

# Goodbye, Zimbabwe



8 nights 7 days, 2 species, 4 lifers. **Lifers in bold.**

I have traded giant pouched rats for cottontails, black-backed jackals for red foxes. We sadly left Zimbabwe (*Musare zvakana!*) at the end of June and moved to Minnesota in the U.S. While I look forward to exploring so many national parks and wilderness areas across North America (I have yet to venture west of the Dakotas), I loved living in Southern Africa. I visited four countries, went on many adventures that included adding 27 mammals to my life list. It has now been almost exactly two years since I posted my first trip report. Wiser and older (now 15), I learned so much in these past two years and on this site from the mammal-watching community. Here I will combine a couple of final short trips from the past nine or so months that I didn't get to post. I'll skip travel days and go in sequential order. Highlight of my recent ventures? Nine years, that's how long I had gone without seeing a leopard. Then in the middle of Savé Valley Conservancy, I spotted a small female well-hidden in a fig tree. She just bounded down into the bushes before I could get a photo. But that's the luck of the mammal-watching game.

This first segment focused on the Southeast Lowveld and Nyanga and follows a route similar to a trip we made in 2023. We took this latest road journey in October 2024.

### **Day 1**

The first day was spent on the long drive from Harare to Gonarezhou National Park. We stopped by Chiredzi and then continued on the arduous trek. I recommend a bigger vehicle with reliable breaks and maybe it's best to leave your siblings behind on such a trip. Just kidding. Gonarezhou remains an overlooked park even though it's just across the border from Kruger and part of the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA). We stayed at the Chilo Gorge Lodge, with an amazing view of the Savé River and a hill into the park. It's also a great place to see wild dogs. Just from the dining area upon arrival, we saw Greater Kudu, a large male Elephant, a lone male Waterbuck, and a pod of Hippos. That night, we heard the lullaby of Hyenas and went to sleep soundly and quickly.

### **Day 2**

We rested the next morning, but Chilo has a balcony down a set of stone stairs that is an ideal place to go in the early hours at first light for both birdwatching and to see what mammal might show up along the river. As I explored Chilo's grounds, I managed to see a Warthog, Nyala, Hippo, African Buffalo, Elephant, and Chacma Baboon. We later went on an evening drive into the park to see more species and hopefully some lifers. During the first half, we saw Slender Mongoose, Southern African Tree Squirrel, Greater Kudu, Nyala, Elephant, Hippo, Eland, and the best views of Wildebeest I have had in a while. I do love seeing both Nyala and Eland in Gonarezhou. We drove a bit more and saw Zebra and a Waterbuck. A pseudo-charge from a female elephant stands out. I highly recommend Chilo Gorge, and you might even get to meet a Zimbabwean conservation legend, Clive Stockil, who founded the lodge and has retired in a home down by the river. Even though he has won the Tusk award given by Prince William, he still has the time to exchange a few words on the elephants and the local wildlife in the area.



*Nyala and Eland in Gonarezhou National Park*



*View of the Savé River from Chilo Gorge Safari lodge, with herds of buffalo and elephant*

### Day 3

We drove northward from Chilo to the reliable Savé Valley Conservancy. Savé protects more than 300 black and white rhinos as a mix of private, community, and government conservancies and ranches. It has a long and difficult history but is one of my favorite places in Zimbabwe. The south of the conservancy has more depleted populations of wildlife due to poaching and habitat loss. After crossing the Turgwe River into the north of the conservancy, it's a stark contrast in terms of mammals. While driving on the rough and unpaved roads of the Savé, we saw Zebra, Southern African Giraffe, Slender Mongoose, Warthog, Chacma Baboon, African Elephant, Impala, and Greater Kudu. We did miss Hartebeest and Sharpe's Grysbok, two species we saw last October. We stayed in one of our favorite historic and rustic spots — Chishakwe Ranch. It has been around for more than 100 years and originally was a cattle ranch in the colonial era. The stove in our ranch house looked about that old! We relaxed after the long drive up the conservancy, but, at night, Chishakwe's dining area is still a decent place for mammal-watching and birdwatching in the mornings. It's a cool spot with a lot of old naturalist drawings and has the name, Biophilia, taken from the book by the famed biologist, E.O. Wilson. As we played pool, foosball, and ping pong, Cape Bats flew and caught insects above our heads. I also used a spotlight to shine along the acacia and shrubs near the fence where I spotted 5-6 **Acacia Rats** jumping in the trees. They have orange eyeshine and are very skittish.

I highly recommend Chishakwe. It's one of those places I'll remember for the rest of my life. Sure, you can see the Big 5 like many places in Southern and Eastern Africa. But it is so off the beaten path and full of so much history, and few people, that it will win you over. I recommend staying in one of the old ranch houses that all have different names. My dad told me of how a famous writer, Alexandra Fuller, lived at Chishakwe, then called Devuli Ranch, as a child, and he had been reading her first memoir, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, while we stayed at the ranch. It came out as a movie this past year. During the dry season (and in 2024, we had a bad drought in Zimbabwe), elephants caused a lot of damage to the ranches in search of water and forage and had even dug up and smashed water pipes at Chishakwe. But they are not as aggressive in Savé when compared to Gonarezhou where elephants are poached and harassed more often. They are still timid and will shy away from you due to safari hunting, which is allowed but hunts are conducted more irregularly for elephants.

### Day 4

For the Savé, I had one goal on this trip — white rhino. Zimbabwe has three places with great chances of seeing a rhino: northern Savé, Malilangwe, and Matopos National Park. There are other spots

as well and sanctuaries like Imire outside of Harare, where rhinos are highly habituated. Malilangwe, a private conservancy run by the same group that owns Grumeti in Tanzania and Sabi Sand in South Africa, has the highest population, numbering 500 strong. They are, in fact, overpopulated in an area of 50,000 hectares and, during the dry season, conservationists have had to even bring forage in via trucks to feed the rhinos. Malilangwe is even looking to translocate up to 100 of their rhinos to other conservancies.

On this day, I hoped to see a rhino in Savé. We went on a guided walk with Cobra, the name of our guide and wildlife ranger. Walks might not always turn up lifers and a ton of wildlife but it's always a good way to learn about dung and spoor and other things about habitats. We started off with tracks of a Civet, which did get our hopes up for seeing one. (Foiled again!) We did soon thereafter see two Giraffes meters away from us. The rest of the hike provided us with mostly common small mammals: Dwarf Mongoose, Slender Mongoose, Rock Hyrax, as well as Kudu, Impala, Chacma Baboon, Southern African Tree Squirrel, Warthog. A big bull Elephant over 50 years old, maybe 3.5 meters tall, provided a thrill. He was accompanied by two smaller males.

After a lovely dinner made by the chef, Stanford, we went on a night drive, which are always exciting. We saw what seemed to be a jackal with green eyeshine, but we could not be sure. We took a route that led far from the main camp on roads (highly generous to call them as such) along riverine forests and shrubland. Near the endless herds of Impala, which at least look more alien and cooler at night, we did see Cape Hare on the side of the road. We also spotted a female and young Large-Spotted Genets, which I have seen at Chishakwe before. At first, I thought it was a bushy mongoose because of the tail and color. I later read that Large-spotted genets can have light brown morphs. The genets ran along the road which gave us a long 20-second sighting. That's a lot of work for one decent sighting, given the treacherous roads, and hours spent using redlights, thermal imaging devices, and spotlights and coming up with zilch so many times. It's so easy to get down on the emotional whirlwind of mammal-watching. Watching Cape Hares and Acacia Rats may be cool, but I had bigger aspirations. And, just as with so many times when I have gone out, when all hope seems lost, then it happens — in this case in the form of a massive **White Rhino** running along a riverbank side by side with us. It was the largest rhino I have seen and the most beautiful sighting of the night. It was almost impossible to get a photo as we not only had trouble holding onto our cameras, we felt like we could almost fall out of our Land Cruiser, as we roared alongside the riverbed, racing with a rhino. It was a thrilling experience that I will never forget.



*Our family going on a hike with Cobra*

### Day 5

We headed to Nyanga National Park and the surrounding highlands but first had an overnight at La Rochelle Country House in the mountains outside of Mutare. It's another old colonial estate built with a tower that looks like a castle, large botanical gardens, with a greenhouse full of rare orchids, and nice hikes for birding, notably sunbirds, and small mammals. Thankfully, I finally saw **Mutable Sun Squirrels** en masse, perhaps the second largest group of rodents I have seen after prairie dogs in South Dakota. We also trekked through a nearby forest and saw Sykes Monkeys. Traveling up Christmas Pass and through Mutare was always worth it, and La Rochelle is a hidden gem that makes for one grandiose rest stop.

### Day 6

From Mutare, we headed up to the Nyanga Highlands and first stopped by Mutarazi Falls, the second highest waterfall in Africa and among the 20 highest in the world. On that day, we were the only ones there! It always amazes me on how few tourists visit Zimbabwe overall. Even when I went to Victoria Falls, there were a lot of people, but even that is nothing compared to many of the parks in Tanzania, South Africa, Kenya, and elsewhere. Recently, Tanzania received some negative attention for how hundreds of tourists flouted the rules of Serengeti National Park and even blocked migratory routes of animals looking to cross the Mara River. Mammal-watching can do wonders for wildlife conservation, but tourists need to be educated and guides and companies have to ensure tourists follow the rules and limit their ecological impact. Anyway, for those looking to go off the beaten path, Zimbabwe still has a lot to offer, and how wonderful to walk the skyline footbridge over a 2,500-foot waterfall all by ourselves. We did see some Skyes Monkeys, but this side quest was all about the views and landscapes. From there, we headed deeper into Nyanga to stay at Zumbane Lodge in the mountains and were greeted by a Eurasian hoopoe with a nest full of chicks just next to my window. The lodge had a great view of the miombo woodland valley.



*Mutarazi Falls and Skyline Footbridge... and my fam... sun squirrel and hoopoe*

## Day 7

This morning, my dad and I decided to climb Mount Nyangani, the highest point in Zimbabwe at 2,592m (8,504ft), in Nyanga National Park. On the way up, we did spot three mammal species, including adding the **Southern Reedbuck** to my life list, a male and two females in the distance. The hike itself didn't challenge me being mostly uphill until evening out into a rocky plateau. But I did forget to bring a sweatshirt, and, despite the cloudless day, the winds and highlands altitude made it all brisk to the bone! It felt like being on the shortgrass plains of the Serengeti but with more mountains and rock outcroppings like kopjes. We did see a herd of Klipspringer near the summit, and a troop of Chacma Baboons. Seeing the baboons in that highlands environment reminded me of the Gelada Baboons in Ethiopia. We made it to the top of Mount Nyangani for some more extraordinary views.



*Atop Mt. Nyangani with my father and a well camouflaged Klipspringer*

## Matopos National Park

Matopos National Park lies just south of Bulawayo and is home to the famous balancing rocks, the gravesite of Cecil Rhodes, and many rhino crashes. The park is 160 miles squared and a fantastic place to see and is by far the best place to see White Rhino in Zimbabwe. The park is small in size but gets minimal visitors. I mainly wanted to hike and get better photos of rhinos on this voyage. We departed Harare on Boxing Day, and we had to stop in Bulawayo for my mother's sake before it was on to mammal-watching. We departed the next day to Matopos and Big Cave Camp. The lodge is located outside the national park and is a 45-minute drive from Bulawayo. Nestled into the boulders and rocky hills of Matopos, and, yes, beside a really big cave, the camp had a lot to offer for exploration on its own. (Internet only at the reception area.) It is also a stunning area for mammal-watching as they do have a small concession where we spotted the usual safari suspects: Blue Wildebeest, Plains Zebra, Greater Kudu, Giraffe, Impala, Warthog, Hyrax, and a Klipspringer. I had not seen a Klipspringer up close, so that was a fun one. Prior to the drive, though, I saw something scurrying amongst the rocks and quickly realized it was an **Eastern Rock Elephant Shrew**. This came as a surprise as I didn't expect to gain a species to my life list in December.

The next day we left for the rhinos. We first passed by the gravesite of Cecil Rhodes, the controversial British mining magnate, politician, and namesake of Northern and Southern Rhodesia, which became Zambia and Zimbabwe after independence. I mainly enjoyed seeing more shrews next to his grave around massive boulders. After descending the "mountain", we finally went to see the habituated rhinos. A juvenile male and female mother rested in an open area that is north of the park, where poachers have a

harder time accessing them. Interestingly, park authorities shave the horns off all rhinos in Matopos and other national parks in Zimbabwe. A recent study revealed this as an effective strategy and deterrent to poaching. What do you think? They are both habituated to humans and don't pay much attention to you unless you're loud. On a later drive, we saw Wildebeest, Plains Zebra, Giraffe, Impala, Warthog, Slender Mongoose, Southern African Tree Squirrel, Klipspringer, and the crown jewel: a crash of 4 White Rhinos that were only 10 meters away from us just as the sun began to set. I have seen many habituated populations and enjoy seeing them but there is always something wondrous encountering something you didn't expect with randomness and luck. We spent time on foot watching the rhinos grazing and lumbering about. Magic!

Finally, we also visited some famous prehistoric cave paintings, for which Matopos is also known along with the rock formations. Many of the famous rock formations even have names like "Mother and Baby." We climbed up to the enormous Silozwane Cave, with paintings more than 6,000 years old, including many of humans doing various activities and interacting with lions, giraffes, impala, buffalo, and other wild animals. Painted by San peoples, these depictions really make you wonder how our ancestors perceived mammals millennia ago.



*Matopos NP: Rhinos, Rock Elephant Shrew, Mother and Baby Formation, Silozwane Cave with Paintings*

## Postscript

We left Zimbabwe a year or so earlier than we had planned due to the US government cutting all funding for wildlife conservation and thousands of other projects around the world. I fear what will happen to the many conservationists, communities, and wildlife populations who benefited from these partnerships. I met so many cool people besides seeing birds and mammals in Zimbabwe. I hope others will come in and fill the gaps of much needed financial support to keep wildlife conservation growing.

Two months before our departure, we had one last short adventure into Savé Valley and Chishakwe during the April school break. It was the wet season, which offered more for birding but limited the number of mammals we could see and made the trips muddier and slower. While tracking down a genet, I did see an amazing Southern White-Faced Owl. And then we spotted a female leopard, the first sighting I have had of one in nine years. Seeing her leap from a tree made my heart leap for joy. The beauty of this country is truly magical. In total, I had five trips around Zimbabwe (and also had the chance to go to Botswana, South Africa, and back to Tanzania). All but one were successful in gaining a new species and I learned so much over the past two years. I want to thank all the guides, rangers, camp managers, and conservation heroes who taught me, as well as those who are part of the mammal-watching community. Finally, on my last day in Savé, we went on a hike on a rainy morning and, atop a rocky hill, saw a herd of elephants below. It just made me appreciate Zimbabwe more. (I'll have to come back to track down the Mashona mole rat and more.) I know that when one of the young bulls raised his trunk to me, it was just so he could smell me better or make a threat display. But I like to think he was saying goodbye. Goodbye, Zimbabwe. Kwaheri. Musare zvakanaka.

Common name	Latin name	Chishakwe/ Savé	Gonarezhou\Chilo	Nyanga	Big cave camp Matobos
Eastern rock elephant shrew	Elephantulus myurus				x
African elephant	Loxodonta africana	x	x		
Rock Hyrax	Procavia capensis	x			x
Impala	Aepyceros melampus	x	x		x
Common waterbuck	Kobus ellipsiprymnus	x	x		
Greater Kudu	Traphelgaus strepsiceros	x	x		x
Nyala	Tragelaphus angasii		x		
Bushbuck	Tragelaphus scriptus	x	x		x
Southern reedbuck	Redunca			x	

	aruidinum				
Klipspringer	Oreotragus oreotragus			x	x
Common duiker	Sylvicapra grimmia				x
Southern African Giraffe	Giraffa giraffa	x	x		x
Hippo	Hippopotamus amphibius		x		x
Warthog	Phacochoerus africanus	x	x		x
Plains Zebra	Equus quagga	x	x		x
White rhino	Ceratotherium simum	x			x
Chacma baboons	Papio ursinus	x	x	x	x
Vervet monkey	Chlorocebus pygerythrus	x	x		x
Samango monkey	Cercopithecus mitis			x	
Large spotted genet	Genetta fieledinia	x			
Dwarf mongoose	Helogale parvula	x			
Slender mongoose	Herpestes sanguineus	x	x		x
Leopard	Panthera pardus	x			
Cape hare	Lepus capensis	x			
Acacia rat	Thallomys paedulus	x	x		
Mutable sun squirrel	Heliosciurus mutabilis			x	
Southern african tree squirrel	Paraxerus cepapi	x	x		x
Cape seritone bat		x	x		