

2021

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**PHOTOGRAPHING THE PITTA – ZIMBABWE
DECEMBER 2021**

Well I finally managed to get to Zimbabwe to photograph the African Pitta, one of the most iconic birds on the Southern African list. After a couple of false starts with unimplemented government instructions about a 10 day quarantine period for all arrivals delaying my departure, I arrived in Harare a couple of days late and headed off to Mushumbi Pools four hours north down in the Zambezi Valley. There my guide Mackenzie picked me up for the two hour 80 kilometre drive to Masoka Village which lies on the banks of Angwa River. The camp is rustic but has everything you need, and is protected from the fierce 38-40 degree temperatures by the shade of some large old Natal Mahoganies. I went to bed every night listening to the African Wood Owls calling right above me.



I was told the Pitta viewing had been great this year so it was with high expectations that we crossed the dry Angwa river bed at 5.15 am the following morning where we could hear the Pittas were already calling. Our first morning proved to be the best. There were three or four Pittas calling and displaying from the trees. I only saw one bird displaying and unfortunately he was behind several branches and had his back to me. The rest of the birds we saw on day three and four were always on or close to the ground (we could not cross the river on day two- the lions were too close) but we managed good views every time we saw them. Photography was particularly difficult as the birds spent most of their time in thick undergrowth rummaging through the leaf litter. The light was dreadful and I was sometimes having to shoot on 16000 ISO.

All species were very difficult to see in the well-leafed canopy . Tropical Boubous, Senegal Coucals and Eastern Nicators were calling constantly but I only saw one Nicator once. I managed a poor shot of a Red-throated Twinspot on our first day, but never caught up with the Orange-winged Pytilia

although again we heard them calling on several occasions – the same was true of Livingston’s Flycatcher. You never know what you are going to run into, and one morning, who should run down the path in front of us but an African Crake! Brown-necked Parrots (I always preferred the old name- Grey-headed) are always difficult to find in Kruger so it was nice to run into 3 birds in the village on this trip.



I needed a photo of African Barred Owlet and was delighted to find a pair down a dry river bed some 15 kilometres from camp. The second big photo target was Lilian’s Lovebird. I was reliably informed that they were always to be found in the village itself. We flattened that village for 4 consecutive days and – no Lilian’s Lovebird- but someone up there was listening as we found the bird on day 5 some 15 kilometres from Mushumbi on my way back to Harare. Funny how often that happens- you find the bird at the death having practically given up all hope of finding it. The valley was desperately dry the December rains not yet having started and I think the lovebirds had moved on looking for water.

The birds in the village were particularly skittish. The most common bird there was Meves Starling but they flew every time they saw the vehicle; they didn’t even wait for it to stop. I think the birds contribute to the diet of the villagers who seemed to have very little to eat. We would take our sundowners out into the river bed each evening and watch the elephants cross the river from the National Park. They dug 3 metre deep holes in the river bed to reach water before invading the village each night. There were no crops there for them to eat as nothing had started to grow as the rains were so late.

For the first two nights I enjoyed the company of a lovely couple from Zimbabwe –Debbie and Andrew but I had the whole camp to myself for my final three nights with just Mackenzie and his team of 5 able helpers to cater to my every need. So a successful trip- I really hope they get some rain soon. The Pittas should start calling again and start their breeding in earnest. Mackenzie tells me if you go in February you can watch them feeding their chicks.



I think Masoka camp is probably only viable in the Pitta season but the birding is good there the entire year round. Winter is a good time to visit (even though the pitta is not there). The birds are much easier to see with less foliage around and of course it is much cooler. If you are keen to see the bird and are interested in conserving the African Pitta (there is another hunting lodge close by where you could see the bird- there was only one bird and they chased it away by over use of its call) please whats' app Mackenzie on +263 77 980 7261or email him on Mackenziezirota@gmail.com. He would love to see you.

Lilians Love bird



African Barred Owlet

