

BATS & BEYOND

Forget Serengeti's wildebeest herds. Africa's biggest migration of mammals occurs once a year in a small forest in northern Zambia – and these wanderers have wings, not hooves. When **Stephen Cunliffe** visited the fabled bat roost of Kasanka, however, he discovered that the bats were just the start of the action. ▶

Sunrise at Kasanka sees up to eight million straw-coloured fruit bats return to their roost.

STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

Kasanka National Park



We stumbled and squelched deeper into the swamp beneath a brilliant star-studded sky. The sucking mud of the waterlogged forest floor made every step an effort. This was my first early morning foray into Kasanka's legendary mushitu swamp forest and, as I plodded forward, I kept a watchful eye on the reassuring bobbing of my guide's headlamp 20m ahead. Kenneth 'Batman' Changwe, with 15 years experience in the park as scout and guide, was my trusty companion.

Soon we arrived at the base of a gigantic waterberry. "We go up there," said Changwe, indicating a rickety-looking ladder that disappeared into the inky blackness. "Carefully!" he added.

An exhilarating climb took us to a platform 20m above the forest floor: an ideal spot from which to greet sunrise. Then, just as the first fingers of dawn were appearing, the magic began: clouds of bats appeared in the sky and started to descend on us. For the next 45 minutes they rained down, squadron after squadron returning from a long night of gorging on forest fruit, their enormous wingspans and sheer numbers darkening the sky and obscuring the dawn.

We watched in awed silence as the bat blizzard raged around us, the winged hordes swarming over the forest in their millions as they searched for a safe landing in the overcrowded roost. I'd heard about this – even seen the pictures – but at first hand the scale of it was overwhelming.



This extraordinary event, once Zambia's best-kept secret, recently reached a wider audience via the BBC's *Life* series with David Attenborough. But here in Kasanka it is nothing new: each year, from late October, colonies of straw-coloured fruit bats begin to converge on ten hectares of swamp forest inside Kasanka National Park, having travelled from the Congo Basin. Millions join in what is one of Africa's largest and most spectacular



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TOP: The Fibwe hide offers a perfect vantage point from which to scan Kasanka's wetlands. **OPPOSITE TOP:** Bat numbers in the Mushitu swamp forest peak in late November. **BELOW, OPPOSITE** Ongoing research, including the use of satellite telemetry, aims to establish exactly how far the bats travel each year.



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movements of animals – the numbers dwarfing even that of Serengeti’s wildebeest migration.

The whole astonishing spectacle is short-lived: a ten-week blockbuster show. The bats continue their relentless descent on the same remnant patch of forest until their numbers swell to a mind-boggling eight million around the third week in November. By early January, with the fruit supply exhausted, the last stragglers abandon Kasanka, following their comrades back north in search of richer feeding grounds.

Back at Wasa Lodge, I discussed the morning’s adventures over a late breakfast with Frank Willems, the park ecologist. “Kasanka’s biggest drawcard is the bats,” Frank agreed. “But there is plenty on offer all year round.” He was sure that after a week exploring the park and sampling its activities I’d know what he was talking about. I drained my orange juice. With birding, guided walks, canoeing, fishing and, of course, more bats on my agenda, I was keen to get back into the action.

High on my priority list was sitatunga, as I’d heard that Kasanka boasts Africa’s best viewing opportunities for this shy, semi-aquatic antelope. Changwe backed this up. “Once I counted 94 in a single day,” he told me as we set out along the forest towards the famous Fibwe hide. I was flabbergasted. The sitatunga is

supposedly one of Africa’s most shy and elusive species, yet Changwe made it sound as though they were as common around here as impala in the Luangwa.

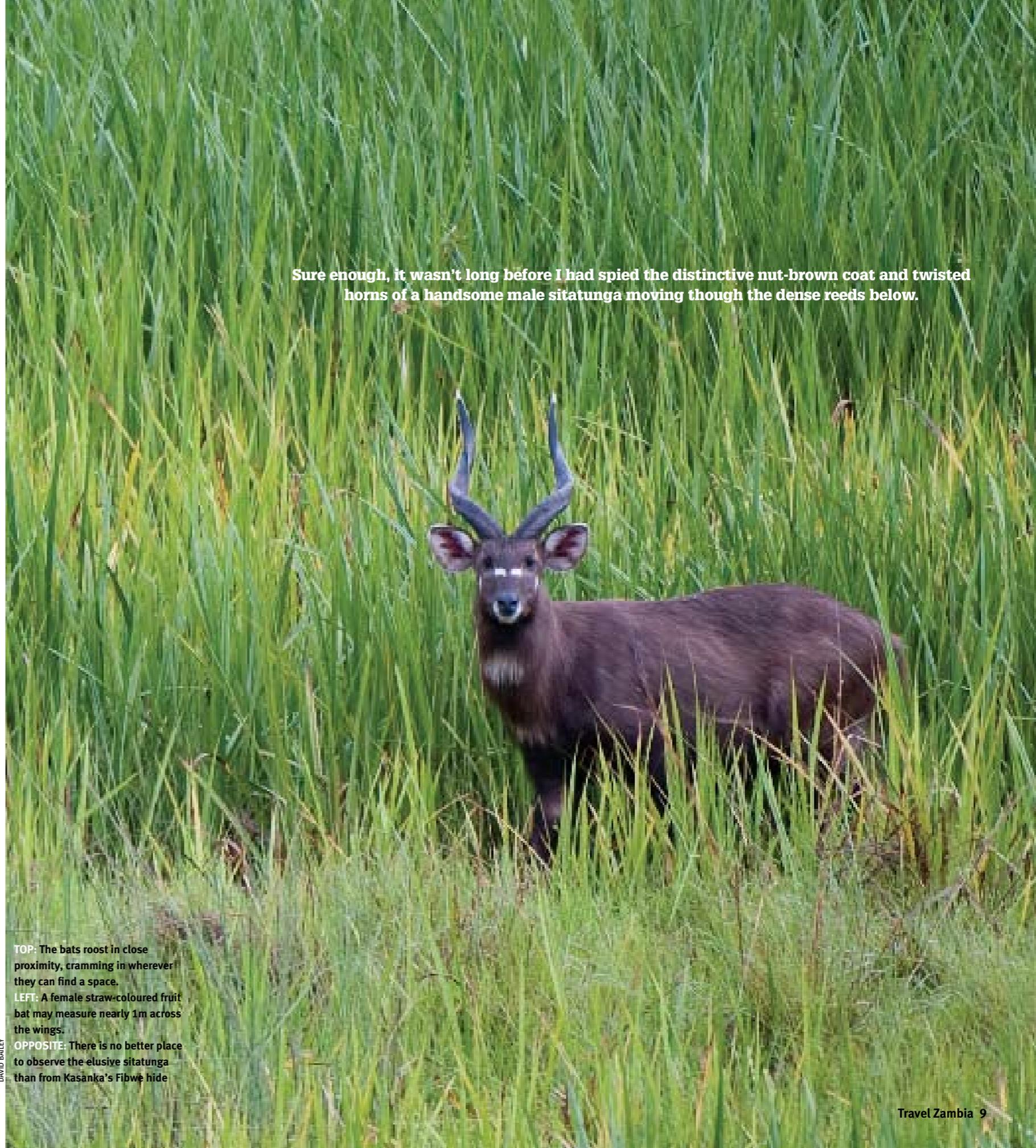
At the top of another set of crude ladders, I found myself seated high in a mululu (red mahogany), overlooking the Kapabi Swamp. This hide provided a superb aerial vantage point for seeking out sitatungas – and sure enough, it wasn’t long before I had spied the distinctive nut-brown coat and twisted horns of a handsome male moving through the dense reeds below. Although we didn’t come close to Changwe’s record, I was delighted to notch up 11 of these elusive antelope. Indeed, they proved so plentiful that I was even treated to an afternoon sighting at Wasa Lagoon while sipping a cold beer on the camp deck. Frank was not surprised when I recounted my sightings later, confirming that Kasanka’s sitatungas were not only famous for their high density but also their great visibility.

“Basically, you’re guaranteed sightings here at any time of year,” he assured me.

At just 420km², Kasanka National Park is a tiny reserve by African standards. But its location, bridging the gap between the drier habitats of southern Africa and the moist Congo basin, makes for a wide range of habitats and ecosystems, including mushitu rainforest, rich papyrus swamp, riverine floodplains and grassy dambos. ▶



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TOP: The bats roost in close proximity, cramming in wherever they can find a space.

LEFT: A female straw-coloured fruit bat may measure nearly 1m across the wings.

OPPOSITE: There is no better place to observe the elusive sitatunga than from Kasanka’s Fibwe hide

DAVID BAILEY

Kasanka National Park

And this, of course explains the impressive diversity of wildlife within such a small area.

Take birds. On arrival I had found an entry in the Wasa guestbook from the birding legend Ian Sinclair that read, “Kasanka has undoubtedly some of Africa’s finest birding”. High praise indeed, from such a source. And Frank confirmed that a remarkable 440 bird species have been recorded here, which is astounding, considering the park’s size. A keen birder himself, he took me out through the park’s riverine forest in search of Pel’s fishing owls. And, though we missed the owl on this occasion, we did notch up such notable sightings as half-collared kingfisher and Ross’s turaco.

Meanwhile our mammal count continued to rise. The next day, on a fishing trip from Luwombwa Camp, I was excited to see a herd of elephants – an increasingly common sight in Kasanka – feeding on the grassy floodplains. Puku and common duiker were ubiquitous, while our rarer sightings included Lichtenstein’s hartebeest, sable, southern reedbeek and even a troop of shy blue monkeys.

The steady recent increase in prey numbers has also meant other exciting visitors. On morning bush walks we picked up the distinctive tracks of both spotted hyaena and leopard, prompting Frank to enthuse about a recent sighting of a leopard on a baboon kill. And perhaps the ultimate proof that the Trust’s conservation efforts are bearing fruit was last August’s arrival of a young male lion, the first to be seen in the park for many years. Its primordial roar resounding through the park told an indisputable truth: Kasanka’s predators are on the way back.

Yes, Kasanka is too small to compete with the likes of South Luangwa and the Lower Zambezi in terms of animal densities and charismatic species. Yet it offers something special for nature enthusiasts who want more than the Big Five. There is so much to do here, with the varied habitat, cooler climate and low incidence of dangerous game making the park ideal for walking safaris, biking and birding. And for those who like to do their thing far from the tourist hordes, the low tourist volumes – just 1435 visitors in 2009 – are a real bonus.

After a week roaming Kasanka I came to feel as though I’d been gifted my own private national park to explore. I had been lured here by the famous bats – and they were as spectacular as promised – but I left the place blown away by its sheer richness and diversity. They say dynamite comes in small packages. Kasanka is no exception. ▶



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



EDMUND FARMER

“Kasanka has undoubtedly some of Africa’s finest birding,” birding legend Ian Sinclair had written.



DAVID BAILEY

TOP LEFT: Scan quiet backwaters carefully for a glimpse of the shy African finfoot.

TOP RIGHT: Greater bushbabies, like the bats, are drawn by night to figs and other fruiting trees.

LEFT: Elephants often venture out onto the grassy floodplains along the Luwombwa River.

ABOVE: Malachite kingfishers flash like brilliant jewels along Kasanka’s waterways.

Kasanka National Park

VISITOR INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE: Charter flights from Proflight and Sky Trails fly directly into the park. The alternative is a 5–6 hour drive on good tar roads from Lusaka; fill up in Serenje (92km before Kasanka).

WHERE TO STAY: The Kasanka Trust runs two fully-equipped camps and three self-catering campsites.

■ **WASA CAMP**, in the east, overlooks a lagoon with hippos, and is well placed for the bats and Fibwe hide; accommodation in thatched rondavels with en-suite bathrooms, solar-powered lighting and a private veranda.

■ **LUWOMBWA CAMP**, in the west, overlooks the Luwombwa River and a grassy floodplain favoured by elephants; three family en-suite chalets, plus river-based activities and attractions.

■ **THREE RUSTIC CAMPSITES** – located at pontoon, Kabwe and Fibwe – with long-drop toilets, showers and a shelter, and an attendant for hot water. The Fibwe site is near the sitatunga hide and an easy walk from the bat roost.

ACTIVITIES: Game drives, night drives, guided walks, mountain biking, boat cruises, canoe safaris, and visits to the sitatunga hide and bat sites.

WHEN TO VISIT: Bat season is late October to early January. Birding and fishing are best over the wet season (November to April). Walking is easiest during the cooler dry season (June to October).

FIND OUT MORE AT: www.kasanka.com

KASANKA BAT SAFARI: Robin Pope Safaris run an annual bat safari in late November/Early December; includes a visit to the nearby Bangweulu swamps, plus three nights in South Luangwa. Find out more at: www.robinpopesafaris.net



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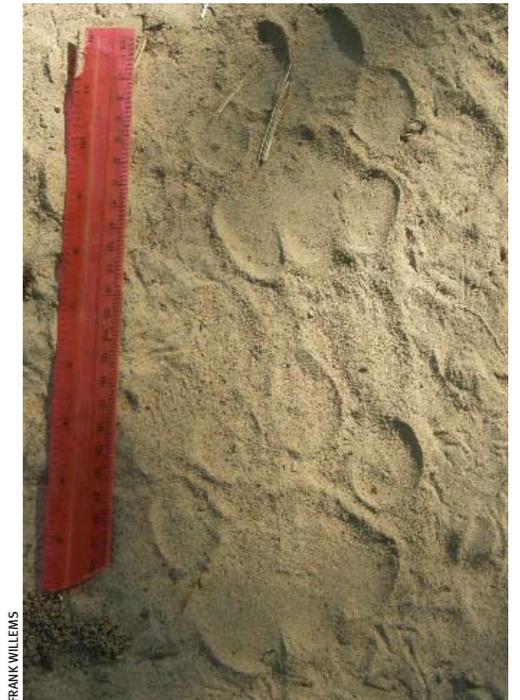
ABOVE: Once the fruit supply is exhausted in early January the bats start to leave Kasanka.

TOP RIGHT: Tell-tale tracks reveal that lions are once again hunting at Kasanka.

RIGHT: Puku are common in the park, where they favour open floodplains.



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



FRANK WILLEMS

THE KASANKA TRUST

Although Kasanka was formally declared a national park in 1972, it received little real protection until the Kasanka Trust, a non-profit NGO, was established in 1989. The following year it became Zambia's first privately managed national park. Initially, the Trust's focus was on protecting Kasanka's habitats, promoting wildlife recovery and securing the bats' future. Poaching was addressed by providing education and development support for the local community. Management costs are currently covered by both tourism revenue and charitable support, and the Trust aims to develop the park's infrastructure and increase tourism to the point where it can become self-sustaining. Over-exploitation by neighbouring communities and wild fires set by poachers remain a threat, but to combat these challenges the Trust – in cooperation with the wildlife authority (ZAWA) – employs local scouts to patrol the park and burn firebreaks. This has so far proved very successful, with 36 poachers apprehended and 2818 snares removed during 2009. The Trust also helps protect the greater Bangweulu area, including the Kafinda GMA (a buffer zone surrounding Kasanka). ■

■ Find out more at www.kasanka.com.