

Tree-top Dawn on the Limpopo - A birdwatcher's delight

By Chris Patton

For those who don't know it Mapungubwe was proclaimed a World Heritage Site in July 2003. It was in the archaeological ruins on Mapungubwe Hill that the Golden Rhino (Emblem of the Limpopo Province) was discovered. It has a rich African history and was a major settlement and trade centre several hundred years ago. It also has a history in the colonial era with Rhodes Drift (of Cecil John Rhodes fame) being in the western part of the park. President Jan Smuts proclaimed it the Dongola National Botanic Reserve in the 1930s and indeed had a house in the area now part of the park. However because of its strategic position (at the apex of 3 countries) it was de-proclaimed by the Nationalist Government and the area became a military reserve. It then was proclaimed as a national park in the 1990s known first as Limpopo Valley and then Vhembe-Dongola before changing its name once more in September 2004 to coincide with the World Heritage Status that had been bestowed on Mapungubwe.

Geographically the park impresses as it houses a marvellous elevated viewpoint of the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers and one can simultaneously witness activity in Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. It is one of the Peace Park Foundation's Transfrontier Conservation Areas. Botanically it impresses with large numbers of ancient baobab trees, copses of Lala Palm, stands of Fever tree, the lush riverine forest along the Limpopo River and the concurrence of Kalahari arid thornveld with moister bushveld. Geologically it impresses with the incredible diversity of sandstone outcrops. The shape of one is reputed to have inspired the Voortrekker Monument. In wildlife terms there are an impressive number of animals thriving in the area. Elephant are particularly plentiful, as are baboon, several species of antelope and although not easy to see all the large African carnivores are present in good numbers. But it is the birds that for me are most impressive. Over 400 species have been recorded in the park's region. There is a distribution overlap of species typical of the arid west and of the moister eastern parts of the country. There are forest species in the riverine forest and rock loving species in the sandstone outcrops. Then there is also the intrusion of some special species normally associated with Botswana and Zimbabwe.

While Limpopo Tented Camp is great for birding being in the heart of Pafurisque riverine forest, on a recent trip I had the pleasure of staying at Leokwe Camp. A pair of Verreaux's (Black) Eagle have their nest on an overhang near the camp's reception, communal bar and pool area. Buntings, firefinches and waxbills constantly buzz around the camp adding flashes of colour. But it was on a Sunday at dawn that 2 of us left the rest of our party to the excesses of the night before and made our way down to the tree top boardwalk through the riverine trees on the banks of Kipling's "Great Grey-green Greasy Limpopo". We didn't get very far from Leokwe before a heard of waterbuck's anxious gaze directed us to a leopard in the road ahead. The cat, startled by our approaching vehicle, turned tail and scampered like a domestic cat along the narrow road, which was cemented at this point to negotiate a gully. It

disappeared from our view in an instant, but as we drove past where the vanishing act had occurred we managed to pick up the beautiful rosette and golden pelt and sleek and fluid body easing its way up the adjacent slope. Pausing near the top of the rise enough for us to get some striking distance poses on our camera, the leopard soon stole over the top of the rise.

Hearts pumping with excitement and pleasure at our decision to rise early we drove the next couple of kilometres to the boardwalk. The boardwalk is an amazing facility allowing visitors (including children, the elderly and wheelchair bound) to rise up into the tree tops above the animals on the ground below and amongst the birds who flit around the boardwalk almost oblivious to one's presence. At the end of the trail through the trees is a hide that provides a wonderful vista point over the extensive Limpopo riverbed, which being winter was predominantly sand.

Baboon and Vervet plucked up the courage to descend from their nocturnal sanctity in the trees. With great bravado and much noise they began their daily foraging several metres below us. More stealthy were several bushbuck. None saw us as a threat from our aerial vantage point. Birds were everywhere. The cackle of Green (Red-billed) Wood-hoopoes; the frenzy of Arrow-marked Babblers, the haunting aqueous duet of Tropical Boubous; the chirr of Crested Barbets, the pulse of their Black-fronted cousins and then my eyes were drawn by an agitated flock of black and white. Incredibly it turned out to be a mixed flock of White-crested and Retz's Helmet-shrikes. These two species normally keep separate having slightly different habitat requirements and it was fascinating to see them merge in one larger feeding party as they sought insect grubs amongst the tree branches. Their union was a tenuous one and akin to an aerial shoal of fish split by the bow of a ship, they separated. The Retz's came my way and soon I had them flittering around my head unconcerned as to my presence

A Meyer's Parrot screeched his morning greeting from the top of a nearby bare tree. Two African Barred Owlets spoke to each other for a few minutes, presumably bidding each other goodnight before spending the rest of the day sleeping. Meve's (Longtailed) Starlings were the most numerous bird, busily foraging on both the ground and through the branches. Hornbills, Wattled Starlings and camaropteras were some of the other species taking part in the early morning activity. Over the 2 hours we spent on the boardwalk that morning we picked up all 4 of the common bushveld woodpeckers.

My companion spent most of the time in the hide. He loves the bush, but is not a birder. He was happy to watch the steady stream of game in the riverbed ... eland, kudu, impala and of course elephant. The park is not like Kruger where apart from the odd refugee from Mozambique, the visitors will only see other visitors and park staff. Here rural communities live on the other side of the river in Botswana. It is a different world to the urban environment most of us are used to and bizarre to watch people and elephants crossing between Botswana and SA simultaneously. Most of the people are farm

labourers seeking subsistence in SA. Other strange juxtapositions include eland and kudu alongside cattle and goat.

Joining my companion in the hide, the cry of fish eagles resonated along the riverbed. The drying pools of the sometimes mighty Limpopo River on either side of the hide were host to busy Little Egrets, Black-winged Stilts and Greenshanks sifting the shallows for prey, the more languid Goliath Herons patiently waiting the opportunity to thrust their brutal bills at a passing fish and a large winter flock of plump Spurwing Geese; while the nasal cry of White-fronted Bee-eaters splashed colour on the scene as they hawked insects from a fixed perch. A coucal purposefully edging its way through the vegetation at the water's edge in search of prey was thoroughly checked to determine if it was not the regionally special *Senegal* species, but its barred rump confirmed it as a *Burchell's* (the Limpopo corridor is the only place in SA where Senegal Coucal occurs).

The possibilities on this facility are wonderful, whether it's to twitch the birds for the ornithologists, to observe human/animal interaction for the social ecologists, to watch the animals from a vaunted aerial view for the zoologists or purely to soak up the magnificence of all things African, Mapungubwe is a must visit for all and only 5 hours drive from Gauteng is one of South Africa's last hidden treasures.