

THE EDGE OF

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Despite being just a whisper more than 500 square kilometres in size, Malawi's Liwonde National Park is a national treasure that brims with exuberant vegetation and a varied wildlife, ranging from elephants and rhinos to a host of antelope, reptile and bird species. **Stephen Cunliffe** donned his backpack and headed for the lush heart of Africa to see for himself what was being done to protect the park against the demands on its resources by the country's burgeoning, impoverished population. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



RIGHT A rustic wooden sign welcomes visitors to Liwonde National Park.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE A family of common waterbuck, with the distinctive white rings on their rumps, keep a watchful eye out for predators as they approach the river to drink.

OPPOSITE, BELOW A grazing hippo disturbs grasshoppers and other insects as it feeds, much to the delight of the egret that enthusiastically gobbles them up.

PREVIOUS SPREAD At Liwonde, the Shire River floodplain is dominated by gigantic sausage trees and shady Natal mahoganies interspersed with borassus palms, which were introduced to the area by early Arab traders.

From our elevated vantage point on the slopes of the largest of the pyramid-shaped Naifulu Hills, Julius Chiomba and I were enjoying a stunning view to the west over the mopane-dominated heart of Malawi's beautiful Liwonde National Park. In the distance, the Shire River shimmered beneath the late-morning sun as it drained out of Lake Malombe and snaked sluggishly south within East Africa's Great Rift Valley. Perched atop a large boulder, gazing out over the landscape, I let my mind drift back 150 years.

The first European to set foot in the area was David Livingstone, whose expedition stopped here in 1859 to rest during his travels in the continent. With the aid of my binoculars and following Chiomba's patient directions (he's the head naturalist guide here and very knowledgeable), I eventually succeeded in picking out the giant hollow baobab that marks the spot of the expedition's campsite in what is now the north of the park. 'It can hold eight people inside,' he told me.

Liwonde, named for the local chief who championed the area's protection, was proclaimed a national park in 1973 to safeguard its extraordinary biodiversity and conservation potential. Unfortunately, mismanagement, poaching and habitat encroachment characterised the

decades that followed, prompting the Malawian government to acknowledge the deteriorating condition of the park and, in the 1990s, seek help to rectify the situation. South African National Parks and the Frankfurt Zoological Society in Germany answered the call, helping to upgrade Liwonde's infrastructure and anti-poaching programme.

With the assistance of various non-profit and non-governmental organisations, a 47-square-kilometre fenced sanctuary was created inside the park to house six reintroduced black rhinos, which will eventually be released into the sanctuary and used to diversify the dwindling gene pool of black rhinos in Africa. Further successful relocations of buffaloes, eland, roan antelopes, Lichtenstein's hartebeest and plains zebras have made Liwonde a crucial reservoir for rare species in Malawi.

Joined by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife escort officer, Lawrence Ikwanga, we resumed

'We have plenty, plenty animals today, but it was not always that way. **ELEPHANT POACHING USED TO BE REALLY BAD'**

our ascent of the largest of the hills. Suddenly the stillness was shattered by the crack of a gunshot, stopping us in our tracks. Turning wide-eyed to Ikwanga, I raised my eyebrows.

'Nothing to worry about,' he assured me. 'The scouts are probably just testing a weapon before they set off on patrol.'





ABOVE The Upper Shire provides arguably the best crocodile viewing in Africa as these ubiquitous predators bask on the riverbanks, totally unruffled by the passing boats.

OPPOSITE Visitors enjoy game viewing from a different perspective as they chug along the sluggish Shire River.

We continued our climb. Two-thirds of the way up, the steep slope became overgrown with tall thatching grass that at times towered over our heads, obscuring the route forward. Panting heavily, we were all searching for an excuse to stop and rest when three more shots rang out in quick succession. Once again I turned to Ikwanga. 'Target practice,' he responded, although with less certainty in his voice than before. 'It must be a patrol team doing some training exercises.'

The gunshots were coming from Liwonde's eastern boundary and, emerging onto the boulder-strewn summit of Naifulu Hill, we had a bird's-eye view over that region of Malawi's flagship national park. Chiomba pointed to the distant smoke tendrils that rose from the villages and farmlands beyond its boundary. Nearby, shrill alarm calls of

klipspringers and rock hyraxes drew our attention back to the hill. Preparing to move on to gain a better view of the curious yellow-spotted rock hyraxes that stared nervously at us from the safety of crevices between the boulders, my attention was caught by a wisp of smoke rising barely a kilometre from the base of our hill.

'Isn't that inside the park?' I asked, pointing at the swiftly evolving plume. Fanned by a light breeze, the fire was spreading rapidly. Flames licked at the tall yellow grass stalks and soon we could hear the crackle of tinder-dry vegetation engulfed by the spreading inferno.

By now, Ikwanga had abandoned all pretence of knowing what was going on. Nodding curtly, he said, 'I need to radio my superiors,' and moved away to make the call.

We waited in silence until he returned a few minutes later, the flicker of a smile on his face hinting that the news was not all bad.

'My colleagues were on patrol when they encountered fish poachers dragging nets across a waterhole near the park boundary,' he explained. 'When they tried to arrest them, the poachers ran away, so the scouts fired a warning shot. While they were trying to capture this first group, a second gang of game poachers set the grass alight nearby to try to scare the animals towards themselves. The scouts ran towards the smoke but the fire had disturbed an elephant, which charged them as it fled from the flames. The three shots we heard were their warning shots to scare the elephant away. The poachers escaped, but the fire is under control,' he ended with a grin.



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We absorbed the news in silence, until Chiomba turned to me and said, 'In many ways things are going very well in Liwonde. We have plenty, plenty animals today, but it was not always that way. Elephant poaching used to be really bad. When I began working here in 1996, hunting and snaring were very serious and the few animals that remained were scared. Now the situation is much better. It's only fish poaching that remains a big problem.'

As we carefully picked our way down the hillside, I asked Chiomba why he thought the poaching situation had improved. He replied, 'The arrival of Wilderness Safaris [an ecotourism and conservation company] in 1995 definitely helped as they employed many of the poachers to work at their Mvuu Camp. At the same time the number of scouts was also increased, making poaching a less attractive alternative. The problem is that there are many villages surrounding this park and Mvuu can't provide

Sitting in my little wooden boat on a river quite literally **OVERFLOWING WITH HIPPOS AND CROCODILES...**

jobs for everyone. As fish stocks shrink in Lake Malombe on Liwonde's northern border, the fishermen look to the park to boost their catches. We'll take a boat cruise along the Shire River tomorrow, and you'll see the illegal fishermen for yourself.'

The following day I decided to rest my weary legs and took up the offer of the cruise along Malawi's largest river. The Shire (pronounced 'Shi-ree') is the park's lifeblood, enabling it to support its diversity and density of animals and birdlife. As Chiomba had observed earlier, 'Liwonde might be considered a small park by African standards, but we have recorded more than 385 of Malawi's 650 bird species within its boundaries.'

Sitting in my little wooden boat on a river quite literally overflowing with hippos and crocodiles, my thoughts returned to our early-morning game drive where we had enjoyed an outstanding view of a low-flying western banded snake-eagle dangling a snake from a talon. Add to that memorable sightings of Lilian's lovebird, Livingstone's flycatcher, square-tailed drongo and Böhm's bee-eater during the preceding three days, and only the elusive Pel's fishing-owl, shy white-backed night-heron and rare brown-breasted barbet remained on my Liwonde wishlist.

The staggering numbers of hippos and crocs make the Upper Shire ▶



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When to go Liwonde National Park is accessible to visitors throughout the year; however, game viewing and river cruises are most productive during the dry season (June to November).

Getting there Liwonde lies to the south of Lake Malawi, some 160 kilometres north of Blantyre and 230 kilometres south-east of Lilongwe, the capital, along good tarred roads.

Where to stay Mvuu Safari Lodge (Mvuu means 'hippo' in the Tonga language), is located in the heart of Liwonde on a secluded backwater of the Shire River. This Wilderness Safaris luxury tented camp has eight permanent en-suite safari tents with private decks and outdoor showers that overlook a lagoon filled with hippos and crocodiles and visited by a host of bird species. Neighbouring Mvuu Camp offers rustic cottages, canvas chalets and camping facilities, and also has a restaurant, bar and swimming pool. For more information about Mvuu Safari Lodge and Camp, go to www.wilderness-safaris.com/country/malawi/introduction and click on the links for the camp or lodge, or e-mail info@wilderness.mw Budget-friendly accommodation is also available at Chinguni Hills Lodge and Camp (www.chinguni.com or info@chinguni.com), located in the south of the park, with good views of the Shire floodplain and a number of large lagoons.

Things to do Day and night game drives, walking safaris, boat cruises and cultural tours to schools and a local development project.

Nowhere on the continent have I felt more strongly the notion of national parks **BEING TINY ISLANDS OF WILDERNESS AT THE MERCY OF A SEA OF HUNGRY HUMANITY**

one of the best places in Africa to view these aquatic beasts, and river cruises provide unparalleled opportunities to observe the plethora of waterbirds. The chances are high that you'll have a close encounter with some of the park's 700-odd elephants as they come to the water's edge to drink alongside waterbuck, reedbuck, impalas, kudus, warthogs and the occasional herd of sable. There was, however, seldom a time while viewing the wildlife that we failed to detect the dugouts of illegal fishermen in the reeds and lagoons along the river's edge.

Malawi, a small landlocked nation with more than 14 million people, is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa. Faced with a situation in which land is becoming increasingly scarce, its predominantly rural population relies on traditional subsistence agriculture and fishing to survive. Reserves here are on the brink of being overwhelmed by people. Nowhere on the continent have I felt more strongly the notion of national parks being tiny islands of wilderness at the mercy of a sea of hungry humanity. Liwonde stands at the forefront of this battle for survival. Dynamite is said to come in small packages and Liwonde, at just a little more than 500 square kilometres, is exactly that. Can it resist the rising human tide or will it be swamped? ■

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ABOVE A borassus palm is silhouetted against a fiery sunset.