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Sure, viewing wildlife in their natural surroundings is a wonderful experience. But what if you're looking for something a bit more hands-on? Stephen Cunliffe received the opportunity of a lifetime: a chance to assist rangers in tagging some of Liywa Plain's carnivores during a "participation safari"

**Text and photography:** Stephen Cunliffe



**I first visited** Liywa Plain National Park in November 2008, and the overland route we followed to get there had been brutal. Driving north across Barotseland from Ngonye Falls, we endured a long, bumpy day on the vertebra-compacting Sesheke-Senanga-Mongu road before eventually reaching Mongu in the late afternoon. After replenishing our fuel and food stocks, we set out to tackle the notorious seasonal track across the Zambezi floodplain. Thanks to the early rains, the route had provided challenging and exciting driving conditions as black cotton soils alternated with fine alluvial river sand,

LIUWA PLAIN NATIONAL PARK

# Hunting the hunters

Caption



both with a strong tendency to thwart our forward progress! We took our time and embraced the challenges before finally arriving, dirty and tired, at the gateway to the park.

I soon discovered that the tough approach had been well worth the effort as we enjoyed the privilege of immersing ourselves in one of Africa's finest wilderness destinations. Indeed, on my first night in Matamanene Camp, I had an up-close-and-personal experience with the legendary Lady Liuwa – reputedly the last lioness in western Zambia.

The plight of Lady Liuwa, the incredible atmosphere of the place and some genuinely world-class game viewing ensnared my soul. I had no doubt that I would soon return to the majestic plains of Liuwa.

As I now made my way back to Liuwa in July 2010, I was as excited as a kid in a candy store. Getting there this time proved to be even harder than before.

An unusually wet rainy season had resulted in high water levels and the road across the Barotse floodplain was submerged. This necessitated a circuitous route through the Kafue to reach Mongu and then crossing by boat to Kalabo. We took a small speedboat through the labyrinth of channels and made the journey to Kalabo in three hours. Our vehicles, precariously loaded on a revamped cattle barge, chugged in eight hours later!

I had come to Liuwa to join a unique "participation safari" that allowed dedicated nature enthusiasts to witness cutting-edge conservation in action. The five-day safari focused on essential research work

being conducted by the Zambian Carnivore Programme (ZCP). The project and the safaris were the brainchild of the African Parks Network (APN) -- the not-for-profit conservation organisation that manages Liuwa Plain National Park.

The aim of these unusual safaris is to raise money to support the ongoing re-introduction and monitoring of key wildlife species in the park, while allowing a fortunate few to participate in hands-on conservation work that's focused on tracking, darting and collaring specific carnivore species.

Our group of excited wildlife junkies was entrusted to the care of an impressive team of dedicated professionals that included ZCP director Dr Matt Becker, park manager Craig Reid and documentary filmmaker Herbert Brauer.

During the introductory briefing we learned that Liuwa supported a complex diversity of wildlife, including Africa's second largest wildebeest migration. APN's mission is to restore the natural ecological processes in Liuwa, and predation is considered a key factor.

Craig explained: "In striving for management excellence, we want all our wildlife decisions, such as translocations and mitigation of human-wildlife conflict,



to be well informed. Our collaboration with the ZCP will allow us to better understand the predator component of the Liuwa system. We are especially interested in the impact of key carnivore species – lion, hyena, cheetah and wild dog – on prey species, and on each other."

I had no way of knowing that the 36-hour carnivore extravaganza of a lifetime awaited me.

It all began when Craig invited me to join him for a microlight flip over the park in a bid to locate one of Liuwa's wild dog packs. As we flew over a landscape dominated by seasonally flooded grasslands and woodland islands, we spotted herds of wildebeest, zebra, tsessebe and red lechwe as they clustered around seasonal pans. We even spotted a recently reintroduced herd of buffalo, but the wild dogs were nowhere to be seen.

With the sun dipping towards the horizon, there was time for one last roll of the dice and

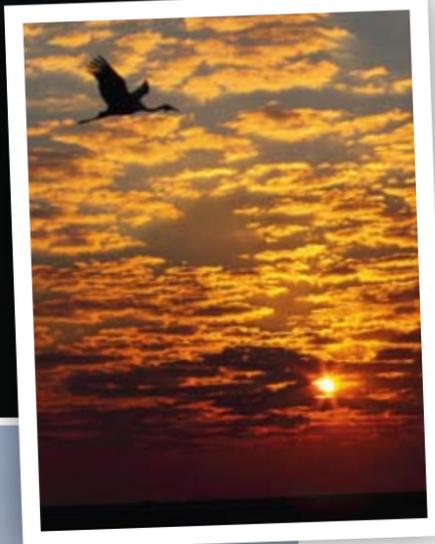
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Craig decided to fly along the Munde Stream. One moment everything seemed tranquil on the ground. The next, all hell broke loose.

“There they are,” yelled Craig, as he banked the microlight sharply.

Down below I spotted the pack: nine dogs going hell for leather after a scrub hare. Somehow the hare’s zigzagging manoeuvres kept it a couple of metres ahead of the pursuing dogs. When it finally bolted down a hole, Craig swung south and headed for the airstrip.

Upon landing, we immediately jumped into a Land Cruiser and shot off towards the spot where we had last seen the dogs.

We found them still digging for their elusive quarry. Eventually they gave up and set off in search of bigger prey. We watched in awe as they terrorised herds of wildebeest and relentlessly attacked scavenging hyenas.

Later the same night we awoke to the laughter of hyenas and the high-pitched twittering of wild dogs. We dived back into the Cruiser and sped off in the direction of the animal cacophony.

We found the dogs just as they were being chased off a kill by a huge clan of hungry hyenas. The dogs fought back bravely, but only managed to steal scraps as the hyenas tore into the carcass and gulped down the meat. In a matter of minutes, only skin and bones remained. The dogs took off again, and we headed back to bed.

The following morning I joined Alex Liseli, a Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) scout and tour guide, for a welcome opportunity to stretch my legs on a bush walk. Alex turned out to be a pleasant and knowledgeable character. With seven years’ experience in the park, he has cultivated an intimate knowledge of Liuwa’s fauna and flora.

While admiring a large flock of wattled cranes, we were interrupted by the arrival of a small group of lions. Lady Liuwa came strolling across the floodplain with her two handsome suitors (recently re-introduced males from the Kafue) in close attendance. We stood in awed silence and observed the tawny cats until they melted into a shady woodland island to rest for the day.

A couple of hours later we stumbled upon the wild dogs just after they had brought down a young wildebeest. We sat quietly and, with the aid of binoculars, watched them finally thwart the hyenas and enjoy a decent feed. By the time we walked back

into camp, I was in seventh heaven!

After a quick snack, we piled into the vehicle and went to watch Dr Becker in action as he darted a spotted hyena and placed a radio collar around its neck. It was fascinating to observe and participate in Matt’s valuable work.

The grand finale of the trip awaited us after lunch.

Matt planned to dart and collar one of the dogs before the pack became active in the evening. We located them easily enough, but they were uncharacteristically skittish and jumpy. It seemed as if they could sense the presence of the dart gun. After an hour of slow manoeuvring, Matt felt he was close enough to take the shot. We held our breath in anticipation.

He pulled the trigger, but the dart missed its mark.

Due to the commotion, the dogs were now awake and were preparing to hunt. There would be no more opportunities to dart one of the dogs, but at least we could follow and observe them in action.

They set off with purpose, evidently not satisfied with the wildebeest calf they had devoured that morning. Their body language showed that they meant business and it wasn’t long before they spotted a disorganised herd of grazing wildebeest.

The pack took off and made a beeline towards their prey. Alarm snorts erupted from the plain as the panicked animals frantically tried to group together and organise their defences.

Chaos ensued. With the dogs bearing down on them, the herd panicked and fled. The dogs chose their quarry wisely. They split the herd and latched onto a yearling. The attack was incredibly efficient. With nine wild dogs attacking the poor wildebeest from all sides, it wasn’t long before it succumbed and collapsed.

The dogs noisily ripped into the carcass, swallowing huge chunks of meat. The hunters knew it wouldn’t be long before the thieving hyenas arrived and wreaked havoc with their dinner, so they ate voraciously.

After a while, the first hyena approached. The dogs managed to chase it off, but soon the whole hyena clan arrived. Outnumbered and outgunned by a superior predator, the dogs surrendered the carcass and retreated to a nearby waterhole.

As the dogs lapped up water to wash down their dinner, we enjoyed some ice-cold Mosi lagers. We toasted the Liuwa team who had delivered experiences beyond anyone’s wildest imagination. This was wild Africa at her very best and definitely worth the effort to get there!



## TRAVEL PLANNER

**HOW TO GET THERE:** The recommended route leaves the tar road at Mongu to traverse the Zambezi floodplain on a rutted dirt track to Kalabo (the last stretch is tarred). Thereafter, a couple of sandy tracks wind north into the park. Please note that this route is closed during the wet season (December to mid-July) when the floodplain disappears underwater, prompting the Luluwa pontoon ferry to move downstream.

Highly adventurous 4x4 enthusiasts can attempt an alternative route (dry season only) by departing the park in a north-easterly direction. There are no roads and you will have to drive cross-country towards either the Lukulu or Limalunga pontoon where you can cross the Zambezi and rejoin something resembling a road! Enquire locally (before you set off) to find out whether the pontoons are operating, and don’t underestimate the gruelling demands of undertaking this challenging journey.

All four route options into Liuwa are available at [www.tracks4africa.co.za](http://www.tracks4africa.co.za). However, for those who don’t feel comfortable tackling a Liuwa expedition on their own, check out Bhejane Safaris ([www.bhejane4x4adventures.com](http://www.bhejane4x4adventures.com)) or Navigators ([www.navigators4wd.co.za](http://www.navigators4wd.co.za)) for advice on guided 4x4 trips to Liuwa.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Matamanene Camp, located in the heart of Liuwa, is the base camp for Liuwa Participation Safaris, the Zambian Carnivore Project and Robin Pope Safaris (RPS). However, this comfortable camp offering four permanent en suite safari tents is only available to safari operators.

Overlanders and self-drive visitors can choose between four well-maintained community campsites within the park – Lyangu, Kwale, Katoyana and Sikale. The shaded campsites offer only basic facilities, including fresh-water wells, flush toilets, showers, fireplaces and wood.

**PARK FEES:** Park entry fees are US\$40 (R293) per person per night. Community campsites are US\$10 (R73) per person per night. Children under 12 are half price and kids below six stay for free.

**WHEN TO VISIT:** Extensive flooding of the plains during the wet season makes access impossible or, at best, unsafe. Consequently, the park closes to all self-drive vehicles from 1 December to 1 June every year. The park is at its driest during September and October when the wildebeest start to mass on the plains. However, it is scenically most spectacular after the first rains in November.

**FURTHER INFORMATION:** Visit [www.african-parks.org](http://www.african-parks.org) or [www.robinpopesafaris.net](http://www.robinpopesafaris.net) and follow the links to Liuwa Plain National Park. For the latest info on the park, road conditions or to book a campsite, please e-mail [liuwa@africanparks.co.zm](mailto:liuwa@africanparks.co.zm).



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