



Park access at Luelo: payment and formalities need to be done in the open air

## NORTH LUANGWA NATIONAL PARK

This conservation area is one of the wildest and most pristine places in Africa. The 4636 km<sup>2</sup> of National Park, set between the steep Muchinga Escarpment and the Luangwa and accessible only for a few months of the year, provides a secluded natural habitat for thousands of wild animals. 'A piece of old Africa' was what Fraser Darling named the Mwaleshi River in 1957, and he most loved to sojourn for three months in a simple grass hut here. When he visited, the park was still completely bereft of any influences from civilisation or road networks. Even though this has changed in the meantime, those emotions from 1957 can still be felt very well today.

Since 1972 Zambia's official no. 2 National Park stretches out over huge forests of miombo and mopane, which nearer to the river, depending on the altitude, blend into broad

grassy plains, acacia thickets and wet meadows. At a level with the mouth of the Mwaleshi the vegetation becomes lighter, and the Luangwa becomes more dynamic. It now forms numerous old lagoons, meandering more vigorously, and the dense riparian forests of its upper reaches thin out.

The fauna is similar to the South Luangwa National Park's, but less varied in species and more timid. Huge buffalo herds with hundreds of animals range through the remote wilderness. At the end of the dry season, when the Mwaleshi dwindles to a trickle between sandy banks, stately lions and hyenas doze for hours on end in the cool shallow water, following the wandering herds. Wildebeests, impalas, pukas and zebras graze on the river's wetlands. Kudus roam around the forests, and in the protection of dense thickets grysboks rest. The elephant population was decimated in the 1980s from 10,000 down to only 700 animals, but has since recovered once more to around 2,500 animals. In the rivers hippos and crocodiles splash about. A few giant lizards

along the Mwaleshi River are even equipped to rob lions of their booty. The successful rhino project of the Frankfurt Zoological Society has certainly turned out to be the prestige project of Zambia.

### A FUTURE FOR THE BLACK RHINO

Since May 2003 South African black rhinos have been returning in batches to their prior habitat and living ever since, under the strictest watchful eye of 160 paramilitary-trained rangers and not accessible to visitors, in a safe game enclosure within the park. In June 2005 the first birth in two decades of a rhino was celebrated. Up to today more than thirty black rhinos once again roam about in the park. The threat posed by rhino poaching, which has increased in recent years in South Africa, is growing, yet so far this project has no losses to lament. Elephants by contrast are already falling

victim once more to unscrupulous poachers, since the demand from China has increased.

The first safari business for tours into North Luangwa National Park was established in the 1980s by John Harvey. He too had transformed from a keen huntsman into a vehement animal conservationist and finally committed himself on a voluntary basis to the battle against poaching. After his death his son Mark took over Shiwa Safaris and since then had been running legendary Buffalo Camp on the bank of the Mwaleshi. Another famous camp on the Mwaleshi belongs to John Coppinger. Since 1992 local safari companies have been travelling with tourists into the park for highly exclusive Walking Safaris. Zambia has so far remained true to its motto, to ensure access to a safari experience of the highest exclusivity for very few visitors. North Luangwa with its selected bush camps, open for only about five months a year, remains the embodiment of the wilderness.

Walking Safari: crossing the Mwaleshi River







Left: Luelo Pontoon. Above: Aircraft of the North Luangwa Conservation Project at Marula Puku Airstrip

### THE FIGHT FOR THE ELEPHANTS OF NORTH LUANGWA NATIONAL PARK

In the isolated North Luangwa Park poaching in the 1970s and 1980s took on such devastating proportions that the fate of the elephants seemed sealed. Every year, here alone, 1,000 elephants were poached. In the better developed South Luangwa National Park animal conservationists ferociously opposed the threatened exodus of the pachyderms, but the impassable North was left to its sad fate and practically written off. At this time US zoologists Mark and Delia Owens directed their attention to the remote wilderness, in order to conduct research on lions. In October 1987 the two began their work in the park. With horror they hereby recognised the extent of the tragedy and immediately launched themselves into the desperate fight against elephant poaching. Their problems and risks were overwhelming, and they made powerful enemies for themselves. Poachers were numerous and heavily armed, the park large and extensive and the few scouts disinterested or even involved in ivory smuggling. Men in the surrounding villages hired themselves out as bearers for the poachers, and even the authorities had a finger in the pie. Nevertheless Mark Owens undertook endless reconnaissance flights across the park, most often only to find more bloody carcasses of felled elephants and to spot at night the campfires of their hunters. At the same time the Owens began intensive education work in surrounding, poverty-stricken villages, with the aim of communicating to people that a living elephant was more valuable than a dead one. Their work produced more setbacks than successes, not least through Mark's unconventional methods. Only

from 1991 on did some improvement become apparent, when the effects of the CITES Agreement were felt. The elephants were declared an endangered species, and the trading of ivory was banned worldwide. Besides this Zambia now promoted tourism more vigorously. It was acknowledged: tourists bring in foreign currency, but not to an empty, poached-out park. During the ten years of their stay the Owens played a crucial part in ensuring that the park was not abandoned. In 1996 they left Africa in a surprise cloak and dagger operation. The precise circumstances and background for their abrupt departure were never explained. After that the Zoological Society Frankfurt, which had already provided financial support earlier, took over management of the 'North Luangwa Conservation Project' and at last obtained the necessary state backing. The South Africans Hugo and Elsabé Westhuizen continued the ambitious project up until 2007; afterwards the Briton Ed Sayer took it over.

They all took care of the acquisition and training of scouts and the expansion of roads in the park. Poaching truly came to a halt, and with German financial help even the successful repatriation of black rhinos was achieved. Today the scouts in North Luangwa are the best trained and certainly also the proudest wildlife scouts in the country. With the help of constant international support, they are keen to protect the pachyderms from unscrupulous poachers, which is necessary as elephant poaching is already on the rise again.

Mark und Delia Owens wrote two interesting books about their time in North Luangwa: 'The eye of the elephant' (1994) and 'Secrets of the Savannah'.





Vultures and marabous in the bone dry plains of North Luangwa National Park



Walking in single file and suitable clothes are a must

## ON FOOT THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

### THE NICEST WAY OF GETTING TO KNOW THE LUANGWA VALLEY

A walking safari is always conducted in small groups, walking in single file. Out in front walk the guide and an armed wildlife scout, then the guests follow and at the end an experienced servant, who carries drinking water. Such foot-marches last around two to four hours. Children under twelve years are not allowed to participate for safety reasons. The particular thing about walking safaris are the intensity of the impressions and the recognition of your own vulnerability in the African wilderness. Your senses are sharpened, and your attention is directed to perceiving inconspicuous things,

such as animal tracks, droppings and plants. A good walking safari guide uncovers many of the secrets of the bush; he points out animal tracks, indicates places where an elephant has enjoyed a dust bath or a crocodile buried her eggs, knows the healing powers of countless plants, knows about the birds' breeding and courtship behaviour, discerns places where fossilised wood may be found and kindles a campfire just with some small sticks.

Lower jaw bone of a hippo

