



The carmine bee-eater hide



Oxpecker on buffalo



# Life through a LENS

**Matthew Vlemmiks gets very, very close to the wildlife on a photographic safari in Zambia.**

From a few feet away you don't so much see hippos as experience them. You smell them, hear their heavy breathing and grunting, look into their eyes and appreciate their breathtaking size and power. But hippos are regarded by many as the most dangerous animal in Africa, so how do you make their intimate acquaintance and live to tell the tale? Simple - you use a hide.

Just about anybody who goes on safari is searching for that special shot, the perfect wildlife photograph that they can endlessly show off to their family and friends. A stay in Zambia's stunning South Luangwa National Park will give you your best possible chance of capturing these unforgettable images. Shenton Safaris have a series of photographic hides that have over the years been a favourite haunt of National Geographic, the BBC and others whose job it is to unearth film and photographs to wow the public. From their two small, stylish camps, they offer three safari activities per day, the third of which will usually involve an hour in a hide, sheltering from the afternoon sun and gaining privileged access to some of Africa's most recognisable creatures.

Even for those who are not keen shutterbugs, time spent in the hides is a fantastic way to learn more about the bush and its residents. There is simply no other way to get this close to large, potentially dangerous wildlife such as hippos, elephants and buffalos. Sheltered safely by the thatch and mud walls that separate you, some of the animals may be distantly aware of an unusual scent, but most are completely unconcerned by it, going about their usual business as if you are not there at all.

At the Hippo Hide, near Kaingo, I watched a large pod of hippos and became more closely acquainted with their behavioural patterns than I ever thought possible. I saw the tenderness between a mother and its calf, the deep scars along the adults backs caused by territorial infighting, the painful in-growing tooth protruding at an unnatural angle from one male's mouth and, more gruesomely, their exhibitionist toilet habits! It is like an hour-long opportunity to step into David Attenborough's shoes and really get to know the behaviour of a particular animal, "warts 'n all." It is also fascinating to examine the way they interact with other species, particularly in the tense but usually tolerant co-existence of hippos and crocodiles. ▶



Thornicroft's giraffe



View from Hippo Hide

Staying near to Kaingo, the Elephant Hide is a treehouse structure perched high above the Luangwa River. The views from here are sensational, and it is most impressive when watching herds of elephant cross the river, the adults keeping a close watch over their calves and an eye out for any brave or hungry crocodiles that might try to steal them away. If you are feeling particularly intrepid, or for a once in a lifetime experience, you can do a sleep-out in the hide. You are provided with a comfortable mattress and blanket, a bottle of something medicinal, and there's no need to worry about leopards or other potentially inquisitive nocturnal wildlife as a scout spends the night in a game vehicle right below the tree.

Mwamba Bushcamp is slightly more rustic than Kaingo but is in an area of the national park that is phenomenally rich in game. Here you will find the Last Waterhole hide, which really comes into its own towards the end of the dry season, when water sources become more scarce and game concentrates in large numbers around the few remaining water holes. It becomes a magnet for



Kaingo Camp

large herds of wildebeest during the months of September and October, which in turn attracts the resident Mwamba pride of lion. This can make for stunning sightings which are often not for vegetarians or those with a weak stomach.

During the time I spent looking out from Mwamba's Last Waterhole, the resident baboons became extremely vocal and agitated, grunting, shrieking and scampering round excitably. Sure enough, moments later a leopard stalked majestically into view and the baboons scattered. There were plenty of vulnerable young baboons around but, for the moment, the leopard was relatively uninterested. For me, this is the major point about spending time in the hides – the animals behave completely naturally, utterly unaffected by your presence. On this occasion, the leopard just wasn't ready to eat – a disappointment for those hoping to see a kill but great for those who wanted some priceless photographs of one of Africa's most elegant and beautiful animals.

Keen birders might be wondering what these hides have to offer them, and the answer becomes clear in



Hippo Hide

September and October, when vast numbers of carmine bee-eaters begin nesting on the river banks. In early September, there's a hide on a boat anchored right in the middle of the river to gain a perfect view of these beautiful little birds busily going about their day. I'm no Bill Oddie, and generally watch mammals and reptiles more than the birds, but even the most sceptical of twitchers cannot fail to be enchanted by the brilliant, luminous colours of the carmine bee-eaters, lilac-breasted rollers and lovebirds that are so abundant in the area.

Derek and Jules Shenton run a fantastic operation in the South Luangwa – Derek has spent his life growing up and guiding there, and Jules is as warm a host as you are likely to find. Their experience of hosting has given them a thorough understanding of the requirements of some of the world's most eminent photographers and camera men. Spend a week at their two camps and you will have enough material to bore the relatives for years to come!

**Matthew Vlemmiks**  
Zambia Specialist



The Elephant Hide

## FACT FILE

A seven night safari including five nights with Shenton Safaris and two nights at the Luangwa River Lodge starts from £2,995 per person. This incorporates all game viewing activities, meals and drinks, internal light aircraft transfers and return flights from the UK. For details please contact Matthew, Cate or James on 01993 838 505.

