

Zambia's Liuwa Plain National Park is rapidly carving out a reputation for having some of the best predator viewing in Africa. After all, anywhere that serves up mating lions, three African wild dog kills and countless hyaena interactions within 48 hours of one's arrival deserves an accolade for being a predator-viewing paradise. In fact, according to environmental conservationist **Stephen Cunliffe**, visitors should be issued with a mandatory health warning: 'Beware, visits to Liuwa are highly addictive, will cause the pulse to race and the heart to pound uncontrollably.'

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



# DOGS OF WAR

For years Liuwa Plain National Park languished off the safari map, but now, with the help of enterprising African Parks Network (APN) conservationists and forward-thinking tourism operators like Robin Pope Safaris, adventurous travellers have a chance to sample, at first hand, the riches of southern Africa's carnivore capital. But safari visitors should be aware that they're signing on for a seriously action-packed adventure. For the dedicated few who undertake the long and often tortuous journey to Barotseland, wildlife carnage awaits on the protected area's wide-open plains.

This remote, little-visited corner of Zambia is the setting for Africa's second-biggest blue wildebeest migration. These lugubrious antelope traverse the terrain in their tens of thousands, moving with the rains from eastern Angola onto Liuwa's green grasslands and through its woodlands before returning across the border. An array of predators, including packs of wild dogs, range in close attendance.

Classified as one of the most endangered large carnivores on the continent, the African wild dog has a reputation for being a difficult animal to see in the wild. However, after just a week on Liuwa Plain, this seemed a ludicrous observation. My first encounter with dogs took the most unlikely form. Skimming over the park's wide-open grasslands in the APN microlight, we spotted a group of them running down a scrub hare. I felt like I was watching BBC's *Planet Earth* series as we banked sharply and followed the chase from above.

Later that night we were awoken by a cacophony of howling, cackling and twittering. Emerging to investigate, we saw, not far from the camp, a pitched battle between the dogs and their arch rivals, spotted hyaenas. Evidently, after the former had brought down a wildebeest in the light of the full moon, a hyaena clan had moved in and robbed the dogs of their bounty. However, the canids refused to go quietly and a raucous fight ensued.

The next morning on a walking safari, we bumped into the same pack of nine dogs,

which had just killed an oribi. We sat quietly and observed them feed. A couple of hyaenas showed up, but, grossly outnumbered, they were on a hiding to nothing and quietly retreated.

Liuwa saved the best for last. Shortly before sundown we located the pack once again at a small pan as they were preparing to hunt. They set off with purpose, evidently not satisfied by the oribi they had devoured earlier that day. Their body language showed they meant business, and it wasn't long before they sighted a loose herd of grazing wildebeest.

The dogs took off, making a beeline for their prey. Alarm snorts erupted from the animals as they frantically tried to group together and organise their defences.

Chaos erupted. With the dogs bearing down on them, the herd panicked and stampeded. The hunters chose their quarry wisely and targeted a yearling. The attack was brutally efficient; with nine wild dogs latching onto the wildebeest from all sides, it wasn't long before it succumbed and collapsed.

The dogs noisily ripped into the carcass. They swallowed huge chunks of meat, knowing that they didn't have long before the hyaenas arrived to wreak havoc with their meal.

The noise of the wildebeest's distress calls and the dogs' frantic feeding had indeed alerted a nearby clan of hyaenas, and an individual came loping over, quickly homing in on the carcass. The dog pack flung themselves on the hyaena, mobbing it from all sides and nipping at its belly and rump. The would-be scavenger slunk off. Soon it was back, though, with reinforcements, and the clan quickly overwhelmed the dogs.

Outnumbered and outgunned by a superior predator, the wild dogs had no option but to retreat and surrender the remains of their wildebeest kill. They lapped up the last scraps from the ground, then turned to vent their frustration on a lone hyaena. In unison they attacked it, biting it in the soft groin area. Yelping and howling, it scampered off to lick its wounds. ▶



PREVIOUS SPREAD African wild dogs range across Zambia's Liuwa Plain. The area is reputedly home to four wild dog packs, with more of these social canids thought to reside in the surrounding West Zambezi Game Management Area and in neighbouring Angola.

ABOVE Having sighted their prey, the dogs take their places in preparation for an attack as the wildebeest huddle to defend themselves.

RIGHT A yearling is targeted and taken down with masterful efficiency.

BELOW The dogs tear into their prey's flesh. They must eat quickly to avoid attracting the attention of competing predators, and can regurgitate the food later.



ABOVE On the lookout for intruders. The wild dog's two main competitors are the spotted hyaena and the lion – the former often steals their prey, the latter will also try to kill them.



RIGHT, ABOVE A lone hyaena, alerted in its nearby den by the noise and action, tries to approach the carcass but is sent packing.

RIGHT, CENTRE The hyaena returns with the rest of its clan, chasing the dogs from the wildebeest and dragging the carcass away.



RIGHT While hyaenas are also ruthlessly efficient hunters in their own right, here they are victorious thieves and settle down to devour their scavenged prey, giving the dogs a final warning snarl.



PORTFOLIO



LEFT Picking the last scraps of food off the ground, the wild dogs admit defeat and leave their kill. *Lycaon pictus*, 'painted wolf', is an appropriate description of their attractively marked coats.



ABOVE, LEFT and RIGHT The dogs vent their frustration on a lone hyaena, attacking it from front and rear and targeting its groin area with painful nips.

RIGHT The hyaena escapes and retreats to lick its wounds. **AG**

