

Walking in Mawimbi

A friendly request to shoot images for a new website resulted in Tammy Marlar spending four weeks immersed in a small corner of the Zambian bush surrounded by antelope, monkeys and leopards. And there wasn't a 4x4 in sight



A WhatsApp voice note on a grey London morning in October: ‘How do you fancy coming to Zambia?’ I’ve known Louise McCance-Price for nearly 30 years, our friendship closely weaved by a shared love of Africa and wildlife. Her latest project sees her helping to build Mawimbi Bush Camp, a remote tented wilderness retreat in a private concession in Kafue National Park. Images were needed for their new website and for social media. Not a moment’s hesitation on my part – in the space of 10 days my camera kit was packed and I was on my way.

Located on the banks of the great Kafue River, a more perfect location for game viewing is hard to imagine – the river view one way, and a large *dambo* (wetland) behind, gifting visitors a 360° open horizon. There’s an incredible concentration of creatures in this relatively small corner of Kafue due to

the diversity of the habitat and the relative peace enjoyed by the Zambian bush. Kafue National Park is the second-largest national park in Africa, spanning 14,000 square miles, plus the game management areas (GMAs), tripling the park’s size with these buffer zones between park and local villages. The safari industry, while long-established in other parts of Zambia (places like South Luangwa), is still relatively nascent in Kafue. Burgeoning international travel combined with the popularity of safaris has led to a deluge of visitors and literally hundreds of vehicles swamping the popular wildlife destinations across southern and eastern Africa, causing severe disruption and chaos to the wildlife’s natural rhythms and behaviour. But it’s still truly wild here in Kafue, like the land that time forgot.

Mawimbi is a private concession, meaning the area is just for its guests, far from the overtourism catastrophe that the great migration, for example, is becoming. The walking safari (or bush walk as the scouts term them) is the ultimate experience for wildlife photographers. You’re led by one of Kafue National Park’s eight scouts, trained in dangerous animal encounters, armed with rifles and intensely knowledgeable about the flora and fauna. We set out at first light. No vehicle, no engine noise, just the soft crunch of your boots on sun-baked earth and the breeze murmuring through winter thorn trees. The anticipation and expectation of what you might encounter as you set off at dawn on these benign ‘hunting’ forays goes to the very essence of what we do, and who we are, as nature photographers.

An intimate conversation

Zambia played a special role in the origins of the walking safari. It was here, in the 1950s, that British conservationist Norman Carr brought the idea to life in the vast wilderness of South Luangwa. A true visionary, Carr believed that to love the bush you had to walk through it – feel it, smell it, listen to it – without the buffer of a vehicle. His belief, that this connection fuels a desire to conserve, remains at the heart of Zambia’s bush-walking culture. Before Carr’s bold ideas, safaris were largely hunting trips for the colonial elite. He reimagined everything. By establishing Zambia’s first photographic safari camp, he introduced walking safaris as a way to honour wildlife rather than disturb it. His guests became students of the bush, learning to read its tracks and respond to its subtle rhythms. Every step becomes part of an intimate conversation with nature, and Kafue’s eight scouts are not only trained to deal with the dangers of the bush but are fonts of knowledge gained over a lifetime of an intimate relationship with their landscape. The conversations are rich in culture and a chance to meet those on the frontline of conservation. One scout, Crispin, tells me the cautionary tale of the honeyguide bird, the legend of which revolves around a unique, age-old partnership in Africa where the bird leads humans (and honey badgers) to wild bees’ nests. The bird, craving wax and larvae but unable to break hives, acts as a guide, expecting a share of the harvest in return for its services. Woe betide any creature not honouring the pact – next time, the honeyguide bird will eke out its revenge by leading you into the path of a dangerous animal. In essence, the legend emphasises a contract of co-operation: the bird finds the ‘treasure’, the human (or badger) opens the nest, and both share the reward, with dire consequences for greed. The scouts do something similar for their walking companions, following clues in the form of sounds, sights and smells, with the ability to lead you to treasure. We listen, we look, we smell, treading softly and speaking in whispers. There’s the childlike

Opposite Zambia is a major stronghold for endangered African wild dogs. Its scientific name, *Lycan pictus*, means ‘painted wolf’. *Right (top)* A Popela’s funnel-web wolf spider, which builds webs on the ground. *Right (below)* A young male leopard stalking prey in long grass. Within seconds, he had disappeared into the bush.





joy of following clues and discovering things, and the experiential learning that goes hand in hand. You detect the subtle but key differences in the spoor (the track or scent) of various species of antelope, which help you understand their behaviour.

We tease out wolf spiders by tapping a stick at the entry to their dew-laden lair. We find stripped and decaying impala carcasses hanging from trees and hear the alarm calls from monkeys and the ever-reliable lapwings telling us the resident leopard is heading back to her patch. Large meringue-like nests overhanging water suddenly appear everywhere, constructed by the southern foam-nest tree frog. They do this as a means of protecting the eggs from predators, with tadpoles hatching and dropping into the water after five days. You meet the ‘tunnellers’ and the ‘rollers’ – different types of dung beetles – those that bury their treasure where they find it, and others that lug it all the way home.

Primeval instinct

On foot, a long lens is a must. I carry my 500mm prime on a monopod for our walks, with my 100-400mm on a Spider belt around my hips. My 100mm and 180mm macro lenses are in my backpack. Without a big zoom, you cannot reconcile the threat you represent with the need to get as close as possible without spooking the animal.

Our ever-widening separation from the natural world means that most of us will walk out into the bush with heart thumping, feeling like the proverbial fish out of water. But on foot, you’re presented with the primeval realisation that, for many animals, man is the apex predator.



A 2023 study found that wildlife (including giraffes, leopards, hyenas and impala) was twice as likely to run, and abandon waterholes 40% faster, in response to human voices compared to the sound of lions. Even top predators like leopards will change their behaviour to avoid human contact.

To a large extent, this changes when you’re in a vehicle, and in many parts of southern and eastern Africa the wildlife has become completely desensitised to the constant stream of 4x4s that descend upon them once a location is shared on a network of radios. Definitely a case of them and us.

On foot, what you experience is primeval instinct, and you learn the three main phases of fear, based almost exclusively on your proximity. Detection comes when the animal sees, smells or hears you, and their first response will be increased vigilance. They will stop feeding, preening or resting to watch you and scan the environment.

The animal will constantly re-evaluate the danger as you move closer, often by freezing or trying to hide. They might also fly or move away, display defensive body language or overtly communicate. In the escape or defence stage, the animal will react with an immediate, high-energy response such as flight (running) or, if cornered, a direct fight.

On one of our afternoon outings, we spotted a pair of bateleur eagles in the near distance perched on different branches of the same tree. Gold dust! We weaved carefully in slow-motion through scrubland to get as close as we could. They watched us intently from their relatively safe vantage point, tolerating our presence as we ventured closer. But the female in particular began to display her anxiety and displeasure as we inched towards the tree.

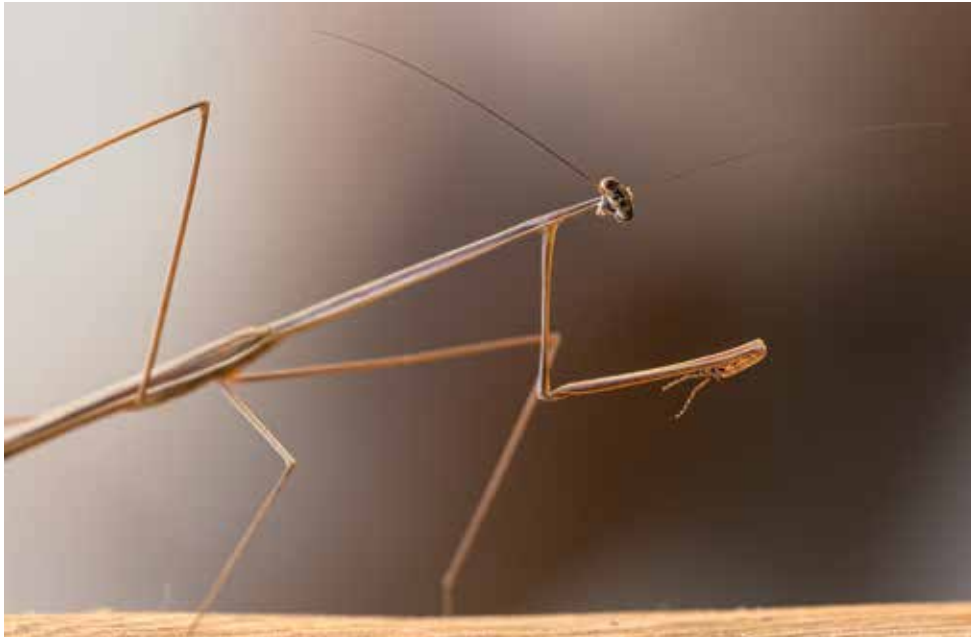
Moments later, she took to the air and joined her mate, displaying another universal truth – the one about safety in numbers – which life in the bush constantly reminds us of. But she allowed me just enough time and proximity to bank some memorable pictures of her. You have to be prepared out here.

Every walk is different, but most include a rest down by the river where the breeze



Opposite (top) A female Bateleur eagle, eyes fixed, extends her wings in a defensive display.
Opposite (below) Baby hippos (calves) stay extremely close to their mothers for protection and nursing, often riding on their backs.
Right (top) I’ve got my eyes on you – a Nile crocodile showing its striking markings, which serve as excellent camouflage.
Right (below) The puku is considered a flagship species of Zambia’s wet grasslands.

FIELD NOTES



TIPS FOR PHOTOGRAPHING IN THE BUSH

- » Wear good bush clothes (camouflage, greens, browns and khakis), comfortable walking boots and a hat. In Kafue, the tsetse flies, while not carrying the sleeping sickness pathogen, are especially attracted to blues and black. And their bites can be really vicious.
- » Know your settings and use your custom buttons to set up profiles for different scenarios so you can toggle quickly between settings – birds in flight, portraits etc. The action can happen quickly.
- » Be prepared for rain and carry rain covers for your rucksack and lenses – the scouts

- are pretty good weather forecasters, but you don't want to be three miles from camp when the heavens open in the rainy season.
- » Travel as lightly as you can for walking safaris, albeit with long lenses.
 - » Spend time observing behaviour so you can anticipate action, allowing you to capture rather than chase the perfect moment.
 - » Be sensitive to your impact in nature, give the natural world respect always, but do not be afraid. Wild animals will very rarely attack unless provoked or cornered. They are incredibly wary of humans.

is cool and I could take my time. Mawimbi currently has two groups of hippos with babies within walking distance. Crispin and I sat, often unnoticed, in the shade of the giant, root-rich trees alongside the riverbank, watching hippo TV. The young ones played and the adults sunk, surfaced and snorted with calming predictability within 50 metres of us.

A richer perspective

Nature's starting gun fires around mid-November with the arrival of the first rains. Act One sees the swarming of millions of termites, and the massive and sudden eruption (not entirely pleasant) provides an abundant, easy-to-catch food source for other insects, birds, monkeys, lizards and other animals. Birds of prey (particularly the yellow-billed kites) have a feeding frenzy.

The ground and trees, parched for the last six months, then explode with pollen-rich flowers, the air fills with mating dragonflies zipping hither and thither looking for the best place to lay their eggs, and the land turns from yellow to green almost before your very eyes.

As a result, my portfolio from my hallowed month at Mawimbi possesses a much richer depth. It includes butterflies, stick insects and millipedes (*chongololos* as the Zambians call them, which is also their word for train). It scales all the way from the ants on the ground to the mighty elephant, and all else in between. In my auditory and olfactory memory boxes are the resonating, deep *haw-haw* sound of the hippos rising from the river below us, and the scent of the honeysuckle that burst into flower overnight, attracting literally thousands of butterflies.

The timing of everything is so seamlessly and delicately interwoven here, its scale super-sized and its propulsion breathtaking. My precious days spent walking in this magical place, at such a pivotal inflection point between dry and rainy seasons, was a bucket-list experience. It gave me the opportunity to become an integral, albeit temporary, part of the bush at its most energetic and miraculous and gain an altogether richer perspective than you ever could as a voyeur atop a 4x4.

For further information about photography trips to Mawimbi, contact Tammy via Instagram (@tammymarlar) or email tammy@tammymarlar.com.

Left (top) A stick mantis with its remarkable hammer-shaped head.

Left (below) An open and shut case – a pair of foxy charaxes showing off their dorsal and ventral markings.