

PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Journal

89 YEARS | AUGUST 2023



The Elephants of Mana Pools, Zimbabwe

By Lillian Roberts, GMPSA, EFIAP



Imagine a place where magical light filters through a primordial forest. Where hippos slumber in the slow-moving river and baboons drink beside zebras. Some 350 bird species sing, hunt, and root for food amidst the foliage, and oxpeckers ride the sun-drenched backs of cape buffalo and myriad antelope species. Wildlife enthusiasts and photographers from all over the world wander freely on foot, even lying flat on the ground to photograph the relatively unbothered large mammals.

And the elephants behave as they do nowhere else on Earth.

Elephant Under Leaning Tree

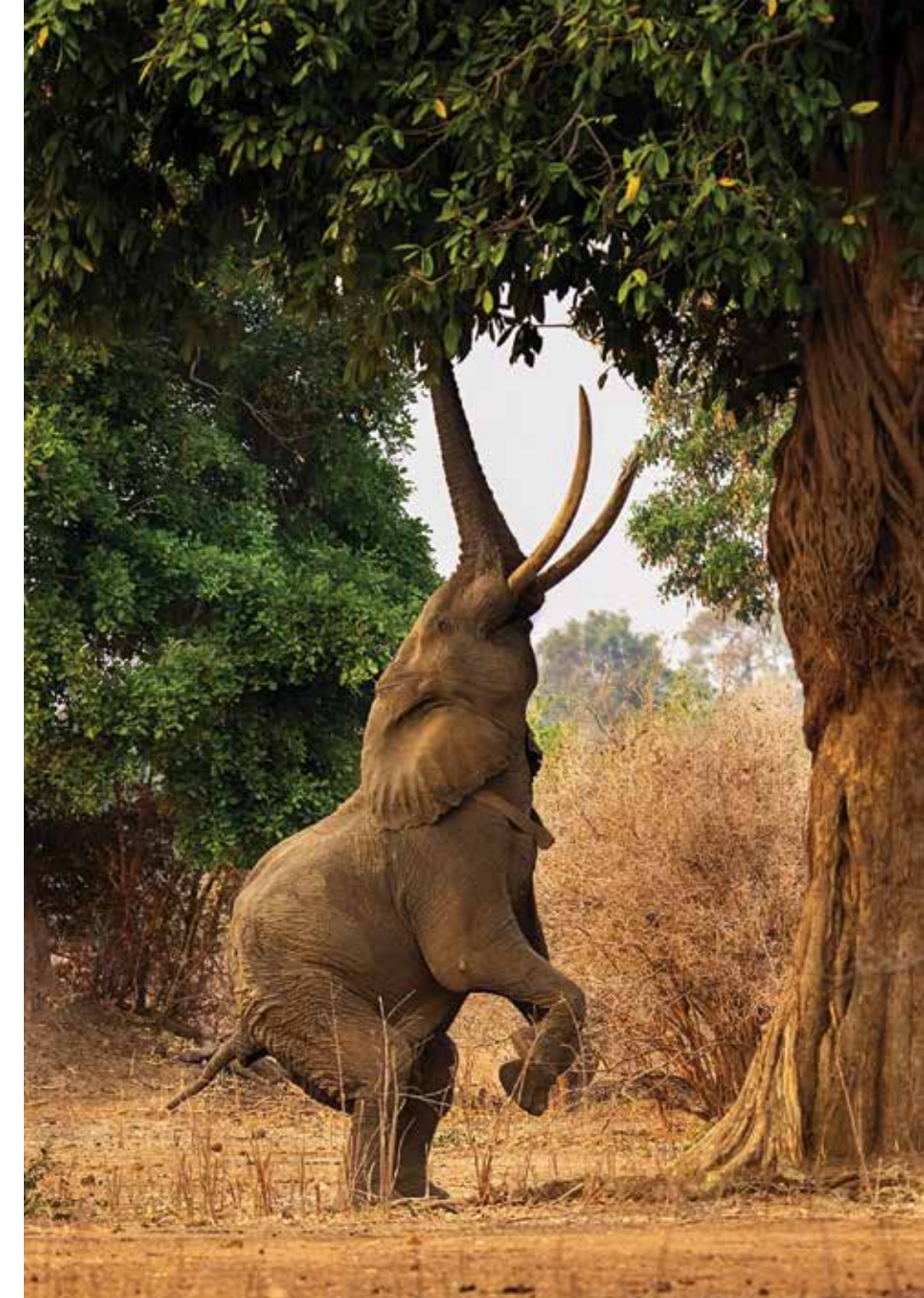


Mana Pools National Park in northern Zimbabwe stretches almost 220,000 ha (about 543,632 acres or almost 849 square miles) from the lower Zambezi River. “Mana” means “four” in a local language, and refers to the four “permanent” waterholes that form during the dry season. In the wet season (roughly October through March), the area floods. Then the rains stop and the water recedes, leaving (historically) 4 large pools of water that serve the wildlife. (Drought threatens the area. At least one of these pools was dry during our visit, and the others held less water than in most years.)

In conjunction with the Sapi and Cheware Safari areas, Mana was designated a Renowned World Heritage Site in 1984. Across the river in Botswana lies more, largely unspoiled wilderness. Mana Pools is an iconic destination for wildlife photographers, yet remains mostly uncommercialized due to its remote location and the absence of any permanent facilities in the park. To visit for more than a day, you must either camp on your own, arrange for an elaborate temporary campsite to be constructed on your behalf, or stay at a lodge outside the park and drive/ be driven each morning and afternoon. The park is closed to vehicular traffic at 6 p.m., so the latter option isn’t terribly practical for photography.

In October, 2021, I joined a small-group photo safari under the combined leadership of Africa-resident photographers Piper Mackay and Carole Deschuymmer, for 6 days in this amazing location. 2021 being what it was, the trip had been in limbo for some time and had already been added on to a much longer trip in South Africa I’d also planned for some time, so I wasn’t fully prepared for what I would find at Mana Pools. The accommodations were certainly primitive by most standards – no running water, no Internet, and the only electricity came from solar panels set up by our hosts and was reserved mainly for charging camera and laptop batteries. A delightful older Zimbabwean couple, along with a team of assistants and a certified guide, the camp hosts went well overboard to ensure that our stay was as comfortable as possible. With large walk-in tents and “en suite” bathrooms that utilized gravity-flow river water to provide showers and flushes, it could not be described as “luxury,” but it added to the overall experience.

Camp was set up on the banks of the Zambezi under a canopy of massive old trees that provided enough shade to make the high temperatures just barely tolerable. By night we were serenaded by the songs of hippos, lions, and other forest sounds. Once an elephant strolled through camp in broad daylight. A makeshift kitchen produced truly wonderful food – including lasagna, fresh bread and even ice. Meals were, of course, al fresco. An assortment of wines



Elephant Standing to Reach



Shadowed Elephant Profile



Elephants Good Friends

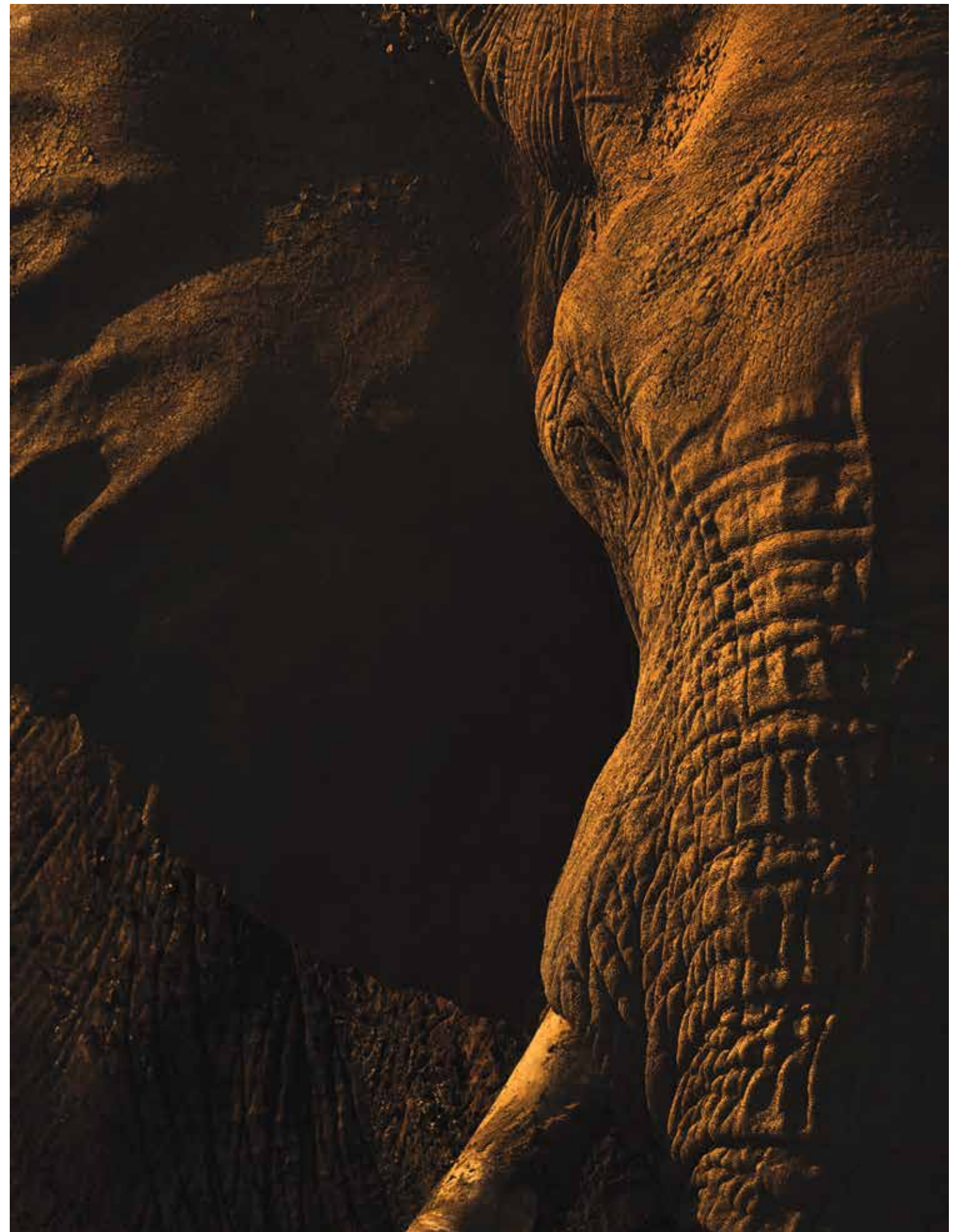
and tales of danger and local lore from our guides made each evening truly special.

But we didn't come for the food! Or even the stories. Each morning we left camp before dawn to scout for subject animals surrounded by the spectacular light that suffuses the forest at first and last light. Mornings and evenings bring a brief but spectacular warm orange glow to the forest, and our challenge was to find wildlife appropriately backlit within the unique woodland setting. Both our trip leaders had been to the area before, and showed astonishing images of elephants placed just so under an arching tree, surrounded by a cloud of orange dust and backlit by the golden light. Spoiler alert: we never got that shot on this trip. And it was a surprisingly undusty season, given how dry it was. A good reason to go back one day. But we did see the light!

Mana Pools is not immune to poaching. Due to its proximity to Zambia across the river, poachers have historically been able to cross the Zambezi by night, slaughter valuable species and steal their tusks/horns then vanish across the border before dawn. Rhinos were extirpated in the 1990s, when the last 10 individuals were removed to another location for their protection. The elephant population throughout Zimbabwe has been reduced by some 40% over time due to poaching. Mana Pools is somewhat protected, but low pay and a near-impossible job tends to demoralize the rangers tasked with policing the massive space. Nevertheless, the immediate



Elephant Reaching for Branch



Undeclared Tusker



Elephant with Broken Tusks Approaches



Lillian Roberts, GMPSA, EFIAP, is an avid amateur photographer who enjoys traveling the world in pursuit of unique opportunities for wildlife viewing and photography. She has been a member of PSA since 2001. This is her third article in the PSA Journal.

Elephant Stands in Marsh with Eight Egrets



park area may be somewhat overpopulated with elephants, such that young trees rarely get the chance to grow up. Another theory about the trees is that the damming of the Zambezi upstream prevented the historical annual flooding that allowed the trees to sprout. Either way, the result is a photogenic, but ultimately self-limiting, population of aging and damaged trees. A few trees fall each year. On the rare occasion that humans notice a sprouting sapling before something eats it, the young tree is immediately fenced off to give it a chance to become a giant one day.

Because poaching (and “legal” sponsored hunting – a story for another day) are such a threat to the elephant population, and animals migrate across borders, large tuskers are all identified by a hard-to-ignore radio collar. Collared elephants all have names, though it’s harder than you might imagine to tell them apart! Boswell is the best-known, and currently has the largest tusks for a living elephant in Zimbabwe. But this is not the reason for his fame! Boswell was the first elephant in the wild to learn to stand on his hind legs to get food! A handful of others – all bulls as far as is reported – have also figured this out. And two others have learned to “climb” the trees by walking their front legs up the leaning trunk or else stand on the termite mounds that populate the region.

Their favorite tree appears to be one known locally as “sausage” trees due to the phallic-looking fruit that hangs ubiquitously and is a preferred food source for baboons and other species. But the elephants prefer the green limbs rather than the fruit. This, and the lack of grass or scrub during the dry season, are what prompt the famous behavior. While there, we were also privileged to photograph a pack of African Wild Dogs playing and devouring an impala. We had a brief encounter with a small group of lions, and photographed a group of vultures so thick you could not see what they were eating (it was what the lions had killed the night before). Cape buffalo, hippos, baboons, bee-eaters, kites, and many other African animals attracted our attention as well. But the elephants are the main attraction, and made the whole trip worthwhile.



Tusker Hangs in Marsh with Egrets

Tusker Strolls Through Forest

