

emissaries OF SKY & WATER

Known for its resident populations of enigmatic shoebills and endemic black lechwes, Zambia's Bangweulu Wetlands is an intriguing destination. Birdwatching here is top-notch, not just because of the many interesting species that are difficult to see anywhere else, but also for the incredible numbers of birds that flock to the floodplains each year. In April 2012, photographer **Morgan Trimble** travelled to Bangweulu on assignment for African Parks, the NGO responsible for managing the wetlands.

'Photographing Bangweulu presented some special challenges,' she says. 'On the plains, the water was too shallow for boats but too deep for vehicles, so I did most of my photography on foot. It's difficult to be stealthy when splashing through knee-deep water, trying not to slip and carrying 15 kilograms of camera equipment. After my two-week trip, I was very pleased not to have dropped any gear in the swamp, although I did have a few close calls!' She returned to South Africa with soggy socks, waterlogged wellies and some fantastic photographs. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY MORGAN TRIMBLE

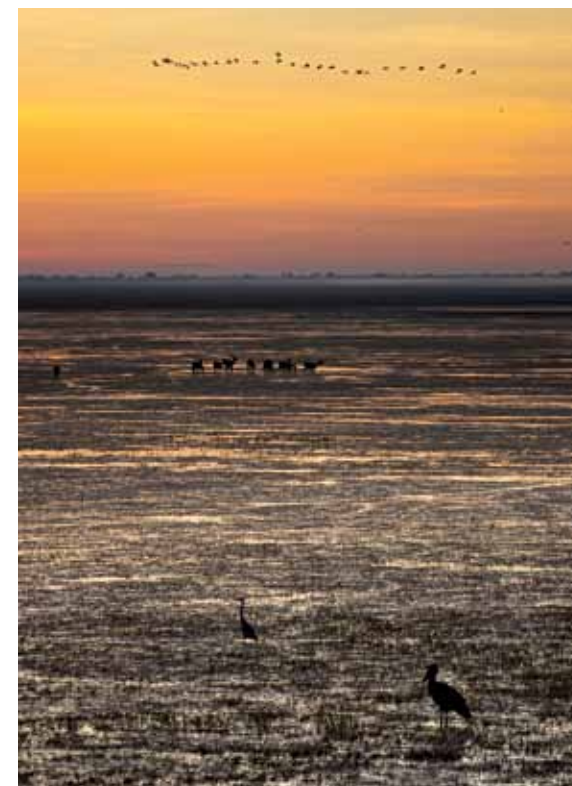


PREVIOUS SPREAD The shoebill, whose scientific name *Balaeniceps rex* means 'king whale-head', is the undisputed ruler of Bangweulu and you'll almost certainly see one if you visit between April and July. Shoebills are huge birds – 1.5 metres tall with a 2.5-metre wingspan and an intimidating bill. When calling, the shoebill rapidly claps its mandibles together to create a percussive, drum-roll-like racket. Then it throws its head back, as seen here, and shakes it from side to side to let out a warbling howl. (I leopard-crawled to this shoebill, which had itself snuck up on a group of vultures feeding on a lechwe carcass.)

RIGHT Bangweulu is home to an estimated 75 000 black lechwe, and those that succumb to disease, old age or hyaena predation keep scores of vultures – mostly white-backed, lappet-faced and hooded – circling the floodplains. I hunkered down in a boat to get this eye-level photograph of a white-backed vulture landing on the horns of a submerged lechwe carcass.

BELOW As the floodplains dry up in April, thousands of wading birds are attracted to the food-rich shallow waters. Huge flocks of spoonbills intermingle with rufous-bellied and black herons, glossy and sacred ibises, yellow-billed, marabou, saddle-billed and white storks, long-toed lapwings and many others. Spoonbills are beautiful to watch, and when a large flock takes flight their wings create a thunderous sound that carries a surprising distance. ▶





OPPOSITE Shoebills in Bangweulu are not particularly skittish, although the dense papyrus swamps they favour make observation at close quarters quite difficult. A shoebill will spend hours standing motionless on a floating mat of vegetation until a fish swims within reach, whereupon it strikes with astonishing speed. This particular bird, a female, was confiscated from a local fisherman, who had stolen it from its nest as a chick. Kapotwe, far from being wary of people, is quite curious. Between bouts of fishing, she investigates the researchers, the fishermen, playing children, other birds and passing boats.

ABOVE It was entertaining to watch little egrets scuttling in the shallows, chasing each other and looking for fish. Forty-five fish species have been recorded in the swamps and they support a booming traditional fishing industry, managed by local chiefs in collaboration with African Parks and the Zambia Wildlife Authority. To photograph the egrets, I sat near a mud fishing-weir where the fish congregated and remained motionless until the birds forgot about me. Except for Kapotwe, who frequently chased me off my perch. (I didn't have the mettle to tackle her face to bill.)

LEFT Bangweulu means 'where the water meets the sky' and sunrise over Chikuni Plain is a daily miracle. Every morning, the lechwe parade from the swamps out to the floodplain, the rams to their 'leks' (the small areas they defend in an attempt to attract females) and the female herds to the greenest grazing. The flocking ibises provide a counterpoint procession, while Kapotwe watches over it all. 📷