

liquid assets

The Bangweulu Wetlands have three claims to fame. First, it is in this watery wilderness, in Chief Chitambo's village, that legendary Scottish explorer David Livingstone died in 1873. Second, it is home to the shoebill, a gigantic, bizarre-looking bird that woos twitchers from around the globe. Third, the swamps are inhabited by an astonishing 75 000 endemic black lechwe. So it comes as a surprise that virtually no-one outside Zambia has even heard of the place. **Stephen Cunliffe** set off to find out why.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



As we splashed through knee-deep water, sinking to our ankles in the dark mud, the nearest tree shimmered on the sun-baked horizon more than a kilometre away. Simon Ng'ona, my Zambia Wildlife Authority-assigned escort scout, and I marvelled at the sea of antelopes whose beady eyes watched casually as we laboured across the waterlogged floodplain. They carpeted the landscape in every direction, forming part of one of Africa's most impressive – but least known – wildlife gatherings.

Here in northern Zambia, a labyrinth of 17 rivers (including the Chambeshi, the source of the mighty Congo River) feeds an extensive system of lakes, swamps, seasonally flooded grasslands and adjoining woodlands that collectively form the 10 000-square-kilometre Bangweulu Wetlands. From April onwards, as the annual floodwater recedes, nutritious grasses sprout in its wake. This rich grazing proves irresistible to the endemic black lechwe, and the Chimbwe floodplain soon becomes the epicentre of an astoundingly large gathering of these attractive antelope as they mass in their tens of thousands.

For the wildlife connoisseur, the wide, game-rich Chimbwe Plains, located in the Chikuni sector of Bangweulu, are hard to beat. This is the proverbial land of plenty: an overwhelmingly peaceful place, where the silence is broken only by the splashing of hooves and the low hum of the lechwe herds. In times gone by, Bangweulu supported upwards of 250 000 of these gregarious antelope and, although poaching in subsequent decades reduced the number, the sheer scale of the gathering – which is on the increase once more – still defies belief.

Seventy-five thousand lechwe are not the only reason to explore the pristine wetlands of northern Zambia's version of the Okavango Delta. The swamps, grasslands and termitaria woodlands of the wilderness are also home to small herds of elephant and buffalo, along with decent numbers of tsessebe, sitatunga, oribi, southern (or common) reedbuck and zebra. During forays across the plains and the shallow swamplands, we were fortunate to enjoy sightings of all these herbivores. At night, spotted hyaenas appeared regularly, monitoring our campsites. ▶



BLACK LECHWE

The lechwe *Kobus leche* is a semi-aquatic antelope found in Botswana, Zambia, south-eastern DRC, north-eastern Namibia and eastern Angola, being especially plentiful in the Okavango Delta, Kafue Flats and Bangweulu Swamps. The black lechwe *K. l. smithemani*, endemic to the wetlands of northern Zambia, is one of four recognised subspecies.

The lechwe is a diurnal antelope, golden-brown in colour with a white belly. The males are darker, but the animal's general hue varies between subspecies. As the name suggests, the coats of male black lechwe become very dark with age. The horns of the males are long, thin spirals that are ridged and vaguely lyre-shaped.

On dry land, the lechwe appears slow and clumsy, but in the water and mud it is easily able to outrun predators, thanks to its powerful hind legs that propel it in long leaps, and the elongated, splayed hooves that prevent it from sinking into the ground. The shaggy, greasy coat acts as a sort of waterproofing, and the legs are also covered in a water-repelling substance.

The lechwe inhabits floodplains bordering swamps, and it can often be seen swimming or grazing shoulder-deep in water. The antelope feeds mainly on aquatic plants and nutritious grasses, and will follow the seasonal deluge, taking refuge in wooded areas if flooding is extreme.

Lechwe generally gather in large, loose groups that have no strict social system. Herds, which can include many thousands of individuals, are usually composed of a single sex, although they mix during the breeding season. Mating takes place during the November to February rainy season, when males compete for access to females by forming a 'lekking' system. Rams fight for control of small areas, known as 'leks', with prime locations being in the centre of the group where there is the greatest access to females. A single lamb is born after a seven- to eight-month gestation period.

Weight 70–130 kg.

Lifespan 12–15 years.

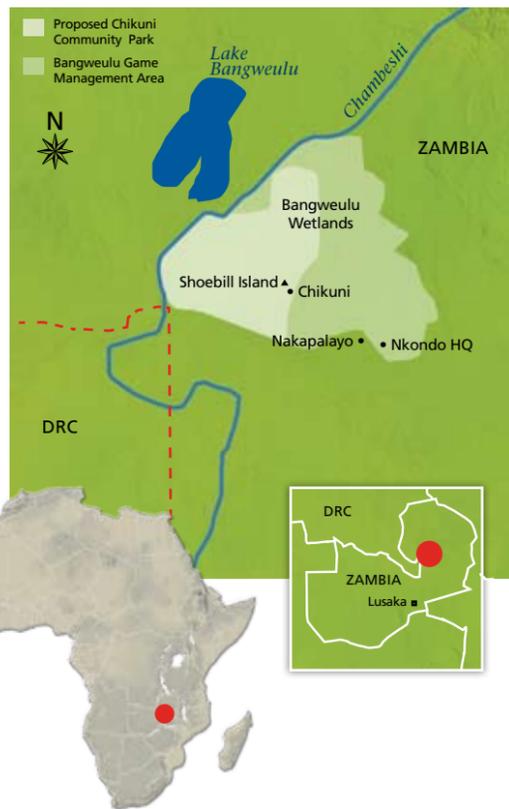
Habitat Wetland floodplains and neighbouring swamplands.

Diet Grasses and aquatic plants.

Call Low humming sound with alarm snorts.

Status Vulnerable at species level.

Threats Hunting and the loss of floodplain habitat.



For many visitors, however, Bangweulu's mammals, even the impressive concentrations of lechwe, play second fiddle to its astonishing birdlife. I watched in awe as great white pelicans sailed past long lines of African spoonbills corralling fish in the shallows. Flocks of wattled cranes (10 per cent of Africa's total population reside here) stalked the plains, along with their retinue of egrets. Deeper into the swamps, memorable sightings of African purple swamphen, lesser jacana and blue-breasted bee-eater were added to our burgeoning bird list.

However, it was the peculiar-looking shoebill, a feathered Holy Grail and arguably the most sought-after bird on the African continent, that soon became my obsession – especially as this is the only place in southern Africa you're likely to see one.

After days of fruitless searching, I began to fear the worst. But Ng'ona was undeterred, insisting he knew just the man to help us track down this elusive, predominantly solitary bird. The following morning he proudly reappeared, poling a small

piroque – a flat-bottomed canoe – accompanied by guide Patson Mukosa. 'I know these swamps like the back of my hand and I want to help you find a shoebill,' Mukosa said. Having spent two decades helping visitors to locate birds at the aptly named Shoebill Camp, his credentials were impeccable. Who was I to doubt him? I nodded, flashed him a thankful smile and hopped into the small boat.

We headed deep into the swamp, where Mukosa informed me that the feeding sites of the shoebills were located. As the day wore on, the intense sun sapped my enthusiasm and energy, but the indefatigable guide was resolute. After seven long hours of poling, and without the aid of binoculars, he suddenly exclaimed, 'Shoebill!'

The huge grey bird, resembling a cross between a stork and a pelican, appeared to be fishing, so we approached cautiously. Standing as still as a statue, it stared into the reeded shallows for what seemed an eternity, then its head darted forward into the water with lightning speed. A second later it emerged with a sizeable catfish clamped in its enormous hooked bill and gulped it down whole.

We watched the shoebill for two hours, edging slowly forward until we were barely 20 metres from it. When it finally retired to a nearby tree to digest its food, we tore ourselves away, but not before Mukosa announced triumphantly, 'I told you I know these swamps. I wanted to find you a shoebill and I did!'

Bangweulu is one of Africa's most important wetland systems and was declared a Game Management Area (GMA) 40 years ago. For many years thereafter, conservationists tried to create a national park here, but a lack of funding, infrastructural development and technical expertise conspired to keep the wilderness off Zambia's tourist circuit.

The situation changed in 2008 when the African Parks Network (APN) was invited by the local community and the Zambia Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) to become their private-sector partner in a project to manage the area. The non-profit Bangweulu Wetlands Management Board was established, with representatives from all three groups.

I joined the board's interim project director, Craig Reid, who had kindly agreed to drive me around the Chikuni sector. As we bumped the trackless plains, Reid shared his vision for Bangweulu's future: 'African Parks works tirelessly to solve the challenges and strengthen the partnership so that the wetlands can realise their full tourism potential and

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benefit both local people and wildlife.' The board is aiming to help Zambians to effectively manage their natural

ABOVE Despite heavy poaching in decades gone by, black lechwe breed prolifically in this idyllic environment and this has helped the antelope to endure in large numbers. Males can be distinguished from females by the presence of horns and noticeably darker coloration.

OPPOSITE Bangweulu has been designated as a game management area, as opposed to a national park, so it is imperative that the local people are afforded access for sustainable resource use under a comprehensive management and land-use plan.

PREVIOUS SPREAD A herd of wetland-adapted black lechwe bound across the Chimbe floodplain.

THE SHOEBILL

If there is one bird that attracts more visitors to the Bangweulu Wetlands than any other, it is the shoebill *Balaeniceps rex* (right). Standing 1.5 metres tall and with a wingspan of 2.5 metres, the shoebill's scientific name means 'King whale-head'. It is easy to see how the bird got its name: its enormous clog-shaped beak is 23 centimetres long and 10 centimetres wide. The hooked tip and sharp slicing edges, designed to scoop, stab and crush in one motion, make it a formidable implement.

The shoebill is endemic to Africa, inhabiting wetland regions and deep swamps from southern Sudan in the north (where the largest population is found) through Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo to Zambia in the south.

It was first identified by Western science in 1851, when Victorian naturalist John Gould described the initial specimen as 'the most extraordinary bird I have seen for many years'. Scientists have since puzzled over its taxonomy, some classifying it among the herons and others among the storks. DNA evidence now suggests that the shoebill is most closely related to pelicans.

The bird often frequents narrow fish-rich channels linking bodies of water, and ambushes its prey (apart from fish, the birds supplement their diets with reptiles and waterbirds) with a sudden lunge. It could win an award for perseverance for its ability to stand in a waterway beneath the full sun for hours, waiting for unsuspecting prey to swim past.

Generally monogamous, a breeding pair requires a territory of at least two square kilometres. At the onset of the dry season, as the floodwaters recede, they construct a large nest in a clearing of swamp grass on an island or raft of floating vegetation. Up to three eggs are laid and the parents will periodically douse the eggs and chicks with water scooped up in their bills to prevent them from overheating. However, inter-sibling rivalry means that generally only one youngster survives.

Weight 6 kg.

Lifespan Up to 50 years.

Habitat Swamps and wetlands.

Diet Fish (especially lungfish and catfish), baby crocodiles, snakes, birds and frogs.

Call Although generally a quiet bird, it will clap its bill when greeting its mate at the nest, producing a sound that resembles the clacking of castanets.

Status With an estimated population of fewer than 10 000, the shoebill is extremely vulnerable to human disturbance (including overfishing and the theft of eggs and chicks for the illegal wildlife trade), and the loss of swampland habitat, especially due to construction of dams. It is classified as Vulnerable.



BANGWEULU WETLANDS

heritage in the long run. 'Ultimately, our goal is to create an environment in which the local communities and fishermen want to preserve Bangweulu,' he elaborated.

The project area comprises the proposed 2 910-square-kilometre Chikuni Community Partnership Park (CCPP), along with the adjoining 3 090-square-kilometre Bangweulu Game Management Area. The status of the CCPP would resemble that of a national park, but it

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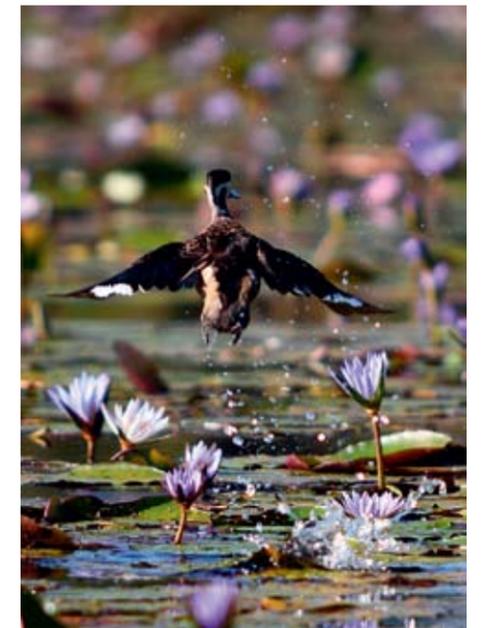
would belong to the local community rather than the state and would be managed by the private-sector partner, making it a pioneering concept in African conservation. As we pulled up alongside a swampy pan, Reid cautioned, 'While this is exciting, one must remember that the project area is designated as a Game Management Area, meaning that the local people must derive benefit from its resources. We intend to develop a comprehensive land-use plan to make sure that this is done in a sustainable manner.' Aside from the region's tourism

potential, controlled hunting, sustainable fishing and selective wood harvesting stand to deliver substantial benefits to local communities.

As we stood around discussing the proposed park and the future of the area, a group of fishermen and their families plodded past pushing heavily laden bicycles en route to their villages. I had heard that these locals, mem-

bers of a 90 000-strong fishing community scattered across the swamp's seasonal islands, felt threatened by the arrival of AFP and their proposed park. Reid acknowledged, 'We are working with all the stakeholders, including the local communities and fishermen, to promote a tourism and conservation ethic. However, the fishermen are especially concerned that the introduction of sustainable fishing practices will impact negatively on their livelihoods.'

The villagers stared at us openly, and I gathered that tourists were a source of intrigue. As we turned to go, Reid added, 'If the fisheries were to collapse, it would be absolutely catastrophic for all the mammal populations in the Bangweulu system.' ▶



ABOVE A hottentot teal takes off from a waterlily-infested pond. In Bangweulu mammals play second fiddle to the swamp's astonishing birdlife.

TOP Bangweulu is home not only to an astounding concentration of lechwe, but also to a 90 000-strong fishing community that lives on the swamp's seasonal islands, providing ongoing management challenges for the area's long-term future.

PACK YOUR BAGS

When to go The best time to visit Bangweulu is from May to August, when the Chimbwe Plains are dry enough to be driven on, but still sufficiently green to attract large concentrations of lechwe. The plains remain accessible until December, but from January to April heavy rains make most access roads impassable and the flooded wetlands reachable only by boat.

Getting there By air: South African Airways www.flysaa.com, Kulula www.kulula.com and Zambezi Airlines www.flyzambezi.com have frequent flights from Johannesburg to Lusaka. To connect to Bangweulu, contact the private charter companies Proflight www.proflight-zambia.com or Sky Trails www.skytrailszambia.com.

By road: Bangweulu is reached via the Great North Road from Lusaka. Remember that the nearest fuel and provisions are in Serenje (182 kilometres from the Chikuni airstrip); self-catering visitors should stock up before leaving Lusaka.

Where to stay Accommodation in the wetlands is available at Shoebill Island Camp, which offers safari tents or reed-walled cottages. For more information, go to www.kasanka.com. A selection of campsites and self-catering tented camps offer additional accommodation options.

What to do Game drives, walking safaris and guided pirogue trips in search of shoebills, black lechwe and other wild animals. Don't miss the Chimbwe Plains. Take a cultural tour to Nakapalayo village.

Health and safety Zambia is an extremely safe country, but use common sense and don't flaunt your wealth. Protection against malaria is essential. South African citizens returning home require a yellow fever jab.

For further information, go to www.african-parks.org or contact Kerri Rademeyer, Field Operations Manager of the Bangweulu Wetlands Project, at bangweulu@african-parks.org



ABOVE Local communities stand to derive significant benefits from the new Chikuni Community Partnership Park.

BELOW Lechwe are easily able to outrun predators, thanks to their long, powerful hind legs and elongated, splayed hooves that prevent them from sinking into the waterlogged ground.

There are exciting plans afoot. A major translocation and restocking programme is in the pipeline, including the release of cheetahs back onto the reserve's floodplains. 'A five-year animal reintroduction programme will be implemented to restore the flora and fauna of the area,' Reid told me. A temporary wildlife sanctuary is planned, which would enable the successful translocation of roan, sable, eland,

hartebeest and waterbuck to augment the remnant populations surviving within the project area. Locally extinct predators, such as leopards and African wild dogs, could follow. In the longer term, it is hoped that black rhinos will also return.

Reid's infectious enthusiasm for the wetland makes him the ideal companion when exploring its treasures. Despite the work that lies ahead, I can't help but believe that Bangweulu has the potential to evolve into the Zambian equivalent of Botswana's Okavango. Meanwhile, if you have a yearning for the untamed and unexplored, and don't mind getting your feet wet, then a veritable water wonderland awaits your visit.

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