



Where the water meets the sky

The **Bangweulu Swamps** has two great claims to fame. First, this watery wilderness was the final resting place of legendary explorer David Livingstone, who died in Chief Chitambo's lakeshore village in 1873.

Second, it is home to the equally legendary shoebill, a bizarre-looking bird that has become a kind of feathered Holy Grail for twitchers worldwide. So why has no one outside Zambia heard of the place? **Stephen Cunliffe** donned his wellies to investigate. ►

PICTURES BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

Black lechwe sprint across the shallow floodwaters of Chimbwe Plain in the dawn light

Bangweulu wetlands



Thousands of beady eyes monitored our slow progress across the waterlogged expanse of Chimbwe Plain. I was plunging knee-deep through water and deeper into the dark mud below as I tried to keep pace with Simon Ng'ona, my Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) guide. But though the going was heavy, the panorama unfolding around us buoyed our spirits and I marvelled at the sheer number of antelope that stretched in every direction to the treeless horizon. We had walked slap-bang into the middle of one of Africa's most impressive – but least known – wildlife gatherings.

The game-rich floodplains of the Chikuni sector, where we now stood, are part of an extensive system of lakes, swamplands, seasonally flooded grasslands and shallow water bodies – fed by the Chambeshi River – that collectively make up the 10,000 km² Bangweulu Wetlands. From April onwards, as nutritious grasses sprout in the wake of the receding floodwaters, black lechwe gather in their tens of thousands to enjoy the grazing. This handsome, medium-sized antelope is endemic to the Bangweulu region. And while poaching in recent decades may have reduced its population from a reputed 250,000 in the 1930s, the sheer scale of the gathering is still astounding.

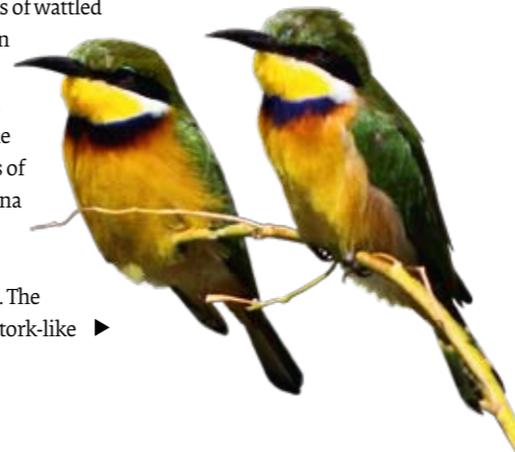
Lechwe are not the only animals to find a home here. The swamps, grasslands and termitaria woodlands of this remote wilderness also support good numbers of tsessebe, sitatunga, oribi, southern reedbuck and zebra, along with small herds of elephant



and buffalo. Our forays across the plains and swamps brought us good sightings of all these herbivores, while spotted hyena regularly put in an appearance and skulked around our campsite at night.

For many visitors, however, Bangweulu's mammals – even the astounding lechwe – play second fiddle to its astounding birdlife. I soon found myself mesmerised by the huge flocks of wattled cranes (10% of Africa's total population reside here) that stalked the plains, along with their retinue of egrets and African spoonbills, while deeper in the swamps we added excellent sightings of African purple swamphen, lesser jacana and white-cheeked bee-eater to our burgeoning list.

One bird holds a particular allure. The bizarre-looking shoebill, an obscure stork-like



ABOVE: Black lechwe gather in tens of thousands during peak season. Only males (top) have horns
BELOW: The white-cheeked bee-eater is a distinct local subspecies of the blue-breasted bee-eater

A small buffalo population still roams the Bangweulu grasslands. Numbers are set to increase as conservation improves.



Bangweulu wetlands



species with an enormous fish-catching beak, is arguably the most sought-after bird on the continent. It had become my obsession as the Bangweulu trip had approached – especially as this was the only place in southern Africa I would ever find one. And yet, after a full day of fruitless searching – the monotonous sloshing of our strides taking us ever deeper into the swamps – I had begun to fear the worst.

Simon was upbeat, however, insisting he knew just the man to help. The following morning he proudly reappeared poling a small pirogue and accompanied by Patson Mukosa, a local guide who had worked for 19 years at the aptly named Shoebill Camp. If there was a shoebill in the area, Simon assured me, Patson would know where to find it. Great! I hopped in and we immediately set off in search of the favoured feeding sites of our elusive quarry deep within the permanent swamp.

Patson informed me that, in his experience, the shoebill – also known as a whale-headed stork – was easiest to locate between March and August, although he was confident he could find them throughout the year. As the day wore on and the heat sapped my energy and enthusiasm, he remained resolute. After seven long hours, and without the aid of binoculars, my elated guide suddenly pointed ahead and exclaimed: “Shoebill!”

And there it was: a huge grey bird with a great boot of a bill standing stock-still in the shallows. We approached cautiously. It stood frozen, staring into the water for what seemed an eternity, before its

head suddenly darted forward and emerged seconds later clutching a sizeable catfish. With a quick gulp and toss of the head down went the prize – whole.

For two hours we edged forward until we eventually sat barely 20m from this extraordinary creature. After a while it took flight, flapping up to rest and digest in a nearby tree, and we tore ourselves away. “I told you I know these swamps,” proclaimed Patson proudly. “I wanted to find you a shoebill and I did. Thank you very much!”

I was jolted from my thoughts by the whine of a distant car engine. Bangweulu project director, Ian Stevenson, had kindly agreed to drive me around for the afternoon. I followed his Landcruiser through binoculars as it churned through the flooded grasslands and slowly drew nearer, eventually coming to a halt some 150m from where we stood – Ian had learned the hard way how easy it was to get bogged down and was taking no chances. Simon and I trudged wearily over to the vehicle.

As we drove across the trackless plains, enjoying a welcome opportunity to rest our legs, Ian told me all about this neglected chunk of wildest Africa. Bangweulu, it transpires, was actually declared a Game Management Area way back in 1972 but fell off Zambia’s tourist circuit due to a lack of funding, development and expertise. Things 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. “The project has a 20 year lifespan,” explained Ian, “and we aim to

ABOVE: The Bangweulu wetlands are home to around 10% of Africa’s wattled cranes

BELOW: The region’s rich biodiversity includes such gems as this exquisite hawk moth

OPPOSITE: To find a shoebill you must take to the water



Bangweulu wetlands



create the capacity for local people to manage their natural heritage for themselves. His vision is a far-reaching one that will benefit people and wildlife alike. “Ultimately,” he added, “the goal is to create an environment in which the community will want to protect and preserve Bangweulu.”

The total project area of 6,000 km² comprises 3,090 km² of the Bangweulu Game Management Area, along with the 2,910 km² Chikuni Community Partnership Park (CCPP). This park, explained Ian, has similar status to a national park but belongs to the local community, rather than the state, and is managed by APN as a private sector partner. “It is a pioneering concept in African conservation,” he enthused.

As we stood around discussing the future of this unique area, a group of fishermen and their families plodded past, pushing heavily laden bicycles through the shallow water en route to some distant village. I had heard persistent rumours that some

locals, members of a 90,000-strong community of subsistence fisherman scattered across the seasonal islands of the swamp, felt threatened by the park and the arrival of APN. “Our greatest challenge is to win the support of the local communities,” agreed Ian, explaining how the fishermen, especially, are worried about the introduction of sustainable fishing practices. “But with the revenue from tourism and the development it will bring,” he insisted, “the community stands to reap significant benefits in the long term.”

Other challenges loom on the wildlife front, including an ambitious plan to release cheetah back onto the floodplains as early as next year. “We want to restore the area’s original fauna and flora,” confirmed Ian, explaining how WWF The Netherlands is funding a five-year animal reintroduction program. A temporary 20,000ha sanctuary to be constructed during 2011 will also allow the translocation of

ABOVE: A shoebill takes flight on its massive 2.5m-wide wingspan
TOP RIGHT: Wildfowl head for their evening roost

And there it was: a huge, grey bird with a great boot of a bill, standing stock-still in the shallows

additional elephant, roan, sable and waterbuck to augment the remnant populations of these species within the project area. Locally extinct predators such as leopard and wild dog will follow, with the ultimate ambition being the return of lion and black rhino within the next six years.

An afternoon in the company of the indefatigable Ian proved a fitting finale to my highly entertaining adventure in this unique chunk of Zambian wilderness. Although the area still has a way to go in developing its full potential for wildlife and tourism, I could easily see how Bangweulu might become Zambia’s Okavango Delta in the years ahead.

Meanwhile, if you have a yearning for the untamed and unexplored, and don’t mind getting a little wet, then Bangweulu is a veritable playground for the adventurous nature lover. The low hum of innumerable grazing lechwe and the deafening silence of the wide-open plains await you. ▶



FITTING THE BILL

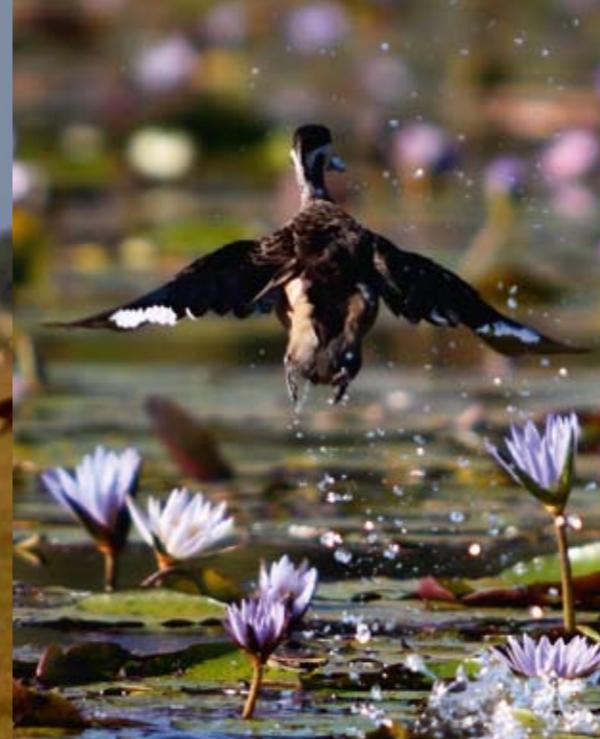
The shoebill (*Balaeniceps rex*) stands 1.5m tall and has a wingspan of 2.5m. Its scientific name means ‘King whale-head’. The enormous clog-shaped bill measures 23cm long by 10cm wide; its hooked tip and sharp slicing edges make it a formidable implement, adapted to scoop, stab and crush all in one.

This distinctive bird eluded western science until 1851, when Victorian naturalist John Gould described his first specimen as ‘The most extraordinary bird I have seen for many years.’ Scientists have since puzzled over its taxonomy, some classifying it among the herons and others among the storks. DNA evidence now suggests the shoebill is most closely related to pelicans (Pelecaniformes), as Gould himself initially surmised.

Shoebills are endemic to Africa, inhabiting deep swamps from southern Sudan in the north (where the largest population is found) to Zambia in the south. They often frequent narrow channels between larger water bodies where fish concentrate, ambushing prey – including fish, reptiles and water birds – with a sudden lunge. A breeding pair requires a territory of at least 2km². They construct a ground nest in a clearing of swamp grass at the onset of the dry season, as the floods recede. Two to three eggs are laid, but inter-sibling rivalry means that generally only one youngster survives, reaching maturity after 3–4 years.

Today the shoebill population is estimated at 5–10,000. The species is highly vulnerable to drainage and disturbance, and is designated as Of Special Concern by the IUCN.





LEFT: Local people will benefit from the new Chikuni Community Partnership Park **CENTRE:** Zebra are among many other grazers that thrive alongside the lechwe **ABOVE:** A hottentot teal takes to the air **BELOW:** The flooded grasslands pose a serious challenge to vehicles

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BANGWEULU BASICS

HOW TO GET THERE: By air: private charter from Proflight or Sky Trails. By road: an 8–10 hour drive from Lusaka along the paved Great North Road then a scenic dirt road via Lavushi Manda National Park. The nearest fuel and provisions are in Serenje (182km from the Chikuni sector); self-catering visitors are advised to stock up before leaving Lusaka.

WHERE TO STAY:

- **Lake Waka Waka Community Camp, Lake Waka Waka** Beautifully located beside Lake Waka Waka (safe for swimming), this rustic community-run campsite offers bucket showers and barbeque spots. A great place to break your journey on the long drive into Bangweulu. Camping from US\$5 pppn.
- **Nakapalayo Tourism Project, Chiundaponde** This immaculate community-run camp consists of six simple twin-bed brick chalets with bucket showers and the village's first flush toilets. For US\$60 pppn, visitors receive an evening meal with traditional entertainment, breakfast and a village tour.
- **Nsobe Community Campsite, Chikuni** Located on the edge of the game-rich Chimbwi Plains, Nsobe is a basic campsite with a fresh water borehole and barbeque facilities. Currently under renovation, it is scheduled to reopen in late 2010, with camping at US\$10 pppn.
- **Shoebill Island Camp, Chikuni** Offers tented accommodation or reed cottages with en suite shower and flush toilet. Camping costs US\$10 per night; self-catering chalets at US\$50 per night. Fully inclusive packages at US\$360 per night include all meals and guided boat trips. The Kasanka Trust administers the camp: www.kasanka.com.

WHEN TO VISIT: The best time is May–August, when the Chimbwi Plains are dry enough to be driven on but still sufficiently green to attract massive concentrations of lechwe. The plains remain accessible until December, but from January–April heavy rains make most access roads unnavigable. During this time the campsite at Nsobe disappears underwater and the seasonally flooded wetlands can only be accessed by boat.

FIND OUT MORE AT: www.african-parks.org/bangweulu or www.bangweulu.org. Alternatively, contact Hanneke Hogerheijde, Marketing & Tourism Development Manager for the Bangweulu Wetlands Project, on +260 974 044 567 or at hanneke@bangweulu.org.

