

# lush lowland OVERLOAD

Malawi's Liwonde National Park

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **MARTIN BENADIE** >

*Liwonde National Park is blessed with a striking diversity of habitats, the impressive Shire River, and a bird list of more than 350 species.*

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THINK OF MALAWI and more than likely the immense Rift Valley lake that dominates the country will come to mind. But there's far more to this landlocked nation. Away from Lake Malawi, most of the wildlife sanctuaries have a low-key charm, are not overrun with visitors and make ideal destinations for birders. One such reserve is Liwonde National Park in the south of the country, which hosts about 350 of the 648 or so bird species recorded in Malawi. Birders who have not yet travelled north of the Zambezi can expect lifers here – lots of them.

**LIWONDE'S LOCATION** in the low-lying Shire Valley, one of Malawi's top birding spots and indeed one of Africa's finest, is key to its high bird diversity. In this tropical lowland, miombo, deciduous thicket and mopane woodland form a multi-textured mosaic, with numerous baobabs punctuating the landscape and prehistoric-looking candelabra trees providing a backdrop.

A particularly rewarding way to arrive at the park is by boat from Liwonde town. The 30-kilometre trip along the Shire River offers an excellent opportunity to become acquainted with the local birds in the ever-changing scenery and vegetation.

The Shire, along with its riparian habitat on both banks, is prominent along the western boundary of the park and forms part of Liwonde for more than 40 kilometres of its 402-kilometre journey from Lake Malawi to the Zambezi River.

On first seeing the smooth-as-glass river, I was struck by its immensity – it's up to a kilometre wide in places – by the sheer number of birds in, on and around it, and by the simple tranquillity of the scene.

The whole area has a tropical vibe that is enhanced by the stunning groves of palms and fever trees along the river. Goliath Herons, Saddle-billed Storks, Spur-winged Lapwings, African Jacanas and African Openbills typically adorn the riverbanks, African Skimmers, Western Ospreys and flocks of Gull-billed and Whiskered terns fly past, and among the various shorebird and waterfowl species a hawking Blue-cheeked Bee-eater often provides a splash of colour. The riverside palms are generally packed with breeding colonies of White-breasted Cormorant, with the occasional Red-necked Falcon, Dickinson's Kestrel or Palm-nut Vulture perched in a tree-top.

Our days in Liwonde were spent birding by boat and exploring the park's tapestry of habitats and ecotones by vehicle and on foot, including the Shire's extensive floodplains and riverine fringe, as well as the mopane woodland away from the river. Be warned, though – the Liwonde experience is a sensory overload, a head-spinning bombardment of birds complemented by a wonderful array of mammals.

**K**nowing something about the vegetation of a birding spot generally enhances your experience there, as you have a much better idea of which birds will be found among certain plants. For me, the richest and most interesting vegetation type in Liwonde is the semi-deciduous riverine forest, which runs in a band between five and 100 metres wide along the banks of the perennial Shire and its seasonal tributaries. The composition of this forest varies from one location to



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the next, depending on the soil type and availability of water: in some places along the river there are almost pure stands of borasus palms, whereas other areas contain mixed groves of species such as fever, fig, mangosteen, mahogany, sausage, false thorn and river cluster-leaf trees. The understorey includes lianas of impressive proportions, and dense thicket grows where the riverine forest borders woodland.

Enter this riverine forest (it's easily accessed on the western bank of the Shire, opposite Mvuu Lodge) and you'll find that the richness of its flora is matched by its birdlife. Quinine trees flourish here, supporting a good population of the highly localised Brown-breasted Barbet and

making Liwonde the only reliable site for this species in Malawi. It's also in this habitat that you'll find my two Liwonde favourites: the delicate Livingstone's Flycatcher and the sought-after Böhm's Bee-eater. The flycatcher occurs in busy groups and can

above Livingstone's Flycatcher is surprisingly common in Liwonde.

opposite The park's habitat is ideal for Dickinson's Kestrel.





*Mopane woodland is the main vegetation type of Liwonde, and covers about 70 per cent of the park.*

be surprisingly common if you know its habits and call, while the bee-eater is unusual in that it nests in level ground (see *African Birdlife*, January/February 2015, pages 22–24).

Other specialist birds in the riverine forest include those of the lower stratum, such as African Broadbill, Black-throated Wattle-eye, White-browed Robin-Chat, Bearded Scrub Robin, Collared Palm Thrush, Tambourine Dove, Eastern Nicator, Garden Warbler and Terrestrial Brownbul. Higher up in the canopy you may see Green-backed Woodpecker,

Spectacled Weaver, Collared Sunbird, Brown-headed Parrot, Purple-crested Turaco, Trumpeter Hornbill, Western Banded Snake Eagle, Green Malkoha and African Emerald Cuckoo. Species to look for in the thickest vegetation are Red-throated Twinspot and, typically in December, an occasional African Pitta. This is also ideal habitat for African Cuckoo Hawk and Pel's Fishing Owl, which nests here and is often seen at a daytime roost. Among the mammals, the reclusive Livingstone's suni is seen from time to time.

**MOVING AWAY FROM THE SHIRE ... THE CENTRAL AND EASTERN PARTS OF LIWONDE ... ARE CHARACTERISED BY BEAUTIFUL, CATHEDRAL-LIKE MOPANE WOODLAND**

The Shire's tranquil tributaries, where dense vegetation hangs over the water, are the haunt of White-backed Night Heron. The river's reedbeds are home to Rufous-winged Cisticola and in summer

they are alive with breeding Southern Brown-throated Weavers. On my most recent visit, a surprise flock of Magpie Mannikins represented a new species for my personal park list.

On the park's north-eastern edge, remnant pockets of Zambesian dry-deciduous forest support bird species similar to those found in riverine semi-deciduous forest. This isolated plant community contains the richest vegetation in the park, even though it covers no more than 1.5 per cent of its area. Several plant species found here were new to science and many

more proved to be first or second records for Malawi.

**M**oving away from the Shire and its floodplain, the central and eastern parts of Liwonde, especially the 4 200-hectare Rhino Sanctuary, are characterised by beautiful, cathedral-like mopane woodland. Often adorned with epiphytic orchids, this is the main vegetation type of Liwonde and covers 70 per cent of the park. It holds a different assemblage of birds, of which the most obvious and colourful are chattering flocks of Near-threatened Lilian's Lovebird.

Other species of the mopane woodland are Speckle-throated Woodpecker, Racket-tailed and Broad-billed rollers, Meves's Starling, Arnot's Chat, Red-headed Weaver, Mosque Swallow, Southern Ground-Hornbill, Stierling's Wren-Warbler, Ayres's Hawk Eagle and, in summer, European Honey Buzzard.

Bird density in the mopane woodland is typically lower than in the riverine forest and the birds

tend to move around in mixed-species foraging groups. Seasonal pools develop in the mopane belt after good rains and here Green, Wood and Pectoral sandpipers may be seen. More reliably, elevated bird hides have been built next to several of the waterholes in the Rhino Sanctuary and they make for a pleasant birding stop or two. Small, noisy flocks of Grey-headed Parrots are typically seen in the early mornings as >



*above The shy White-backed Night Heron frequents overhanging riverine vegetation.*

*below The sought-after Western Banded Snake Eagle occurs in Liwonde's riverine forest.*





above *Flocks of the Near-threatened Lilian's Lovebirds may be found in the mopane woodland.*

right *Collared Palm Thrush occurs in the understory of the groves of riverine forest.*

they screech overhead to and from their feeding sites.

The terrain of Liwonde is generally flat, at about 500 metres above sea level, except for three isolated groups of hills. The most noticeable of these are Chiunguni in the south and Nyafulu in the east and they are covered in mixed *Brachystegia*, *Combretum*, *Burkea* and *Kirkia* woodland. This miombo habitat harbours yet other bird communities, with the area around Chiunguni Hill, for instance, offering good birding for the likes of African Barred Owllet, Orange-winged Pytilia, Shelley's

Sunbird and Green-capped Eremomela. Bat Hawks are often seen hunting here at dusk and I have recorded them nesting in the vicinity too.

Liwonde's northern boundary adjoins the Mangochi Forest Reserve, an area of escarpment that peaks at the 1 716-metre Mangochi Mountain. A wildlife corridor (albeit poorly patrolled) exists between Liwonde and Mangochi and the amalgamation of these two conservation areas would not only be logical, but also of extreme value in the long term, as human pressure in the area is on the rise.

Overall, especially considering its 548-square-kilometre extent, Liwonde's flora is significant, with at least 1 600 plant species estimated in the park and on the Mangochi Plateau. This can be compared with Tanzania's 44 800-square-kilometre Selous Game Reserve, which has a flora of about 2 100 species or South Africa's 19 485-square-kilometre Kruger National Park, which has a similar number.

The park's mammal fauna is equally varied, with good numbers of common waterbuck, sable, impala, elephant, zebra,



yellow baboon, African buffalo, Lichtenstein's hartebeest, water mongoose, common reedbuck, oribi, greater kudu, warthog, eland and Sharp's grysbok (near Mangochi), as well as a small population of black rhino. One of the highest densities of hippos in Africa, estimated at 49 individuals per kilometre, occurs in the Shire River and numerous monstrous Nile crocodiles can be seen lazing on its sandbanks.

The birdlife in Liwonde is prolific and the national park offers probably the best year-round birding in south-central Africa, with easy and affordable access to a range of species that are difficult to track down elsewhere in Africa – all this in some of the most inspiring scenery on the continent. I recall one special evening, when a rising full moon illuminated the Shire escarpment before us and I simply couldn't think of anywhere I would rather be. It really is very easy to get used to enjoying a succession of sun-downers (and sunsets) along the serene Shire to the accompaniment of the churring of Square-tailed Nightjars. ♦

## And away you go...

**Seasons & weather** There are two distinct seasons: dry and wet. About 85 per cent of the annual rainfall occurs between December and March. Temperatures can rise to above 40 °C in November, before the rains; winters are cool and comfortable. Birding is better in the wet season, but reaching all parts of the park then is more difficult.

**Habitats** Semi-deciduous riverine forest; river and floodplain; mopane woodland; miombo woodland.

**Specials** Brown-breasted Barbet; Livingstone's Flycatcher; Böhm's Bee-eater; African Pitta; Lilian's Lovebird; Pel's Fishing Owl and Spur-winged Lapwing.

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