

## Gorongosa NP, Mozambique

Tom Clode, 8<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> September 2019

An ambitious relocation project had drawn my attention to Gorongosa NP in Mozambique in 2018, as a pack of wild dogs was moved from Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa to their new home. Gorongosa itself has plenty to offer besides the dogs (known locally as “Mabecos”) with a growing population of lions and elephants, reintroduced buffalo, zebra and wildebeest, and much more. The variety of game was greatly reduced by the Mozambican Civil War, and animals are still understandably wary around vehicles – cheetah were unsuccessfully reintroduced, leopard are vanishingly rare and the niche vacated by many antelope species has been filled by vast quantities of waterbuck. Having said this, the park itself is stunning, consisting of a variety of landscapes and the wildlife is rewarding if you put the hours in.

Mozambique is increasingly accessible, with Gorongosa accessed from either Beira or Chimoio most easily. I flew into Beira – Ethiopian Airlines fly here via Blantyre, but be aware that my flights were cancelled just two weeks before I was due to leave. I was forced to travel via Johannesburg with Virgin Atlantic and SA Airlink instead. Beira is a nice enough city, although still reeling from the effects of Cyclone Idai when I visited. Transfers, though not cheap, can be arranged from either Beira or Chimoio with the Montebelo hotel in Gorongosa.

I can't say enough nice things about the Montebelo Gorongosa resort. It certainly detracts from the feeling of being in the wild but makes up for it with comfortable accommodation, good food, friendly service and excellent amenities. For me, the most important aspect was the excellent local guiding team who offer game drives from the hotel each morning and evening – they were conscientious and kind throughout, even taking me out on private drives at no extra cost to pursue the wild dogs.

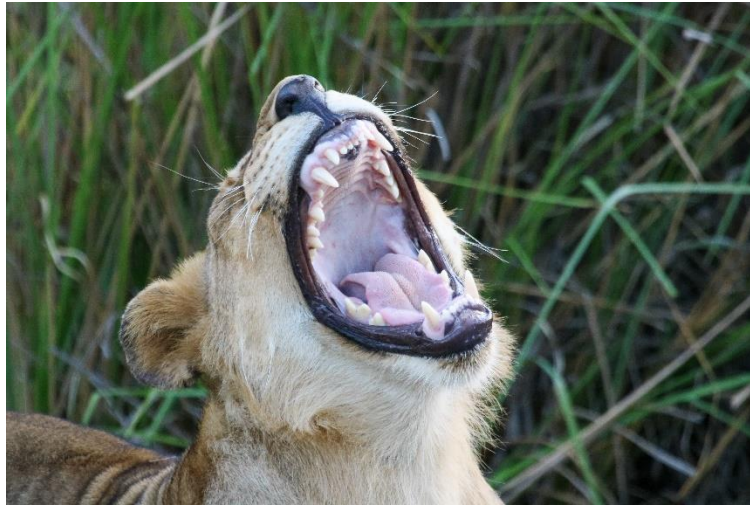
### **8<sup>th</sup> September:**

I arrived at around midday into the resort after a smooth 2.5 hour transfer from Beira – to my surprise, the hotel was extremely busy but it soon quietened down as most guests were checking out after a holiday weekend. A buffet lunch was followed by a spot of birdwatching before my first evening drive with Maquinha, my guide, and a handful of other guests.

The birding was excellent – I ticked off lifers including crested guineafowl, trumpeter hornbill and crowned hornbill within half an hour. I also got my first look (of many) at nyala and common waterbuck. Greater kudu were also well represented before we noticed a herd of elephant had passed across the road recently – bouncing off into the bush we soon got a good look at a herd of around 20 elephants, despite the tall grass. We kept a reasonable distance but as soon as we were noticed, the adults started to tear after us – certainly not mock charges! It's understandable given the history of this area but the elephants here are the most hyper-aggressive I've ever come across – this is why self-driving was banned in Gorongosa in 2019.

We were soon on the floodplains in the west of the park, near the famous “lion house” – a building left to nature and inhabited by lions for many years during the park's heyday before the civil war. I was stunned by the number of common waterbuck here – tens of thousands as far as the eye could see. Impala and black-bellied bustard were ticked off as we bumped across the plain towards a number of vultures gathered in some treetops – in the long grass beneath them we located three young lions, exceptionally sleepy and clearly waiting for their mother to return to them. An enjoyable twenty minutes was spent with them – some of the most resilient lions in Africa in my

opinion. A marvellous sunset across the plains completed a great first day – our quick drive back through the twilight provided us with rusty-spotted genet.



Young lioness near the “lion house”

### 9<sup>th</sup> September:

An early start this morning to try for dogs – before 6am we’d had African paradise-flycatcher, hooded vulture, yellow-billed kite and gymnogene. A quiet drive, except for loads of waterbuck, ensued, punctuated by a number of small, but rambunctious, elephant herds. As we stopped for coffee in a dry riverbed, we disturbed a distant herd of eland. Continuing on, we flushed a pair of oribi and a male warthog before happening upon a mass congregation of great white pelicans and yellow-billed storks, with a few saddle-billed storks for good measure. These birds were enjoying the high water levels left by the cyclone just a few months before. The rest of the drive took us through wild dog country, although we were left to settle with “just” trumpeter hornbill, black-chested snake eagle and Lichtenstein’s hartebeest.



A relaxed Gorongosa elephant

Our afternoon drive took us west, to the dry plains that are known to hold some of Gorongosa’s reintroduced species, such as zebra and wildebeest. We kicked off with crowned hornbill, hooded vulture and oribi, before locating a photogenic herd of sable. True to form, a large herd of wildebeest were also nearby and made for good viewing. Southern reedbuck were plentiful in this

area also, and we soon returned to the main floodplain for another sensational sunset. On our drive back we found an African savanna hare looking particularly nervous, as well as a distant civet.

### **10<sup>th</sup> September:**

This morning was punctuated with the usual sightings of nyala, warthog, bushbuck and even a hamerkop, but the highlight was undoubtedly stumbling into a group of four lions. These were the three youngsters I had seen on my first day along with their heavily pregnant mother. They were relatively relaxed around us and made for an incredible sighting and great photos. When we eventually tore ourselves away, we were again treated to mountains of waterbuck and a distant bull elephant. Purple heron and a much closer, and more inquisitive, bull elephant were the highlights of a loop near the vast Lake Urema. We grabbed coffee at the lake itself and were treated a distant glimpse of a pod of hippos, as well as crocodiles, fish eagles, white-faced whistling duck, African jacana, blacksmith lapwing, grey heron and grey-crowned cranes. The rest of the morning saw us view greater kudu, warthog and chacma baboon (this being the very north of their range). Vervet monkeys were also easily seen in the hotel.

Our afternoon drive started with a bang, with the three young lions putting on a show as they prepared to move off into the evening. Nyala were well seen before we intercepted a large herd of elephants heading to Lake Urema for a drink – they were nervous and walked briskly, but still afforded us wonderful views through the gallery forest. Greater kudu, waterbuck and impala were all seen again and we encountered the lions once more as we returned back to base.

### **11<sup>th</sup> September:**

We once again returned to main floodplain near the “lion house” today and were tempted into investigating an area suspiciously devoid of waterbuck – the three lion sub-adults had set up shop here, a few hundred yards from where we had left them the night before. They were hungry and were eyeing the waterbuck longingly, but seemed to lack either the know-how or drive to hunt. Moving on, we found a large number of vultures on a fresh waterbuck carcass near Lake Urema – upon closer investigation it seemed to have broken its neck fighting and was not the dog kill I was now furtively praying for.



Waterbuck are ubiquitous in Gorongosa

This evening our focus was solely on the dogs, but no sign was found. Instead we recorded Lichtenstein's hartebeest, nyala, elephant and red-necked spurfowl – the search for dogs was becoming desperate!

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

We focussed on the west this morning in an effort to pick up zebra or buffalo – unsuccessfully due to a thick blanket of fog. A young sable was our first sighting of note (besides the usual bushbuck, oribi, nyala and waterbuck) and was swiftly followed by a rare daytime sighting of bushpig. Lichtenstein’s hartebeest were seen very well here.



Bushpig on a foggy morning

Our afternoon drive was again very quiet indeed, although a roosting spotted-eagle owl was a nice surprise. Near Lake Urema we caught a breeding herd of elephants out in the open – they made their displeasure known and we beat a hasty retreat. After sundowners, several great civet sightings were enjoyed, and genets and white-tailed mongoose were easily seen as well.

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

This morning the guides and I set out to the east in a last-ditch attempt to find those pesky dogs! En route we stumbled across a lone lioness who was very nervous, and after a few minutes she ran deep into the bush to avoid our attention. Not long after, we finally had some evidence that wild dogs were around, with a day-old track on the junction between several roads. We combed the area intensively to no avail and hopes were beginning to fade as the tracks disappeared – we paused briefly to decide on our next move when two round ears poked up from the long grass to our left. “Mabeco!” came the cry from me and we darted off after the ears – to my utter delight the entire pack was to be found, with two litters of pups eager to get a sniff of our vehicle. In all there were 30 dogs, with 25 pups in tow – one of the greatest sightings I have ever had the privilege of being at, and they were all ours!





Tiny wild dog pup – on the last morning!

Our afternoon drive, flushed with success was a great way to end the trip – lions, elephants, bateleur and rutting impala, although everything of course paled in comparison to the beautiful dogs! To finish up we had a last gasp sighting of porcupine to complete the trip.

Overall, I would heartily recommend Gorongosa to anyone looking for an off-the-beaten-track but comfortable safari. There are big plans to reintroduced species currently absent, including rhino, and there are special sightings to be had throughout the park. For me, though, the variety of landscapes found in the park was astounding, and along with the dogs and the amount of waterbuck, was the real star of the show.

#### **Species list:**

African Bush Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) – *aggressive but reliably seen in the Lake Urema area*

African Civet (*Civettictus civetta*) – *seen on several night drives near Chitengo*

African Savanna Hare (*Lepus microtis*) – *several seen at night near the “lion house”*

African Wild Dog (*Lycaon pictus*) – *one pack seen in the east of the park*

Blue Wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*) – *one herd easily seen in the west of the park*

Bushbuck (*Tragelaphus sylvaticus*) – *countless seen every day*

Bushpig (*Potamochoerus larvatus*) – *half a dozen seen in one morning in the west of the park*

Chacma Baboon (*Papio ursinus*) – *troops seen every day, easily seen from the hotel*

Common Eland (*Taurotragus oryx*) – *one herd seen near Lake Urema*

Common Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) – *one pod distantly seen in Lake Urema*

Common Warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*) – *countless seen every day, easily seen in camp*

Common Waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus* ssp. *Ellipsiprymnus*) – *so many, everywhere*

Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix cristata*) – *one pair seen at night near camp*

Greater Kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) – *at least one herd seen a day, especially near Lake Urema*

Impala (*Aepyceros melampus*) – *countless seen every day*

Lichtenstein’s Hartbeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus* ssp. *Lichtensteinii*) – *reliably seen in the west*

Lion (*Panthera leo*) – *sightings most days of the same four individuals near the “lion house”*

Mohol Bushbaby (*Galago moholi*) – *countless seen each night*

Nyala (*Tragelaphus angasii*) – *countless seen every day*

Oribi (*Ourebia ourebi*) – *easily seen throughout the park*

Rusty-Spotted Genet (*Genetta maculata*) – *at least one seen each night*

Sable Antelope (*Hippotragus niger*) – *reliably seen in the west of the park*

Southern Reedbuck (*Redunca arundinum*) – *reliably seen near the “lion house”*

Vervet Monkey (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*) – *easily seen in camp*

White-Tailed Mongoose (*Ichneumia albicauda*) – *one seen on the airstrip near camp*