

## **Mana Pools NP, Zimbabwe**

Tom Clode, 12<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> October 2019

Mana Pools had long been on my list of “must-visits”, well before the crowds were drawn in by the famous Dynasties series. However, my reason for visiting was much the same as Attenborough’s – the chance to encounter wild dogs on foot. I was flush with success earlier in the year, catching up with dogs in Botswana and Mozambique – Zimbabwe would be country no. 6 in my quest to find the doggies in all their range states.

Logistics were arranged through Michael Scott of the excellent Khangela Safaris – I would heartily recommend Mike to anyone considering a visit to Zimbabwe. A thoroughly professional set-up, Khangela can offer guiding services across most parks in the country (and beyond), including Hwange and Matobo. The itinerary was for five nights in the park, being collected from my accommodation in Harare after a straightforward flight via Dubai with Emirates. The first two nights were to be in the drier area of Chitake Springs, with the last three on the Zambezi river on the border with Zambia, near Nyamepi Camp. October is an interesting time to visit – I joined a pre-existing trip that Mike was running with two other clients, so had no flexibility in dates. The weather was exceedingly hot – not quite the 48 degrees I managed in Senegal, but close enough! It was also clear that the park was in the grips of a drought, with supplementary food out for the herbivores. Not ideal, but not disastrous either. Mana Pools is very much a walking safari destination, so the sparse bush was perfect for tracking down our quarry.

### **12<sup>th</sup> October:**

It was a lengthy drive north from the beautiful city of Harare to Mana Pools, but the road system was excellent and we made good time. On the last section of the drive, the tar roads gave way to dust tracks and we soon caught sight of our first impalas and elephants of the trip. Upon reaching the main gate, it was less than an hour to our campsite at Chitake Springs. Immediately upon arrival we noticed vultures kettling towards the springs and heard lions bellowing within a few hundred metres of camp.

After settling into camp, being entertained by chacma baboons descending nearby trees unconventionally, we slowly wandered towards the spring. Within about 100 metres, we could see the remains of a buffalo tucked under some bushes on the far bank – and movement! A cub padded away from the kill to the shade of the bank under our feet. Poking our heads over the lip of the bank, we were quick to locate a couple of adult male lions lounging around, which we admired for some 20 minutes before a lioness noticed us and gave us a snarl as she skittled away – the following scene was reminiscent of a clown car, as from under our feet emerged 15 lions disturbed by our presence. A great start to the trip! The rest of the walk was largely uneventful, and our good night’s sleep was welcome, interrupted only briefly by roaring lions and grumbling ellies.

### **13<sup>th</sup> October:**

Over morning coffee we could see the lions from the previous evening clambering out of the riverbed upstream, and we made a beeline for them on our morning walk. They had melted into the bush – although one male did meander across to the water below giving us excellent views. Two bull elephants were also very photogenic, digging deep into the sand around the spring for fresh water. The highlight of the walk, though, was a huge herd of buffalo descending into the spring, thundering

up dust as they did so. We watched for half an hour or so, then beat a hasty retreat to camp as the heat of the day began to build.

We took a quick drive to the far side of the spring, and were rewarded with two distant subadult male lions and several sets of leopard tracks, but it was clear that the wildlife had retired deep into the shade and the chances of a morning wild dog sighting were waning. We returned to camp to admire the local baboons once more.



*Lion cub at Chitake*

Our evening drive was to a collection of baobabs nearby for some photo opportunities and a (very enjoyable) beer. Little did I know that the night itself was to be far more exciting than the evening drive! On our return to camp, we had excellent moonlit views of three elephants tip-toeing past camp for a drink at the spring. Once everyone else had retired for the night, I spotted a lioness walking towards camp and decided to call it a night myself – only to flush another lioness across the riverbed from me (about 15m or so) with a huff and a growl. Within an hour or so of getting to bed, I was woken by a horrendous scream, recognisably an animal being killed. Seconds later, hooves thundered past the tent followed unmistakably by pads beating on the ground; the chase was on! I thought to myself how incredibly close this all sounded – and then the sound of pawprints changed, as their owners ran across the groundsheet of my tent! I tried to get a glimpse of the action but in the pitch black it was impossible, but you could easily hear the dogs begin to rip the impala apart in the riverbed. A lion soon began roaring, the dogs chattering and barking before beating a retreat. The rest of the night was spent listening to elephants chasing the dogs on a shelf above the campsite - needless to say I barely slept at all!

#### **14<sup>th</sup> October:**

On waking, Mike and I filled the other clients in on the dog kill – they hadn't even stirred as the dogs sprinted past their tent. Tracks corroborated the story of the night before but, try as we might, we couldn't pin the dogs down on our morning walk. Elephants were easily seen though, and we curtailed our walk to make the 2.5 hour drive to Nyamepi.



*Elephant drinking in Chitake*

Our campsite on the riverfront was stunning, with views of the Zambezi escarpment as well as the local elephants and hippos. Local intelligence suggested the dogs were not too far away and we formulated a plan to find them that evening. We spent some time with a dazzle of zebra as we meandered along the river, as well as a handsome herd of eland. Scouring the area, it was clear the dogs had been using the area in the previous three or four days, but tracks were not especially fresh. We were invited to a vacant tented camp, where three young lions had made a number of kills – we were rewarded with lovely views of two young lionesses and a sub-adult male on the river bank to end the day.

**15<sup>th</sup> October:**

Whilst desperate for dogs, we were also very keen to head into the “Magic Forest” of Mana and try to catch Boswell (a well-studied elephant) feeding on his hind legs. This morning we headed to Nyamepi, inspecting many elephant bulls’ feeding behaviour en route. We were also pleasantly surprised by another large herd of buffalo near the main camp – but no Boswell and no dogs for our efforts. We did, however, have the privilege of spending time with a tiny orphaned elephant whose mother had recently succumbed in one of the mud-bound waterholes. The baby was now hanging out in the relatively safety and comfort of camp. Our return journey was equally quiet, some excellent birding aside.

We again headed out in the evening to the “Magic Forest”, and were rewarded with a sensational sunset and a very grumpy elephant. Waterbuck and impala were also very willing models in front of the sunset, and the time spent here ranks amongst the most special I have enjoyed in the bush.



*The "Magic Forest"*

That night I opted to stay up, with excellent views of civet, white-tailed mongoose, eland and hippo enjoyed. In fact, the hippo was so close to my bed that he brushed against me through the tent canvas that night – my heart rate was certainly up during the entire encounter!

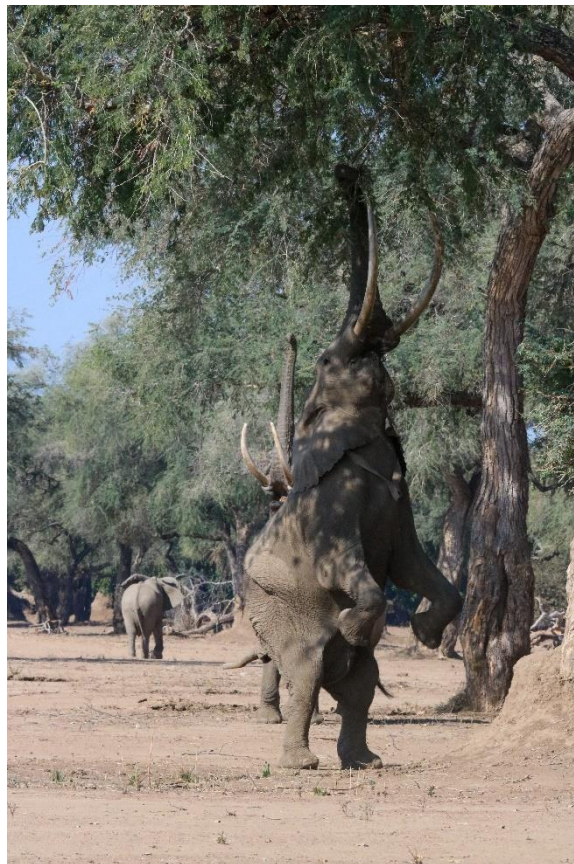
**16<sup>th</sup> October:**

Our final full day, and still no dogs! Some in the group were getting a little disheartened and moods were not improved by the news that the national parks service were asking guides to report dog sightings as they were wanting to tranquilise and collar one of the pack. In short, if another group found the dogs first, they would have the sighting shut down and we'd leave empty-handed. The park authority's tracker was struggling to locate them though, so we vacated the area, assuming they had done an extensive search. We checked a few old dens, with nothing to show for it but a Sharpe's Grysbok. Reluctantly, we returned towards the river and decided a quick walk down to the river itself would be pleasant. About fifty metres in (and no more than 100 metres from the unfriendly tracker from earlier), some white-tipped tails were flicking under a large fig tree. Elated, we spent a full hour with them – mostly to ourselves – though they weren't up to much mischief. We headed back to camp triumphant.



*Wild dogs drinking near Nyamepi*

At midday, we noticed the carmine bee-eaters were putting in a great display not far from camp, so headed off via a banded mongoose sighting for a closer look. We then spotted a group of bull elephants feeding, including the famous Boswell. Without any delay, he popped up onto his hind legs for a private display that has lived long in the memory.



*Boswell feeding on his hind legs*

Our evening was spent sitting with the dogs once more, waiting for them to stir. To our delight, they did so shortly before sunset, strolling within five feet of us as they headed for a pre-hunt drink –

bliss! Our drive back to camp gifted us a spotted hyena and white-tailed mongoose to book-end our stay.

**17<sup>th</sup> October:**

We headed directly out of the park this morning, bidding a fond farewell to a sensational park.

**Species list:**

African Bush Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) – *easily seen from Nyamepi and Chitake Springs*  
African Civet (*Civettictus civetta*) – *one seen near Nyamepi*  
African Savanna Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) – *one herd seen near Nyamepi, one more at Chitake*  
African Wild Dog (*Lycaon pictus*) – *one pack seen near Nyamepi*  
Banded Mongoose (*Mungos mungo*) – *one seen in camp in Nyamepi*  
Chacma Baboon (*Papio ursinus*) – *easily seen throughout the park*  
Common Eland (*Taurotragus oryx*) – *easily seen near Nyamepi*  
Common Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) – *countless seen in the Zambezi*  
Common Waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus* ssp. *Ellipsiprymnus*) – *easily seen near Nyamepi*  
Greater Kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) – *a herd seen in dry area near Nyamepi, away from the river*  
Impala (*Aepyceros melampus*) – *countless seen every day*  
Lion (*Panthera leo*) – *one pride well seen at Chitake, one near Nyamepi*  
Plains Zebra (*Equus quagga*) – *easily seen at Nyamepi*  
Sharpe's Grysbok (*Raphicerus sharpie*) – *one individual seen in arid area near Nyamepi*  
Spotted Hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) – *one individual seen near Nyamepi*  
White-Tailed Mongoose (*Ichneumia albicauda*) – *two seen at night near Nyamepi*