

Zambia birding - Kasanka

Written by Neil Gray

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Based currently out of Lusaka in Zambia, I took a week leave and headed north for a 7-day birding trip, very ably organised for me by Thorn Tree Safaris (<http://www.thorntreesafaris.com>). I had three specific destinations – Kasanka National Park, Shoebill Island and the Mutinondo Wilderness area - with the goal of removing the Shoebill from No.1 spot on my "must see" list.

The first of these locations, Kasanka National Park, is an approximately 7-hour drive from Lusaka, sitting in Zambia at the end of the so-called "Pedicel" of the DRC that separates the Copperbelt from the remote northern Luapula Province. Kasanka, although a national park, is run by the Kasanka Trust (<http://www.kasanka.com/>). Accommodation is either camping or chalets, but visitors to the chalets must supply all their own food. Kasanka supply the cooks. The chalets in the main Wasa Camp are situated in miombo woodland, an evergreen broad-leaved woodland dominated by

brachystegia

('miombo' is the Swahili word for

brachystegia

),

julbernardia

and

isoberlinia

species. There is a closed canopy to the trees and only short grass grows in between. I also learnt that when the

isoberlinia

species are absent miombo morphs to chipya, also known as 'Lake basin woodland'. The trees do not form a closed canopy, allowing sunlight to penetrate and tall grasses to grow. Chipya is also prone to very hot fires in the dry season, and this gives these woodlands their name as 'chipya' means 'burnt' in the local language.

The chalet that I stayed in overlooked Wasa Lake, home to many birds such as African Pygmy Goose, Rufous-bellied Heron and Lesser Moorhen, all of which were rather difficult to see through the long flooded grassland at the edges of the lake.

I arrived just after lunchtime and was able to do a circuit of Wasa Lake through the miombo with

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bird guide Webby, who certainly seems to know his bird calls and the habits of the local birds very well. A surprising sighting, only raptor of the walk, was a European Honey Buzzard. One of the miombo specials seen was Yellow-bellied Hyliota. Miombo birding is not for the faint-hearted, as it is "low density" birding – great species diversity, but no great numbers of anything. The secret is to latch onto one of the multi-species bird parties and follow them. As many of the species flit around in the canopy a stiff neck is also guaranteed, and also makes for 'interesting' angles for photos if you are even able to pin down any of these highly mobile birds.

The next day I had a morning drive and walk and a late afternoon walk and night drive, accompanied by Webby and Frank Willem the resident ecologist for the Kasanka Trust. First stop of the day was the Fibwe lookout, some 16m up a fig tree and overlooking extensive papyrus beds, home to one of Africa's largest populations of the shy and elusive sitatunga, smallest member of the kudu family. Spotting a big male that might just make 2m to the tip of his horns in papyrus that grows to 4m is quite a challenge, but with the assistance of Frank's spotting scope I eventually succeeded in adding sitatunga to my mammal list. Fibwe is situated in mushitu (riverine forest) and supports a somewhat different bird population to the miombo and chipya. Highlights here were a beautiful male Narina Trogon, Schalow's Turaco, Purple-throated Cuckooshrike (lifer), Böhm's Bee-Eater (lifer), Brown-headed Apalis (lifer) and Pallid Honeyguide (lifer).

Less than 1km from Fibwe and a comfortable walk through the mushitu, is a viewing site on the edge of a dambo (seasonal wetland) for one of the truly remarkable sights of Africa - the annual migration and arrival at Kasanka of millions of Straw-coloured Fruit Bats, and then their departure a mere 2 months later. This spectacle takes place in November and December every year. In the dambo, however, I picked up Croaking Cisticola and another lifer in Anchieta's Tchagra, southern counterpart of the west and central African Marsh Tchagra.

The afternoon drive and walk targeted miombo species and I was not disappointed, adding more lifers in Western Violet-backed Sunbird, Black-necked Eremomela (a highly photogenic little bird, but it flits around on steroids so no hope of a photo), Böhm's Flycatcher and one of my biggest bogey birds Arnot's Chat.

A highly successful day and a half at Kasanka to get the trip off to a good start, with a total of exactly 100 species seen including 9 lifers.