



BANGWEULU

In the balance

My first visit to the Bangweulu Wetlands in north-western Zambia in June 2001 left an indelible impression. Driving there was an adventure in itself, but being confronted by tens of thousands of black lechwe on the floodplain south of Chikuni was one of the greatest wildlife spectacles I have witnessed. And once I reached the swamps themselves, the diversity and sheer numbers of ducks, herons, storks and other wading birds beggared belief; even normally scarce species such as Rufous-bellied and Black herons were present in their thousands. Like most visitors, I was there mainly to see the enigmatic Shoebill, but it proved to be just the cherry on the top of a unique wilderness experience. So it's not surprising that when I had half a chance to go to Bangweulu again, I grabbed it.

Arriving at Chikuni almost 10 years to the day since my first visit brought a strong sense of *déjà vu*. Black lechwe still crowd the floodplain, interspersed with Wattled Cranes. Clouds of waterbirds continue to throng the shallow edges of the swamp. But there are some unsettling changes. A seasonal fishing

village has sprung up next to the field station at Chikuni. Earthen walls have been dug across the once mirror-flat floodplain to set fish traps. Patches of water-lilies have been cleared from the main channels to allow seine netting. The swamps are crisscrossed by kilometres of fishing lines set just at water level, which may account for the disappearance of African Skimmers. Duck snares await unwary waterbirds, and shots from home-made muzzle-loaders punctuate the night. The Shoebills are still there and are now among the most approachable of birds, with other species being distinctly skittish.

It is worrying that these changes have occurred in the heart of the proposed 290 000-hectare Chikuni Community Partnership Park, which has been managed by the Bangweulu Wetlands Board since early 2009. One of the key stakeholders, the African Parks Network, has come to the conclusion that the project is unworkable in its present form. The lack of enabling legislation, poorly defined community expectations and little effective control over the use of natural

resources are significant challenges. A process is under way during 2011 to correct these problems and thus give the project a chance of long-term success.

If the Bangweulu project can be righted, there is the potential to restore a globally important conservation network in the region, which includes six game management areas (Bangweulu, Chambeshi, Luwingu, Kafinda, Kalasa Mukoso and Mansa) and several protected forests, as well as Isangano National Park to the north, Lavushi Manda National Park (which shares a boundary with the Bangweulu Wetlands) to the east and Kasanka National Park to the south. The Kasanka Trust (see box, page 63) has recently taken on the challenge of running Lavushi Manda National Park. Given its proven track record, it has every chance of restoring game populations in this scenically attractive reserve. We can only hope that the African Parks Network is afforded the political support necessary to enable it to conserve the Bangweulu Wetlands effectively and in a sustained manner into the future.

PETER RYAN

SHOEBILLS

When David Lloyd saw a pair of Shoebills in Kasanka in 1992, it was hoped that a satellite population of the species would develop and become probably the only population inside a national park in Zambia. But there had been only one sighting since then – until December 2010, when a single bird showed up and was joined by another two. They stayed until July 2011. If rainfall remains high in the coming years, sightings of this species will hopefully become an annual event.

Little is known about the nearby Bangweulu population, but recent research suggests that there may be more than

1 000 birds. The Bangweulu Wetlands Project and the Percy FitzPatrick Institute have started a multiple-year study of the species, in collaboration with the Kasanka Trust and other organisations; funding has been provided by WWF-Netherlands.

Shoebills are resident at Bangweulu and April to July is the best period to see them. In recent years the guides from Shoebill Island Camp have managed to find them throughout the year, but in the late dry season sightings are achieved only after hours spent traversing the swamps.