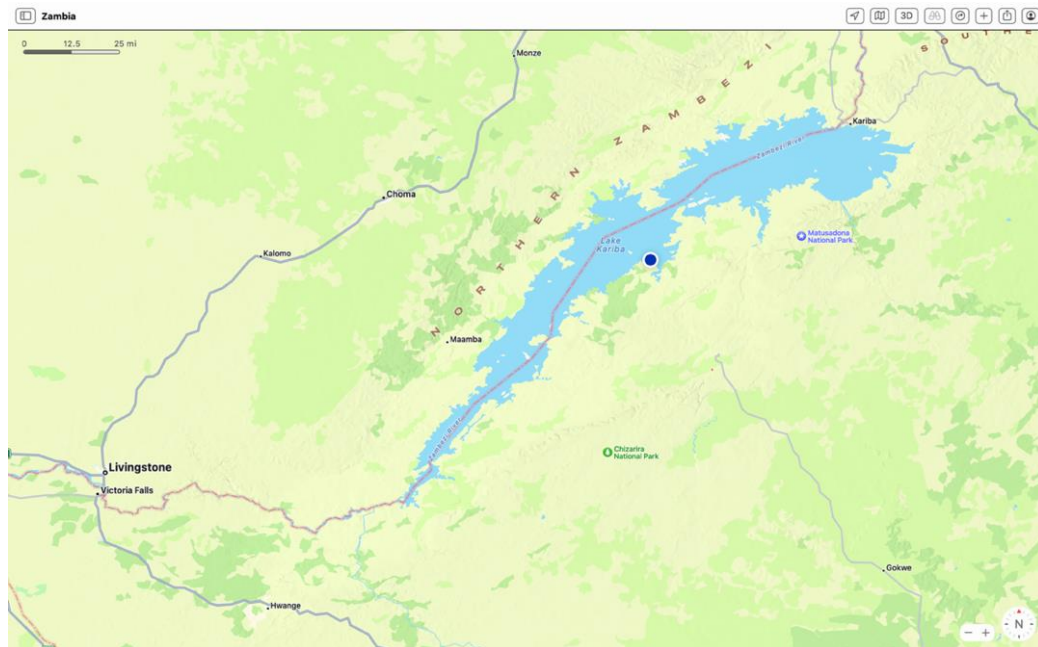


I recently spent three weeks in the Songo Conservancy (black dot on map), northeast of Victoria Falls, on the shores of Lake Kariba, volunteering for the International Anti-Poaching Foundation (IAPF).



IAPF manages lands where both legal and illegal hunting have severely reduced wildlife populations. Some of these lands border national parks and/or could serve as corridors that would allow wildlife to move between protected areas. The organization recruits and trains young women as rangers who conduct anti-poaching operations within their own communities. (*Akashinga* is a documentary film about the first set of female rangers trained by IAPF (you can watch it at <https://www.iapf.org/the-film>). IAPF also supports schools, clinics, legal fishing camps and conservation education. The organization was founded by a charismatic, ex-military Australian. His mission is to wipe out poaching in Africa by building communities that coexist with wildlife and have zero tolerance for poaching or other environmental crimes, whether initiated from within or from the outside. The rangers are impressive, and their salaries help support their extended families.

A herd of about 130 elephants has returned to the area where IAPF's Songo operations are based. We frequently saw them walking across the flood plains in smaller family groups, or singly – usually a lone male. Elephants never cease to inspire awe and wonder!





The Conservancy's operational base is located in two compounds on a now defunct crocodile-breeding farm just above Lake Kariba's floodplain. The site looks across the plains and the lake to the mountains of Zambia. Water is pumped from the lake half a kilometer away, some of which is filtered for the benefit of those of us who are unaccustomed to drinking untreated water. A scalding hot bath can be had during the day when the summer sun heats the water pipes. Electricity is mostly reliable, with the help of a generator. Electrified fences keep the elephants out of the compounds when there's nothing inside to tempt them. But when the tasty, kale-like greens grown by staff are ready to harvest, the shock doesn't deter them from breaking through and devouring entire gardens.



The view from my balcony.

Hippos spend their days in the water to keep cool. They feed at night, but on cloudy days, they sometimes leave the water to graze.

As a volunteer, I was asked to compile a list of birds found in Songo, a welcome challenge for me, given that I'm in no way an expert birder, just someone who loves observing and

photographing birds. I spent early mornings and late afternoons doing just that in and around the compound and at an inlet of the lake a few hundred yards away. Between 9:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. it was usually too hot to be outdoors (it is summer here), so I used much of that



Blue Waxbill

time identifying the birds I'd photographed. Some, like this Blue Waxbill, were easy to identify by its unique coloring. (And quite a few birds are familiar to me from previous visits to Zimbabwe.)

When I photographed a bird new to me, I always hoped my images had captured the clues that Robert's Bird app mentions as key identifying features for a particular species. (For example, the lighting and angle of a shot are critical to

distinguishing between a pale buff or white or even yellow underside and can also obscure or reveal the true color of the legs or the eyes.) Sometimes a bird flew off before I could photograph its backside or its front. Fortunately, most birds hung around the area long enough for me to photograph it on another day.

In the wooded areas, I struggled with a subtly colored crombec, a prinia, a camaroptera and the cisticolas, among others, but I've started to feel more comfortable with these little guys. Here's a couple of them:



Tawny-flanked Prinia



Grey-backed Camaroptera

I usually saw the *Prinia* and the *Camaroptera* foraging in trees or shrubs with a dense network of crisscrossing branches, under an overcast sky with a lot of glare. I finally caught these birds in more open vegetation and decent lighting. It was all fun, if sometimes frustrating – like solving a puzzle.

Shorebirds and waders presented a different challenge. They forage in the open, on bare ground at the water's edge, or a few feet into the water, which here lacks emergent vegetation in



which to hide, so they tended to be skittish, especially the egrets. (It was critical to see the color of their feet to distinguish between two species.) Crocodiles occasionally lay just at the water's edge or partially submerged, and I had no desire to be within 50 yards of them (overkill, perhaps). So I shot from afar, which yielded somewhat fuzzy images.

Below, a very blurry *Common Sandpiper*, fortunately with a distinctive pattern. On the right, the *Wood Sandpiper* had been difficult to confirm until I got this clear image of its head.



Woodland / grassland birds:

Woodland Kingfisher
(eats lizards and insects,
not fish)





White-crested Helmet-Shrike



Kurrichane Thrush



The *Grey-headed Bushshrike* is a favorite of mine, with its beautiful eyes and rust and yellow underparts. Its haunting call is heard throughout the day and is difficult to locate.

Lack of transport to other

areas in the Conservancy is a major obstacle to enlarging the bird list. I will likely return to Songo for a few weeks in January if the rains have filled the pans (depressions) on the floodplain and attracted more birds. A comprehensive list within Songo's 450 square miles would require the efforts of several experts over perhaps a couple of years. I hope my list will provide a good start for those who might continue the project, but whatever happens, I enjoyed the process and learned a lot from it.



Tropical Boubou

While at Songo I attended the graduation ceremony for 40 some young women who had successfully completed their training as rangers. For three hours they stood at attention, hatless in the hot sun, singing the national and local anthems and listening to endless speeches (including by the five chiefs who each represent a community within Songo) praising the rangers and IAPF.

As the women were called up to receive their certificates, most of them maintained a serious expression befitting a soldier, even as their proud, smiling families danced and ululated their way across the field, to hug their daughter and stuff US dollars into her shirt pocket. (Dollars are one of several currencies used in Zimbabwe's incomprehensible financial system.)



After the speeches, recitations about the natural environment, a skit about capturing poachers and a demonstration of re-assembling rifles while blindfolded, the celebration began. Women from the community, followed by the men, danced to popular music blaring from a speaker. Soon, the new rangers joined in (one is on

the right in uniform), letting loose and dancing up a storm, smiling and laughing. Finally, lunch was served - a big bowl of mealie meal (highly refined cornmeal that sticks to your innards) and tasty beans.

A few days later I was fortunate to sit in on a primary school graduation ceremony in a lovely community in a wooded, fertile valley where water is available year-round. Like the rangers' graduation, speeches and presentations dominated the lengthy proceedings, but the tone was lighter thanks to about 80 school kids who were not expected to behave like soldiers.



Proud family of a child who's just been awarded a graduation certificate



One morning after birding, I opened the inner door to my room and was startled to see a beautiful green snake about three feet long looking at me, also startled. It immediately took refuge in the bottom of my open closet, amidst the dirty laundry. It must have moved from a tree onto the balcony and into my room through my often-open door.

After confirming that it was a Spotted Bush Snake, not the

green mamba that occurs further east in Zimbabwe, I felt comfortable allowing it to stay as long as it wanted. At the time I didn't even consider the possibility that it could be a venomous boomslang, which is also green, has big eyes on a small head and lives in the trees.

I'm now back in Victoria Falls, where I'll spend most of December. I hope to get out and see wildlife, which is an integral part of the Vic Falls community.