



**NATURE  
ENCOUNTERS**  
TOURS & TRAVEL LTD.

# The Magic of Zambia

## March 2005

By Mona Keith, Zookeeper/Tour Leader



South Luangwa National Park was not shy in sharing its treasures with us. It provides one of the best opportunities to see one of my favorite animals, the hippopotamus! The Luangwa River boasts at least 50 hippos per kilometer, one of the highest densities anywhere in Africa. We were able to observe them going about their daily and nightly routines. From lounging in

the lagoons scarcely visible beneath the dense floating mat of Nile cabbage, to magnificent full views during our evening and morning game drives. At night we could hear them loudly munching the grass and “dung-spraying” outside our cabins. We had one close encounter when one hippo was late retreating to the water one morning. His proximity to the path held up our arrival to breakfast but offered an unrivaled view of the huge behemoth.

The valley also offers the unique opportunity to see one of the 9 subspecies of giraffe. The Thornicroft giraffe is found only in the Luangwa valley. We saw them everyday and their elegance and attentive gaze made a special connection with all. We also spent many enjoyable moments watching the intricate social behavior of many of the animals. From the non-stop activity of a troop of baboons, the energetic “pronking” of impala, to a lioness casing out a group of impala for their potential as a meal once it got dark.

Our excellent night drives offered a glimpse into a world we so seldom see. At sunset as we chatted around our vehicle enjoying a drink, a lone elephant, the largest animal on earth, loomed out of the darkness without a sound! Once back in the vehicle and using a spotlight we marveled at seeing the bright-eyed elephant shrews, genets hunting in the grass, galagos clambering about in the trees, nightjars flitting about in the headlights of our vehicle, hippo, hyena, lion and more. We could smell the huge herd of buffalo before we could see them and then we were engulfed in them, hundreds of animals milling around.

Just when we thought the elusive leopard was going to elude us, only a few minutes away from the Lodge, on our last night drive, a gorgeous male leopard appeared .....WOW!

The birdlife in the valley is splendid. Appropriately, we reached our 100<sup>th</sup> bird species with the Trumpeter Hornbill! In the heat of the afternoon, when most of the animals seek shade and rest, we followed suit. While relaxing we enjoyed two presentations and left donations for 2 ongoing projects in the area. The first was on animal communication by the well-known safari guide and biologist, Derek Solomon. He spoke of the 'dawn chorus' of birds ... "Hey! I survived the night and this territory is still occupied"; elephants communicating for vast distances using ultrasound both above and through the ground; the complex communication of hippos both above and below the water; the Puku's whistle, the impala's grunts, and more. It opened a new aspect of game drives for the group learning to listen as well as to look. For the second, Rachael McRobb gave a presentation on the courageous efforts of the South Luangwa Conservation Society and its anti-poaching efforts, striving to preserve the valley's incredible wildlife for future generations.

We ended our adventure with a visit to Victoria Falls. With the Zambezi River close to full flood the deafening sound of the water plummeting 100m into the gorge could be heard from our hotel. Donning ponchos and umbrellas in a feeble attempt to protect our camera gear, we took in all sensations that only one of the seven natural wonders of the world can produce.

A happy but tired group returned home to Canada – some with luggage . . . . some without – oh the perils of travel - full of memories of a wonderful land and great wildlife!