



THE 9 LIVES OF LUANGWA'S LIONS

SAFEGUARDING AFRICA'S APEX PREDATOR

africa
GEOGRAPHIC
m a g a z i n e

by

Stephen Cunliffe

4 September 2015



They say cats have nine lives, but in an age of ever-increasing human pressure and rampant wire-snare poaching, Africa's tawny felines seem to be burning through their second chances at a frightening rate. Stephen Cunliffe recently spent a month in Zambia's South Luangwa with two enterprising conservation organisations at the sharp end of safeguarding Africa's apex predator.

Despite lion numbers crashing across the continent in recent decades, it is not all doom and gloom for the king of the savannahs. On a recent **Robin Pope Safaris** (RPS) trip to Zambia's flagship South Luangwa National Park – home to the country's largest lion population – I was fortunate to spend a couple of weeks with the indefatigable duo of Rachel McRobb and Benson Kanyembo from the community-based **South Luangwa Conservation Society** (SLCS), and a cohort of dedicated researches from the **Zambian Carnivore Programme** (ZCP). All in all it was an uplifting and motivating experience.

As first glance, Luangwa Valley's wildlife appears abundant. Widely regarded as one of the greatest wildlife sanctuaries in Africa, Luangwa endured a torrid time a couple of decades back when heavy poaching saw 75% of the region's elephants vanish along with all the rhinos and half the local buffalo population. Encouragingly, these catastrophic wildlife declines

have largely reversed in recent times, and the resilient animal populations have made a determined comeback. But illegal hunting – and most notably wire snare poaching – remains an omnipresent (and ever-increasing) threat to this wildlife resurgence.



©Stephen Cunliffe

It didn't take long before I got to see the effects of the poaching pandemic first-hand. On my second game drive inside the park, vultures alerted us to the presence of death alongside the languid Luangwa River. Striking out on foot behind my RPS guide Sebastian Kamwendo and Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) escort scout Jason Mtiti, we hadn't gone far when Jason spied a freshly killed impala ram. We approached cautiously, scanning the surrounding trees and

thickets for the tell-tale rosettes of a well-concealed cat. But, as we got closer to the carcass, Sebastian spotted a second impala sprawled awkwardly across the game trail a little further back. It soon became apparent that this double herbivore homicide was not the work of Africa's stealthiest feline, but rather a human-induced tragedy that is rapidly denuding Africa's wild places. Jason's stony face said it all even before he spoke: "We must search this area for further snares and report back to ZAWA and SLCS base; they will then try to source some manpower to properly rake the area and lay an ambush here tonight."





Antelope may be the chief target of poacher's snares, but these crude devices kill other animals too ©Stephen Cunliffe.

A combined patrol of ZAWA wildlife police officers and SLCS village scouts heads out on a snare sweep ©Stephen Cunliffe.

Puku dash across the water. Many poachers pose as fishermen on the Luangwa River, giving them an alibi to hang around the park boundary ©Robin Pope Safaris.

Wire snare poaching is crude, cheap and highly effective. Scouring the surrounding area, we located twelve snares and two dead impala. As we dismantled the makeshift wire nooses, Sebastian and Jason enlightened me further: "These snares are the work of bush meat poachers who pretend to be fishermen; this gives them an alibi for hanging around the park boundary as well as easy access to slip inside for poaching. It is very difficult to tell the poachers from the real fishermen and this will make catching the culprits responsible for these snares very difficult," they begrudgingly conceded.

PARADISE SUN HOTEL

7 nts dinner & breakfast
24 Aug – 22 Nov 2015
Including flights and taxes

from **R22 530 pps**

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFO](#)



IN PROUD PARTNERSHIP WITH



A few days later I accompanied a combined ZAWA and SLCS village scout patrol as they conducted snare removal operations in the hard-hit Nsefu sector of the park. Surrounded by a sea of poverty-stricken humanity on three sides, the area and its wildlife are coming under increasing human pressure. Searching the dense thickets that surround the Nsefu hot spring we found not only more thick-wire snares, but also the remnants of an old poacher's camp. As Benson Kanyembo and his team of game scouts decommissioned the snares, I asked the SLCS operations manager what he believed was the biggest challenge facing the

park.

“Rapid population growth, because more people leads to more poaching problems,” Benson instinctively replied. “As fast as we find and remove these snares, others are being set. We have removed thousands of wires already, but it never ends. It can be disheartening at times, but we have to keep fighting and we cannot give up; the animals of the South Luangwa are depending upon us for their survival.”

Read more beneath the advert



YOUR OWN GAME RESERVE IN BOTSWANA.
IT'S EASIER THAN YOU THINK.

[CLICK HERE TO FIND OUT MORE](#)


Limpopo-Lipadi
PRIVATE GAME & WILDERNESS RESERVE

The worst problem with wire snares is that they are completely indiscriminate. While poachers typically set them in the hope of catching antelope to supply the burgeoning bush meat trade, ultimately all wildlife is susceptible – including keystone species such as lion. Death is usually

caused by strangulation, although snares can also attach to legs, trunks and other appendages causing slower and more agonising deaths unless a veterinary team from SLCS or the ZCP can intervene.





An SLCS village scout dismantles a thick wire snare set by illegal bush meat poachers inside the national park ©Stephen Cunliffe.

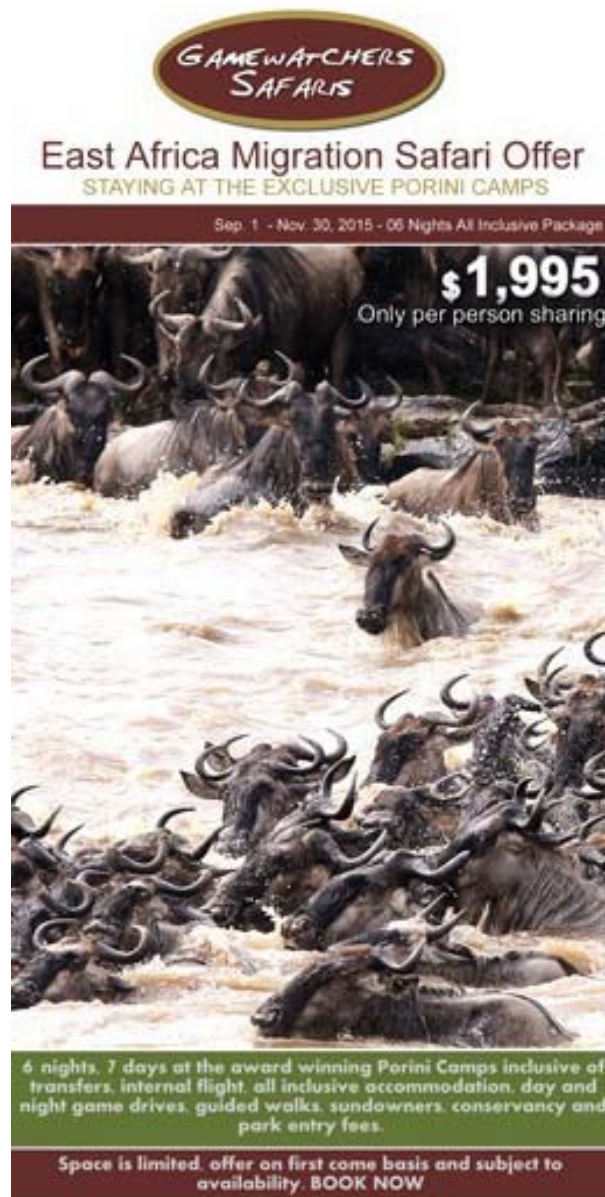
A puku is rescued from the mud during a patrol ©Stephen Cunliffe.

This buffalo, abandoned by his herd, was no match for this pride of lions ©Stephen Cunliffe.

Dr Matt Becker and the dedicated team from the ZCP collect tissue samples and research data from an immobilised lioness ©Stephen Cunliffe.

Back at the idyllic riverside Tena Tena bush camp, it was hard to reconcile the abundant wildlife herds that surrounded me with the enigmatic poaching menace that I had glimpsed. Accompanied by RPS guide Julius Banda, we set off in search of a large lion pride known to reside in the vicinity of Nsefu's saltpans. We stopped under a shady marula for brunch, and as

Julius prepared the picnic and readied the stove, a large herd of buffalo – in excess of 400 strong – emerged from the thickets and began plodding slowly past our picnic spot towards the nearby water: the quintessential African safari scene.



GAMEWATCHERS SAFARIS

East Africa Migration Safari Offer
STAYING AT THE EXCLUSIVE PORINI CAMPS

Sep. 1 - Nov. 30, 2015 - 06 Nights All Inclusive Package

\$1,995
Only per person sharing

6 nights, 7 days at the award winning Porini Camps inclusive of transfers, internal flight, all inclusive accommodation, day and night game drives, guided walks, sundowners, conservancy and park entry fees.

Space is limited, offer on first come basis and subject to availability. **BOOK NOW**

Suddenly two lionesses broke cover and latched onto a lone buffalo loitering on the fringe of the herd. 400 buffalo immediately turned tail and galloped away in billowing clouds of dust. The old bull was left surrounded by lions and all alone. What followed was 90 minutes of pure, unrelenting

African drama, as the buffalo valiantly fought seven lionesses. Surprisingly, the buffalo herd never returned to assist the *dugga boy*, and in the end – with one final blood curdling bellow – the old boy went down. It had been an exhausting struggle, but soon the triumphant lions settled down to feed with their cubs. We looked on in awe, entranced by the harsh beauty of the wild until a smiling Julius finally broke the spell, asking: “So how would you like your eggs cooked?”

As we munched our delicious brunch and listened to the lions squabbling noisily across the plain, a large female hyaena appeared: no doubt attracted by the bellows of the dying buffalo. Upon seeing all the lions she dejectedly slunk away – but not before we noticed a snare around her neck. Our ZAWA escort scout Robert Chibuye immediately switched on his radio to report the matter. The message was clear: even amidst the rich abundance of the South Luangwa, snaring remains an ever-present threat inhibiting the recovery of many predator species.



Heavy duty wire cutters are used to remove a thick cable snare deeply imbedded in the neck of the Chowo lioness

©Stephen Cunliffe.

Towards the end of my time in the Luangwa, I joined leading carnivore researcher Dr Matt Becker, SLCS head Rachel McRobb and ZAWA veterinarian Mwanba Sichande for one final mission into the neighbouring Lupande Game Management Area (GMA) where they wanted to follow up on reports of a lioness that was carrying a nasty neck snare.

This small group of lions, known as the Chowo pride after a seasonal river at the core of their territory, lives predominantly outside of the national park, making them more skittish than any lions we had encountered to date. The pride's territory was huge with few roads traversing the hilly terrain, so we began by using the SLCS/ZCP Cessna – generously funded by the Bush Camp Company: a long-

standing supporter of these two critically important conservation organisations – to track the lions from the air. Thanks to the valuable science-based research work being carried out by the ZCP, Matt was able to tune into the telemetry signal from a VHF radio collar on one of the healthy lionesses to locate the lion pride from above.

Back on the ground, we approached cautiously. Looking through binoculars it was obvious that one of the females was badly injured, and I could see the crimson collar that confirmed she was carrying a deeply embedded neck snare. After an hour of slow manoeuvring, the vehicle was finally close enough for Rachel to take the shot. The pop of the dart gun sent an orange-tailed dart whizzing into the lioness's rump. She succumbed quickly to the drugs. Using the vehicles to shield her from the pride, the team immediately set about the gory business of removing the snare, cleaning her wound, and dousing the raw flesh with a purple disinfectant. They operated with the cohesive efficiency of a well-oiled machine; you could tell everyone had been through this life-saving routine many times before.







The chowo lioness' wound after removal of the snare ©Stephen Cunliffe.

Having removed the snare and cleaned the deep necklace wound, Rachel McRobb of SLCS sprays it with disinfectant before administering an antidote to awaken the lioness ©Stephen Cunliffe.

Future of the pride ©Robin Pope Safaris.

Examining the wound up close was not pretty, but thankfully her trachea remained intact. While patching her up, Matt and his team took blood samples and measurements for their research work. “This is the third lion from this pride that we’ve darted to remove a snare in the last year alone,” Matt

confided. What remained unsaid was the fact that without the combined efforts of the ZCP and SLCS there would no longer be a Chowo lion pride.

Having removed the snare and cleaned the deep necklace wound, Rachel McRobb of SLCS sprayed it with disinfectant before administering an antidote to awaken the lioness, upon which we retreated to observe the lioness's recovery. Her eyes flicked open, she groggily got to her feet and slowly staggered over to re-join her brethren. One by one the lionesses and cubs from her family came out the bushes to greet her safe return – all the while keeping a watchful eye on our distant vehicle.

This story has a particularly happy ending because, shortly after I'd returned home, I received a couple of mating lion images and an update from Matt to say that the Chowo lioness had not only made a full recovery, but she was also pregnant! Considering the snaring challenges and extreme hardships that these lions have had to overcome, I can think of no more fitting finale to this story of tawny feline tenacity, than hearing the pitter-patter of tiny Chowo lion cub feet splashing across the rain soaked savannahs of the South Luangwa once more.



About the Author



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE is first and foremost a passionate and pragmatic conservationist. As director of the Grumeti Fund in Tanzania, he is tasked with safeguarding, managing and sustainably developing the 350,000 acre Singita Grumeti Reserves conservation project in the western corridor of the Serengeti ecosystem. But Steve is also a registered EcoAfrica environmental consultant, an experienced and dedicated private safari guide and a highly respected freelance

photojournalist.

As an international photojournalist specialising in wildlife conservation, environmental projects, eco-tourism and adventure travel, Stephen's stories and images have been widely published with his work regularly appearing in a diverse range of magazines and newspapers from around the globe including the Royal Geographical Society's Geographical magazine, Africa Geographic, Travel Africa, and the Asian edition of the Wall Street Journal.

His 'spare time' is devoted to his lovely wife Katherine and his two amazing little boys, Charlie and Ollie.

You can see more of Stephen's work on his website www.stephencunliffe.com