

Bwabwata National Park

Wildlife wonders: People and wildlife species co-existing

Many overseas visitors to Namibia share back gardens with squirrels, birds, and so on, but in the Bwabwata National Park, garden visitors and neighbours come in large and sometimes threatening forms! That people and wild-life can get along so well and in such close proximity is one of triumphs of the Bwabwata National Park.

Everybody's neighbours!

While visiting the Bwabwata National Park you are sharing space with some of the biggest wildlife Africa has to offer. Large mammalian predators include leopard, cheetah, lion, hyaena and African wild dog.

African wild dogs, or 'painted dogs', are the most endangered large carnivores in Africa, with continental populations estimated to be only 3 000 to 4 000, down from an original population of half a million, due to persecution by farmers and other competitors. Lions kill wild dogs whenever they can. Superbly adapted to hunting (80% of hunts result in a kill), they specialise in pursuing prey relentlessly over long distances. They have the strongest bite measured against body mass of any carnivorous mammal. Interestingly, males often act as babysitters. Wild-dog numbers are increasing in the Bwabwata National Park.

Lion populations are low. The Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism and the local resident's association hope to improve numbers by adding value through an increase in tourism and trophy hunting value so that local people have an incentive to not only tolerate, but also to protect lions. While not many people want more lions next door, here they do!

Extremely large crocodiles patrol the rivers. More dangerous to man, however, are the hippos that live in the Okavango and Kwando rivers. Territorial and aggressive, hippos kill more people in Africa each year than any other large wild mammal species. Never come between a grazing hippo and the water.

African elephants, the world's largest land mammal, need no introduction. Extremely abundant in the Kavango and the Caprivi, which they use as a migration corridor between Angola, Botswana and Zambia, they visit the rivers of the Bwabwata National Park in large numbers during the dry season. The park also serves as a corridor for many other migrating animals moving between Botswana, Zambia and Angola.

The Bwabwata National Park is the best place in Namibia to see Cape buffalo (thereby filling your Big Five tick list!). The Buffalo Core Area conserves a large buffalo population that, with the exception of the buffalo on the Waterberg Plateau and the population near Khaudum National Park, is unique in the country. The buffalo are normally followed by an entourage of red- and yellow-billed oxpeckers and egrets that feed on the parasites and insects that are attracted to the herds.

Roan and the majestically horned sable are the highest-value antelope species in the Bwabwata National Park, due to their rarity elsewhere. Kudu and impala occur in high numbers in the conservation core areas. Riverine habitat and floodplains support red lechwe, sitatunga and reedbuck.



Waters of life

The reed-lined rivers of the Bwabwata National Park are a Namibian rarity – they are perennial! The Okavango, which is the source of the Okavango Delta in neighbouring Botswana, acts as a 400-km long border with Angola. During high waters, normally in April, river levels rise between 3–4 metres above the low watermark. This overflow feeds the floodplains and is essential to the wetlands in both Namibia and Botswana. The Kwando forms the border between east and western Caprivi.

Seasonal rains (November to March), often accompanied by dramatic displays of thunder and lightning, create temporary pans known as 'omurambas' on the floodplains. Wetland birds thrive in the Bwabwata National Park particularly in Mahango, which, despite its modest size (24 462 ha), has had more bird species recorded than any other national park in Namibia. Endangered wattled cranes, Pel's fishing-owl, snakebirds, jacanas, various herons and egrets, and the black coucal are just some birding highlights. African skimmers nest in holes pecked out of riverside mud banks. Over 450 bird species have been recorded.

Vegetation

The baobab – big, slow growing, very long-lived and decidedly eccentric in design – is the show stopper. Baobabs can be hollowed out, leaving the tree alive, and in Namibia certain trees have served variously as a prison, a chapel, a bar, a western-style toilet and grain store. The Bwabwata National Park is also characterised by deciduous Kalahari

woodlands and scrub, both of which have been identified as a conservation priority by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and which favour wind-blown sand dunes, sometimes as much as 60 metres deep. Lilies and mats of floating vegetation in the rivers, as well as the reed and papyrus beds, are nurseries for aquatic species that include the sharply fanged tiger fish. All in all 869 species of plants have been recorded in the Bwabwata National Park, 25% more than in the adjoining swamps of the Okavango Delta.

Safety in the park

Please be aware that elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo, hippo and crocodiles are potentially dangerous. Always keep a safe distance from elephants, particularly mothers with calves, and remember size does count – they have right of way! Ear-flaring, screams and mock charges are warning signs and do not necessarily mean the animal is about to charge, but it does mean they are annoyed and are warning you to stay away. If you are confronted with a herd, stop your vehicle and wait for them to pass, especially when herds are on the river side of the road.

Don't swim in rivers or pans and backwaters. Hippos and crocodiles are abundant. And vervet monkeys are notorious picnic/tent raiders. Keep an eye on the little thieves!

This is a malaria area and bilharzia is also present. Consult your doctor before visiting.

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Environmental Care Code

Please adhere to the following:

- **Keep your distance from elephants, particularly those grazing or resting between the road and the river. They may feel trapped if you try to drive past them, so it is best to give them time to move away first.**
- **Do not drive off designated roads and tracks.**
- **Camp only in designated areas.**
- **Fishing and boating are prohibited in the park.**
- **Remove all your litter.**
- **Be aware that you enter the park at your own risk.**
- **Follow the rules and regulations on your park permit.**

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