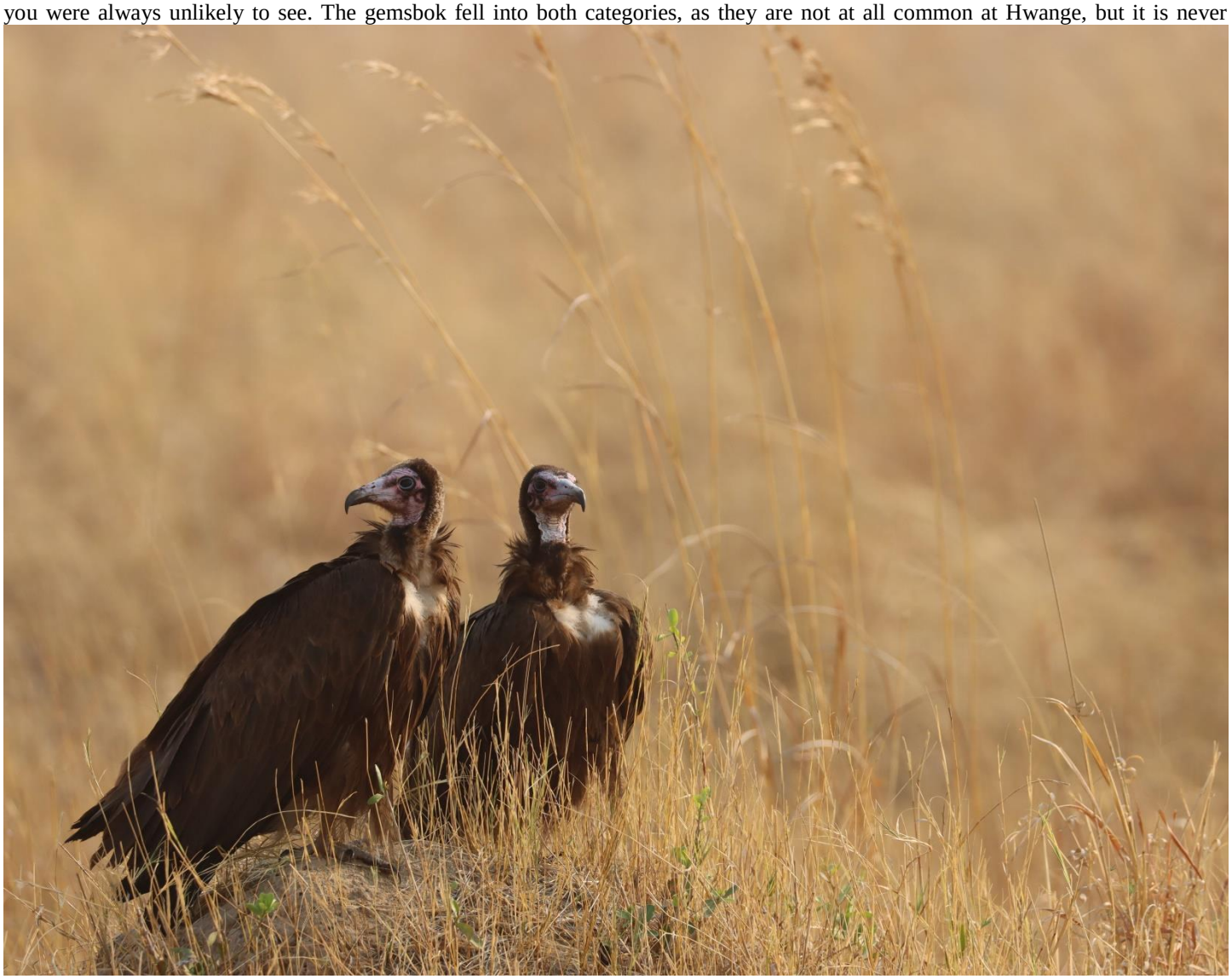
in the country. This would have produced more possibilities in terms of additional species, as we often spent the entire morning driving to a new area, only to have to return more or less immediately. It would have also meant that I had less time with my one guide here, who was sadly one of the poorest I can remember, both in terms of his ability to spot anything and his enthusiasm, which was almost completely lacking. The first issue can be forgiven of course, but it is difficult to accept a guide not even trying, not when you consider that some visitors might have saved for years to take what to them could be the trip of a lifetime. Even if that is not the case, every guest should be treated as if this is the only safari they will ever take and although I could have insisted on changing, that would have only meant that someone actually on holiday would have been given my guide, which would not have been fair. Instead, I made the best of it, largely by spotting everything myself, and obviously I would not be able to return to this lodge or use it for guests, unless the quality of the guiding could be guaranteed. Sadly, on this occasion I had probably allowed my heart to rule my head, as I have very fond memories of this particular lodge and had spent part of my last visit driving between the artificial waterholes with the camp manager to refuel the water pumps, all of which are now thankfully operated by solar power. These man-made waterholes are actually the lifeblood of Hwange, as the park is situated in an extremely arid region on the edge of the Kalahari Basin and the vast majority of the wildlife is entirely dependent on these critical water sources. Consequently, most of the sightings take place at or within close distance of these waterholes and the safari experience at Hwange largely involves either driving between them or waiting at one to see what might arrive. Many of the lodges maintain their own waterholes as well and the camp that I was returning to is famous for having one of the best, which again contributed to my decision to stay there. I would spend most of my downtime watching a variety of animals here, including almost constant herds of elephants, but my first great encounter was actually on the drive in from the airstrip and involved the main species that I was hoping to see at Hwange, a cheetah, or in this case, a pair of cheetahs. These often elusive cats are becoming more difficult to observe across much of their range and it never surprises me to hear that someone has visited Zimbabwe, even for an extended period, without being fortunate enough to see one. In fact, that would have been my fate on this trip had I relied on my guide, as we drove straight past two cheetahs lying less than 50 metres from the road and they were so blindingly obvious, I initially thought that I must have made a mistake and almost did not ask him to stop. Thankfully, I made a split second decision to check and you can imagine my relief when I saw that they were indeed cheetahs and that I had not simply ignored one of the major highlights of the tour, not that I would have ever known for sure of course. As thrilled as I undoubtedly was to have found my one major target within less than ten minutes of entering the park, I have to say that even at this early stage, I was slightly concerned that my guide had missed such a relatively easy spot and this initial unease was not greatly

assuaged when he suggested we leave after about five minutes and before either of the cheetahs had moved. Given that I was well aware that this could easily be my only opportunity to even see this animal, let alone spend time watching two of them together, I obviously declined and over the next hour or so I was able to savour the fascinating interaction between these superb cats, a mother and her young male offspring in this case. I remember hoping at the time that perhaps my guide had just been rushing to get me settled in, but that was sadly not the case and this incident with the cheetahs was repeated throughout my stay with a variety of species, although now I obviously stopped the vehicle to check just about everything. In doing so, I was rewarded with an exceptionally sweet pair of bat-eared foxes, which were curled up sleeping at the edge of their den just a few metres from the road. Given their proximity and the excellent morning light, how we drove past them remains a mystery and although I would again have never known, I would have been exceptionally sorry to have missed these distinctive little foxes. Indeed, it was difficult not to consider what else I may be missing without the assistance of an actual guide or what those poor visitors who totally rely on one would have seen...or not. These types of situation can be difficult for tourists to deal with, particularly if they do not have a great deal of experience, but I had no intention of letting the issue spoil my stay and after just a few hours, I had already decided that it would make sense to view this particular individual as a driver rather than a guide, which is actually what he had been previously at Victoria Falls. We got on well enough and although I would generally prefer some local assistance, I have spent a great deal of time searching on my own over the years and do not feel that my time at Hwange was massively affected. If anything, the situation probably made me concentrate more and ultimately I would enjoy the type of outstanding experience I have come to expect at one of the premier national parks in Zimbabwe, despite a few very odd exceptions. I failed, for example, to see a single buffalo at Hwange for the first time, which I would have said was more or less impossible on a visit of this duration, and I similarly missed spotted hyena and African civet, both of which I have always encountered here. To be fair, a small herd of buffalo did keep popping up at the lodge waterhole, but I was

always out in the field during their brief appearances and they had invariably departed by the time I got back. The absence of a civet was slightly more disappointing, as I had not seen these entertaining little African carnivores elsewhere and had longer spotlighting sessions at Hwange than anywhere since Victoria Falls. The limited size of the concession area that we were able to access clearly did not help, but basically I was just unfortunate with this particular animal and was destined to return home 'civetless'. These annoying little setbacks go with the territory of course and in stark contrast, I would encounter eight mammals here that would not be observed elsewhere, including two cats, a single wild cat on a night drive in addition to the cheetahs, and two dogs, the bat eared foxes and several black-backed jackals, which are by far the more common of the two jackal species that occur at Hwange. The only strictly

nocturnal member of this new group was the white-tailed mongoose, with individual animals being observed on four of my five night drives, and the final three new arrivals were all antelope, sable, roan and steenbok. The sable would only be seen once, when a pair walked directly behind the two cheetahs that I was parked in front of, so within a short period of entering the park, and the roan were spotted throughout my stay, although in low numbers and never regularly. The same cannot be said of the steenbok, which were so abundant they competed with the springhares in terms of the most ubiquitous mammal smaller than an elephant. The springhares probably won or maybe it just felt like it, as almost every eyeshine we picked up at night seemed to belong to these totally insane looking rodents. I would have loved to have added a brown hyena to this new species list, as I have always had a soft spot for these widely persecuted scavengers, they are poor hunters and kill very little of their food, and they are not uncommon at Hwange. The problem is, you need to explore the park at night in order to see one, as was clearly demonstrated during my stay, when an annual game count took place and volunteers were permitted to spend 24 hours at every waterhole, basically in order to record the exact number of animals visiting each. I would have certainly joined one of these vigils if I had been aware of such a tremendous opportunity and the following morning I was given some idea of exactly what was being missed every evening, when two decidedly thrilled volunteers described watching brown hyena, aardwolf, leopard and lion within about a ten-minute drive of my camp and these were just the species they considered worthy of mentioning. We did enjoy some moderate success on our concession at night and when you deduct several hundred springhare sightings, which you eventually learn to distinguish by their inane bouncing motion, we were left with a resourceful wild cat, which attempted to use the light of our spotlight to hunt by, two mongooses, the white-tailed and selous's varieties, and two each of the genet species that occur here, so common and large-spotted genets. By way of a lovely nocturnal bonus, lesser galagos would bounce around the trees outside my room and one evening meal was disrupted by a leopard wandering out of the treeline to lap greedily from the camp waterhole, with guests running in all directions for a better view, while I watched it quietly from the binoculars that never leave my side. My only other leopard sighting would also take place at a waterhole, but this time towards the end of the afternoon, with that late golden sunshine illuminating the similarly radiant creature in the most breathtaking fashion. Wild dogs were a possibility as well, as I had been extremely fortunate with a solitary animal on my last visit back in 2009 and had hoped that I might perhaps be lucky enough to encounter a large pack on my return, particularly having only observed the three animals at Mana Pools. However, the lodge guides all confirmed that these handsome dogs had not been seen for

some time and that it was now more a case of them moving through the park, than visitors being able to rely on a resident pack. Despite my best efforts and some long days searching, I would ultimately fail to see gemsbok as well, which was more frustrating in a way, given that Hwange represents the easterly extreme of their range and that I consequently devoted a great deal of time to the task. In fact, I probably spent longer searching for this majestic oryx than any other single animal, which tends to happen towards the end of a trip, when you have already seen so much and are now either looking for animals you have missed or the very rare species that you were always unlikely to see. The gemsbok fell into both categories, as they are not at all common at Hwange, but it is never



possible to see everything and some of the most memorable safaris are based on how well and naturally you have been able to observe the wildlife, rather than what you have actually seen. To many visitors, and certainly to me, a genuinely wild experience, with time to appreciate the precious animals encountered and to perhaps begin to watch and learn a little of their behaviour, is far more important than a list of species that you might have only glimpsed for a few seconds. This is why Hwange and so many other reserves in this region are so special to me, as they are rarely crowded, certainly in comparison with many national parks in East Africa, and offer the visitor a traditional African adventure, almost a return to a classic bygone age. The lack of rhinos in many reserves remains a huge issue for me, as no true safari is complete without at least the possibility of observing perhaps the most persecuted creatures on the continent, but both species are now being reintroduced across at least parts of their former range and in June 2022 two white rhinos drew breath at Hwange for the first time in almost twenty years. The two males were released on a relatively small, but heavily protected reserve on the southern edge of the park, which was once grazing land donated by the local community. In return, they will benefit from a number of well paid jobs, including as armed rangers protecting the rhinos, and will receive a share of all income generated by the project. As much as I intend to in future, I did not arrange a visit, as the initiative is in its formative stages and until females are introduced, and a breeding programme established, there is no possibility of a viable and authentically wild population. However, this momentous first step does represent a historic landmark for the national park and a remarkable opportunity for all concerned to once again demonstrate the importance of including local people in the conservation of the wildlife they are expected to live in harmony with, not to mention the fact that animals are worth far more alive to an entire community, than dead to a single poacher. While I have to admit that I was sorely tempted to at least photograph these pioneering rhinoceros, I instead concentrated my efforts on the abundance of wildlife that this grand old park is famous for. This would in part mean multiple lions, including three absolutely massive males feasting on a dead elephant, the first giraffes beyond the private reserve at Victoria Falls, large herds of wildebeest and more elephants than you can imagine unless you have visited Hwange. You will basically see elephants at any time of the day and at more or less every waterhole and towards the evening they congregate around almost every water source in even greater numbers, not particularly because the afternoon has been so hot, although that is part of the story, but more because the pumps at each waterhole are solar powered, which means they turn off at night and no fresh water is pumped until the next day. The elephants know this of course and given that they much prefer fresh to standing water, they rush towards the waterholes before the pumps shut down. Throughout the park there are processions of elephants marching towards their favourite waterhole and when one herd departs, another rumbles in to take its place. I would spend at least the last half an hour or so of daylight enthralled by this incredible spectacle and when I returned to my camp for a quick meal before heading out on the night drive, the waterhole there

would already be surrounded by yet more thirsty elephants. Magical memories and if I had ever forgotten, even slightly during my long absence, my time in Zimbabwe reminded me exactly why I love this part of the world and how exhilarating it will be to visit Zambia, Namibia and Botswana again over the next couple of years. I cannot wait and hopefully these pending trips will proceed without any major issues, as 2022 has been a pretty mixed year in terms of travel, with trips to both the DRC and Greenland cancelled at short notice, the latter two hours before I was due to fly. That said, and to place those difficulties in some kind of context, the year began with my first major expedition to Chad, which turned out to be one of the most extraordinary tours I have ever been involved with. Over the course of an amazing five weeks and three out of this world destinations, Zakouma National Park, the Ennedi Plateau and Ouadi Rimé, I enjoyed more highlights than I could possibly recall here, including caracal, striped hyena, black rhino and pale fox at Zakouma, ruppell's and fennec fox at Ennedi and some of the rarest bovids on the planet at Ouadi Rimé. Sadly it was then almost a case of from the sublime to the ridiculous, for although my visit to Denmark, Sweden and Norway produced its share of great wildlife moments, most notably an Arctic fox with eight cubs, an incredibly rarely observed European mole and a small herd of utterly endearing muskoxen, I would not consider the tour untroubled, particularly in terms of the obsessive hunting mentality of the Swedes, and would not be in any hurry to return. Mexico on the other hand was both successful and enjoyable and the many highlights included yet another puma, which maintained my record of seeing what has always been one of my favourite animals, almost wherever I travel and they occur. As you will have read here, Zimbabwe was also an unqualified success and if I had to choose a single noteworthy sighting, it would be the greater cane rat at Matobo, simply because they are never seen and this was a perfect view of one from both the car and then on foot. In terms of spectacular encounters, the wild dogs trying to rip the ill-fated impala from the tree at Mana Pools would be difficult to beat and I would also have to add my first view of a black rhino at Victoria Falls, as these are again favourites of mine and I have never ceased to be thrilled by the sight of one. However, for all of these wonderful experiences throughout the year, and the dozens more that I have not been able to include, my highlight of the year is shared, for the first time ever, between a trio of animals observed at the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve in Chad, principally because none of the three should probably now exist. Managed by the Sahara Conservation Fund, Ouadi Rimé, is home to the scimitar-horned oryx, still officially extinct in the wild, the addax and the dama gazelle, both of which are critically endangered with estimated populations of perhaps less than 100. There is nowhere else on earth, at least not that I am aware of, where it is possible to encounter three species of this rarity and this is not a fenced reserve, where the animals are protected in artificial conditions, it is an entirely wild and hostile environment and the animals here are living and dying a genuinely wild life. For me to be given the opportunity to see all three on a single trip, on one occasion in a single day, was a privilege that I almost cannot begin to convey and as I wrote at the time, sometimes it is not so much a question of what you see, it is understanding the significance of still being able to see it.

(1) Matobo National Park, (2) Victoria Falls, (3) Mana Pools National Park,
(4) Matusadona National Park, (5) Hwange National Park

Destination	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**
Nights Per Destination	2	3	7	3	5
Lion	-	X	X	X	X
Leopard	X	X	X	-	X
Cheetah	-	-	-	-	X
Caracal	-	-	X	-	-
African Wild Cat	-	-	-	-	X
African Wild Dog	-	-	X	-	-
Black-backed Jackal	-	-	-	-	X
Side-striped Jackal	-	-	X	X	X
Bat-eared Fox	-	-	-	-	X
Spotted Hyena	-	-	X	X	-
Honey Badger	-	-	X	-	-
Common Dwarf Mongoose	-	-	X	-	X
Egyptian Mongoose	-	-	X	-	-
Slender Mongoose	-	X	X	-	-
White-tailed Mongoose	-	-	-	-	X
Banded Mongoose	-	X	X	-	-
Selous's Mongoose	-	-	X	-	X
Common Genet	-	X	-	-	X
Large-spotted Genet	-	-	X	-	X
Impala	X	X	X	X	X
Sable Antelope	-	-	-	-	X
Roan Antelope	-	-	-	-	X
Common Waterbuck	-	X	X	X	X
Common Wildebeest	X	X	-	-	X
Common Duiker	X	X	X	X	-
Southern Reedbuck	X	X	-	-	-
Klipspringer	X	-	X	-	-
Common Eland	-	-	X	-	-
Bushbuck	X	X	X	-	X
Greater Kudu	X	X	X	-	X
Steenbok	-	-	-	-	X
Sharpe’s Grysbok	-	X	X	X	-
African Buffalo	-	X	X	X	-
Plains Zebra	X	X	X	X	X
Giraffe	-	X	-	-	X
African Elephant	-	X	X	X	X
Hippopotamus	-	X	X	X	X
White Rhinoceros	X	X	-	-	-
Black Rhinoceros	-	X	-	-	-
Chacma Baboon	X	X	X	X	X
Vervet Monkey	X	X	X	X	X
Southern Lesser Galago	X	X	X	X	X
Common Warthog	X	X	X	X	X
Bush Hyrax	-	-	-	X	-
Rock Hyrax	X	-	-	-	-
African Savanna Hare	-	X	X	X	X
Jameson’s Red Rock Hare	X	-	-	-	-
Eastern Rock Sengi	X	-	-	-	-
Springhare	X	-	-	-	X
Smith’s Bush Squirrel	X	-	X	X	X
Greater Cane Rat	X	-	-	-	-
Southern Giant Pouched Rat	X	-	-	-	-
Bushveld Gerbil	X	X	-	-	-
Total Species Per Destination	**22**	**26**	**31**	**18**	**31**
Unique Species Per Destination	(5)	(1)	(5)	(1)	(8)

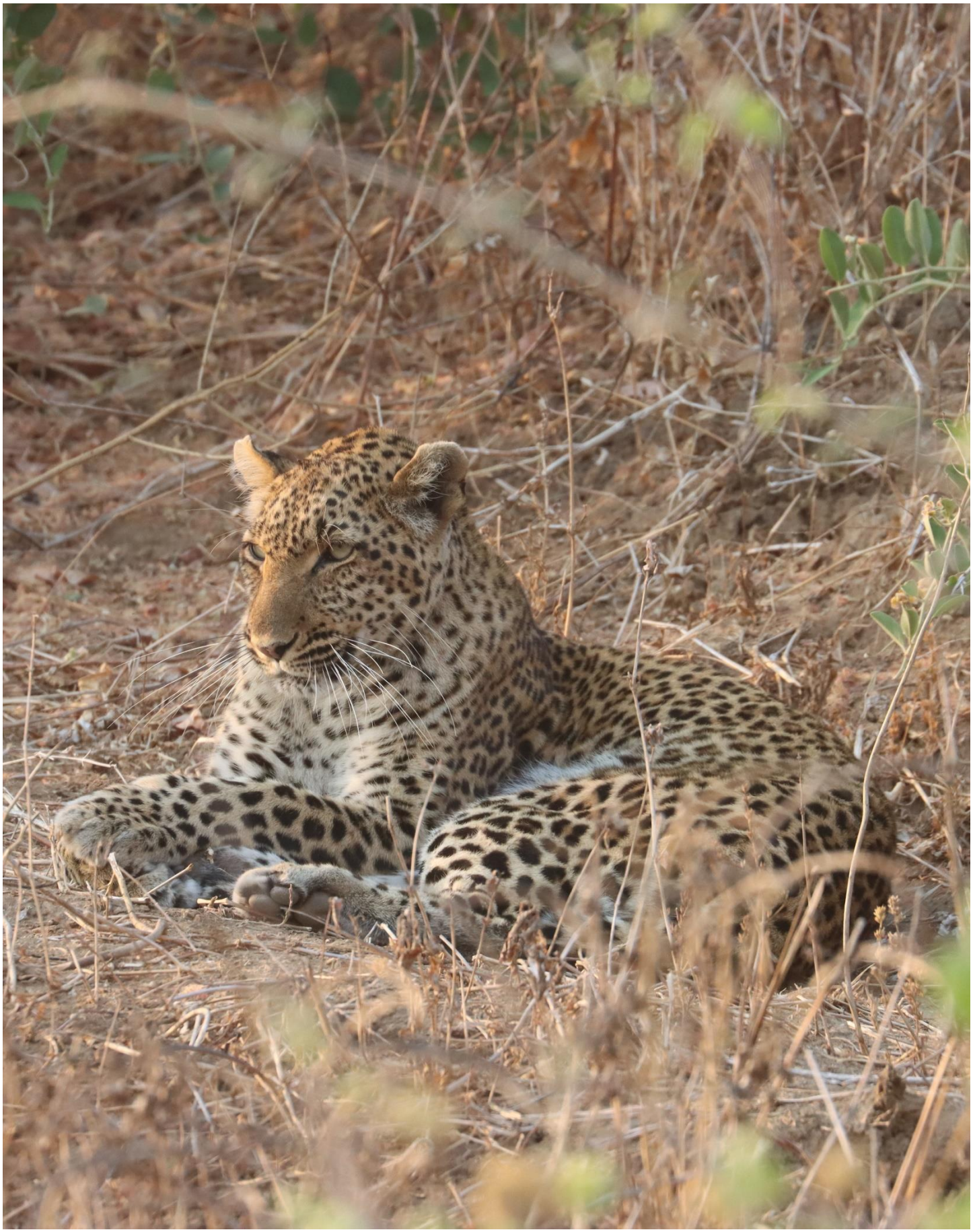
The Victoria Falls destination includes Victoria Falls National Park, Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park and Victoria Falls Private Game Reserve.

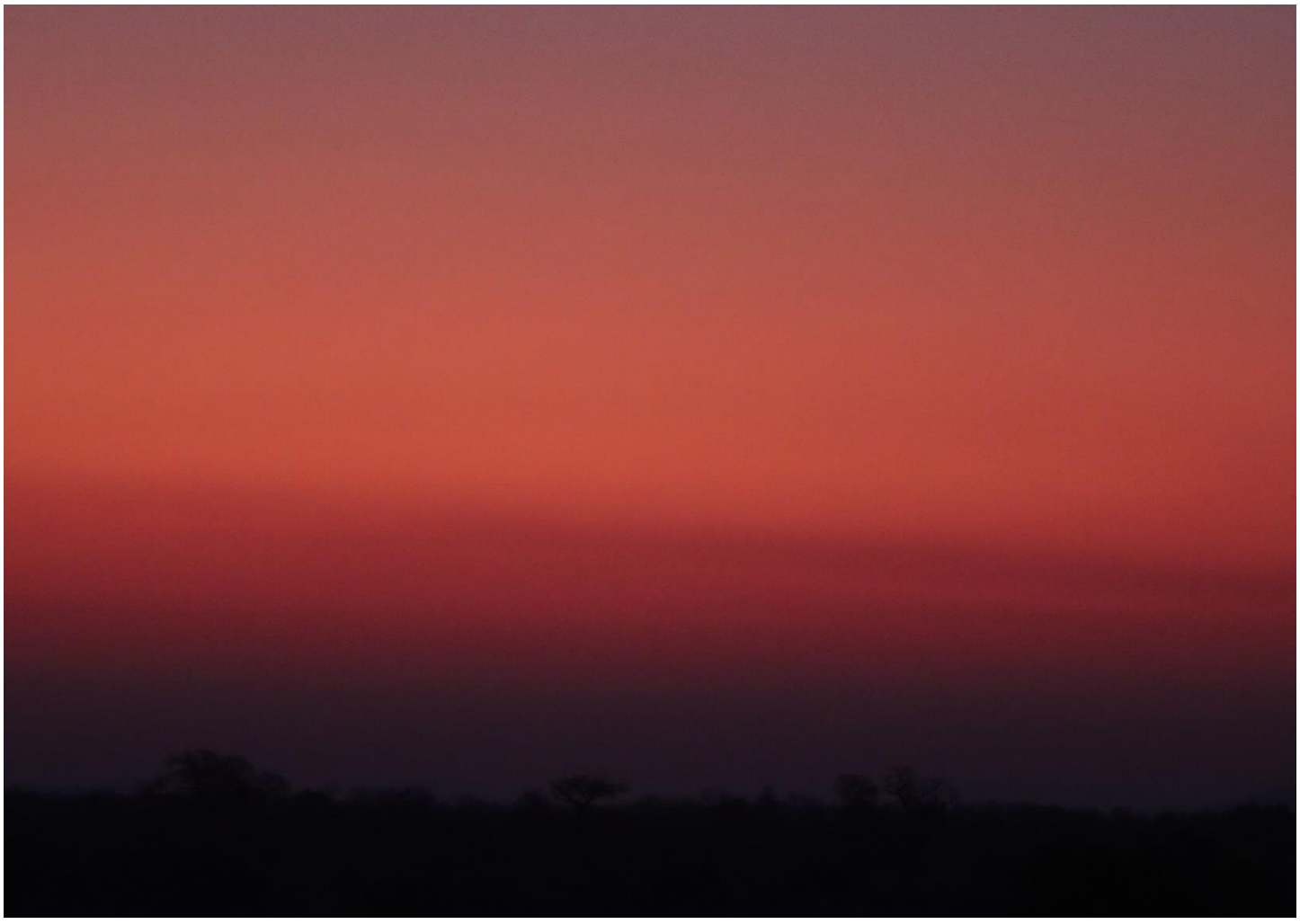
No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Lion	Panthera leo	Single prides at Victoria Falls and Matusadona and multiple sightings at Mana Pools and Hwange.
2	Leopard	Panthera pardus	One each at Matobo and Victoria Falls, two at Hwange and two or three different animals at the second area of Mana Pools.
3	Cheetah	Acinonyx jubatus	A mother and subadult male at Hwange.
4	Caracal	Caracal caracal	An individual animal at Mana Pools.
5	African Wild Cat	Felis lybica	A single animal hunting at Hwange.
6	African Wild Dog	Lycaon pictus	Three at night at the second Mana Pools destination and two of the three again in the evening and early morning.
7	Black-backed Jackal	Canis mesomelas	Hwange only, where they were relatively common during the day and at night.
8	Side-striped Jackal	Canis adustus	A pair and an individual at Mana Pools and one each at Matusadona and Hwange.
9	Bat-eared Fox	Otocyon megalotis	A pair sleeping by their den in the morning at Hwange.
10	Spotted Hyena	Crocuta crocuta	A few individuals and a pair at Mana Pools, three for an extended period at Matusadona.
11	Honey Badger	Mellivora capensis	One in the morning at the first Mana Pools destination and one at night at the second.
12	Common Dwarf Mongoose	Helogale parvula	Three sightings at Mana Pools and four at Hwange.

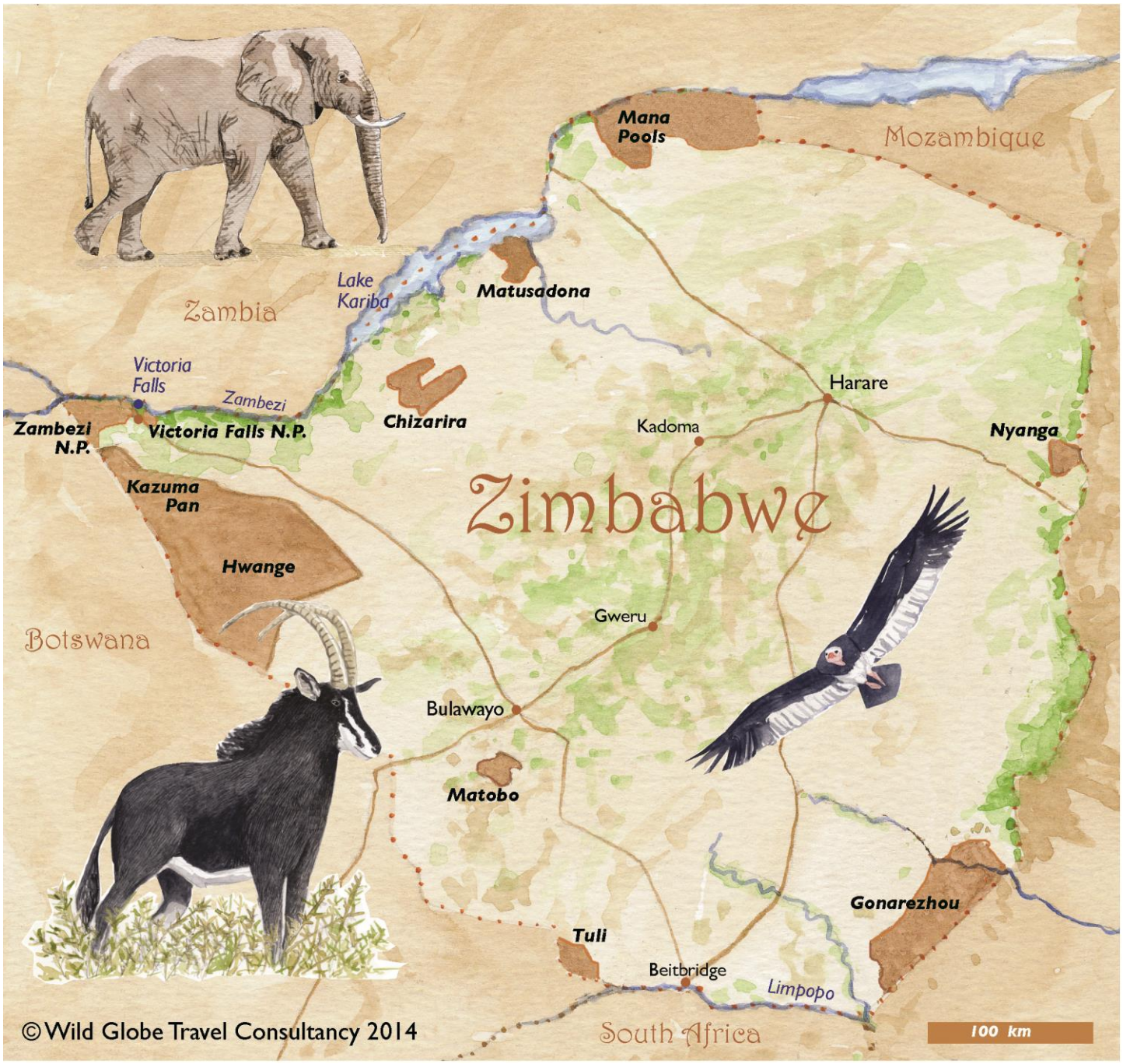
13	Egyptian Mongoose	Herpestes ichneumon	An individual at Mana Pools.
14	Slender Mongoose	Herpestes sanguineus	One at Victoria Falls and a pair and three individuals at Mana Pools.
15	White-tailed Mongoose	Ichneumia albicauda	Four individuals at Hwange.
16	Banded Mongoose	Mungos mungo	A troop of 23 on the lawn of The Victoria Falls Hotel and small groups at distance at Mana Pools.
17	Selous's Mongoose	Paracynictis selousi	Single animals at Mana Pools and Hwange.
18	Common Genet	Genetta genetta	Two individuals at both Victoria Falls and Hwange.
19	Large-spotted Genet	Genetta maculata	Multiple sightings at the second Mana Pools location and two individuals at Hwange.
20	Impala	Aepyceros melampus	Observed at every destination.
21	Sable Antelope	Hippotragus niger	Single sighting of two animals whilst stopped for the cheetahs at Hwange.
22	Roan Antelope	Hippotragus equinus	Small herds and pairs at Hwange.
23	Common Waterbuck	Kobus ellipsiprymnus	Observed at every reserve excluding Matobo, but only regularly at the first Mana Pools destination.
24	Common Wildebeest	Connochaetes taurinus	Low numbers at Matobo and Mosi-oa-Tunya and commonly encountered at Hwange.
25	Common Duiker	Sylvicapra grimmia	Low numbers everywhere except Hwange.
26	Southern Reedbuck	Redunca arundinum	Observed at both Matobo and Victoria Falls, but not beyond.
27	Klipspringer	Oreotragus oreotragus	Three at Matobo and low numbers in one area at Mana Pools.
28	Common Eland	Tragelaphus oryx	Regularly seen at Mana Pools, but not beyond,
29	Bushbuck	Tragelaphus scriptus	Seen everywhere except Matusadona.
30	Greater Kudu	Tragelaphus strepsiceros	Observed at every destination excluding Matusadona.
31	Steenbok	Raphicerus campestris	Routinely observed at Hwange, but nowhere else.
32	Sharpe’s Grysbok	Raphicerus sharpei	A few individuals at Victoria Falls, Mana Pools and Matusadona.
33	African Buffalo	Syncerus caffer	Herds at Victoria Falls, Mana Pools and Matusadona.
34	Plains Zebra	Equus quagga	Encountered at all five major locations, including two of the three reserves at Victoria Falls.
35	Giraffe	Giraffa camelopardalis	Observed at Victoria Falls and Hwange only.
36	African Elephant	Loxodonta africana	Routinely encountered at every reserve after Matobo and in large herds at Mana Pools and Hwange.
37	Hippopotamus	Hippopotamus amphibius	Seen at every destination excluding Matobo and in high numbers at Mano Pools and Matusadona.
38	White Rhinoceros	Ceratotherium simum	Four at Matobo and ten at Mosi-oa-Tunya, including a large male and mothers with five and six-month calves.
39	Black Rhinoceros	Diceros bicornis	Four sightings of six animals at Victoria Falls, five females, including a pair, and a mother and subadult male.
40	Chacma Baboon	Papio ursinus	Observed at every destination, including all three reserves at Victoria Falls.
41	Vervet Monkey	Chlorocebus pygerythrus	Encountered at every reserve and beyond in some areas.
42	Southern Lesser Galago	Galago moholi	The third primate observed at all five major areas, including three living above the bar at Matusadona.
43	Common Warthog	Phacochoerus africanus	Routinely encountered at every destination.
44	Bush Hyrax	Heterohyrax brucei	Three perched high on rocks at Matusadona.
45	Rock Hyrax	Procavia capensis	Six individual animals at Matobo.
46	African Savanna Hare	Lepus victoriae	Observed at every destination excluding Matobo, with extremely close views at Mana Pools.
47	Jameson’s Red Rock Hare	Pronolagus randensis	One running across the road in the rain at Matobo.
48	Eastern Rock Sengi	Elephantulus myurus	An extended view of a single animal at Matobo.
49	Springhare	Pedetes capensis	First encountered at Matobo and abundant at Hwange.
50	Smith’s Bush Squirrel	Paraxerus cepapi	Sightings at every reserve, excluding those at Victoria Falls.

51	Greater Cane Rat	Thryonomys swinderianus	Observed at one of the dams at Matobo.
52	Southern Giant Pouched Rat	Cricetomys ansorgei	A single animal in the road at Matobo.
53	Bushveld Gerbil	Gerbilliscus leucogaster	At least one encountered at Matobo and another at Victoria Falls.

A number of additional small rodents and bats were observed, but not identified, including three of each at Matobo.







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