

life, death & resurrection

Once a lush wildlife wonderland, the Liuwa Plain in western Zambia flatlined at the hands of poachers and hunters. Now, like the proverbial phoenix, it is recovering from its misfortunes, animal by animal. **Dale R. Morris** visited this remote region to witness the process for himself.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY DALE R. MORRIS/GECKOEYE.COM ▶



Imagine a seemingly endless plain where wildebeest gather in such gargantuan numbers that they almost rival those of the Serengeti migration. Along with zebras, buffaloes, tsessebe and hartebeest, they stretch as far as the eye can see, to the margins of the woodlands, where eland and roan fringe the crowd. A pack of African wild dogs trot off towards an unbroken horizon, a cheetah family watching them from atop a termite mound. Amongst the long golden grasses, a pride of lions, some 20 animals strong, focus on outflanking a huge herd of buffaloes which have yet to see them. They are also keeping an eye on the four people who are fishing nearby in a flower-rimmed pool.

Vultures and marabou storks gather around the men's pile of catfish and a hyaena lopes with malicious intent, but a small boy has been employed as a scarecrow and with a clap of his hands he scatters the would-be thieves. The buffaloes turn to see what the commotion is about, and that's when the lions attack. This is Zambia's Liuwa Plain – as it was 200 years ago.

I watch as thunderclouds build over the plain in preparation for the annual inundation – a flood of biblical proportions that will turn 11 000 square kilometres of grassland into a lake. The landscape is stunning. It's as flat as a pancake and covered with pretty pink lilies, but there are almost no animals; a scattering of wildebeest and a hyaena are the only ones to be seen. There are no buffaloes and the lions that hunted them have died out or been shot by trophy hunters. A few zebras dot the plains and no-one has set eyes on an eland, wild dog or cheetah for years. This is the Liuwa Plain, just seven years ago.

It's a miserable story. But we've all heard of the phoenix, haven't we? That beautiful mythical bird that rises from the ashes of destruction? Well, metaphorically, the phoenix does exist and, thanks to the privately run African Parks Network (APN), the Liuwa Plain and the national park that bears its name have risen and are almost ready to fly.

'In the Western world we have a perception that it is the government's duty to take care of national parks,' said Craig Reid, APN's man in Zambia. 'In affluent societies this is made possible because taxes are set aside for that purpose, but in many African countries the

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government simply does not have sufficient funds. Salaries don't get paid, there is no equipment for staff to do their jobs, morale drops and poaching and encroachment go unchecked.'

It's a continent-wide problem, and one that APN deals with by attracting and managing private funding that is used (amongst other things) to train new and existing employees, pay them fairly and equip them with the tools necessary for their tasks.

'We now have sufficient competent scouts as well as vehicles, motorbikes, quad-bikes, motorised boats and amphibious vehicles. There's also a spotter plane, which is extremely effective. You can see a great deal of what's going on from up there.'

Since the APN took control in 2003, poaching has come to a standstill and animal numbers have skyrocketed. Zebras are up by 82 per cent, tsessebe by 215 per cent and the lechwe population, which almost went extinct, is now considered stable.

Even more impressive is the increase in wildebeest numbers and the re-establishment of a once-mighty migration. 'Currently, we have an estimated 50 000 animals, up from a mere 15 000 in 2003,' said Reid, 'and who knows how big the migration will be? Perhaps 90 000 or more!'

African wild dogs, cheetahs and leopards are also returning. But what about the big players? The lions and the buffaloes – those arch rivals of the bush that, by their very presence, epitomise the wholeness of a functioning system?

'We had to bring them back,' said Reid in a nonchalant manner that suggested this sort of event is a regular occurrence. Perhaps in Africa it is but, as I found out on my most recent trip to Liuwa, behind every translocation there's a fascinating story involving a cast of engaging characters, both human and animal. ▶



ABOVE The second-largest wildebeest migration on earth occurs on the Liuwa Plain, coinciding with the arrival of the rains, which bring sprouting grasses and a profusion of beautiful flowers.

LEFT Blacksmith lapwings are just some of the myriad bird species that flock to Liuwa to feast on the abundance of food left behind in shallow pools as the seasonal floods retreat.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Almost devoid of wildlife in recent years, this lush area of western Zambia is once more filling up with animals, and sights such as these zebras are now relatively common.



ABOVE Lady Liuwa and a young male newcomer relax after a marathon mating session.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE The 20-strong herd of buffaloes are under constant supervision until there are sufficient individuals to fend off lions.

OPPOSITE, BELOW On patrol, Roger Monde checks the buffaloes before setting off to find Liuwa's three lions.

Thus far, there are only 20 buffaloes. 'But these are early days,' said Chris Lipelo, the bovine babysitter. 'We are taking things slowly and treating the animals like prize cows.' While they may be allowed to roam the plains during the day, the buffaloes are constantly accompanied by Lipelo on his motorbike.

'We are worried that the herd is not yet big enough to fend off a lion attack,' he explained as we walked 50 paces behind a line of big waddling bottoms. 'Every night, I round them up with my motorbike and bring them back to their boma.' He pointed to the horizon, where I could just make out a fence line.

The buffaloes are breeding and there are plans to supplement them with an additional herd, but such things take time and money and, for now, these feared and revered behemoths of the bush still require an au pair.

Prior to their arrival in late 2008, 19 of the 20 buffaloes had been enduring a frugal existence, stranded on a sparsely vegetated island in Lake Kariba.

Food quality was poor, a fact borne out by the animals' wretched condition when they were loaded aboard a ferry for the first part of their journey. However, after seven months of good grazing at a private game reserve, they were deemed fit and plump enough for the final 700-kilometre leg to Liuwa.

The gruelling odyssey took several days. 'All went well until they reached the Luangina River, which borders the park. That's when the little pontoon almost sank,' Lipelo filled me in. He puffed out his cheeks. 'We all nearly died of heart attacks that day.'

We sat on the grass to eat our packed lunch, watching as the herd grazed contentedly a few metres away. Without warning, one of the group broke ranks and rushed towards us. 'Don't worry,' Lipelo reassured me as I choked on my sandwich. 'That's Elton. He is perfectly safe.'

Elton, I discovered, had been hand-reared by local ranchers who donated him to the park when he began to get, in their eyes, unruly. 'He likes to follow me around,' Lipelo explained as the

young bull flopped down in the grass beside us, belching as he knelt. 'But we are discouraging this sort of behaviour as it won't serve him well in the long run.' Gently, he shooed at Elton who, looking dejected, got back onto his feet and ambled over to where the rest of the herd was happily ruminating.

That evening, whooping like Texan cowboys, we herded Lipelo's charges back to their boma. I couldn't help thinking about his unusual job. Every day he travels with the buffaloes; every night, he sleeps in a tent beside them. What's more, he is prepared to chase away curious lions that threaten the herd's safety. 'Of course,' he said, 'they'll have to fend for themselves one day. But until then I'll be here, making sure they're OK.'

'M eet Lady Liuwa,' announced Roger Monde, a man who spends a great deal of time following lions. 'It's nice to see her working as hard as the rest of us to re-establish wildlife populations here,' he added with a grin.

We'd been tracking Liuwa's last remaining lioness for several hours from the seat of a motorbike, and we'd eventually found her lying with a handsome young male in a field of yellow flowers. Both cats looked exhausted.

'If I know lions, they've had a busy night,' said Monde with one eyebrow cocked. 'And no doubt the action will continue.' Right on cue, the young male hauled himself to his feet and the couple commenced to mate.

As I watched from the back of the bike, feeling a little vulnerable, I listened to Monde's description of Lady Liuwa's extraordinary life. Somehow she had managed to survive 10 years on the plain with no other lions for company. 'For a while she possessed ▶

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almost mythical status,' Monde explained, 'a lion that was only ever seen occasionally and never for more than a few moments at a time.'

But then documentary cameraman Herbert Brauer began filming in the park and came across the lioness on several occasions. 'She is a remarkable animal,' said Brauer in his film *The Last Lion in Liyuwa*. 'Somehow she is able to hunt alone in an environment that offers very little cover.'

Compared to the male mounting her, Lady Liuwa was a large, muscular creature with a physique that could be described as the feline equivalent of Arnold Schwarzenegger's in his heyday. Not only had she managed to avoid being shot by poachers, she had also learned to hunt in water and deal with the largest hyaenas in Africa – all on her own.

'She can run faster and for longer periods than any other lion I have ever seen,' commented Brauer. 'She is really phenomenal.'

During filming, he told us, Lady Liuwa began to act strangely. She would approach his vehicle and roll around in front of it, purring like a kitten. Later, she took to entering the camp, where she would spend the night at the door of Brauer's tent.

The reason soon became evident. For the first time since her family had been killed, the lioness had encountered another living being that neither ran away nor attacked her. She found him intriguing. 'It was amazing,' he reported. 'This top predator, whose pride had been harassed and killed by people, chose to seek out and bond

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with a human. She must have been very lonely indeed.'

It was obvious that Lady Liuwa needed some male company. So, armed with a recording of a sexy female lioness and a tranquilliser gun, a capture team visited Kafue National Park to the east.

'We played the recording, the males came to investigate; they showed surprise and we got our lions.' A few months later, after a stay in a private game reserve, two males arrived at Liyuwa, fast asleep in the back of a pickup truck. 'The next morning, they woke up behind the electrified fence of their boma,' said Monde. That night, they complained loudly at their imprisonment, and for the first time in a decade, Lady Liuwa heard the voice of her own species ring out across the plain.

'The following morning, she was at the fence of their boma,' said Monde. 'She looked shocked.'

For five days and nights the lioness lay in front of the males as they snarled and spat at her through the fence. On the sixth night, potential tragedy struck when the new arrivals broke out of their boma, accompanied

by Lady Liuwa. Although the lioness was fitted with a radio-collar, the males could easily have run off the radar. 'After all, they hadn't shown any interest in her,' Monde went on. However, when the female was finally located, the two males were with her. 'She is no longer the last lion in Liyuwa,' he said with satisfaction, gesturing towards the copulating cats.

With only three lions and 20 buffaloes present in the 3 660-square-kilometre park (there's a planned extension of an additional 8000 square kilometres), it will take quite a while before either population reaches such a size that the age-old patterns can be re-established.

'But it will happen,' said Reid as I left the park. 'And with an average annual increase of 10 per cent across the species board, it won't be long before the natural balance has been restored.'

When that happens, Lipelo will no longer be required to follow his herd of buffaloes, nor will Monde need to keep track of Lady Liuwa's every move. The phoenix of Liyuwa will rise from the ashes and the Liyuwa Plain will be restored to what it was two centuries ago. ■

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The author's trip was arranged by Robin Pope Safaris, which offers guided safaris to the Liyuwa Plain. Reserve your place on one of the exciting journeys scheduled for November and December 2010, or from mid-2011. To contact them, tel. +265 (0)177 0540/0560 or go to www.robinpopesafaris.net

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ABOVE Some 20 000 people live in and around the Liyuwa Plain National Park, but recent moves by the African Parks Network to educate the public (alongside effective patrolling) have brought poaching problems to a standstill.

OPPOSITE The hyaenas here are the largest specimens in Africa. Because there have been no lions in the region to scavenge from, apart from Lady Liuwa, they have learned to become exceptionally effective hunters.