

# Moving to Zimbabwe (Part I)

*July 2023: 5 days, 27 total species, 6 new species on my life list, 1 unconfirmed sighting*

My name is Moses Swanson-Mwamasika. I am 13-years-old. I grew up mostly in Tanzania, and I started going into the wilderness to see mammals when I was a baby, or so I have been told. My mother and father like to tell the stories of when, outside the Serengeti, we ran into a female leopard who locked her yellow-green eyes right on me. Maybe she thought I could have been her lunch! Another time, when I was a toddler, we came across wild dogs hunting wildebeest and they even killed a calf. Of course, I don't remember any of this but the moments somehow live on in my imagination.



*Wild dog puppies outside of a den near Gonarezhou National Park*

I have always dreamed of seeing wild dogs (again, I guess, but I couldn't exactly include them on my mammal list from that last time). For the past four years, though, I lived outside of Washington D.C. in northern Virginia, and we did get to go to many US national parks and travel in Africa a bit. And then, in the spring of 2023, I found out we would be moving to Zimbabwe. Flash forward a few months later and summer break arrives, just as "winter" starts in southern Africa, and this is where our journey and my trip report begins.

Within a week of arriving in Zimbabwe, we headed to Victoria Falls, which, like Arusha in Tanzania, is the gateway to the country's most visited and largest national parks. So soon would I be within a few meters from Africa's largest land mammal and feel like I was home.

Note that many of my first forays into wilderness areas in Zimbabwe were along with my whole family or along my father while he was at work, so I did not get to focus exclusively on mammal watching or spend a lot of time in one area, which is needed to see a lot of species.

No trip to Zimbabwe is complete without a visit to Victoria Falls National Park. Being my second time witnessing the magnificent falls, I also got to appreciate the rainforest in all of its beauty. The falls were, of course, amazing with their sheer power and might, but something about this small calming rainforest near soothes the mind and puts you in a Zen-like state. In the local language, the falls go by the name Mosi-oa-Tunya, meaning the “Smoke that Thunders.” The iconic British explorer, David Livingstone, named the falls after Queen Victoria. Victoria Falls also hold Zimbabwe’s western most rainforest, created by the massive amount of water and mist that comes up from the falls.



*Mosi-oa-Tunya aka Victoria Falls*

Despite the lack of mammals overall in this park, we did end up seeing a female **Bushbuck** (*Tragelaphus scriptus*). If you want to convert to birding, then I would reckon that you should spend a couple hours in the park beyond just taking in the falls. We spotted many bird species, including Schallow’s Turaco (*Tauraco schalowi*).

## **Zambezi National Park**

Two days later, we entered the first park where we aimed to see more mammals. In Zambezi, which covers 218 square miles along the Zambezi River. We traveled in the early morning with my absolute favorite local guide, Paul Ngorima. We went with some other family, as you will on most safari-like experiences, so did not get to explore and see as many species as I



would have liked but it was still worthwhile. We did see **South African Giraffe** (*Giraffa camelopardalis giraffa*), **Grant's Zebra** (*Equus quagga boehmi*), **Bushbuck**, **Greater Kudu** (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*), **Spotted Hyena** (*Crocuta crocuta*), **African Elephant** (*Loxodonta africana*), **Southern African Tree Squirrel** (*Paraxerus cepapi*), **Chacma Baboons** (*Papio ursinus*), and **Savanna Warthog** (*Phacochoerus africanus*).



*Spotted hyena with pup outside of den in Zambezi National Park*

The next day in the early morning, we also took a sunrise cruise down the Zambezi in through the park. I highly recommend this cruise, as I have taken it twice and we had the entire boat to ourselves with no other tourists. Most really go for the sunset cruises. But as sunrise you are guaranteed to see a ton of birds and some mammals. We saw a **Bushbuck** and **Common Hippo** (*Hippopotamus amphibious*). I have also seen a **Greater Cane Rat** (*Thyonmys swinderianus*) on the river cruise and **Blue Wildebeest** (*Connochaetes taurinus taurinus*), **Cape Buffalo** (*Syncerus caffer caffer*), **Black-backed jackal** (*Canis mesomelas*), and **Steenbok** (*Raphicerus campestris*) inside the park.



*Pre-dawn on the Zambezi River*

## Hwange National Park

I also journeyed into Zimbabwe's largest national park. Hwange National Park contains Zimbabwe's largest number of elephants and species, containing 28% of the 350 species of mammals in Zimbabwe. The park supports a semi-arid and savanna-like environment. It's about 5,700 square miles, making it a little bigger than the country of Montenegro. Hwange does have a closing time which limits night drives. On my first and only game drive in Hwange, we saw **South African giraffe, Grant's Zebra, Bushbuck, Greater Kudu, African elephant, Southern African tree squirrel, Chacma baboons, Steenbok, Common waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus ellipsiprymnus*), Savanna warthog, Sable antelope (*Hippotragus niger*), Common hippo, Blue wildebeest**, and possibly a large **African civet (*Civettictis civetta*)** but it will not count on my mammal list as it is unconfirmed.



*Sable antelope*

We only had short trip into this massive park, so I would like to return to spend some quality time searching for mammals, perhaps spending 3-4 days if possible.





*Greater kudu (male)*



*Savanna warthog*

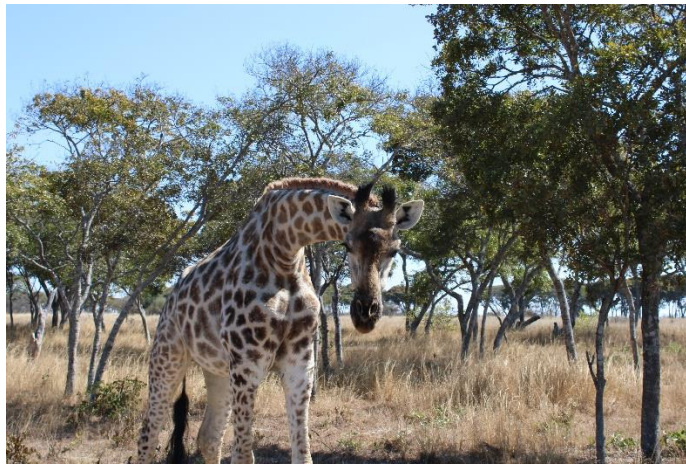
## **Savé Valley Conservancy & Gonarezhou National Park**

In the far south of Zimbabwe at the tripoint of Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, lies Savé Valley Conservancy and Gonarezhou National Park. The Savé Valley Conservancy is a relatively new conservation area. During the late 1800s through much of the 1900s, the area was dominated by colonial cattle ranches. After Zimbabwe's independence, it was clear that cattle ranching was impossible due to the arid climate and disease. In 1991, cattle ranchers decided to turn it into a consortium of more than 20 ranches covering more than 1,000 square miles into the modern-day conservancy. Savé Valley is part of the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA), which includes Krueger, Gonarezhou, and Limpopo national parks. We didn't dedicate a full day to mammal watching so we only saw a few species. But those species include **South African giraffe**, **Grant's Zebra**, **Greater Kudu**, **African elephant**, **Cape bat** (*Neomica capensis*), **Whalberg's epauletted fruit bat** (*E.*

*wahlbergi*), **Southern African tree squirrel**, **Chacma baboons**, **Common waterbuck**, **Savanna warthog**, **Impala**, **Common genet** (*Genetta genetta*), **Common dwarf mongoose** (*Helogale parvula*), and **Cape Buffalo**.



*Whalberg's epauletted fruit bat*



*South African Giraffe*

Gonarezhou National Park in my opinion is the most humbling national park experience in Zimbabwe. The word Gonarezhou translates to “Land of Elephants”. It is called the land of elephants due to the massive population of elephants in the region. Gonarezhou has around 150 mammal species, and, during a short trip, I saw 15 of them, anyway. Those species include **Greater Kudu**, **African elephant**, **Cape bat** (*Neomica capensis*), **Southern African tree squirrel**, **Chacma baboons**, **Savanna warthog**, **Common dwarf mongoose** **Common hippo**, **Common eland**, **African wild dog**, **Rock hyrax** (*Procavia capensis*), **Impala**, **Nyala**, and



**Bushbuck.** The baobabs of Savé and Gonarezhou are massive, many thousands of years old, but elephants also damage them.



*Elephants in Gonarezhou National Park*



*Male and Female Nyala in Gonarezhou National Park*



*Caught me! Early morning bird-watching in Savé Valley Conservancy, Chishakwe Ranch*

And then there were the wild dogs. These dogs actually denned outside of the national park near a village, which is very dangerous because they often kill goats of villagers and lead to human-wildlife conflict. Local community wildlife scouts and NGOs have been working with communities to protect the wild dogs but also ensure people can benefit more from wildlife and tourism. We headed out before dawn and waited forever near a den. Just when we were about to give up, as the sun was fully up and it seemed like we missed our chance, we spotted five adults coming back from a hunt. They made these strange growling barks, perhaps thinking we were a threat. We could even smell them from a distance. It was a weird heavy smell as well. Finally, the puppies also came out of the den and the adults approached to feed them. The regurgitate food to feed them. There were at least 10 puppies and we watched them play and socialize. This was one of the best mammal-watching experiences of my thirteen years on planet earth and now I can officially add them to my list. I want to come back to Gonarezhou and spend more time in the park and some of these other areas, perhaps crossing into South Africa or Mozambique.



*Me looking out on the Savé River at Chilo Gorge Safari Lodge*

## **Imire Rhino and Wildlife Conservancy**

Imire is a private conservancy outside of Harare. Although some of the animals, like rhino and elephant, are habituated, (several were rescued after poaching incidents in the wild), it is a great experience and did give me three new mammals to my list. Here are the mammals I saw in Imire: **African elephant, Chacma baboons, Savanna warthog, Common hippo,**



**Common eland, Impala, Nyala, Cape buffalo, White rhino, Savanna warthog, Blesbok, and African Cheetah.**



*African cheetah at Imire*



*Black rhino at Imire*



*White rhino at Imire*



*Blesbok at Imire*

Believe it or not, there quite a few mammals lurking around Harare, the place I now call home. While waiting for soccer practice to begin, I once saw a **White-Tailed Mongoose**. When driving from a restaurant on a night out, we saw a **Cape hare**.



I'm calling this Part 1 of my Zimbabwe Trip Report, as southern Africa is now home so I will make other ventures at some of the parks and conservancies already mentioned and others here in Zimbabwe. I hope, one day, to travel to South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Mozambique, as long as I am here. But tomorrow I have my first day at school in eighth grade so I guess some of those trips will have to wait.



*Me in awe of a massive baobab in Savé Valley Conservancy, Chishakwe Ranch*

### **Mammal Species List:**

	<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>
1	South African giraffe	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis giraffa</i>
2	Grant's Zebra	<i>Equus quagga boehmi</i>



3	African Elephant	Loxodonta Africana
4	Bushbuck	Tragelaphus scriptus
5	Greater Kudu	Tragelaphus strepsiceros
6	Savanna warthog	Phacochoerus africanus
7	Impala	Aepyceros melampus
8	Common Hippo	Hippopotamus amphibious
9	Southern african tree squirrel	Paraxerus cepapi
10	Chacma baboon	Papio ursinus
11	Banded mongooses	Mungos mungo
12	Sable antelope	Hippotragus niger
13	Blue wildebeest	Connochaetes taurinus taurinus
15	Common Genet	Genetta genetta
16	Common Dwarf mongoose	Helogale parvula
17	African wild dog	Lycaon pictus
18	Rock Hyrax	Procavia capensis
19	Nyala	Tragelaphus angasii
20	Cape hare	Lepus capensis

21	White-tailed mongoose	Ichneumia albicauda
22	Common eland	Tragelaphus oryx
23	Wahlberg's epauletted fruit bat	Epomophorus wahlbergi
24	Spotted Hyena	Crocuta crocuta
25	Cape buffalo	Synercus caffer nanus
26	Common water buck	Kobus ellipsiprymnus ellipsiprymnus
27	African pygmy mouse	Mus minutoides