

A Watery Wonderland

On an adventure in Zambia's Bangweulu Wetlands, **Sue Watt** is blown away by the beauty and diverse wildlife of the country's answer to the Okavango Delta





LORENZ ANDREAS FISCHER / AFRICAN PARKS

Russik welcomed me in his own inimitable style as I arrived at Bangweulu. With long spindly legs, a big belly and bright-yellow eyes, he seemed to be grinning mischievously as he waddled towards me. We eyed each other with mutual curiosity — and for my part, surprise. I hadn't expected to be greeted by a shoebill. Standing upright, this prehistoric-looking bird reached my waist. Just 18 months old and losing his fluffy juvenile feathers, he was so endearingly scruffy I wanted to stroke him. His enormous razor-sharp bill made me think again.

Russik is no ordinary shoebill. Captured illegally then confiscated by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife, he was brought from a zoo in Lusaka to Bangweulu to be released. "Unfortunately, we realised he was totally imprinted," Carl Huchzermeyer, Bangweulu's Fisheries Manager, explained. "He's so used to people, he thinks we're all the same — either we're all shoebills or he's human."

Some 60-100 shoebills live in north-eastern Zambia's Bangweulu Wetlands. Reminiscent of Botswana's Okavango Delta and equally beguiling, it spans 6000sq km, with glass-like lakes, lily-strewn waterways and sunrise skies that look like they're on fire. "Everything here moves with the water levels: birds, animals, people, fish," Carl said. "It's like a huge shallow lake with a shoreline that moves up to 20km between seasons."

Bangweulu may not have Okavango's great elephant herds, or lion or leopard, but it has a special charisma borne of an unusual co-existence: around 90,000 people live here, and they're an integral part of its unique character.

Driving along a rutted dirt track, we'd passed village after village of mud-brick houses with women wearing colourful wrap-around *chitenge*, children screaming excitedly and youths in old football shirts coolly giving us a thumbs-up. Most families live off fishing and the floodplains are dotted with their reed huts, giving the landscape a different dimension.

But this isn't a picture-postcard idyll. Catfish stocks suffered through unsustainable fishing practices; game was heavily poached. And shoebills struggled to survive — sold to private collectors, kept captive or losing their papyrus habitat through fires. In 2008, the six chiefdoms that collectively own Bangweulu Game Management Area invited conservation organisation African Parks (AP) to manage the wetlands in a public-private partnership with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) and the chiefdoms' Community Resource Boards.

Not everyone welcomed the new managers. As we drifted in our fibreglass dug-out canoe, Tresford, an African Parks Fisheries Monitor, explained. "Some people aren't happy because they'd fish destructively, using mosquito nets. Now that's not allowed — we tell them they must conserve for their children."

Enforcing annual three-month fishing bans to protect spawning runs initially brought resentment. But time has proved the bans worthwhile: diminishing stocks are thriving again. Fishermen are now able to sell their fish in a community market built by AP, eliminating profiteering middlemen.

Locals see other benefits, too, as AP improves roads and infrastructure, provides better healthcare and educational →

PREVIOUS PAGES: Russik, a habituated shoebill, interacts with white-backed vultures at Chikuni, where he is being rehabilitated back into the wild. **ABOVE:** A flock of African spoonbills and egrets in the shallow floodplains; skilled boatsman Junior Chisabi keeps an eye out for birds as he guides the boat through narrow swamp channels

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facilities, and introduces income-generating projects such as beekeeping and a community campsite. “It’s taken seven years slowly getting people to understand African Parks,” Elijah Mofya, a Community Development Facilitator, told me. “Now, about 70 per cent support it. They’ve seen the project develop and they love it.” Tourism is vital to Bangweulu’s success, although few venture here. African Parks offers visitors boat trips to spot the shoebills for which the wetlands are renowned. “On average, we’ll see shoebills on 80 per cent of trips,” Carl told me. But finding them in the wild proved quite unnerving.

Bangweulu means ‘where water meets the sky’, and our canoe glided in blissful silence, the still lake mirroring fluffy white clouds and azure skies in perfect symmetry. Suddenly, in a narrow papyrus-fringed channel, a pair of ears and eyes splashed out of the water. “Hippo!” our boatman Elijah shouted in tangible fear as it instantly retreated underwater, only to unintentionally jab the unseen animal with his pole as we moved straight over it. Fortunately, the obliging hippo stayed submerged, letting us pass unharmed to broader waters. Luck smiled down on us that day. Having survived the hippo, we saw four shoebills in a swampy area called Bulanda. Two were flying in the distance, easily identified by their wingspan, typically around 2.5m. Another disappeared swiftly into dense reeds. Then a woman outside a fishing hut said she’d seen one earlier, pointing to a small island some 100m away. On cue, a shoebill emerged from the grasses, almost defying gravity as his great bulk flew away.

Following his flightpath, we found his landing spot near a clump of tall papyrus. Impressively large with blue-grey plumage, he completely mesmerised me, standing motionless for what seemed like forever, in typical shoebill style. Eventually, he toddled nonchalantly into the grasses, gawky and graceless, leaving me breathless. “I think that’s Seymour,” Carl whispered proudly. “He’s another rescued shoebill we returned to the wild.” I asked him whether he became attached to the shoebills. “In a sense, I do,” he confided. “With Seymour we made a concerted effort to minimise contact. Having the bird go free was so rewarding. With Russik, because he’s imprinted, his future’s less certain...”

Shoebills and forgiving hippos aren’t alone here. Designated an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, it’s home to astonishingly diverse avian life, from wattled cranes and pelicans to swamp flycatcher and blue-throated bee-eaters. Buffalo, zebra, elephant, sitatunga, reedbuck, oribi and tsessebe all roam the floodplains, albeit some in small numbers. African Parks is planning to relocate a further 700 animals here shortly and even rhinos may eventually return.

They won’t need to relocate black lechwe — some 50,000 of these endemic antelope live here, splashing their way through the sodden grasslands. We walked across the watery Chimbwi Plains amid thousands of lechwe. Darker, handsome males rutted aggressively, while reddish-brown females grazed as dusk cast a serene golden hue over their haven.

When we left our camp at sunrise, Bangweulu was at its most beautiful. We drifted on tranquil waters reflecting gold and purple skies laced with wispy clouds. Floating lotuses, closed during daylight, were wide open shining like jewels in the dark, and the adorable Russik waddled up to greet us as we approached Carl’s house. Perhaps next time I visit, he, like Seymour, might have returned to where he belongs, to the wilds of these enchanting wetlands.

Sue Watt travelled with grateful thanks to African Parks.



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SHOEBILL CONSERVATION SENSATIONS

Classed as vulnerable, shoebills are among the most sought-after birds for ornithologists. Their preferred habitats in the swamps of Sudan, Zambia, Uganda, DRC, Tanzania and Rwanda means that they are rarely seen and precise estimates of their population are difficult to ascertain, believed to number between 5000 and 8000. Bangweulu has the second-largest population after the Sudd wetlands in South Sudan.

Researchers have been monitoring the shoebills of Bangweulu since 2011, looking at the effects of overfishing and human disturbance on their behaviour. Sensitising local people to their value has been vital to the success of the project. “They didn’t understand the importance of the shoebills,” Elijah Mofya, one of African Parks’ Community Development Facilitators, told me. “We spread the information through schools in environmental education classes and they’ve passed it on to their parents.”

But Bangweulu’s fishermen are now shoebill guardians. They report nests and eggs they’ve come across to African Parks, and then protect them, reaping a reward once the chicks are fledged.

It’s generally assumed that shoebills lay two eggs, with only the stronger offspring surviving. Last year, however, nine nests were protected and, unusually, 11 chicks hatched and survived.

SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** Kenya Airways and South African Airways fly to Lusaka via Nairobi and Johannesburg respectively. If self-driving from Lusaka, the journey to Bangweulu Wetlands takes 11 hours.

■ **Where to stay** Shoebill Island Camp, the only fully catered camp in Bangweulu, is temporarily under refurbishment. Contact African Parks for updates. Alternatively, the local people manage the simple Nsoke Community Camp (from US\$20 per person, excluding activities) on the Chimbwi Plains, near Chikuni.

■ **When to visit** From May, the floodplains become drier and attract large herds of lechwe and other mammals. From October, the land is parched. Rains return in November and from January to February the landscape is flooded, bringing many migratory birds.

■ **Things to do** Activities depend on season. Shoebills can be seen between April and June, and nest visits are possible in the breeding season from August to October. The greatest numbers of lechwe are seen in May and June. Bangweulu is an excellent place for cycling in the drier season, with flat landscapes and friendly locals on bikes, too. With no significant predators here, and easy (albeit sometimes sodden) terrain, it’s also perfect for walking. Throughout the wet season, bring river shoes — your feet will undoubtedly get wet.

■ **Further reading** *Bradt Guide to Zambia* (6th Edition) by Chris McIntyre; Zambia Tourism Board (zambiatourism.com); African Parks (african-parks.org).

