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October 2004

Seasons greetings !

As last year was the year of the elephant for me, (please see below) I am dedicating 2004 to the leopard. I have a feeling its going to be a good year for them at "Kaingo"(leopard) as there were strong signs that another new female in the area was due to give birth sometime in December. This pretty leopard (as yet unnamed) mated with "Goldie's son" in early September. Goldie's son is locally dominant with a territory that extends from north of Kaingo past Fish Eagle Lagoon, to the Chambowa (Buffalo) river crossing (south past the ebony forest) – an area of 15 - 20sq km.



So with a bit of luck and lots of care at least one cub (out of the normal two) will survive and we will have some great viewing next May when the young one is taught by the mother how to hunt and survive right on Kaingo's doorstep.

2003 was the year of the elephant because it was the year we built our elephant hide/blind, got severely charged by a cow on a game-drive and were practically foster parents to two orphans (4 and 8yrs) that used Mwamba camp as their base and watering hole all season.

Elephant hide: this has turned out to be a great success. Built as a platform high up between two ebonies and a sausage tree, it offers its occupants the privilege of close up elephant watching as they congregate and drink before crossing the Luangwa River below (just downstream of Kaingo Camp). Plenty of interesting behaviour was witnessed (like the week old calf, which was crossed to the Nsefu side, once and was then deemed unfit each time for the return to our side for four weeks after that by her nervous first-time mother). There were also the times when the large resident crocodile was unwilling to move off the beach island making the elephants more nervous (see photo on web-site). Other excellent sightings from the hide included a lion kill, 600 buffalo drinking and a few sightings of leopards on the bank opposite.

Mad cow: The elephant charge occurred on an afternoon drive in early August. We were actually creeping up to a thicket in low gear, searching for a leopard that had been sighted earlier that day, when an elephant cow with calf who had been part of a small family group quietly feeding 100m away, suddenly turned and ran full speed towards us. I immediately turned to the car to face them "head on". The cow stopped a few meters away, lining us up with her one tusk while all the time swaying her head menacingly. I clapped my hands and shouted at her – and kept the engine running. After a moment however, she charged and put her one tusk through the "bull-bar" and started pushing us backwards; she did this twice while I applied brakes and hurled abuse at her. No one in the vehicle could quite believe any of this was really happening, such is the power of the moment. An elephant appears huge when it is a

few feet away just the other side of the hood, particularly when you are in an open Land Cruiser! She then took a few steps back preparing to come at us again when I decided enough was enough and managed to swerve the car round and speed away (with her following) but not before she took a swipe at the back seat. The guest in the back nearest to her did an excellent job of swerving his body out of the way as she flattened the armrest with her tusk. Fortunately everyone escaped unscathed – except for a good dose of adrenalin!

The amazing thing is that the next day I saw the same cow and calf and she was absolutely calm, letting me drive right past without even batting an ear. Was it a bad hair day or something to do with the leopard in the thicket? (I suspect the latter though I'll never be sure). I do though, have a nice little piece of ivory that broke off her tusk during the encounter as a souvenir – perhaps this is how to harvest ivory “organically”.

2003 Game-viewing Highlights:

Birds: resident Black-shouldered kites and Tawny eagles nesting; long crested eagle; young Pel's fishing owl; wood owl; close-up Carmine bee-eaters nesting in the river bank: (we set up a floating hide on top of a canoe-catamaran enabling us to be within 10m of the colony).

Lion plain: very productive as usual with over 50 elephant, 200 zebra and the 600 strong herd of buffalo seen almost daily throughout the season.

Cookson's Wildebeest: this handsome subspecies of the blue wildebeeste have been slowly building up in numbers in recent years. There are now 105 in the area around Mwamba – one of the largest herds found anywhere in the Valley.

Hippo fights: the hippo population remains high and “hide-corner “(pop. 200) was as entertaining as ever for hide trips and bush-breakfasts. Also, late in the season the largest crocodile that presides over that part of the river became very active in attempting to pull in unsuspecting impala, warthog and even a young elephant. Although never successful from this spot, he never gave up.

Aardvark: there were 3 sightings of this most elusive of nocturnal mammals. The last one was seen very close to a hyena den which use the aardvarks abandoned burrows.

River safaris: I will be conducting two, four-day river trips in March, (boating and game walks in and around Kaingo/Mwamba areas while staying at Kaingo Camp). There is still some space if anyone is interested in doing a river safari during the annual floods (max 6 guests per trip).

Looking ahead: We open Kaingo Camp on 20 May and Mwamba Bush Camp on 01 June and it is looking like it is going to be busy season in the Valley.

In order to show guests more of this beautiful park, this year we will be opening a new track into an area not very far from Mwamba Bush Camp where are resident roan antelope and Lichtenstein's hartebeest.

At the moment it is of course our “off-season” and this means occasional trips to camp by river to check the buildings etc and re-supply the watchmen and our privately funded scout patrols. The rains have been slightly below average so far but not as bad as in some countries further south where there is a full scale drought. I am holding thumbs though as I have a large crop of soya beans on the family farm in Mkushi, central Zambia, which will need rain up till the end of March.

In the meantime, salani bwino (stay well/take care).

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