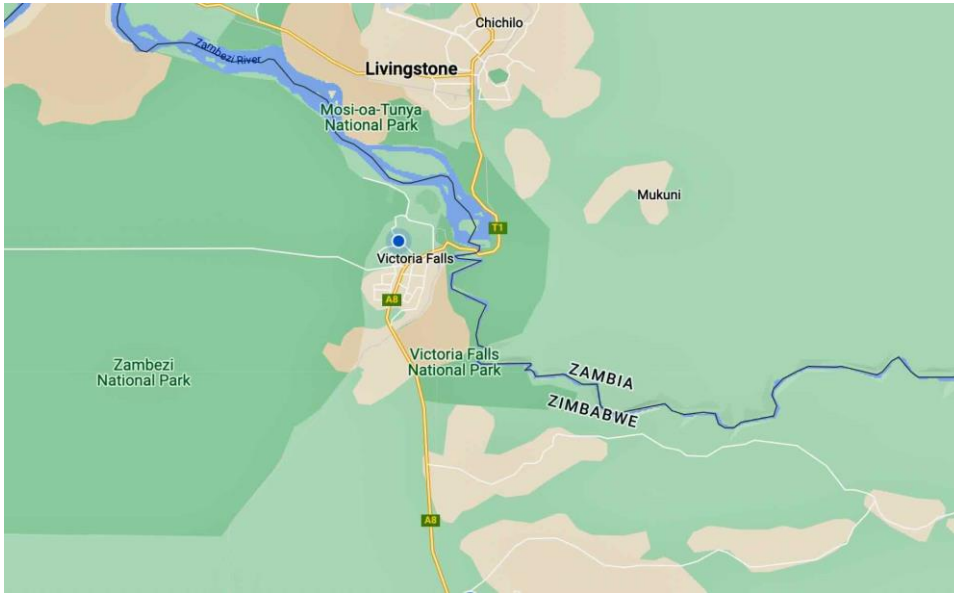


Since late November I've been living in Victoria Falls, a small tourist city just across the Zambezi River from Zambia. Two national parks, Zambezi NP on the west, Victoria Falls NP to the east, surround most of the city. Fences only partially separate Park lands from commercial/residential



areas, so walking on the edge requires alertness. Baboons and warthogs move through the commercial and residential areas, mostly unharassed, though people understandably chase baboons from their vegetable gardens. Baboons will go after women – not men - carrying shopping bags. A large male baboon followed me

once, too close. I was trying to figure out where to take refuge until a human male noticed and offered to walk me to my gate. Elephants and buffalo often wander through town at night. Recently, lions were sighted in town, attracted by buffalo. Elephants and lions very occasionally kill humans, usually when someone is chasing an elephant raiding a garden or is trying to protect their livestock from a lion attack. Overall, Victoria Falls is quite wildlife tolerant – tourism is a huge source of foreign exchange and employment.



A few weeks ago, my friend Rose, a senior ecologist with Zimbabwe's National Parks and Wildlife, visited Victoria Falls with her kids. She invited me to join them on a game drive in a small, private reserve where she was consulting with the manager.

An electrified fence surrounds the reserve, but the resident lion pride escapes frequently and kills livestock from surrounding communities. The lions always return. The elephants also go back and forth, crossing the river that forms one boundary of the reserve. Recently, four of the eleven black rhino residents started doing the same. As rhinos are normally averse to water, the manager believes they

learned this behavior from watching the elephants and hopes to trade these “naughty” rhinos for others from elsewhere. (As wildlife is increasingly hemmed in and cut off from seasonal migratory routes by unplanned, uncontrolled development in rural areas “managing” wildlife populations gets more complicated and uglier.) We saw neither lion nor elephant that day, but the birds were lovely, and we glimpsed a rhino in a thicket.



Giant Kingfisher

Water thick-knee (Water dikkop)



I attended a vulture program at a safari lodge at the edge of Zambezi National Park, overlooking a waterhole and a woodland that appears endless.



White-backed vultures and a Marabou stork hang out in the trees, awaiting the arrival of the program presenter.

The free program is presented daily to educate tourists about threats to vultures and their contributions to a healthy ecosystem. A major threat comes from poachers. Vultures circling in the sky alert ranger patrols to the possible presence of poachers at an illegal kill. To reduce or eliminate the numbers of these birds, poachers may throw deadly poison on the carcass of an elephant or a rhino after removing the tusks or horn. Farmers poison vultures, as do some veterinary medicines. Other threats include power lines; loss of food supply from habitat destruction; and traditional medicines that use animal body parts (e.g., some people believe that placing the head of a vulture under one's pillow brings dreams that predict the correct lottery number).

In a small amphitheater, the birds are about to pounce, once the presenter dumps a huge pile of meaty bones on the ground. He calls the offering an “appetizer” – enough to bring them to the amphitheater but not enough to alter their natural feeding habits.



A white-backed vulture tries to grab some meat from the bill of a marabou stork.

The birds quickly pick the bones clean and depart. Hyenas come at night to eat the bones.

The presenter stressed that vultures perform important “ecosystem services”. By ingesting the last bits of meat left behind on a kill, they clean up the environment and remove pathogens in the meat that can cause disease in wildlife, livestock and humans. Their feces recycle nutrients into the soil.

A bird hide overlooks a small pond on the grounds of this same safari lodge, which employs someone to scatter animal feed around the pond's periphery to attract bushbuck, warthogs and guinea fowl.



This Hamerkop was strolling slowly through the water, sometimes slightly shaking a leg to stir things up.



The Hamerkop may have been searching for tadpoles of a foam-nest tree frog. The female frog secretes a jelly or mucous onto a plant that emerges from the pond or hangs over it. Then she and interested males whip up the secretion with their legs into a ball of white-ish foam. The nest helps protect the eggs and young tadpoles from predators, drying out and high temperatures. Eventually, the tadpoles fall into the water beneath them.

On numerous return visits to the pond, I saw neither Hamerkops nor other birds, except guinea fowl. In a good rainy season, as we're experiencing now, wildlife is no longer reliant on isolated waterholes.



Helmeted Guineafowl



Male Bushbuck

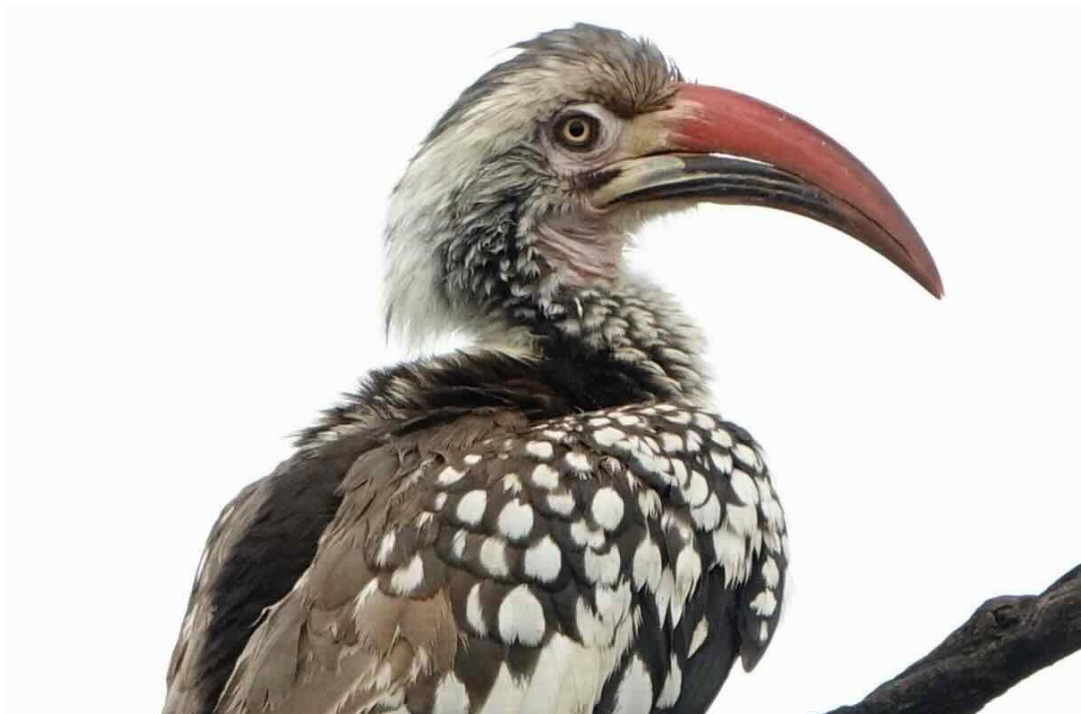


Female Warthog

Finally, here are some photos from a game drive in Zambezi National Park. I hired a vehicle and driver, hoping to learn from him how to maneuver on the muddy roads. Within minutes of entering the Park, the car was slipping a bit as though on ice, then suddenly we were mired in the thickest and stickiest mud I've ever handled. It took us half an hour to remove enough from the rear tires and wheels, using hands and sticks, to continue driving no more than 30-40 meters before we got stuck again. This activity occupied us over the next two and a half hours until we eventually reached higher, dryer ground. The rest of the day was lovely.



Female Pied Kingfisher



Southern Red-billed Hornbill



This Senegal Coucal, its feathers wet from the morning rain, is vocalizing. Coucals hunch over and puff out a bit when calling.

Chameleon, possibly a flap-necked one







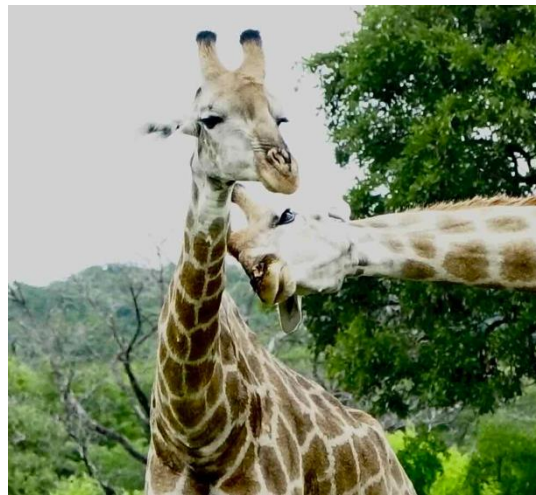
We watched two young male giraffes engaged in what looked like a slow-motion dance, each swinging his neck towards the other, sometimes pointing a head skyward and assuming postures you don't usually see with these animals. I assumed they were practicing their fighting skills for the time when, as mature males, they'll use their necks and horns to deliver painful, even fatal blows to a rival as they vie for the position of alpha male.

None of the “blows” from one giraffe seemed to hurt or destabilize the other. Their movements seemed so gentle and calm that I later wondered if they were expressing affection and friendship while they also worked on their fighting techniques for the future. I felt incredibly lucky to have watched this series of beautiful movements, postures and gestures.





Crested Francolin



A giraffe selfie?