

An aerial photograph capturing a herd of antelope, likely reedbuck, swimming across a vast, dark wetland. The scene is illuminated by the warm, golden light of a low sun, which creates a shimmering path of light across the water's surface and highlights the animals as they move. The water is dark and textured with ripples, and the overall atmosphere is serene and wild.

a watery wilderness

Bangweulu Wetlands, northern Zambia



Sixty thousand
lechwe are
not the only
reason to
venture north
and explore
the pristine
Bangweulu
Wetlands – a
wilderness
lovers'
playground.

Words and pictures by Stephen Cunliffe.



I opened the passenger door, hopped down into the knee-deep water and immediately sunk down to my ankles in the black mud below. A relentless African sun beat down on the exposed plains and the combination of cool mud and refreshing water reinvigorated my body. As I sloshed and squelched my way around the vehicle, I assessed our predicament: you didn't need to be a 4x4 expert to realise that we were properly stuck. The dark sucking mud had swallowed our Land Cruiser right down to the axle and the vehicle did not appear to be going anywhere in a hurry. We had a winch, but the nearest

tree shimmered on the sun-baked horizon over a kilometre away. It was time to get dirty and start digging.

As we worked on the car, our progress was monitored by thousands of beady eyes. Countless herds of black lechwe kept an inquisitive eye on proceedings as we worked on the immobile vehicle. These lechwe, endemic to the Bangweulu Wetlands of northern Zambia, were one of the prime reasons for our decision to visit these unknown swamps. To be honest, from a wildlife point of view, we could not have chosen a better place to get stuck. We were slap bang in the middle of the game-rich

Chimbwi Plains in the Chikuni sector of the Bangweulu Wetlands. This area is the epicentre of the black lechwe's preferred habitat, and as the flood waters slowly recede, these antelope congregate on the plains in their tens of thousands – a truly grand wildlife spectacle. It was an incredibly peaceful scene with only the sound of digging and the low hum of the lechwe herds to break the deafening silence of the wide-open plains.

Sixty thousand lechwe are not the only reason, however, to venture north and explore the pristine Bangweulu Wetlands. The swamps, seasonally flooded grasslands and termitaria

woodlands of this seldom-visited wilderness remain home to small herds of elephant and buffalo, along with larger numbers of tsessebe, zebra and sitatunga. During our forays across the plains and shallow swamps we were lucky enough to enjoy sightings of all these herbivores, while spotted hyena skulked around our campsite at night.

The concentrations of wildlife around Chikuni were impressive, but it was the birdlife that proved truly phenomenal. While huge flocks of wattled cranes (10 percent of Africa's total population reside here), African spoonbills and egrets stalked the marshy plains in massive numbers, it was the bizarre-looking shoebill,

arguably the most highly sought-after bird in all of Africa, that produced the biggest gasps of appreciation from our crew of nature lovers. These enigmatic birds tend to frequent the papyrus areas of the permanent swamp, which necessitated that we temporarily abandon our vehicle in favour of a local guide with a small pirogue who successfully escorted us to their favoured feeding sites. We learned that the best time to search for these rare birds is from March to July, while game-viewing is at its most productive between May and August.

As I settled into a rhythm, the monotonous digging allowed my mind to drift back and mull over all I ▶



had recently learned about this neglected chunk of wildest Africa. Bangweulu was actually declared a Game Management Area way back in 1972; however, it languished off Zambia's tourist circuit due to a lack of funding, technical expertise and infrastructure. All of this changed in 2008 when African Parks Network (APN) was invited by the local community and ZAWA to help the wetlands realise their huge tourism potential to the benefit of the local people and wildlife.

With the help of WWF Netherlands, work began on upgrading the infrastructure, protection and visitor facilities in Bangweulu's proposed Chikuni Community Partnership Park. I also discovered from Ian Stevenson, APN project director for Bangweulu, that there are exciting plans afoot to release cheetah back onto the reserve's floodplains during 2011. This will be followed by the reintroduction of additional sable, roan, waterbuck, wild dog, leopard and elephant with the

ultimate vision being to see lion and black rhino return within the next six years.

All of a sudden I was jolted from my thoughts by the sound of a distant car engine. What a stroke of luck; this was the first vehicle we had seen around Chikuni in three whole days of exploring! We keenly followed the progress of the white 4x4 as it churned its way through the flooded grasslands and slowly drew nearer. The vehicle stopped a good 50 metres from where we remained



bogged down in the glue-like mud. Gilmour and Julia Dickson strolled over and introduced themselves as our rescue party. Our situation suddenly looked much brighter.

As we stood around discussing our predicament and the best way to extricate our Cruiser, a group of local fishermen and their families plodded past us pushing heavily-laden bicycles through the water *en route* to some far-off village. These inquisitive Zambians, members of a 90 000-strong community of subsistence fisherman scattered across the seasonal islands of the massive 10 000 square-km swamp, stopped to gawk at us. On a floodplain that is normally the undisputed domain of the ubiquitous lechwe, I understood that our

misfortune was a source of great intrigue and entertainment to the locals.

We set to work with snatch straps, spades and hoes, but it still took another hour before we finally had both vehicles freed and on solid ground once again. It was an exciting way to end what had proven to be a highly entertaining and rewarding adventure exploring a rare and unique wilderness that will undoubtedly become known as 'Zambia's Okavango Delta' in the years ahead.

If you like getting wet and dirty and enjoy wheeling through undiscovered and unexplored chunks of African wilderness, then Bangweulu certainly is the place for you. It's a veritable playground for the adventurous wilderness lover. ►



Accommodation in the Bangweulu area is available at Lake Waka Waka Community Camp, Nakapalayo Tourism Project, Nsoke Community Campsite and Shoebill Island Lodge.

Lake Waka Waka community camp, Lake Waka Waka
With a stunning location on the edge of Lake Waka Waka (which is safe for swimming), this rustic campsite offers bucket showers and braai areas. It is maintained and managed by local community members who prepare fires and fetch clean water from the lake. It's a great spot to break your journey on the long drive into Bangweulu. Camping costs US\$5 per person per night.

Nakapalayo Tourism Project, Chiundaponde
The camp, immaculately set up and run by the local community, consists of six simple twin-bed brick chalets with outdoor bucket showers and the village's first flush toilets! For US\$60 per person per night, visitors receive an evening meal with traditional entertainment, breakfast, and a village tour.



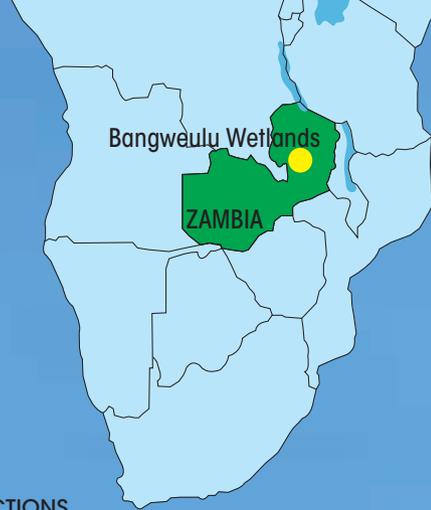
Nsoke Community Campsite, Chikuni
Ideally located on the edge of the game-rich Chimbwi Plains, Nsoke is a basic campsite with a borehole for fresh water and braai facilities. It is currently under renovation; however, upon reopening in late 2010, camping fees will be US\$10 per person per night.

Shoebill Island Camp, Chikuni
Shoebill Island Camp offers a choice between tented accommodation and reed cottages with *en suite* shower and flush toilet. Self-catering chalets are US\$50 per night, while fully inclusive chalets go for US\$360 per night (which includes all meals and guided boat trips through the swamp). Camping costs US\$10 per night. The Kasanka Trust administers the camp; more information at www.kasanka.com.

PROVISIONS
Basic provisions are available in Serenje and Mpika; however, overlanders are strongly advised to stock up properly before leaving Lusaka.

FUEL
The nearest fuel is available at the BP filling station in Serenje on the Great North Road. This is 182 km from the game-rich Chikuni sector of the park.





MAP AND DIRECTIONS

There are two routes from the Great North Road into the Bangweulu Wetlands. The one recommended below is slightly longer distance-wise; however, the road is in better condition and the route more scenic:

- From Serenje continue north on the paved Great North Road for about 180 km before turning left onto a dirt road signposted Lavushi Manda NP, Chiundaponde and Muwele; this road takes you through the centre of Lavushi Manda National Park for 70 km until you reach Chiundaponde.
- From Chiundaponde continue for 65 km to Chikuni and Nsobe Camp, on the edge of the floodplain;
- From Nsobe Camp continue for eight km across the floodplain, following the causeway, to Chikuni. Shoebill Island is three km further on. (NB: Do not attempt this last section during the wet season; rather organise a boat transfer from Nsobe).

ROAD CONDITIONS

Road conditions are fine outside the rainy season, but when the rains arrive expect all access roads to resemble elephant mud baths! At present there is no network of game drive routes across the Chimbwi Plains, so you are free to explore responsibly.

VEHICLE REQUIREMENTS AND ESSENTIAL GEAR

A 4x4 with decent mud-terrain tyres is essential. On the open floodplains your winch will be of little use if you get stuck, so travelling in convoy is recommended for those who want to really explore the area. A snatch strap, spade, sand / mud ladders and GPS should all be considered essential gear.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

From May to August. During this period the plains are sufficiently dry to be driven on, but are still green enough to attract the massive lechwe congregations. The plains remain accessible until December; however, from January to April the seasonal flooding of the wetlands makes access by vehicle impossible and the campsite at Nsobe disappears underwater.

Further information and useful contact details can be found on the African Parks Network website at www.african-parks.org/bangweulu or www.bangweulu.org.

