

MAMMALS SEEN IN MALAWI

November 24-29 2015

In November 2015 I was invited by the Malawi Tourist Board to tour the southern part of the country. It was primarily a birding trip (organised through *Birdwatching* magazine in the UK), but it was hard to avoid the mammals! The following are brief notes on the latter. My guide, who was quite exceptional, particularly on birds, was Abasi Jana. He works for Central African Wilderness Safaris, who arranged the trip faultlessly (<http://cawsmw.com/>).



Mount Mulanje

Panari Hotel, Nairobi

No, it's not in Malawi. However, owing to a mix-up by Kenya Airways I was mistakenly bumped off the last flight of the day to Lilongwe, and they put me up in this luxury hotel, which among other things, boasts the only skating-rink in Africa. More importantly, it overlooks Nairobi National Park, and I was able to see a few mammals distantly from my bedroom (indeed, from the bed itself), including the only Giraffes and Wildebeests of the short trip. There were 2 African Buffalo much closer.

Dzalanyama Forest Reserve.

Having reached Lilongwe, the first stop was 45km south-west of the capital. It is a large area of miombo (*Brachystegia*) woodland. Once full of mammals, the area now hosts very little. However, we did see an active hole of an **Aardvark**. The birding, on the other hand, was simply sensational.

In Lilongwe I stayed at the comfortable, homely Heuglin's Lodge, run by Central African Wilderness Safaris. It was very friendly, the food was excellent and there was a swimming pool.

Lilongwe Nature Sanctuary/Nature Centre

Right in the middle of the bustling town/city, this area of woodland and scrub along the Lingadzi River still holds some mammals. While birding we flushed a **Bush Duiker**, and there were **Vervet Monkeys** near the entrance.

Zomba

The old colonial capital, Zomba lies four hours south of Lilongwe. Its main attraction to the tourist is the Zomba Plateau above the town at 1800m, which offers hiking, fishing, pony trekking and so on. Most birders stay at the Sunbird Ku Chawe Inn (<http://www.sunbirdmalawi.com/index.php/kuchawe>), which commands truly wonderful views over the country below and, from my experience, first rate food. We visited the Botanic Gardens in search of the localised White-winged Apalis, and it was hard to avoid the **Yellow Baboons** here. Up near the lodge, we encountered several **Mutale Sun Squirrels** in the small patches of forest that remain, and also several **Blue Monkeys**.

Near the botanic gardens, a local natural history enthusiast told me he hears Galagos most nights in his garden, and there is a Civet midden on his roof.



Blue Monkey on Zomba Plateau

Thyolo Mountain

To visit the minuscule forest patches on this largely denuded hill, you stay on the Satemwa Tea Estate. I was fortunate enough to be ensconced at the colonial style Huntingdon House (<http://www.huntingdon-malawi.com/>), which was not only very comfortable but also had exceptionally friendly and helpful staff. At present you can hardly avoid seeing the rare **Harrison's Soft-furred Fruit Bat** here, because they gather in the porch at dusk and fly right about your head. They were identified as new to Malawi in July 2015 by African Bat Conservation, of whom more later. These bats are very rare.



Harrison's Soft-furred Fruit Bat, Huntingdon House, Satemwa, Thyolo

In the forest patches we saw **Blue Monkey** and **Mutable Sun Squirrel** again, and found the droppings of a **Blue Duiker**. There are also Porcupines in the area.

Mount Mulanje

One of the highlights of our visit was an afternoon trip to Mount Mulanje. Hands up who's heard of it – yet at 3002m it is the tallest peak between Kilimanjaro and South Africa. The hikes around here are refreshing and scenic, especially near to the tumbling waters of the river. I loved it and would jump at the chance for a go at the summit. Once again we saw **Blue Monkey** in the forest, but there must be lots of mammals in this, the only serious acreage of montane forest in southern Malawi.

Our visit was in the afternoon and we drove the 40 minutes or so back to Satemwa in the dark. Within one 1km stretch we nearly ran over an **African Hedgehog** and a (Black-eared) **Scrub Hare**, but didn't see any more mammals at all.

Liwonde National Park

This is one of the country's best known National Parks, and you can see why; it looks like a classic "safari" destination, with game animals everywhere. However, Liwonde – and Malawi itself – suffers from not being able to bring you encounters with all the "Big Five", and the large predators, in particular, are missing or are at least very rare. If you're desperate to see Lions, Leopards, Cheetahs and Giraffes you need to go elsewhere. However, the lack of predators means that walking trips

can be arranged. Another big advantage is the night drives, which are worth the visit alone.



View from Mvuu Lodge restaurant, with Waterbuck, Impala, Yellow Baboon and Warthog

There are two large mammals, however, you can hardly avoid. There are said to be 900 **Elephants** and 2000 **Hippos** in the park, in only 580 square kilometres, and it's easy to believe. The Hippos live abundantly along the Shire River on the western border of the park (it drains Lake Malawi) and you cannot miss them here. They are seen to best advantage on the boat safaris, which run from Liwonde town and from the lodges. The Elephants famously often swim across the Shire River to towns opposite, where they are a menace. From a tourist's point of view they are just exciting.



I stayed at the luxurious Mvuu Lodge, a few hundred metres upstream of Mvuu Camp (<http://cawsmw.com/index.php/lodges/mvuu-lodge/>). My accommodation was a very comfortable chalet set well away from the complex, giving it an exciting isolated feel, especially with gauze windows allowing the bush sounds to flood in. On one of my two nights there a terrific thunderstorm lasted throughout the hours on darkness, and I was awoken on my second morning by an elephant thrashing about just outside. The hippos could be heard grunting away at almost any time of day or night, while the low rumble of elephants was mainly a night sound. After sunset you must be accompanied by a member of staff whenever you go outside, summoning them if necessary with a drum placed in your room.



Several other mammals are seen easily around the Lodge and Camp, namely **Waterbuck** (seemingly everywhere), **Impala**, **Bushbuck**, **Warthog**, **Vervet Monkey** and **Banded Mongoose**. On daytime game drives it is very easy to see **African Buffalo** and **Greater Kudu**. If you keep your eyes open, you will surely also see **Smith's Bush Squirrel**.

During my short stay I made one excursion into an area of mopane woodland about 20 minutes' drive from camp. Here two of the park's other ungulates appear to be easy enough to find: we saw a small party of **Sable Antelope** while birding close to the fenced off edge of the Rhino enclosure (part of the park is fenced to house a Black Rhino introduction scheme). We also saw some **Lichtenstein's Hartebeest**.

One of the many delights of this national park is that you can do night drives, and I eagerly arranged two, for both nights I was there. Quite apart from seeing Pel's Fishing Owl and many of the species mentioned above, these seem to be very productive for other stuff. For instance, on my first night drive we saw **Marsh** and **Slender Mongoose** and a **Porcupine**. We also saw the eyeshine of a **Galago** sp.

On the second game drive we saw some of the same, but added two good ones, a **Blotched Genet** and, to my absolute delight, two **Four-toed Sengis**. Personally I had always wanted to see a Sengi, and it is clear that they are reasonably common. Indeed, Abasi says that he has seen Checkered Giant Sengi by the small swimming pool near the restaurant at Mvuu Lodge.

A current additional pleasure for mammal-spotters at Liwonde is an ongoing study of the area's bats, run by African Bat Conservation (www.africanbatconservation.org). This means that the researchers, who are based at Mvuu Camp, go out most evenings to mist-net the local bats and catch them in Harp Traps. Keen mammal-

watchers could probably go out with them on an informal basis; time and the weather prevented me going. I had a chat with a very helpful researcher called Matt Town who told me that they have now recorded more than 30 species at Liwonde and about 60 in Malawi as a whole. Some are very rare.

There was a roost of bats in a tree above the restaurant at Mvuu Lodge, which Matt identified as either **Wahlberg's** or **Peters' Epauletted Fruit Bats**.

African Bat Conservation sound like a brilliant organisation, who need both volunteers and, as ever, funds.



Vervet Monkey

Mammals seen in Malawi, 24-29 November 2015

Bush Elephant *Loxodonta africana*
Four-toed Sengi *Petrodromus tetradactylus*
Yellow Baboon *Papio cynocephalus*
Vervet Monkey *Chlorocebus pygerythrus*
Blue Monkey *Cercopithecus mitis*
South African Porcupine *Hystrix africaeaustralis*
Mutable Sun Squirrel *Heliosciurus mutabilis*
Smith's Bush Squirrel *Paraxerus cepapi*
Scrub Hare *Lepus saxatilis*
African Hedgehog *Aletherix albiventris*
Harrison's Soft-furred Fruit Bat *Lissonycteris goliath*
Peters'/Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bat *Epomophorus crypturus/wahlbergi*
Blotched Genet *Genetta maculata*
Marsh Mongoose *Atilax paludinosus*
Slender Mongoose *Herpestes sanguineus*

Banded Mongoose *Mungos mungo*
Common Warthog *Phacochoerus africanus*
Common Hippopotamus *Hippopotamus amphibius*
African Buffalo *Syncerus caffer*
Greater Kudu *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*
Bushbuck *Tragelaphus scriptus*
Bush Duiker *Sylvicapra grimmia*
Waterbuck *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*
Impala *Aepyceros melampus*
Lichtenstein's Hartebeest *Alcelaphus (buselaphus) lichtensteinii*
Sable Antelope *Hippotragus niger*

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