

Zakouma NP, Chad

Tom Clode, 9th - 15th March 2018

I've been fortunate enough to travel across much of Africa, and I often get asked where one "should" go for an African safari. The answer, of course, isn't straightforward – but for anyone with a real passion for wildlife, Zakouma NP has to be top of the list. Situated in southern Chad, Zakouma represents one of the last vestiges of what the Sahel must once have been. Despite having being decimated by poaching in the late 20th century, the recent management of African Parks has turned the park into a shining light in African conservation. The park is now heavily militarised (the bulletholes in the game viewing vehicles are testament to that, as well as relatively recent unrest) and holds good populations of game including lion, leopard and buffalo. The world's largest elephant herd famously resides here and they would be amongst my chief targets, as well as the vanishingly rare cheetah and wild dog in this region.

I travelled with Chalo Africa, a company run by the excellent Sangeeta Prasad. I'd heartily recommend Sangeeta and I see she has recently run a tour to Chad including Ennedi and Ouadi-Achim, where Dama Gazelle, Addax and Scimitar-Horned Oryx (all reintroduced) were observed. I flew into N'Djamena via Casablanca with Royal Air Maroc. I would highly recommend RAM as an airline, not least as their flights are often half-empty – my return flight with Ethiopian via Addis Ababa was deeply uncomfortable so I'd suggest RAM as an alternative. Upon arrival in N'Djamena, I spent one night at the Mercure (very comfortable and reasonably priced) and one at the Hilton (extremely expensive, but of typically luxurious 'US military hotel in 3rd world country' standard).

We were flown directly from N'Djamena to Zakouma on a charter flight arranged by Chalo Africa – an experience in itself – and the flight took about two hours. Our accommodation was to be Tinga Camp, the more budget option in the park. Camp Nomade is the luxury flycamp that tends to be situated at the iconic Rigueik Pan during high season – however I was quoted over £20k for a week here as a solo traveller. Tinga was a more reasonable £5k. Food and accommodation here was perfectly fine for a week. Our guide was Doug MacDonald, who put in great time and effort on our behalf, and whose knowledge was unparalleled – sadly a couple of characters in the group were determined to make his life difficult but he was a pleasure to be guided by.

9th March:

After an incredible flight over the vast expanse of nothingness that is southern Chad, our descent into Zakouma game us a taste of what was to come. Giraffe, of the rare Kordofan subspecies, were easily seen, as were ostrich, west African crocodile and Buffon's kob. After meeting Leon Lamprecht, the park director, and our guide Doug, we set off on the short drive to Tinga. We soon encountered our first Lelwel's Hartebeest, as well as green bee-eaters and huge numbers of black-headed heron. Roan, defassa waterbuck and olive baboon were the next mammals to be ticked off, with birds including yellow-billed kite, yellow-billed stork, common redshank, African spoonbill, hamerkop, knob-billed duck, fulvous whistling duck, common sandpiper, Namaqua dove and hooded vulture.

We settled into our accommodation at Tinga quickly – the small camp is situated by a riverbed, which makes for excellent birdwatching. Upstream there is a small pool filled with west African crocodiles, and a few lone bull elephants frequent it. Black rumped waxbill, little weaver, red-throated bee-eater, dark chanting goshawk, pied crow and red-billed quelea were easily seen here.

Our first afternoon drive began with a lovely sighting of Kordofan giraffe, followed by gymnogene and ostrich. We headed towards Rigueik Pan, famous for its wealth of mammal and bird life. As we

neared, we encountered increasing numbers of Lelwel hartebeest and giraffe and the birdlife swelled too – with bateleur, cattle egret, helmeted guinea fowl, Abyssinian roller and more getting early ticks. Bohor reedbuck were seen well, as were tawny eagle and long-crested eagle.

We spooked a Nile monitor up a nearby tree – he shot up at incredible speed – and also ticked off defassa waterbuck, collared pratincole, Abyssinian ground hornbill and African grey hornbill. The pan proper soon came into view, and the volumes of tiang here were astonishing – unparalleled by most herd densities elsewhere in Africa. Buffalo, marabou stork, black-crowned crane and lanner falcon completed our day as the sun began to set over the pan. Sundowners were enjoyed with an incredible view of hundreds of white-faced whistling duck, great white pelicans and black-crowned cranes.

A winding route back to camp began with a male lion kipping peacefully near the pan – a brief sighting was enjoyed before we intercepted a serval in the long grass a bit further on. This individual was blind in one eye, but seemed perfectly content – believe it or not, this was the first of 16 serval sightings we would have this week! An excellent start to the night drive was followed up by a distant honey badger, common genet and a huge African civet. The sighting of the night for me was a very large tom serval near staff housing – he looked like he had been living healthily off scraps for some time. Very satisfied with day one, we returned to camp.



The second of 16 serval sightings we enjoyed in Zakouma

10th March:

Out early this morning, our first spot was a young Buffon's kob, followed by a small herd of buffalo. As the sun rose we encountered a mother Patas monkey with a tiny youngster, although the sighting was distant. Red-fronted gazelle were seen well near the runway – although we decided we preferred the name 'Sahel Gazelle' as a more poetic alternative. The remainder of the early morning yielded Lelwel hartebeest, African fish eagle and red-billed quelea. We spent mid-morning enjoying

the challenge of photographing green bee-eaters perching and spur-winged geese clumsily landing, where we also picked up warthog and Kordofan giraffe. Buffalo and wattled lapwing were observed at a small pan nearby, before we were directed towards two male lions on a kill. The heat of the day was building and the lions were content in the shade with their meal, so after an enjoyable twenty minutes, punctuated by shots of secretary bird, Abyssinian roller and yellow-billed kite, we left them to it. A juvenile black-crowned night heron, Patas monkey, a Nile monitor and a pair of long-crested eagles completed our morning drive.



Lion cubs – we nearly stepped on them!

Our afternoon drive began with a handsome male giraffe, woolly necked storks and a large troop of Patas monkeys. A lone daggha boy posed beautifully and a few moments later we decided to take a brief walk in the fading daylight – we hopped down from the vehicle and, to our great surprise, the bush erupted with a pride of frightened lions! A large pride caught us completely unawares, so we jumped back into the vehicle and trundled after them. The pride of a dozen lionesses and cubs were far more relaxed within a few minutes and treated us to an hour-long sighting – heaven!

After a quick sundowner, we set out in search of what Zakouma had to offer after dark. Numerous serval were seen, as well as genet, civet and white-tailed mongoose – but the undoubted highlight was the shout of “cheetah” from Doug... although in fact it turned out to be a leopard! A beautiful leopardess was hunting kob and let us follow her remarkably calmly, despite the lack of habituation in this area. As she stalked, we waited patiently, enjoying sensational views of the Milky Way. Every now and then we’d scan with a light to reconfirm her presence, and we waited over an hour for her to make her move. Eventually, she simply melted away into the bush – but what an awesome sighting! The only other sighting of a note was a Greyish owl as we returned to base.

11th March:

We kicked off with a brief and uneventful walk this morning before reverting to the vehicle. Our drive provided us with red-fronted gazelle, buffalo, olive baboon, Lelwel hartebeest, common warthog, Kordofan giraffe, kowal, ostrich, saddle-billed stork, roan, African openbill and grey heron.

At midday we made the decision to go in search of the vast elephant herd to the south rather than return to Rigueik Pan. En route we encountered our first greater kudu herd of the trip – the western greater kudu is rarely seen and a prized hunting trophy. After a long drive, we quietly positioned ourselves in a riverbed the elephants frequented – a feeding frenzy of pelicans and marabou storks quickly caught our attention. Remarkably, within five minutes of arriving we were approached by rangers on horseback patrol, giving an insight into how well protected these elephants are. The herd numbered around 550 during my visit but catching a glimpse was tricky – they disappeared into the bush so easily. After toing and froing for some time, we eventually caught up with a handful of the herd on the far bank – even seeing a pair mating – before we were confronted by a curious male. He approached each side of the vehicle in turn before deciding, after careful consideration, that we didn't warrant any further investigation.

We positioned ourselves slightly downstream of this encounter, keeping ourselves entertained with photographs of pied kingfishers. Slowly but surely the elephants began to gravitate towards the river – it's hard to describe the sight of over 500 elephants drinking, playing and fighting in the small pool of water just yards away for over half an hour...but needless to say it's not a sight I will soon forget.



A small subset of the c.550 elephants who came to drink as we watched

Our drive back to camp yielded a pair of African fish eagles locked in combat, three shy adolescent lions, spotted hyena and the usual nocturnal maelstrom of serval, civet, genet and honey badger.

12th March:

The next morning was earmarked for a trip to a local market, although we managed good views of buffalo, west African crocodile and African sacred ibis en route. This direction was our best bet for wild dogs, as the key population in this area is to the west of the park in Siniaka-Minia, although this trip didn't yield any Lycaon. Our drive back through the park was largely uneventful.

Our afternoon drive to Rigueik was filled with the usual game, as well as a very rare black-and-white morph of the African paradise-flycatcher. We spent much of the afternoon and evening sitting with the displaying black-crowned cranes and watching ribbons of red-billed quelea drink around the giraffes and tiang on the plain. As darkness fell, we noticed a distant buffalo herd kicking up a lot of dust – a quick binocular check revealed a pride of lions in hot pursuit. We sped after them, but by the time of arrival the lions had settled down again, padding slowly away from the buffalo. We followed them for nearly 45 minutes, once accidentally driving through the middle of Camp Nomade, picking up African civet, serval, white-tailed mongoose and Congo gerbil en route. We located another large pride of lions about half an hour away but they were so sedentary we decided our efforts were best targeted at getting a good night's sleep at Tinga.



Black-Crowned Cranes and Kordofan Giraffe

13th March:

This morning began with a lone daggha boy and we were soon onto tracks of two male lions – within half an hour we had located one, a beautiful blonde youngster. He was nervous, though, so we left him quickly, but we were pleased with a successful trail. Little did I know we were about to witness what I've always said is my greatest sighting ever!

We set up stall at Rigueik after noticing huge flocks of red-billed quelea drinking there, in turn amassing kites by the hundreds. Now, I know a bird sighting may make mammal-watchers wince, but this was truly spectacular – we estimated about 20 million quelea were gathered around a single

pan, the sky positively black with birds. So many were there that branches on nearby bushes were snapping off – an incredible experience.

The remainder of our drive was punctuated by a giraffe kill surrounded by vultures, a delightful trio of female ostrich, Abyssinian ground hornbill, waterbuck and tiang.

The plan for this afternoon was to enjoy a night of luxury at a flycamp (set up for Nomade guests) in the south near the elephants. Our drive south took in kudu and roan, before we quickly located a sizeable portion of the elephant herd. Our sighting wasn't quite as spectacular as our previous one, although still very impressive, and we quickly moved on to photograph a large breeding herd of buffalo. Our evening drive picked up crested porcupine and a distant pair of lion, before we retired to a well-earned bush dinner.



The iconic Rigueik Pan

14th March:

Our first spot this morning was a skittish lioness who avoided closer inspection by darting off into the bush – a good start, quickly followed by a more protracted, though still somewhat abridged, sighting of the elephants as they paraded into the thick bush by the river. We also saw buffalo and roan before we set off in search of cheetah – but disaster! An untimely flat tyre saw our plan foiled, and we were left to settle with Buffon's kob, banded mongoose and a Nile monitor. A long drive back to camp picked up little, although a first for me was a serval kitten, as well as a fleeting glimpse of a black mamba. As we ate that night, we were startled by nearby roaring and we poked our heads out to see a mating pair of lions about twenty yards from the kitchen – that night the windows in my room literally shook in their frame!



Our beautiful Chadian leopardess

15th March:

Our final morning was spent exactly how you would want it – surrounded by lion cubs! Within twenty minutes we had found a group of four cubs waiting for the pride to return. They were intensely curious and made for excellent photos. Just before we departed, the lionesses returned and the cubs bounced away into the bush – a perfect way to end a great trip!

Species list:

African Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) – *easily seen throughout the park*
African Bush Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) – *single herd observed in south, lone males near Tinga*
African Civet (*Civettictus civetta*) – *a dozen seen over the course of several night drives*
African Savanna Hare (*Lepus microtis*) – *several seen at night throughout the park*
Banded Mongoose (*Mungos mungo*) – *one troop seen in south-west of park*
Bohor Reedbuck (*Redunca redunca*) – *singles and pairs seen at Rigueik*
Common Genet (*Genetta genetta*) - *easily seen on night drives*
Common Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) – *pod in Cameroon as landing in N'Djamena*
Common Warthog (*Phacocoerus africanus*) – *easily seen at Rigueik*
Congo Gerbil (*Taterillus congicus*) – *one seen near Rigueik*
Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix cristata*) – *one seen near the flycamp in the south of the park*
Giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis* ssp. *antiquorum*) – *countless seen every day*
Greater Kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) – *one herd seen twice in arid area south of Tinga*
Honey Badger (*Mellivora capensis*) – *four seen, one lone and three together, near airstrip*
Kewel (*Tragelaphus scriptus*) – *a handful seen near Rigueik*
Kob (*Kobus kob* ssp. *kob*) – *easily seen throughout park*
Lelwel Hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus* ssp. *lelwel*) – *reliably seen throughout the park*

Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) – *one seen between Tinga and Rigueik at night*
Lion (*Panthera leo*) – *sightings most days of the same four individuals near the “lion house”*
Olive Baboon (*Papio anubis*) – *easily seen throughout the park*
Oribi (*Ourebia ourebi*) – *pairs easily seen throughout the park*
Patas Monkey (*Erythrocebus patas*) – *large troops easily seen across park*
Red-Flanked Duiker (*Cephalophus rufilatus*) – *one seen near the airstrip*
Red-Fronted Gazelle (*Eudorcas rufifrons*) – *easily seen near the airstrip*
Roan (*Hippotragus equinus*) – *easily seen across the park*
Serval (*Leptailurus serval*) – *16 seen across multiple night drives*
Spotted Hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) – *two individuals seen near Tinga*
Tantalus Monkey (*Chlorocebus tantalus*) – *easily seen from Tinga*
Tsessebe (*Damaliscus lunatus* ssp. *tiang*) – *seen in huge numbers at Rigueik Pan*
Waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus* ssp. *defassa*) – *seen easily at Rigueik*
White-Tailed Mongoose (*Ichneumia albicauda*) – *at least one seen each night*