

Our Summer/Winter Vacation

By Micah and Moses Swanson-Mwamasika

My name is Micah Swanson-Mwamasika, and I am 10-years-old. For a long time, my older brother has influenced my love for mammals and so has the Mammal Watching Podcast. Now I'm inspired to write my first trip report about our summer/winter adventures. For better or worse, I will do so along with my older brother.

And my name is still Moses Swanson-Mwamasika, and, yes, I am, for better or for worse, also still Micah's older brother.



Moses and Micah at sunrise by the Ruaha River

At any time in our house, now in Harare, Zimbabwe, we might be discussing Japanese anime, Dungeons and Dragons, international soccer, and, most importantly, mammals. And because we are brothers, we also have become highly competitive. And sometimes we fight — even over species identification and who did or who did not see what and when and maybe once or twice some shoves, fists, bad words, and tears were involved.

Over our school break, technically “winter” in southern Africa while it was summer in the northern hemisphere, we had the opportunity to travel to western Zimbabwe, Botswana, and our other homeland, Tanzania. In total we, across those three countries and four protected areas, we saw 33 mammal species and that included 11 lifers for us both. The absolute top highlight was hiking off trail in Udzungwa Mountains National Park to see the endemic and endangered Sanje mangabey. But we will get to that in a bit. Let's start in the Matetsi Safari Area.

3 countries, 4 protected areas, 2 trips (June 2024, August 2024), 33 species, 11 lifers

Matetsi Private Game Reserve (western Zimbabwe)

Matetsi is about 136,000 acres of savannah right next to Zambezi National Park and Victoria Falls. We traveled to the area in June 2024 after school finished and hoped to see a lechwe, as it would be a lifer for us. As Matetsi is a private reserve, we also looked forward to going out at night and aimed to see a galago and other nocturnal species. Over the summer/winter, Micah also aimed to see his 100th mammal as he started the break at 92.



Female lion via redlight

Matetsi has an excellent tented camp and offers activities that are not always an option in national parks. We started with our first game drive not long after arriving via Victoria Falls. There is currently a drought in Zimbabwe and across southern Africa so it is an extremely challenging time for both rural human communities and wildlife. We easily spotted South African giraffe, Cape buffalo, blue wildebeest, greater kudu, bushbuck, plains zebra, African elephant, Chacma baboon, vervet monkey, and more. We heard the whining cry of a black-backed jackal and our guide told us it could be a sign that a bigger predator might be nearby. Later at dusk we came across a female lion guarding a buffalo carcass. It was awesome!

Finally, at night, Micah spotted a **southern lesser galago**. This became a point of contention between us and a bit of a scuffle broke out at dinner. (We also later spotted one off the coast of Tanzania.) Overall, we both recommend Matetsi as an excellent private conservation area with top level accommodation. It was the third time we used the Zimbabwean guide, Paul Ngorima, who has become the head guide at Matetsi this past year. He is also a fantastic birder, for those interested, of course. 😊

Chobe National Park (Botswana)

Chobe is an extremely popular national park just across the border of Zimbabwe in Botswana. We took a day trip to the park and back, which many people do via Victoria Falls. It seemed even drier, however, with wildlife concentrated around more limited water sources and many open patches of red dirt, savannah, and sands. We saw many of the same species we saw in Matetsi, including elephants, giraffe, Southern African tree squirrel, and a pride of lions. We also took a boat ride on the Chobe River, spotting many hippos. Early during the boat ride, we also viewed our first ever **red lechwe**. Overall, the day trip was worth it, however, Chobe also has a high concentration of tourists. There were many boats on the river and vehicles on the roads and we did get caught in a safari traffic jam. So go the travails of wildlife viewing in the summer/winter.



Lechwe near Chobe River

Udzungwa Mountains National Park (Southern Tanzania)

The Udzungwa Mountains are a part of the greater Eastern Arc Chain, with Afromontane forests stretching from southern Kenya to southern Tanzania in a crescent or arc shape. These mountains are chock full of endemic species and old growth forests. Our mother's family also comes from the Udzungwa mountains area on the Iringa side, and the national park takes its name from a clan of the Hehe tribe, the Wadzungwa; our grandparents are from the Wadzungwa clan, and it is possible we had ancestors who lived and hunted in the mountains.

We aimed to knock out four key primates with one stone in Udzungwa. We stayed at the Hondo Hondo Tented Camp, where most everyone stays when exploring the mountains. Apparently, Moses was there when he was like two-years-old, and he ran throughout the camp barefoot and ended up getting a chigger mite in his foot. (Moses: I dispute this account as I have no memory of it happening or of a doctor slicing my infected foot to get the mite out.)



Sanje mangabey



Angola black and white colobus



Udzungwa red colobus

There are many previous reports from Hondo Hondo, which means "hornbill" in Swahili. It's an ideal spot at the base of the Udzungwa Mountains. There's a nice loop trail from the camp as well that is a good way to get started hiking. We saw a blue monkey right away on the trail and then also the endemic **Udzungwa red colobus**. They were absolutely everywhere and almost impossible to miss. A lot of them were calm and allowed easy viewing opportunities. They are cute primates with their red tufts of hair, reminded me of their island cousins, the Zanzibar red colobus, which we saw some years ago. We sat there for 30 minutes before the troop soon departed, and we also headed back to the camp. We heard **Southern African tree hyrax** all night, and also a lot of traffic from the nearby road.

Throughout our stay, we used a FLIR thermal imaging device to spot nocturnal mammals. Unfortunately, we missed out on bushy tailed mongoose, palm civet, and Servaline genet.

However, while we waited for our meal, Moses managed to use thermal imaging to spot some creatures in the forest and soon saw their eyes gleaming in the darkness. It took some time to identify the species but after getting some blurry photos and consulting our field guide (Larger Mammals of Tanzania), we think we saw a pair of **blue duiker** mates possibly with a juvenile nearby. We spotted them the second night as well. But does anyone think these are **sun**i? The photos below are horrible. To us, the coat of the antelope seemed more grey than reddish brown.



The next morning, we woke before sunrise and soon headed into the national park after breakfast. At the park headquarters and visitors' center, we learned more about the history of Udzungwa and how the national park was formed only in 1992. We also learned more about the wildlife and human communities in the areas, as well as issues of human-wildlife conflict, poverty, and other challenges. The visitors' center is definitely worth 30-40 minutes.

Then, it was off to the most popular Sanje Waterfalls hike, going with a young park guide. We saw troops of more Udzungwa red colobus throughout the hike but right away a slightly larger primate caught our eyes — the **Angola black and white colobus**. And that was Micah's 100th mammal! A nice sighting, too. The hike took about 3-4 hours up to the falls, which were magnificent, and maybe 90 minutes back. We all went swimming in the chilly waters beneath the falls. We also saw a troop of **yellow baboons** along the trail, which, believe it or not, were first sightings for us.

The following day, we made the more rigorous hike up to Njokomani Waterfalls to see the habituated troop of Sanje mangabeys. The hike might have been shorter but it had many straight-up steep climbs. We went with another young Tanzanian guide, while wildlife rangers located the mangabeys ahead. Right from the start, we had some good luck. We saw something going from tree to tree — black in color with red on its face and tail. We are almost certain it was a **Swynnerton's bush squirrel**, as there is no other squirrel that dark in Udzungwa. At some point, the guide stopped us to show a medicinal plant and that's when a small mammal scurried across the trail. The guide whispered the word — shrew. A **Grey-faced sengi**! We literally saw it for no more than a few seconds at most. Now we know why this shrew is called the ghost. We searched the forest floor and the bushes to see it again but it was long gone.



When mammal watching in the forest, there is the added bonus of a neck workout

After a tough hike for more than two hours, we almost lost all hope. When we reached the peak of the trail and met the rangers, they told us the mangabeys had descended further back down the mountain. We would have to hike off-trail through thick forest to find them, but if they kept moving, it might be impossible, especially by a family of five. As we caught our breaths, we began to give up hope. But then we trudged forward, remembering an even more difficult hike we had made to see gibbons in Thailand several years ago and, how, at the very last moment at the end of the day, we finally saw white-cheeked gibbons high in the trees.



Now this is real hiking



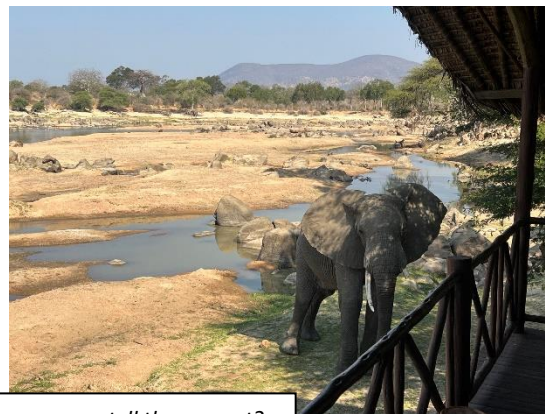
At Hondo Hondo Camp

It was so steep down, and slippery on the leaves and dirt, that a ranger had to carry our youngest brother sometimes. Then we saw what we had been hiking almost three hours for — the legendary **Sanje mangabey**. At first, they were in the distance in the trees. We continued down until we found ourselves in the thick of the forest just some meters away from several mangabeys feeding on fruits. Some even sat on the forest floor and didn't even seem disturbed by our presence. Their white faces and dark eyes really make for a strange look. Others literally dropped

fruits on our heads. There were dozens. We were surrounded by them. We sat down and observed them for an hour. Looking at all these primates, you can see human-like emotions and expressions. We hope one day to trek and see chimpanzees, gorillas, and maybe even orangutans and bonobos. But since we are not old enough, these amazing smaller primates in the forests will have to do. Once again, perseverance paid off.

Ruaha National Park (Southern Tanzania)

Ruaha National Park is the second largest national park in Tanzania. We really hoped to see some species like aardwolf or honey badger. For Moses, Ruaha also marked the 26th national park he has been to in the world. We immediately saw greater kudu, hippo, African elephant, zebra, impala, and waterbuck, many in areas around the Ruaha River. We stayed at Ruaha River Lodge, which is one of the older camps in the park and, as per the name, located right on the river. **Rock hyraxes** covered the kopjes, trees, and campgrounds. They were absolutely everywhere. Our cottage offered a perfect view of the river and it was great for mammal watching and birdwatching. An elephant came really close to our cottage.



These species are so obviously cousins. How can you tell them apart?

On a couple of drives led by solid guides from the camp, we saw more of the species already mentioned and also Cape buffalo, Kirk's dik-dik, **yellow baboon**, warthog, black-backed jackal, bushbuck, Grant's gazelle, Masai giraffe, banded mongoose, and fortunately did see **dwarf mongoose**. I previously reported I had seen one in Zimbabwe but have since identified that one as a slender mongoose. The dwarf mongoose were much more shy than banded mongoose and stayed in a small group. We thought that the group would be bigger because they are smaller and would need to band together for strength in numbers. As far as smaller mammals, at a picnic site, we did see what we believed to be an **ochre bush squirrel**. While we didn't get a good photo, our guide confirmed that's what he thought it was. (Note outside of Iringa town at an excellent lodge called Kisolanza, we also saw **savanna hare**.)

Overall, we wished we could have explored more of Ruaha and also had the chance to walk and go out at night. Don't get us wrong, it was an amazing opportunity and experience but we are always eager to see more. But then late in the day, we were reminded of the magic of mammal watching. Not only did we spot multiple prides of lions, we came across a male and a female in the middle of mating. They stopped after 20-30 seconds and we sat there and observed. Such random encounters are the best. It was a true education, and we were the only ones there. That won't happen in the overcrowded Serengeti or Ngorongoro.



Now that we are finally posting this, we are already back in school in Harare. Note that we also have a younger brother, Matthew, who is 8-years-old and already says that he wants to be a primatologist one day. But that's just because he loves all the Planet of the Apes movies so if he thinks he can join us and contribute to a joint trip report, he has another thing coming.

The beautiful thing, however, is that mammal watching never ends just because we are mostly back in our classrooms. Going on camping trips is actually part of every class each year at our school. Oh, and term break is right around the corner in October. Where to next?



Combined Trip Mammal List

Common name	Latin name	Udzungwa	Ruaha	Matetsi	Chobe	Kisolanza	x=seen *=heard only
Greater Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepiceros</i>		x	x	x		New species in bold
Bushbuck	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>		x	x			
Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>		x	x	x		
Grant's Gazelle	<i>Nanger granti</i>		x				
Blue duiker	<i>Philantomba monticola</i>	x					
Common waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>						
Red Lechwe	<i>Kobus leche</i>				x		
Masai giraffe	<i>Giraffa tippelskirchi</i>		x				
South African giraffe	<i>Giraffa giraffe</i>			x	x		
African cape buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer caffer</i>		x	x	x		
Blue wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>			x			
Hippo	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>		x		x		
Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>						
Plains Zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>			x			
African savanna elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>	*	x	x	x		
Grey faced sengi	<i>Rhynchocyon udzungwensis</i>	x					

Rock hyrax	<i>Procavia capensis</i>		x				
Chacma baboon	<i>Papio usrinus</i>			x	x		
Yellow baboon	<i>Papio cynocephalus</i>	x	x				
Sanje mangabey	<i>Cercocebus sanjei</i>	x					
Udzungwa red colobus	<i>Ptilocolobus gordonuram</i>	x					
Angola black and white colobus	<i>Colobus angolensis</i>	x					
Vervet monkey	<i>Chlorocebus pygerythrus</i>		x	x			
Mitis Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus mitis</i>	x					
African lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>		x	x	x		
Black backed jackal	<i>Lupulella mesomelas</i>		x	x			
Banded mongoose	<i>Mungos mungo</i>		x		x		
Dwarf Mongoose	<i>Helogale parvula</i>		x				
Savanna hare	<i>Lepus victoriae</i>					x	
Swynnerton's bush squirrel	<i>Paraxerus vexillarius</i>	x					
Ochre bush squirrel	<i>Paraxerus ochraceus</i>			x			
Southern african tree squirrel	<i>Paraxerus cepapi</i>			x	x		
Southern lesser galago	<i>Galago moholi</i>			x			