

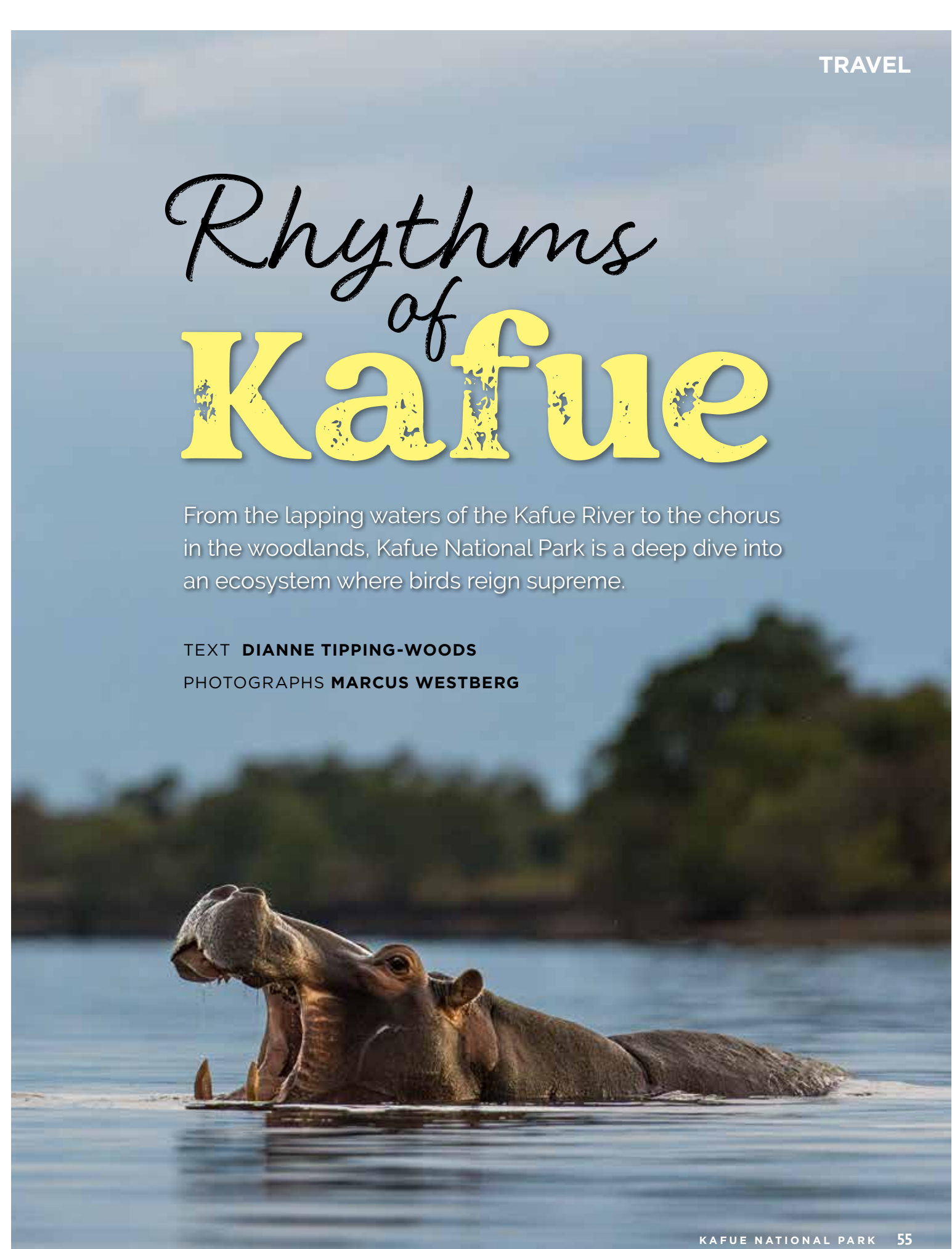


Rhythms of Kafue

From the lapping waters of the Kafue River to the chorus in the woodlands, Kafue National Park is a deep dive into an ecosystem where birds reign supreme.

TEXT **DIANNE TIPPING-WOODS**

PHOTOGRAPHS **MARCUS WESTBERG**





‘haplin’s Barbet?’ Guide Aaron Shambotu tilted his head and scanned the canopy around Fig Tree Bush Camp. ‘You’ll be very lucky if you see it, but I know a few places where they appear.’

Sycamore figs are the main food source and nesting site for Zambia’s only endemic bird species, also known as the Zambian Barbet, and it thrives in the woodlands surrounding this tree-top camp in central Kafue National Park. With an estimated population of about 2000, the striking, mainly white bird is classified as Vulnerable by the IUCN. It inhabits this small area of Kafue National Park and rarely appears elsewhere.

But I hadn’t travelled to Zambia’s largest national park specifically for the rare barbet and spent much of my 10-day visit watching a wide variety of birds in some of the country’s most beautiful landscapes. BirdLife International has identified Kafue as one of Zambia’s 42 Important Bird Areas. The park protects

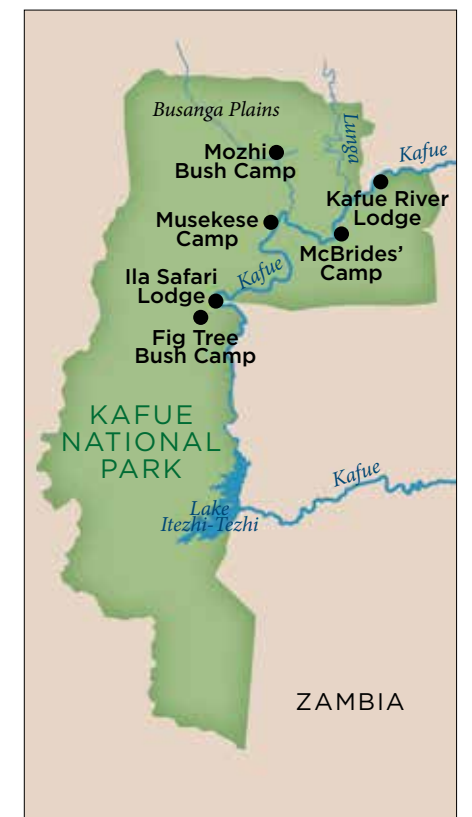
globally threatened species like the Slaty Egret, Lesser Kestrel and Denham’s Bustard; restricted-range species like Black-cheeked Lovebird; biome-restricted species like the Red-capped Crombec, White-backed Night Heron and Black-backed Barbet; and globally significant congregations of birds like African Openbills, Spur-winged Geese, Wattled Cranes and Caspian Plovers.

Much of Aaron’s birding begins with listening. ‘You get to know the vegetation types and the birds that frequent >

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them. This tells you what you can see,’ he explained as we set out for our afternoon game drive, hoping to hear the barbet’s call. Overnight rain – one of the first storms of the season – had drawn bee-eaters out in force. White-fronted and Swallow-tailed bee-eaters flashed bright hues as they hawked for insects. We spotted a Black-backed Barbet, its bright red crown contrasting with the dark bark as it called in rapid bursts. We also saw Temminck’s Coursers, Lesser Kestrels and Violet-backed Starlings. To add to the vibrant colour, velvet mites crawled everywhere, fiery red against the black soil.

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As my journey through the north and central sections of Africa’s fifth largest national park neared its end, I reflected on its start: an afternoon boat safari from McBride’s Camp. The Kafue River lapped against the hull as hippos’ rounded ears broke the surface, followed by their bulbous, watchful eyes. ‘There, African Finfoot!’ called guide Catherine Hoy. I glimpsed something slipping between tangled roots of mature water pears. Then the enigmatic waterbird emerged, sleek, dark-bodied, almost serpentine. ‘You don’t come to Kafue for the usual safari experience. It delivers so much more,’ replied Catherine when I asked what she loved about guiding in the park.

As we drifted down the river, jacanas, egrets and African Openbills busied themselves in the shallows. African Fish Eagles perched on branches and a flock of Sacred Ibises flew across the river. Agile swallows moved with the boat. ‘Look out for Pel’s too,’ advised Catherine,

Notable birds in Kafue National Park

Chaplin’s Barbet (endemic), Black-cheeked Lovebird (near-endemic), Shoebill, Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler and Red-crested Korhaan (all restricted range in Zambia), Gull-billed Tern and White-breasted Cormorant (occurring locally), Black-eared Seedeater, Black-backed Barbet, Böhm’s Bee-eater, Denham’s Bustard, African Finfoot, Racket-tailed Roller, African Spotted Creeper, Collared Palm Thrush, Wattled Crane.

scanning the riverbanks for the elusive fishing owl. Near the camp, she pointed to where African Palm Swifts had glued their cup nests – crafted from scavenged feathers and plant material – to the fronds of makalani palms before laying their eggs. >





By the time I left McBride’s for Kafue River Lodge the next day, I had seen Böhm’s Bee-eaters nesting at the camp-site and swum in natural hot springs, watched by vocal Meyer’s Parrots. I had tried to imprint the melodic song of a Brown-crowned Tchagra on my mind. And when an elephant had wandered past my bungalow (the team had cautioned us to listen for breaking branches), I had begun to appreciate a place so wild that for half the year large parts are inaccessible to humans.

Almost the size of Wales, Kafue National Park is managed under a 20-year conservation collaboration agreement between African Parks and the Zambian government to strengthen conservation,

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enhance law enforcement and improve tourism infrastructure. The collaboration protects Kafue’s populations of lions, leopards, elephants and other iconic mammals, along with about 500 bird species recorded across its diverse habitats, from sprawling wetlands to dense riverine forests and dry mopane woodlands. These woodlands shelter another special resident: the Black-cheeked Lovebird. This species has suffered local extinctions in Namibia and Botswana, which makes Kafue one of the best places to see it in the wild.

From McBride’s I had taken a long dirt track to Northern Kafue Safaris’ river camp through a kaleidoscope of burnt orange, deep purple, golden yellow and vivid green – the park’s famed miombo woodlands. Some broad-leaved miombo trees had burst into crimson and pink, while others stood bare against the sky. A Racket-tailed Roller flashed electric blue as it swooped past. A herd of sable antelope darted through the trees. Guide John Hamdula stopped the vehicle to let us listen to a White-browed Coucal’s haunting, rising call. We swatted at tsetse flies, though they weren’t as bad as expected. Then came Arnot’s

Chat, Levillant’s Cuckoo, Black-bellied Bustard, Black-chested Snake Eagle... John explained how miombo woodlands provide crucial habitat for many birds, including six woodpecker species, Souza’s Shrike, Yellow-bellied Hyliota, Green-capped Eremomela and more.

John was part of the BirdWatch Zambia Training facilitated by African Parks. ‘His passion is contagious and he’s becoming quite renowned,’ says Ian Pollard, Kafue’s commercial and enterprise manager. ‘Investing in local guides like him unlocks the true potential of avitourism for travellers while empowering communities.’

That afternoon, John guided us onto the water near the confluence of the Kafue and Lunga rivers. We drifted past Rock Pratincoles – delicate birds with ruby-red bills and subtle eye markings – clustered on sun-warmed boulders. A family of Egyptian Geese created a perfect reflection on the water. We saw African Spoonbills, Common Sandpipers, Squacco and Black herons and African Wattled Lapwings. Later we cruised the Lunga River, its deep waters lined with wild pear trees. More finfoots, then an African Cuckoo, Yellow-billed Kites, Hamerkops, >



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Great White Egrets and Striated Herons appeared. Schalow's and Ross's turacos flashed green and purple respectively in the dense foliage. Sunlight reflected off the water, casting dazzling light on the trees, and a leopard slunk along the bank.

Much smaller than the Lunga and Kafue, the Moshi River flows from a natural spring near Mozhi Bush Camp, our next destination. As we arrived, a Bateleur – guide Chrispin Ndlovu's favourite bird – stretched its open wings toward the sun, sunbathing still as a statue to warm the oils of its feathers. With a flick, it folded its wings neatly, ruffled its chest feathers and turned its piercing eyes to the horizon. 'It looks like a cow's horn when it flies,' Chrispin said as the bird took off, its legs extending beyond its tail feathers and wingtips curving upward, its distinctive shape enabling it to manoeuvre easily through banking turns and sudden dives.

The following day, Chrispin led us to Busanga, the fabled plains where black mud dries like cement, bogs down tractors and gives birth to lilies. This seasonally flooded wetland, recognised under the Ramsar Convention for its global conservation importance, transforms into an avian spectacle when the waters rise. 'It's dry now, but so much life hides beneath the cracked mud,' explained Chrispin. 'When the rains come, it will explode.' Large flocks of African Openbills foraged for freshwater molluscs alongside Saddle-billed Storks, African Black Ducks and an array of herons, egrets and both African and Lesser jacanas.

African Fish Eagles, Zambia's national bird, soared overhead. At each sighting Chrispin quizzed us. 'Male or female?' he'd ask, explaining that females are larger and have a white chest apron. Along with the birds, we spotted wildebeest, lechwe, sable, buffalo, Defassa waterbuck, puku, kudu, impala and roan.

We encountered two lion prides, one lounging beneath a giant fig tree that had colonised a termite mound. 'Their style here in Busanga is "kill and chill",' joked

Chrispin, referring to the abundant prey that sustains the region's thriving predators. Nearby, White-backed, Hooded and Lappet-faced vultures feasted on a fresh carcass, while in the distance Wattled Cranes stalked along streams. One of the park's many globally threatened species, Africa's tallest crane is closely tied to wetland ecosystems.

These wetlands and woodlands, and the Kafue Flats beyond the park's border, contribute to the health of the Kavango–Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, which spans Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The park provides breeding and feeding grounds for the migratory waders, herons and storks that move between the Okavango Delta, Zambezi River floodplain and Victoria Falls wetlands.

Many of Kafue's camps line the banks of the Kafue River and its tributaries, but Musekese Camp sits alongside a large *dambo*, or seasonal wetland, called Eden. Sightings here were also spectacular; within minutes of leaving our Bedouin-style tents we had spotted an African Harrier-Hawk, an African civet, elephants and some lions with cubs. A White-browed Scrub Robin sang as we set out on a morning drive – and soon stopped to look at a Broad-billed Roller and some Trumpeter Hornbills. 'Look out for leopards,' guide James Mulenga reminded us. Researchers at Musekese Conservation, the camp's non-profit partner, have documented 21 known individuals in this area alone, along with well-studied lion prides. Soon James found a leopard known as 'Kinky Tail' on a fresh puku kill.

I ended my trip back where I had begun, on the broad expanse of the Kafue River, but this time aboard Ila Safaris Lodge's silent electric boat. Kingfishers – Giant, Pied and Half-collared – patrolled the water. But despite the guides' best efforts, we never found a Chaplin's Barbet. As storm clouds gathered on the horizon, I could only imagine what else we humans would miss in this vast wilderness once the camps were packed away and water ruled the wild for the next six months. ♦