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# THE KAFUE NATIONAL PARK BUCK

[ Delve into the wilds of Kafue and discover the diverse antelope -  
and the conservation efforts that are helping them thrive -  
in Zambia's largest national park. ]

# STOPS HERE



WORDS & IMAGES | DIANNE TIPPING-WOODS

# THE LECHWE EMERGED AS THE SUN ROSE OVER THE BUSANGA PLAINS,

their russet backs catching the light and shadows taking form. At first glance, I thought I saw a small group, but as I looked longer, more appeared. Without binoculars, the distant shapes blurred into the horizon once again.

“How many do you think there are?” I asked Chrispin Ndlovu, our guide from Mozhi Bushcamp.

“Can you count the grass?” he replied.

Chrispin explained that the semi-aquatic grazers were red lechwe. Having moved to Zambia from Zimbabwe, one of his greatest joys as a guide is spotting new antelope species thriving in this wet, wild landscape managed by African Parks in partnership with Zambia’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife.

Kafue National Park has been a globally significant protected wildlife area for over a century. Many locally based NGOs, such as WWF, The Nature Conservancy, Musekese Conservation, Game Rangers International, Panthera, and the Zambian Carnivore Programme, have played a role in maintaining its wildlife populations, even when faced with threats like poaching.

Driving deeper into the plains, we saw the red lechwe up close. Their vivid chestnut coats were accented by white underparts, throat patches, and facial markings. Black stripes lined the front of their legs. Male lechwe stood out with long, sweeping horns and proud postures. Occasionally, one darted head-down across the road, but most fed near this seasonal wetland’s quick-drying streams and rivulets, waiting for them to fill with the summer rains. Their long, slender legs and splayed hooves are perfectly adapted to wet environments.

Busanga spans roughly 720 square kilometres in northern Kafue, Africa’s second-largest national park. The Lufupa River and its tributaries flood the plains yearly, making them accessible only between April and October when the waters recede. In addition to lechwe and puku, we spotted kudu, sable, roan antelope, reedbuck, duiker, oribi, zebra, buffalo,

wildebeest, elephants, and extraordinary birdlife.

Kafue National Park hosts the highest diversity of antelope in southern Africa, with 21 species. This is because of the park’s large size (22,400 square kilometres), spanning Africa’s sub-equatorial to sub-tropical rainfall zones, and its exceptional diversity of vegetation and habitats, including extensive areas of miombo, Kalahari, savanna and mopane woodlands, riparian forests and floodplains, swamps, and wetlands, which remain intact and unencroached, says ecologist and conservation biologist Richard Jeffery. These varied habitats – interspersed between the Kafue, Lunga, and Lufupa rivers – uniquely support this wide variety.

In the park’s wetland areas, such as the Busanga swamps and floodplains, Jeffery explains three species of shorter, stocky antelope (red lechwe, puku, and Defassa waterbuck) occur together with little competition. “Red lechwe thrive on emergent grasses of wetlands’ seasonally expanding and receding floodplains; puku on a broad range of floodplain grasslands and dambos, as do waterbuck, but with a greater affinity for the grassland interface between woodlands, dambos, and floodplains,” he notes. Meanwhile, the sitatunga is the most adapted antelope to aquatic habitats and does not compete with the other antelope. Instead, it lives deep in papyrus swamps, swimming freely between foraging areas for its preferred diet of herbs, sedges, and grasses, and deep cover where it raises its young.

While Busanga’s abundance is unrivalled, sightings in other areas were just as captivating: bushbuck at Kikujji Camp on the Lunga River, kudu and roan in the savannah woodlands around Mukambi Safari’s Fig Tree Bush Camp, lion, leopard, and cheetah from Classic Zambia’s Ntemwa Bush Camp, and herds of sable near McBride’s Camp.

Recently, 400 Kafue lechwe were released around Lake Itezhi-Tezhi in the southern part of the park to provide additional sub-populations of this threatened antelope. The red and Kafue lechwe in the park do not overlap in distribution. Kafue lechwe, related to the more common red lechwe, is an endemic subspecies. According to the Endangered Wildlife Trust, they are listed as vulnerable, declining from around 80,000 in the 1970s to about 23,000 today. Its distribution was recently restricted to the Kafue Flats wetlands (outside Kafue National Park), but historically included what is now Kafue National Park.

“This was the basis for their re-introduction”, said Craig Reid, Park Manager at Kafue National Park. “African Parks has worked hard on providing a secure environment for natural populations of all wildlife, inclusive of antelope,



PREVIOUS PAGE: Namib-Naukluft National Park unfolds across five distinct parts with classic desert scenery alongside windswept gravel plains, the Naukluft Mountains and rocky outcrops, which are home to numerous desert-adapted creatures and plants. THIS PAGE: the fastest (and easiest) way to the top of Big Daddy is to walk along the dune’s ‘spine’ (above); each canvas and thatch room at Kulala Desert Lodge has a flat rooftop, ideal for open-air sleep-outs under



to start their natural population recovery process. To help this process along and boost some of the key ecosystem processes of the park we translocated the Kafue lechwe, restoring the population in its former range. The next major target is the imminent translocation of around 1,300 wildebeest and 150 zebra to Kafue which will further boost wildlife numbers in this iconic Park.”

Antelope matter in a large system like Kafue, Jeffery suggests, “because naturally occurring wildlife in their natural habitats make up by far the most productive form of sustainable land use and protection of ecosystem services supporting life and livelihoods on our planet.” Yet, they face growing threats from poaching, habitat loss, and climate change. Conservation efforts in Kafue are vital to ensure these species – and the ecosystem they support – continue to thrive.



## Essentials

### WHERE TO STAY

Kafue has a mix of luxury and bush camps, with options for hosted and self-drive safaris. Many camps close during the rainy season, so plan your travel accordingly.

**Wilderness Shumba:** Front row seats to dramatic and thrilling wildlife encounters in one of Africa’s most exclusive destinations: Kafue’s Busanga Plains.

**McBrides’ Camp:** A charming, classic camp located in a remote area on the Kafue River.

**Mozhi Bush Camp:** Family-friendly accommodations, including Mozhi House, two-person luxury tents, and Bongololo Campsite, (with WiFi).

**Musekese Camp:** An exceptional camp for safari-goers seeking an enriching, conservation-focused experience with excellent guiding.

**Mukambi Fig Tree Bush Camp:** Features treehouse-style rooms, a star bed, and a pool, offering a unique character without being over-the-top.

**Ila Safari Lodge:** A luxury camp offering gourmet meals, and safari innovations like electric vehicles and boats for silent exploration.

**Nanzhila Plains Safari Camp:** An authentic safari experience with access to diverse wildlife and bird species in the south of the park.

**Konkamoya Lodge:** On the shores of Lake Itzhi-Tezhi in southern Kafue National Park that’s renowned for wildlife sightings and Italian cuisine.

**For more info, visit: [africanparks.org/the-parks/kafue](http://africanparks.org/the-parks/kafue) and Africa’s Eden: [africaseden.travel](http://africaseden.travel)**

## ANTELOPE OF KAFUE NATIONAL PARK

### AQUATIC ANTELOPE

On the Busanga Plains, red lechwe is almost guaranteed, but spotting the elusive sitatunga is possible if you’re very lucky. Secretive and shy, this spiral-horned wetland specialist moves with a gait that looks like it can “walk on water”.

### ROYAL GAME

Sable and roan, often shy, linger at the edges of woodlands and wetlands. A male sable, with his glossy black coat and scimitar-shaped horns, is wilderness royalty. Solitary males move quickly, but herds are often more relaxed. Roan, their stockier cousins, exude understated beauty with pale brown coats and bold facial markings.

### SPIRALLED GIANTS

Standing up to 1.7 metres tall and weighing 700 kilograms, Eland move with surprising grace across open plains and woodlands. Smaller kudu, with spiralling horns and soulful eyes, are equally captivating. A startled kudu can leap over 2.5 metres in a single bound. Bushbucks, the smallest of the group, often reveal their presence with a baboon-like bark.

### SMALL ANTELOPE

Look closely and spot some of Kafue’s tiniest treasures: Sharpe’s grysbok and steenbok in the grass, or a klipspringer perched on rocky outcrops. Soft-eyed and slender-legged oribi add to the quartet of small antelopes. Kafue also supports both common and blue duikers.

### FAST RUNNERS

Lichtenstein’s hartebeest, recognizable by their reddish-brown coats and twisty horns, thrive in miombo woodlands. They form small herds and can run up to 70 kilometres per hour.

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