



LIUWA in the wet

BIRDING WESTERN ZAMBIA

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Each summer, imposing thunderheads tower over the Liuwa Plain of western Zambia, flooding the landscape and forming broad swamps along the rivers. Access is all but impossible from late December to mid-April but, after the rains stop and the waters recede, they leave in their wake a network of pools that provide crucial breeding and feeding sites for vast numbers of waterbirds. The adjacent grasslands, famous for their large herds of wildebeest, zebra and red lechwe, are also home to a wealth of open-country birds. Spicing up the mix are a lonely lioness and some of the most curious spotted hyaenas in Africa. **Peter Ryan** visited Liuwa in May to witness the spectacle.



When I told a colleague I was going to the Liuwa Plain for a week, he said, 'You've already birded Zambia, there can't be any lifers for you'. True enough, but there's more to life than lifers, and the chance to visit Liuwa was not something I could pass up. Since being taken over by African Parks four years ago, the Liuwa Plain National Park has rapidly gained a reputation as one of the great wilderness parks of Africa. Best known for the second-largest wildebeest migration on earth, the plain also supports globally important populations of cranes, storks and other waterbirds, as well as a wealth of grassland species, including two endemic subspecies of larks.

Getting to Liuwa is more than half the challenge, especially at the end of the wet season, when the Zambezi floodplain is impassable by road throughout much of the Western Province. I was fortunate to fly directly to Kalabo from Livingstone, which not only obviated many hours of driving, but also provided a wonderful overview of the landscape. To someone raised in southern Africa, west means dry, but this certainly isn't the case in Zambia. Flying northwest from Livingstone, the vast tracts of semi-arid woodland are increasingly interrupted by pans and drainage lines that cry out to be explored for rails and crakes. Then one reaches the Barotse



floodplain, where the Zambezi spills out, forming an intricate maze of channels and flooded vegetation up to 50 kilometres wide. The sheer volume of water is staggering.

The headquarters of Liuwa Plain National Park are in Kalabo, on the banks of the Luanginga River, 20 kilometres west of the Zambezi floodplain. Visitors must check in here before proceeding. The park itself sprawls between the Luanginga and Luambimba rivers, and is reached via a pontoon that

Above *Wattled and Grey Crowned cranes are abundant, especially around the many pans that dot the plain.*

Opposite *Although Liuwa is most famous for its large blue wildebeest migration, the region also supports a significant proportion of the world population of African Skimmers.*





Above *The Eastern Clapper Lark reaches its northern limit at Liuwa, where it is represented by the pale grey subspecies M. f. jappi.*

Top *Swamp Nightjars are fairly common, and offer good views when flushed from their roost sites during the day.*

carries vehicles across the Luanginga. A sandy track leads from the ferry through an attractive mix of *Burkea* and *Baikiaea* woodland, until the trees fall away and you enter the vast, grassy plain that comprises most of the 3 660-square-kilometre park.

Unlike most national parks, there is no fence or entrance gate. Herds of cattle are gradually replaced by wildebeest as you drive into the sanctuary. It was formally gazetted in 1972, but Liuwa Plain's wildlife has been protected by the Litunga, paramount chief of the Lozi, since the 1800s. Large numbers of people live along the perennial rivers bordering the park, grazing their cattle on its fringes. As the floods recede, people fish in the temporary wetlands, spearing large barbel or catching smaller fish in traps. One has the sense that the Lozi people form an integral part of the ecosystem.

That's not to say that Liuwa is a primordial paradise. The instability caused by the Angolan bush war resulted in widespread poaching, causing reductions in many of the region's large-mammal populations. Fortunately, this situation has improved and numbers are recovering. The latest census estimated 34 000 wildebeest, 4 000 plains zebra, 1 200 red lechwe, 500 tsessebe and at least 1 000 oribi, hundreds of spotted hyenas and a pack of African wild dogs. Species extirpated in the past few decades, such as eland and buffalo, are being reintroduced, and there are plans to bring in a male lion to rekindle the park's population of that species. Only a single, lonely female survives, which has taken to hanging around the main camp at night, apparently seeking out people for company.



The Barotse floodplain

Impressive as the herds of game are, waterbirds dominate the landscape after the rainy season. Large flocks of cranes, pelicans, storks, herons, ibises, spoonbills and ducks feed in the pans. Liuwa is the fourth most important site globally for Wattled Cranes, with nearly 200 breeding pairs. Some 1 000 gather on the plain, and flocks of up to 100 are regularly seen. Southern Crowned Cranes are just as abundant, with almost 800 counted at the end of the rains. Saddle-billed Storks are amazingly common, ranging across the plain as well as at wetlands. At least 100 pairs breed in the park.

Another globally important species is the Slaty Egret, which usually occurs ▸

The Zambezi is a river of many moods, from its humble beginnings in Mwinilunga, through tumultuous rapids and vast dams to its sluggish lower reaches and delta in central Mozambique. I thought I knew it fairly well from birding trips along much of its length, but nothing prepared me for the scale of the Barotse floodplain. Each summer, an area of up to 10 000 square kilometres is inundated. The main floodplain extends for more than 200 kilometres along the Zambezi, and averages about 30 kilometres wide. The area is heavily settled by the Lozi, with people moving onto the plain to fish and plant crops as the floods recede. Yet it still supports significant populations of birds, especially piscivores such as Black, Rufous-bellied and Squacco herons, Little and Great egrets, Reed Cormorants and Pied Kingfishers.

The sandbanks exposed by the receding floods are home to impressive numbers of African Skimmers. We counted 500 in a single flock, with smaller numbers at other sites. Given a total estimate of only some 10 000 birds, this represents a significant proportion of the world population. In mid-May, the birds were just beginning to pair up, conducting

glorious tandem aerial displays similar to those of terns. Other sandbank species include White-crowned Lapwings and the inland race of White-fronted Plover.

A few pairs of Wattled Cranes persist despite the high human population density, but perhaps the most arresting sight was a vast colony of African Openbills breeding on a peninsula of flooded reeds, just north of the confluence of the Luanginga and Zambezi rivers. It is a spectacle to rival the great seabird colonies, with thousands of the storks soaring overhead, and thousands more flushing from the reeds as you drift by. The colony extends over at least 30 hectares, with a total population of some 10 000 to 15 000 pairs. Few other birds occur in the colony. Given the storks' rather silent nature, it is also an unusually quiet congregation. Further north, another, smaller colony of Openbills attests to the vast availability of molluscs on the floodplain. Even a relatively conservative estimate suggests that the population requires some eight to 12 tonnes of snails and mussels each day during the breeding season.





Above African Openbills soar over their vast breeding colony on the Barotse floodplain.

Opposite A male White-bellied Bustard of the central African race *E. s. mackenziei*, which is sometimes treated as a distinct species from the southern African Barrow's Bustard *E. [s.] barrowii*.

Previous spread A flock of waterbirds, dominated by African Spoonbills and Pink-backed and Great White pelicans, take to the air from one of the seasonal pans on the Liuwa Plain.

in small numbers, but flocks of up to 30 have been reported.

Given the abundance of flooded grassland, crakes and rails are surprisingly scarce, but Greater Painted-snipes and Lesser Jacanas are among the more skulking species, and Great Snipes probably are relatively common in summer. The damp grasslands also support both Rosy-breasted and Fülleborn's longclaws, while Kurrichane and Black-rumped buttonquails occur in drier grassland. Liuwa is the only known breeding site in Zambia for Whiskered Terns, with thousands mingling with smaller numbers of White-winged Terns. They share the airspace above the wetlands with hundreds of Collared Pratincoles, which are joined in summer by tens of thousands of Black-winged Pratincoles. On their southward migration, much of the world population of Black-winged Pratincoles apparently passes through the park, with 100 000 counted in one day in mid-November.

Raptors are abundant in Liuwa, with African Fish-Eagles and Bateleurs vying for numerical supremacy. In the centre of the plain, breeding sites are extremely limited, forcing some pairs of fish-eagles to breed cheek by jowl in the same

tree. African Marsh-Harriers and Greater Kestrels are also widespread, with smaller numbers of many other species often present; in total, 37 raptor species have been recorded from the park. White-backed, White-headed and Lappet-faced vultures are all common, often resorting to roosting on the ground because of the lack of trees.

Denham's Bustards are perhaps the most imposing birds of the open plains, which they share with White-bellied Bustards of the central African race *Eupodotis senegalensis mackenziei*. This race shows characters intermediate between the southern African and Sahel-East African populations, complicating calls to split the two forms. Small coveys of Yellow-throated Sandgrouse are quite approachable, provided you can spot them before they flush, giving their peculiar, frog-like croaking calls. Swamp Nightjars are equally reluctant to flush, but offer great views if you stumble across one roosting near the many pans.

Among more cryptic grassland species, pipits and larks are well represented. African, Buffy and Plain-backed pipits are common, and careful scrutiny may reveal other species. Among the five plains larks, two subspecies are confined



to the area, both representing the northern limit of their respective species: Eastern Clapper *Mirafrja fasciolata jappi* and Pink-billed *Spizocorys conirostris makawai* larks. Birders familiar with Clapper Larks further south are likely to be confused by the pale grey birds that have evolved to match the whitish sands of Liuwa. Even the Red-capped Larks look different here, with two seemingly distinct forms: a rich, rufous one presumably attributable to the nominate subspecies, and a dark-backed form which has blackish margins to the red breast patches (*Calandrella cinerea saturator*).

The woodland around the plain is depauperate relative to the miombo woodland that occurs throughout much of Zambia. However, there are still some birds of interest. Wood Pipits are common, and roving bird parties contain a wide diversity of woodland species, including Green-capped Eremomelas, Red-capped Crombecs, Souza's Shrikes and some seemingly unlikely combinations of sunbirds, such as Variable and White-bellied, as well as Scarlet-chested and Amethyst.

Apart from the large flocks of Wattled Starlings that consort with the herds of game on the plain, starlings are scarce, although small groups of Sharp-tailed Starlings move through the woodland.

Ross's Turacos occur in riparian woodland along the Luambimba River in the north of the park.

Having visited Liuwa, it was much easier to justify my trip to sceptical colleagues. The park more than lived up to its reputation, and I'd love to get back there a little earlier in the year, when the migrants are still present. The few birders to visit the park at that time report vast gatherings of Ruffs and Caspian Plovers. The birding is also excellent at the start of the rains in November, when birds flock in to take advantage of the newly flooded pans on the open plains, and Black-winged Pratincoles fill the air like smoke. Much remains to be learned about the region and its birds. The park is an Important Bird Area, with 328 species recorded. However, I was able to add two species during our visit. One of these was Woolly-necked Stork, which was common on the plains. More observations during the rainy season are likely to boost the park's birdlist further.

African Parks deserves all the support it can get in rebuilding Liuwa Plain National Park, including linking it with adjacent game-management areas and, ultimately, with conservation areas in neighbouring Angola. □

Off you go...

Liuwa Plain National Park is situated 12 kilometres north of Kalabo in Zambia's Western Province. Access is restricted to 4x4 vehicles, with a maximum of 25 vehicles in the park at any one time, but this limit has never been reached, so you're unlikely to feel crowded.

The park is open from May to December, but it is not possible to approach Kalabo from Mongu in the east, across the Zambezi floodplain, until July or August. Prior to this, access is either from the south, along the west bank of the Zambezi from Sesheke, or from Angola. At the height of the dry season (September to November), it is possible to leave the park in the north-east near Lukulu, to head north-west to Zambezi and the Minyanya Plain (home to a localised population of White-throated Francolins), or continue north to Mwinilunga, the birding Mecca of western Zambia (see volume 7, number 6, pages 36–41). Alternatively, the more adventurous may want to travel into Angola from Kalabo to explore the vast Kameia National Park, before looping back into Zambia to either Zambezi or Mwinilunga.

The climate is superb from May to August, with warm, sunny days and cool nights. From mid-September it starts to get hotter during the day, and prior to the first rains in October it is often very hot. In May, I was pleasantly surprised by the lack of annoying insects, with no mosquitoes despite the abundance of standing water. Malaria isn't a problem in the park, but it does occur at a relatively low level in surrounding communities, so take appropriate precautions, especially during the hot, dry season.

The park is geared for independent 4x4 travellers, with a choice of three community campsites in which to stay. Game scouts are available for a modest daily fee, and are strongly recommended to help navigate the network of tracks across the plains, as well as to allow you to walk around without too much concern about lions or hyaenas.

Visitors should contact the park headquarters in Kalabo prior to arrival (www.african-parks.org; bookings.liuwa@africanparks.co.zm), especially early in the season, to check on the state of access roads.

For a supreme wilderness experience without any of the logistic hassles, Robin Pope Safaris offer exclusive fly-in safaris in May/June and December. Their early-season safaris include a boat trip down the Luanginga River from Kalabo to Mongu, visiting key birding sites. For more details, visit www.africageographictravel.com