



OUT FOR THE COUNT IN HWANG



Volunteer to count Zimbabwe's wildlife at a waterhole stakeout. It's a good excuse for a road trip and a chance to stay up all night enjoying the bush...

Story & pictures **Morgan Trimble**

The dry season in Hwange National Park reached its height in late September. My partner Ashley and I huddled in our Pajero, trying to keep warm in the chilly midnight air on the bank of Mandavu Dam. The water shimmered silver under the full moon as night-owl storks stalked the shallows.

Sudden splashing alerted us to the thirsty arrival of an elephant herd on the far bank. I strained through binoculars to count the drinking adults and playful young – a herd of 23. Scanning back to our side of the dam, I found four huge bulls right next to us, drinking silently. I marked both groups on my clipboard, thankful for the action which helped to keep me awake. I felt a little jealous

of my partner's sister, Claire, and her fiancé, Ian, snoozing next to us under their Hilux's canopy. But it would soon be time for a shift change, and our chance for a nap.

This wasn't a typical safari. We were conducting a 24-hour stakeout as volunteers for the annual Hwange Game Count. A Harare-based NGO called Wildlife & Environment Zimbabwe (WEZ) organises these counts. Our task was to tally every critter that visited our assigned dam. Ninety-one other teams were doing the same at waterholes, seeps, pans and dams spread across the park. Afterwards, WEZ tallies each team's sightings for a database which stretches back to the 1970s. This year marks Hwange's 49th 24-hour static pan count.



Fellow count volunteer Arnold Tshipa is the ecologist for Wilderness Safaris. According to Arnold, the WEZ data is a rich resource for scientists and park staff that monitor Hwange's wildlife. The waterhole counts are more consistent than the occasional aerial survey. They also capture smaller animals that observers can't see from the air.

Planning

After years of talk, we finally contacted Pam Birch, WEZ's count coordinator, in early 2018 to apply to participate. We had to detail our team members (2 - 6 people); the number and description of our vehicles (4x4 or 2x4, high or low clearance, diff lock or no); and our experience with previous counts. Lacking experience, we had to promise that we knew a klipspringer from a kudu. There was also an opportunity to choose accommodation – chalets or camping in Sinamatella, Robins, or Main Camps, or camping at one of several 'picnic sites' (remote spots with basic ablutions and a wilderness feel). We could also request a specific pan or area of the park.

No permanent rivers flow through Hwange's 15 000 km² extent. In the dry season, life revolves around pumped waterpoints. This is why

the game count is so effective. Any animal that needs a drink visits a waterhole, and volunteer teams cover as many as possible.

We'd been to Hwange only once before, so we didn't know what pan to request. I put in an afternoon's effort scouring previous years' count reports to look for waterholes with plenty of action. Legendary spots like Ngweshla, Nyamandhlovu and Kennedy tend to go to experienced counters. Nevertheless, we wrote that we would love to camp in a remote picnic site, and count in a spot with prolific game.

When our assignment came back with Mandavu Dam West, we had mixed feelings. Mandavu ranks tops for sightings... but it's a huge body of water. We worried about missing the wilderness experience at a small, remote waterhole. On the plus side, we would be camping in the Mandavu Picnic Site before, and after, the count.

Getting there

Soon enough, it was the Saturday scheduled for our departure from Johannesburg. We routed through Botswana, using a slight detour to avoid long-weekend mayhem at Groblersbrug/Martin's Drift. We crossed at Stockpoort/Parr's Halt without delay, not even to pay road tax and insurance. Their computers had gone missing the

Above Roads in Hwange are poorly maintained. Luckily the riverbed was dry because the concrete bridge had washed away years previously.

Opposite page Wildlife is abundant in Hwange and easy to spot around waterholes in the dry season. Several of the busiest waterholes feature nice hides like this one at Masuma. Elephants account for half the mammals tallied during the game count. Colin Gillies briefed our team on count procedures at Sinamatella Camp. Other teams were spread between Main Camp (pictured) and Robins Camp.





previous night, but an officer assured us that we could pay on our way out. 'Drive safe,' she said, as we left.

After camping north of Nata, we crossed into Zimbabwe at Kazungula. We felt cheated about having had to pay for the insurance after driving safely, but we would need it again for the return journey.

Stocking up on fuel and supplies at Vic Falls went less smoothly. We hadn't brought fresh food for fear of confiscation at the border, but no one had checked. Nor had we filled our jerry cans with fuel in Botswana – again, no-one had checked. In Vic Falls, we found 60 cars in a queue at the petrol station because of ongoing fuel shortages. Luckily, they had diesel, and were filling jerry cans between cars. The OK Store had a meagre stock of fresh food with eye-watering U.S. dollar prices. We found the essentials, but felt sorry for the locals. I forked out \$25 for a tube of sunscreen – won't forget that again.

It's 150 km from Vic Falls to Hwange's Sinamatella Camp. Just before entering the park, we passed through a coal mine. Black dust coated everything – the road, the sparse vegetation and the colossal quarried boulders.

It looked apocalyptic. Suddenly, the mine road forked, and pristine gravel led us the short way to Sinamatella Gate. Green bushes glowed against yellow mopane, and sunbeams danced in the 'clean' dust.

In Sinamatella, we met Colin Gillies, coordinator for the region and a 26-year count veteran. A Land Cruiser drove circles around the camp, making a loud clank-clank. Colin explained that it had a broken brake pipe and calliper dangling on the front tyre.

The briefing for the official count was in the evening, but we were given a private rundown since we were camping at Mandavu Picnic Site. Colin drew a map of our site and talked us through a folder stuffed with papers for recording mammals, temperature, weather and birds. We had special forms to report sightings of rhino, cheetah, leopard and certain bird species.

Colin said he'd never seen so much water in the park: "We've had some phenomenal rains this year, so there's a lot of what we call natural water." Good news for wildlife, bad news for observers like us hoping to count lots of animals.

But Colin wasn't worried about a lack of animals. "Be careful in that area," he warned. "When nature calls, don't go far into the bush.



The dam is alive with crocodiles, and that area is quite hectic. You'll see at night, when it starts gathering momentum."

Colin's warnings weren't limited to animals. Last year they had four incidents of people encountering poachers during the count. "For God's sake don't be a hero. Don't confront them," Colin advised. "If you hear gunshots, try to determine the direction it comes from, and note the time."

After explaining the route to Mandavu, Colin gestured at the clanking Cruiser and gave a final warning, "It's a bloody awful road, I'll tell you that. They haven't done any work on it in ages."

Mandavu

After bumping along to Mandavu, we pitched our tents—mine next to a deep depression in the dust. (Later, the camp attendant told me the dent was a favourite nap spot of a resident hippo.) The small camp has space for three groups and a beautiful view over the water.

A few scraggly strands of wire are all that remain of the perimeter fence. There's a tank of clean water for cooking, and a shower and flush toilets that run on malodorous dam water. Hyena tooth-marks decorate the ladies' toilet seat, a few bites of which are missing. It's a wonderful camp. We fell asleep to lions and hyena calling, hippo grunting and elephants trumpeting.

In the morning, we found a mating pair of lions a few hundred meters away. Then, using Colin's map, we drove to our assigned position on a small peninsula. Hippo had grazed the area shorter than a putting green. We had clear views of our side of the dam and could see the Mandavu East team setting up across the water. The count began at noon, when we immediately set in identifying waders. Between birds, a steady stream of mammal sightings entertained us all afternoon. Impala, zebra, warthog, squirrel, waterbuck, baboon, hippo, kudu, jackal, buffalo, elephant, repeat...

Opposite page Game counts are conducted during a full moon at the peak of the dry season to ensure the best night-time visibility and most sightings.

Above Hwange features vast stands of mopane veld as well as teak forests and grassy plains. Our team ready to count at Mandavu Dam—during the count participants must stay in their vehicles and minimize disturbance. We took turns napping under the Hilux canopy while the pair on duty kept watch and tallied sightings from the Pajero.



Just after sunset, as African skimmers swooped past, we had our most spectacular sighting. We heard the rumbling of thousands of hooves. Next came a cacophony of mooing, and then the dam water sounded as if it had started to boil. A spotlight aimed across the water revealed a sea of buffalo eyes, twinkling green, like stars in the Milky Way. The herd stretched hundreds of metres along the waterline and up the ridge behind the dam. It took an hour for them to drink and move back over the hill. Counting was tough in this darkest part of the evening before moonrise. We estimated 1 200 animals.

Later, as we heated pasta on a backpacking stove under the Hilux canopy, a young male lion sauntered past. Nightjars provided a mesmerising soundtrack for the night. Two scrub hares added diversity to the visits from hippo and elephant. In the morning, we added hyrax, hyena and giraffe to our species list.

In total, we recorded 47 bird species, and 1 811 individual mammals comprising 16 species. WEZ's count report showed that we had observed both the most individuals, and the most mammal species for 2018. Madavu Dam didn't disappoint. Neither did the overall-count results. Observers across the park counted nearly 40 000 animals (more than half of which were elephants), in line with previous years. Hwange's wildlife is doing fine.

On to Zambezi

After the count, we needed an early night. I closed my eyes... and immediately heard the alarm for our morning departure.

We headed east to exit at Main Camp. Along the way, we stopped for coffee at Shumba, another lovely picnic-site camp. Godfrey, the camp attendant, said that a serval had killed a scrub hare there, right in front of the volunteers. "So, should they count the hare?" he pondered.

In the afternoon, after resupplying in Victoria Falls, we arrived upriver for three nights in Zambezi National Park. At reception, Emmerson Mnangagwa's portrait oversaw the proceedings. We paid for fees and fishing permits under the glassy gazes of a dozen scruffy taxidermied birds in a cracked display. The only park map available was painted on the wall behind the receptionist. She kindly pointed out how to get to our camp, but the rest of her advice was perplexing.

"Where are good places to see game?" we asked.

"Everywhere," she said. "But don't take the loops." I thought she meant the animals would be near the river, not in the inland mopane veld. But no. She explained that the loop roads are in poor condition and rarely travelled. We would get stuck and never be found.

Victoria Falls is a short drive from Zambezi National Park. Besides enjoying sunrise from our remote camp, we chartered a boat to explore the river, fished for tigers and bream, and navigated the game drive routes, which include hours-worth of river frontage in addition to inland loops through the mopane veld and a track through Chamabonda Vlei.





We then asked whether we might have lions in camp. She just laughed. Did that mean we had no chance of seeing lions? Or that most campers are dragged from their tents and devoured?

As we left, she called after us. “Oh, and pack up your tents when you go out for the day. We’re very close to Zambia. The people might cross the river and take them.”

Our uneasiness eroded along the picturesque sandy road edging the mighty Zambezi. We passed elephant, zebra, waterbuck and impala on the way to our bush camp-site, Chundu 2. There, verdant green islands punctuated the river between white sandbanks. Hippos peered curiously at us, and pied kingfishers dive-bombed minnows. No people and no facilities... pure magic.

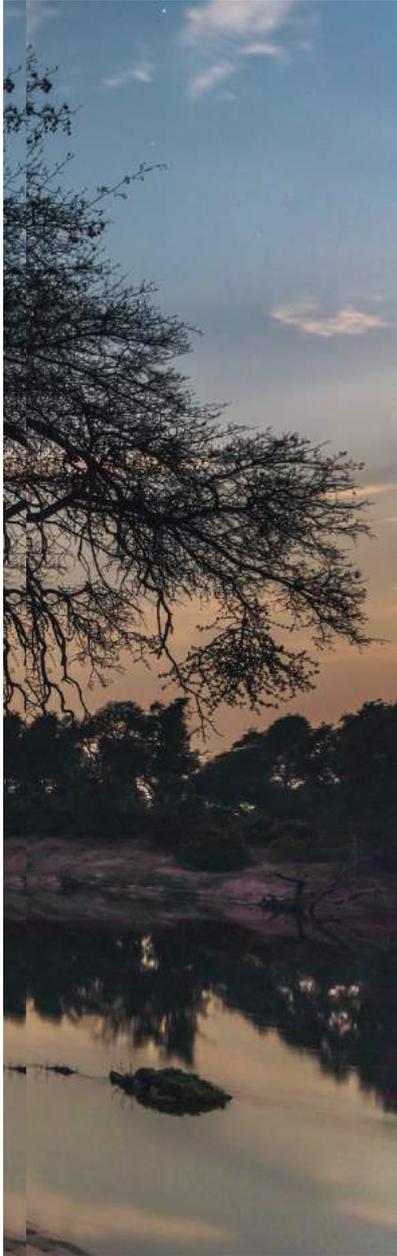
In the end, we didn’t pack our tents up for the day, and they weren’t stolen. We did take a few

loops, and weren’t stuck forever, and we didn’t see any lions, although we found old tracks in camp. We spent two lovely afternoons exploring fishing spots along the river. Despite plenty of bites, we failed to catch anything, but we enjoyed watching rock pratincoles swoop over the water.

For our last evening, we booked a boat trip on a small pontoon for a different view of the river. We also got some much-needed fishing lessons from our guide, Neville. Finally, Claire managed to land a tiger fish – a tiny success.

The next morning, as we were packing up, loud song from a nearby palm alerted us to a pair of elusive collared palm thrushes. After that, we spotted an African finfoot paddling between islands. Ticking these rare species was the perfect end to our stay. We spent the long drive home planning for next year’s count. ●

An African scops owl seemed surprised to see us on the infrequently travelled and little-maintained loop roads in Zambezi National Park. Our riverside camp spot provided luxurious sleeping conditions after the back-of-bakkie naps during the Hwange Game Count.



ROUTE GUIDE

Hwange Game Count

The count takes place under a full moon at the end of the dry season. For 2019, it's scheduled for 12-15 October. Check Wildlife and Environment Society Zimbabwe's website for updates (www.wezmat.org). Contact coordinator Pam Birch to apply (pbirch@yoafrica.com). Costs for SADC residents include game count entry fee (\$40 per person), accommodation (from \$30 per person for 3 nights camping or \$120-\$400 per unit for three nights at various chalet options), and discounted conservation fees (\$10 per vehicle and \$4 per person per day). Participants must also register for an annual WEZ membership (\$30 per person) in compliance with the organisation's research permit.

What to bring

Bring everything you need; don't expect to find provisions or fuel in the park. An extended fuel tank or jerry cans will come in handy. The nearest fuel station is in Hwange town, but they sometimes run out. For the count, bring a thermometer, pens, paper, binoculars, bird and mammal guides and warm clothes – it gets cold at night. No braaing during the count; bring a small gas stove and food that's easy to reheat. The tar road through the park is more pothole than tar, and side roads are rough. Bring a puncture repair kit and compressor. Some areas have deep sand, but organisers consider vehicle capabilities when assigning pans.

Zambezi National Park

Camping in Zambezi requires full self-sufficiency. There are no ablutions or facilities although you can fill water tanks at the gate. Fuel and supplies are a short drive away in Victoria Falls. Conservation fees (\$10 per vehicle, \$8 per person per day) and fishing permits (\$5 per person) are payable at the gate. Bush camp sites should be booked in advance (\$50 per night, www.zimparks.org). The 48km Zambezi River Drive is beautiful to explore. It has patches of deep sand requiring 4-wheel drive. High clearance is needed on the loops, which looked like they would be disastrous in the wet season. Rent a boat and skipper for \$75 per hour to explore the river (vicfallsfishing.co.zw). It's also worth exploring the 25km road in the Chamabonda Vlei section south of the Kazungula road. Access is via the road to Bulawayo.