

Kasanka

MORE THAN JUST BATS



Well known for its staggering roost of fruit bats and obliging sitatungas, Kasanka National Park in northern Zambia also supports an incredible diversity of birds, including most of the region's specials. It's not surprising, then, that it's regarded as one of the country's best birding destinations. >

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Arjun Amar descends the ladder from the viewing platform in Fibwe Forest that overlooks prime *sitatunga* habitat.

At only some 400 square kilometres in extent, Kasanka is one of the smallest national parks in Zambia, but despite its size, lack of altitudinal variation and the limited attention it has received from birders, an astonishing 457 bird species have been recorded there to date. Most of these are residents or frequent visitors, and a good day's birding at the right time of year will easily produce 200 species, including many Zambian and Central African specials.

The focal point of any visit should be Fibwe Forest, a 40-hectare block of wet



- 1 Mpululwe Hill
- 2 Wasa Lodge
- 3 Fibwe Forest
- 4 Pontoon Campsite
- 5 Kasanka Floodplains
- 6 Kabwe Campsite
- 7 Chikufwe Plain
- 8 Luwombwa Lodge
- 9 Musande Forest



mushitu tropical forest that is typical of the high-rainfall areas of Zambia and is dominated by marsh fig, red mahogany and waterberry trees. The forest is best known for its aggregation of 8–10 million giant straw-coloured fruit bats that roost here between mid-October and the end of December, when the first rains result in a bounty of fruit in the surrounding miombo woodland. As one of the largest animal concentrations in the world, the roost is ranked among the top wildlife spectacles.

But for hard-core birders the wealth of Zambian and Central African species will be of greater interest. You will probably have ticked Böhm's Bee-eater even before you've switched off your vehicle's engine in the car park at the forest edge. Black-backed Barbets are also relatively easy to see; just scan the tree-tops bordering the forest in the early mornings and late afternoons. Equally common but less conspicuous is the localised Purple-throated Cuckooshrike, but take care not to confuse the male with a Black Cuckooshrike, which is often seen in the adjacent woodland. To make identification more difficult, the local form of Black Cuckooshrike has an orange gape and black shoulders, but the call and glossy plumage of the male Purple-throated are distinctive, as are the unbarred underparts of the female.

An hour spent birding around the edge of the *mushitu* usually provides many

THE KASANKA TRUST

During the 1970s and '80s, wildlife in Zambia was heavily poached, to the extent that the once numerous black rhinos completely disappeared. Kasanka was not spared, and when the late David Lloyd visited the park in 1985 he was shocked to see how wildlife numbers had dwindled in comparison to those of the early 1960s, mainly as a result of intensive poaching, widespread bush fires and encroaching cultivation. Having decided to invest money and energy in protecting the park, he founded the Kasanka Trust and Kasanka became the first national park in Zambia to be privately managed. It is still operated by the trust, in partnership with what is now the Zambia Wildlife Authority, and it and its large mammal populations have shown an incredible recovery.

If you plan to visit Kasanka, the Bangweulu Wetlands (where the trust operates Shoebill Island Camp) or any of the other birding gems in northern Zambia, go to www.kasanka.com or contact the trust at wasa@kasanka.com or Frank Willems at frank@kasanka.com. All revenue derived from tourism is reinvested into the protection of the park.

more forest specials, including Ross's and Schalow's turacos, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Red-throated Twinspot and various honeyguides. Interspersed among these you're likely to see species typical of forest-edge, thicket and long-grass habitats, such as White-winged Black Tit, Short-winged Cisticola, Fawn-breasted Waxbill, Moustached Grass-Warbler, Hartlaub's Babbler and a range of sunbirds, as well as the pink-legged northern race of Speckled Mousebird.

A platform high in a mahogany tree overlooking the adjacent marsh is an excellent vantage point from which to look for *sitatunga*, the secretive swamp antelope best seen at dawn and dusk. Of the many wetland bird species, Greater Swamp-Warbler and Coppery-tailed Coucal are probably of most interest. Large and often mixed flocks of Miombo Blue-eared and Sharp-tailed starlings move through at sunset and sunrise en route to their roosts.

It is well worth spending a full morning exploring the trails and many tree platforms in the forest. An armed guide is compulsory as elephants and hippos are present, but you are more likely to be startled by a bushpig, *sitatunga* or blue monkey. This is where you can practise identifying greenbuls, with Grey-olive, Cabanis's, Little and Yellow-bellied on offer, as well as Yellow-throated Leaf-love, Narina Trogon, African Broadbill, Dark-backed Weaver and Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird will present fewer identification problems. Find the nest of the resident pair of African Crowned Eagles and there's a good chance that you'll see not only the eagles but also Brown-headed Apalis, which is common nearby but tricky to make out as it forages high in the canopy. ▷



DAVID ROGERS

The staggering 10 million straw-coloured fruit bats that gather in Kasanka's Fibwe Forest every year are thought to constitute the largest mammal migration on earth.

The further you move into the forest, the more apparent will be the impact of the weight of millions of roosting bats. Tall trees collapse and are rapidly replaced by young growth that, also stunted by the bats, creates a dense canopy at a height of about five metres. Scattered half-dead trees rising above the canopy provide perches for turacos, Mosque Swallows, bee-eaters, large and noisy flocks of Trum-peter Hornbills, and sometimes White-headed Saw-wings, while Green-backed and Olive woodpeckers forage on the dead wood. Bocage's Akalats and Green Twinspots breed in the dark understorey, but you'll need determination and luck to find them. One of the trails ends at a platform on the Musola stream, where African Finfoot and Half-collared Kingfishers are often seen.



Above Forest-fringed rivers host a range of specials, such as this White-backed Night-Heron.

Right Senegal Lapwings are regular dry-season visitors, and typically breed in short-grass plains dotted with small termite mounds.

Opposite The majestic African Crowned Eagle normally feeds exclusively on primates, but the masses of fruit bats make a tempting seasonal alternative for the Fibwe pair.

During the bat season the platforms provide excellent views of the roosting bats and the many raptors hunting them. African Fish-Eagles, Martial, African Crowned, Steppe and Lesser Spotted eagles and African and Ayres's hawk-eagles all enjoy the bounty, and there are regular reports of White-backed and Palm-nut vultures taking live bats. Smaller species like Yellow-billed Kite, Steppe Buzzard and even Eurasian Hobby are also seen targeting the bats, but they are seldom successful.

Fibwe aside, forest lines many of the rivers in Kasanka. The most extensive and accessible stretches are found along the largest river, the Luwombwa in the west. Nightly boat rides are almost guaranteed to produce foraging Pel's Fishing-Owls and White-backed Night-Herons. There's

a good chance that you'll be able to tick Black-fronted Bush-Shrike and Green-headed Sunbird here, in addition to the common forest species seen at Fibwe.

Downstream of Fibwe Forest, where the Musola joins the Kasanka River, extensive reedbeds are bordered by grasslands dotted with large termite mounds bearing minuscule forest patches. When the grasslands flood in the rainy season, species such as Black Coucal, Anchieta's Tchagra, Red-chested Flufftail, Broad-tailed Warbler, Black-winged Bishop and Yellow-mantled Widowbird, as well as Palearctic warblers, join the cisticolas and swamp-warblers that are present year-round. Hundreds of thousands of Barn Swallows roost in the reedbeds in summer, along with good numbers of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. During the early dry season, grazing and controlled burning transform the grasslands into suitable habitat for large flocks of non-breeding Cuckoo Finches, among other granivores. On plains where there are high densities of small termite mounds, look out for breeding Senegal Lapwings, Temminck's Coursers and Grey-rumped Swallows.

Further downstream, between the Pontoon and Kabwe campsites, the Kasanka River forms a large and more dynamic swampy floodplain, where hippos, puku and sitatungas have been instrumental in creating a mosaic of short grass, sedges and open water among the dense beds of reeds and papyrus. Herons, storks, ibises, ducks and geese gather here in large numbers, and among the less common species you can expect to see Lesser Jacana



WHEN TO GO

Although birding at Kasanka is excellent throughout the year, the best period is from October to December – and it's no coincidence that this is the bat season. The early rains create an explosion of new vegetation, including fruits, and insects, which attract large numbers of Palearctic and intra-African migrants. Flying termites provide a feast for a spectacular range of species – from sunbirds to Bateleurs – and are a magnet for wanderers and migrants like Woolly-necked Storks and Lesser Spotted Eagles. Low water levels attract large numbers of fish-eating species and waders, and many of the resident species are more conspicuous as they prepare to breed.

January to April, when large sections of the park become flooded, is still good for many of the migrants. High water levels make for productive birding, but can complicate logistics. The birds are fairly quiet in the cool winter months (April to July), but this is when the nearby Bangweulu Wetlands are at their most spectacular and sightings of Shoebills are almost guaranteed (see overleaf). August and September see the return of increasing numbers of migrants, and resident birds begin to sing in anticipation of the approaching rains.

and Rufous-bellied Heron; a recent addition is several Shoebills that wandered south from the Bangweulu Wetlands. Between August and November good numbers of waders join these ranks, as do flocks of Great White Pelicans and Woolly-necked and Abdim's storks, while African and Corn crakes, Allen's Gallinules and Lesser Moorhens swell resident rallid populations in summer.

Large and increasing densities of mammals support good vulture populations and these, together with a range of raptors that includes resident Western Banded Snake-Eagle and visiting Montagu's and Pallid harriers, make for excellent raptor watching.

Away from the rivers and wetlands, miombo woodland – dominated by *Brachystegia* trees – covers large areas of the park, but is replaced by *chipya* dry evergreen forest and thickets where the soils are richer. The birding in this habitat is challenging but can also be very rewarding, especially when you encounter a bird party. Common specials include Black-necked Eremomela, Böhm's



Flycatcher, Red-capped Crombec, Pale-billed Hornbill, Western Violet-backed Sunbird and Miombo Scrub-Robin, while Souza's Shrike, Green-backed Honeybird and Miombo Pied and Anchieta's barbets may require more effort. Collared Flycatchers often join the mixed parties in summer. Between September and November you may be lucky enough to flush a stunning male Pennant-winged Nightjar.

Some species occur only in certain types of miombo woodland. The dry, rocky 'hill miombo' near Mpululwe Hill in the east supports the likes of Miombo Rock-Thrush, Miombo Double-collared Sunbird and Reichard's Seed-eater, whereas Racket-tailed Roller and Arnott's Chat are species of tall, open woodlands on rich soils. Cabanis's Bunting and Trilling Cisticola are typical of tall-grass woodlands, often in the transition zone between 'true' miombo and more open habitats.

Large *dambos*, the Zambian equivalent of vleis, are another feature of the miombo zone. Seepage water and rain fill depressions in the woodland in the wet summers, creating large, open grasslands that

support a great diversity of plant life, especially orchids. The Chikufwe Plain is one of the most accessible examples, and at first glance it appears to be dominated by Grey-rumped Swallows, Flappet Larks, pipits, and a resident group of Southern Ground-Hornbills foraging among the handful of Lichtenstein's hartebeest, sable and reedbuck. But look more closely, preferably on foot, and you may be rewarded with Fülleborn's Longclaws, Pale-crowned Cisticolas and Yellow-breasted Waxbills – and perhaps even Locustfinches, Blue and Harlequin quails, Black-rumped and Kurrichane buttonquails, and Chestnut-headed and Streaky-breasted flufftails.

Most of the *dambos* dry out during the winter months, but the surroundings of the central Wasa camp and lodge support several permanent lakes, providing yet another habitat for Kasanka's birdlife. Residents include African Pygmy-Geese, Lesser Jacanas and a breeding pair of Wattled Cranes, while Spur-winged Geese in their thousands, as well as other waterbirds, descend on the lakes when their more fertile riverine habitats go dry. ▸