

Anything but plain

In the far west of Zambia lies a vast land of golden savannah, flower-filled lagoons and plentiful wildlife: Liuwa Plain National Park. **Sue Watt** reports on this conservation success story

In the afternoon heat we found Lady resting in the shade of shrub. She raised her battle-scarred head, gazed sleepily in our direction with amber eyes full of leonine wisdom, then promptly lay down again, oblivious to our hushed excitement.

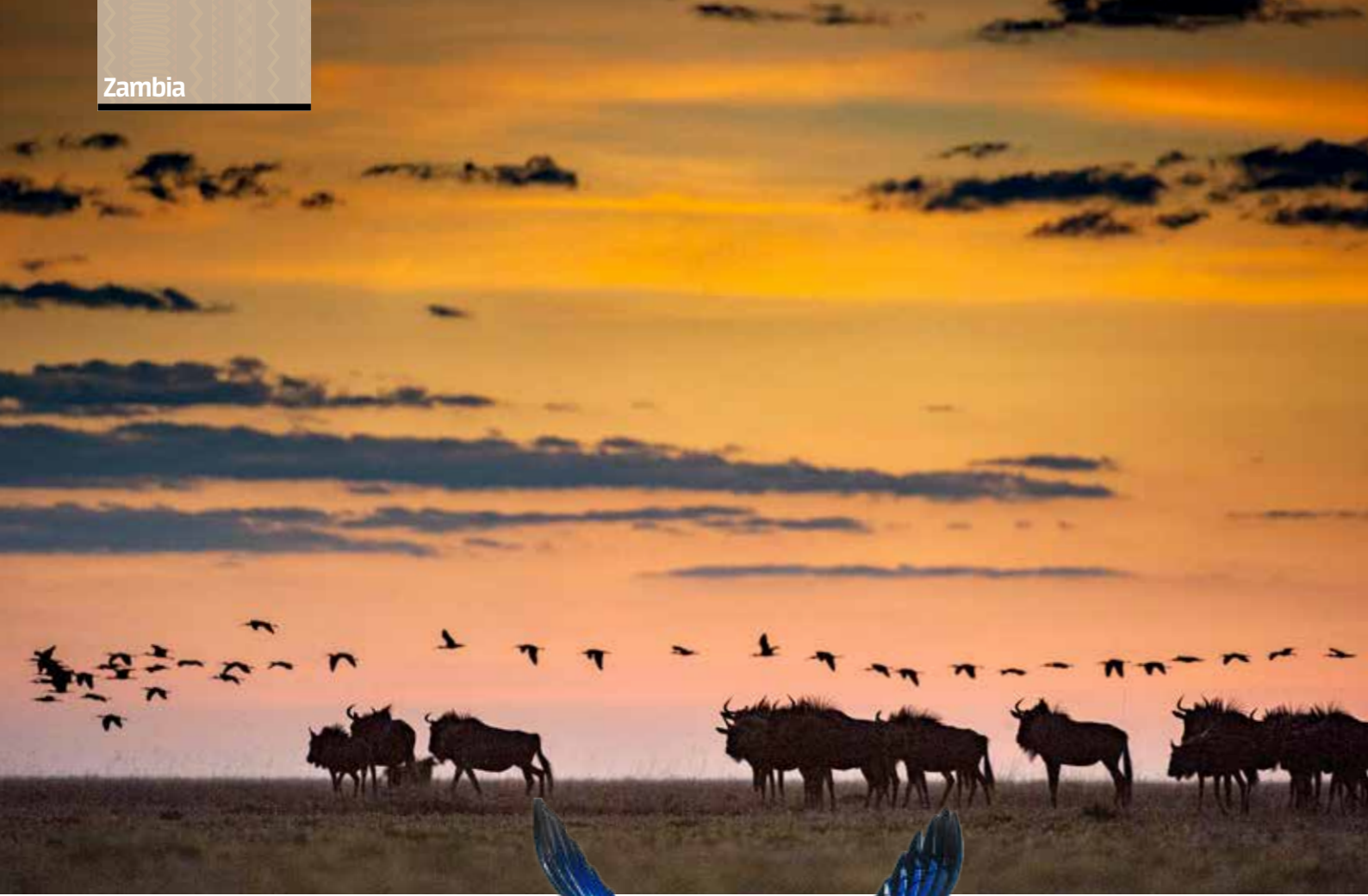
Lady is a legend in Liuwa. For nine years she was the only lion in this vast national park. Today, she heads a pride of five, but in those lonely years she showed no desire to leave and who could blame her? She must have realised what a special place this is.

This secret wilderness has long been fêted by safari connoisseurs, but despite this publicity welcomes few visitors. It's remote and raw, taking time and effort to get here. Our journey involved a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Lusaka to Kalabo, a pontoon across the Luangwa River and a two-hour drive to our camp, Matamanene,

the only one in the park (for now). But it was well worth the ride: Liuwa is a land of surprises.

Spanning 3660sq km in Zambia's Western Province, Liuwa is home to Africa's little-known yet second-largest wildebeest migration. 45,000 of the animals roam its expansive plains. This represents a true conservation success story: when non-profit organisation African Parks started their 20-year management tenure in 2003, the wildebeest numbered only 15,000. Wherever we looked now, there were wildebeest, whether in herds of several hundred braying restlessly or solitary bulls ambling across the landscape. Liuwa usually floods from December to May, and this is the principal draw for these alluring animals. As the floods recede from the southern plains, they follow the water north, usually from June to July, and then start their return journey around September. By →





DAVID ROGERS (3)

November, as the rains recur, the southern plains once again teem with wildebeest and game.

“Look at them all,” our guide Brian Mukumbuta commented, as we found yet another herd. “This place is just one huge meat pot for the hyena!”

Here, unusually, hyena aren’t scavengers. They’re predators, and they attack in style. The single, small lion pride poses no threats to them, so populations are thriving, with some 700 hyenas living in clans of up to 50. We watched in awe as a pack of 21, with bloodstained jowls and fat, full bellies polished off a wildebeest, crunching the remaining bones. Two young, inquisitive hyenas sauntered up to our Land Rover checking us out, with fluffy saucer-shaped ears and teeth that looked too big for their mouths.

As dusk fell, we waited at the ‘South Clan’ den, where five tiny black cubs emerged, their pink ears and white eyebrows suggesting they were under six weeks old. Mischievous and playful, they squealed and stumbled on little legs as they explored their surroundings, only to be carried in their mothers’ mouths back to the safety of their lairs.

Surprisingly, the Lozi people are as much a part of this landscape as the wildebeest and their predators. Liuwa only gained national park status in 1972, yet it is one of Africa’s oldest protected regions. Located in the kingdom of Barotseland, the king (or Litunga) declared it a royal hunting ground in the late-19th century. Villagers were tasked with protecting its wildlife in exchange for land use and fishing rights, which still continue today. Some 20,000 Lozi now live in 432 villages within the park and its buffer zone, adding a complex dimension to conservation.



In a unique, three-way relationship, Liuwa is managed by African Parks through a public-private partnership with Zambia Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) and the traditional authority representing the local people, the Barotse Royal Establishment (BRE). “BRE invited African Parks to get involved,” explained Simon Pitt, AP’s Operations Manager. “Without their support, particularly at the early stages, this project would never have worked.”

Inevitably, the project has faced challenges. African Parks’ law-enforcement role includes ranger patrols to impede poaching, and enforcing seasonal fishing bans for sustainable fishing. “The communities appreciate us being here,” Simon continued. “But there will always be conflict. We have to find ways to overcome that.” These ways have included building school classrooms, computer labs and housing for teachers, establishing conservation clubs focusing on the environment and employment, and sponsoring children to attend secondary school. African Parks has also built wells, clinics and campsites with all profits going to communities. And the organisation contributes monthly payments to Community Development Funds, rewarding reductions in poaching levels.

Over 12 years, anti-poaching activities and animal reintroductions have helped Liuwa’s wildlife flourish. On game drives, we watched dazzles of zebra grazing on the plains. Around a thousand skittish red lechwe scattered as we approached. Small, speedy oribi constantly played ‘chicken’, running and jumping in front of our vehicle. Buffalo, eland and lions have also been reintroduced into the park. It’s also a fabulous destination for birders, with 330 species including →



WILL BURRARD-LUCAS / NORMAN CARR SAFARIS

PREVIOUS PAGES: Apex predators. There are about 700 spotted hyenas at Liuwa Plain, living in clans of up to 50. **CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** Lady, once the only lion here; the park’s lily-filled lagoons make it a photographer’s heaven; a lilac-breasted roller; wildebeest roam the plains at sunset

LADY LIUWA

For all the wildebeest and hyena that populate this remote park, Lady is the true star of Liuwa. In 2010 National Geographic filmed a documentary about her called *Lady Liuwa: The Last Lioness*, relating her life as the only lion in this vast national park. The population had been wiped out due to poaching, human-wildlife conflict and illegal trophy hunting, and for nine years, she was its solitary lion. “She’s amazing, a true survivor,” our guide Brian Mukumbuta told us. But it seemed Lady had spent her last years alone in the wilderness.

African Parks’ conservationists set about finding her a family to restore Liuwa’s lion population. In 2009 two males were introduced and the coalition seemed strong and healthy. But danger lay ahead. The two males moved on to Angola, where one was killed by locals. The other, Nakawa, returned to the relative safety of Liuwa.

In 2011 two females were introduced from Kafue National Park, only for one of them to die in a snare. Traumatized, the surviving sister, Sepo (meaning Hope), headed towards Angola but was recaptured and airlifted back to Liuwa. She was kept in a boma alongside Lady, and the two females bonded. Lady took the young lioness under her wing and they have remained together ever since.

On being released from the boma, Nakawa was regularly seen mating with the young lioness and in December 2013, three little cubs were born, a male and two females. It seemed Liuwa’s lion population would now be stable. Tragically, however, their father was found dead in September last year. The circumstances remain unexplained, but he is believed to have been poisoned.

For more on lion behaviour, turn to page 92.

PLAY FIGHTING: The flat landscape of Liuwa is the ideal habitat for cheetah



WILL BURRARD-LUCAS / NORMAN CARR SAFARIS

huge flocks of pelicans, elegant crowned cranes in their hundreds and endangered wattled cranes.

Liuwa's tourism is also enjoying a new lease of life. Norman Carr Safaris (NCS) opened Matamanene in May, and plans to establish a luxury camp in early 2017. In the meantime, with five ensuite tents set in shady woodland, Matamanene is stylish and unpretentious. It has a lovely relaxed vibe, so relaxed that even the lions have been caught playing on sofas in the open *chitenge*.

Activities here offer a deeper appreciation of life in Liuwa. The park is a photographer's dream, with endless vistas of amber savannahs and lily-strewn pools as backdrops to wildebeest in their thousands, migrating birds, charismatic hyena, leaping cheetah and famous lions, and NCS has started photography safaris with expert guide and photographer Ed Selfe.

An evening presentation and dinner with Teddy Mukula from the Zambian Carnivore Programme gave us a fascinating insight into their research and history. The following afternoon, their manager Graeme Ellis accompanied us on a game drive, as we tracked wildebeest, hyena and lion using GPS and telemetry, learning about their relationship to each other as predators and prey.

In the cool early morning, I had the privilege of going on NCS's very first walking safari. We had 360° views of nothing but plains, vivid blue pools and just one lone palm tree piercing the horizon in the distance. And on our last evening, we feasted on a fabulous bush dinner under a full moon and starlight.

With golden plains and flowers by day, glittering stars by night and lightning from miles away dancing across the sky, Liuwa has an aura all of its own. No wonder Lady never wanted to leave. 🐾

SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** Kenya Airways and South African Airways offer flights to Lusaka via Nairobi and Johannesburg respectively. Some tour operators offer tailor-made trips to Liuwa Plain, including Expert Africa and Natural World Safaris. The writer travelled as a guest of African Parks and Norman Carr Safaris.

■ **Where to stay** Matamanene is the only lodge in the park; it's run by Norman Carr Safaris. A new property called Mambeti is set to open in early 2017, after which management of Matamanene will revert to African Parks. There are five campsites, from which the local communities retain all profits.

■ **When to go** Matamanene is open from May to July and October to December. The campsites are open June–December. From December to April/early May, rains can make the park inaccessible, although this is the best

time to see migratory birds. From May to August, the climate is cool but usually sunny, warming up towards October (the hottest month). The rains start to return around November.

■ **Things to do** Activities include game drives, walks and spending time with Zambian Carnivore Programme researchers.

■ **Further reading** Read the *Bradt Guide to Zambia* (6th Edition) by Chris McIntyre or visit the websites of the Zambia Tourism Board and African Parks.

