

CHOBE NATIONAL PARK  
**THE GREAT  
RIVER**

Discovering Botswana's legendary wildlife  
photography destination by car  
and by luxury liveaboard



*The Chobe Princess, the liveaboard we choose for our trip. We had the water-level cabin facing forward, easily seen in the image with its sliding doors opening in front - highly recommended!*

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*B*otswana's Chobe National Park is legendary among African safari enthusiasts. It's one of those must-do destinations of a lifetime, in the same league of Namibia's Etosha or Tanzania's Ngorongoro, and it has been there for a long time. Botswana also enjoys a very good reputation among wildlife photographers and serious conservationists, and that was one more good reason to be interested in visiting Chobe (or at least a part of it), so when the subject came up with

our friend Phillip Conradie of **African Wildlife Photo Safaris** during a trip to Namibia the decision was quickly made. We'd go to Etosha first - during the rainy season, a first for all of us - and then we'd basically drive north-east from there, crossing hundreds of deserted bush first to Moremi Reserve and finally to Kasane, a little wild town at the border between Namibia and Botswana which would serve as our port of entry to the mighty Chobe river. I use the word "port" on purpose, as

*continued on page 18* ➤



*Malachite kingfisher Alcedo cristata with spider prey - a common sight along the tree-lined shores of the Chobe.*

■ African buffalo or  
Cape buffalo  
*Syncerus caffer* with  
African elephants  
*Loxodonta africana*  
in the distance.



we had decided to do things on a grand style and enjoy the Chobe in the best and most luxurious way - by liveaboard, taking a river cruise aboard the beautiful Chobe Princess (see our Travel Guide further on for the details). But what's so special about the Chobe to justify the admittedly rather horrendous expenditure of time and money needed to visit it?

**BOTSWANA'S EDEN FOR WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHERS**

Chobe National Park is Botswana's first National Park, and also the most biologically diverse. Located in the north of the country, it is Botswana's third largest park, after Central Kalahari Game Reserve and Gemsbok National Park, and has one of the greatest concentrations of game in all of Africa. The Park is widely known for its spectacular elephant population: it

*continued on page 20* ➔

*African elephant **Loxodonta africana** taking a dust bath. This image - like the previous one - was taken from the top deck of the Chobe Princess as we slowly motored along the river.*





■ *Giant kingfisher*  
*Megaceryle maxima* with crab prey.

A very displeased young male African lion *Panthera leo* has just been displaced by a herd of elephants going to the river for their evening drink.

contains an estimated 50,000 elephants, perhaps the highest elephant concentration of Africa, and part of the largest continuous surviving elephant population. The elephant population seems to have solidly built up since 1990, from a few thousand. Elephants living here are Kalahari elephants, the largest in size of all known elephant populations. They are characterized by rather brittle ivory and short tusks, perhaps due to calcium deficiency in the soils. Damage caused by the high numbers of elephants is rife in some areas. In fact, concentration is so high throughout Chobe that culls have been considered, but are too controversial and have thus far been rejected. At dry season, these elephants sojourn in Chobe River and the Linyanti River areas. At rain season, they make a 200-km migration to the southeast stretch of the Park. Their distribution zone however outreaches the park and *continued on page 24* ➤





Left, Little bee-eater *Merops pusillus*; top right, Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta*; bottom right, Spur-winged goose *Plectropterus gambensis*.







A large Nile crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus* basks on a river bank in the late afternoon - notice the elephants foraging in the background.

*African elephant  
Loxodonta africana  
enjoying a cool shower  
by the river side.*



spreads to northwestern Zimbabwe. The Park can be divided up to 4 areas, each corresponding to one distinct ecosystem: The Serondela area (or Chobe riverfront), situated in the extreme Northeast of the park, has as its main geographical features lush floodplains and dense woodland of mahogany, teak and other hardwoods now largely reduced by heavy elephant pressure. The Chobe River, which flows along the Northeast border of the park, is a major watering spot, especially in the dry season (May through October) for large breeding herds of elephants, as well as families of giraffe, sable and cape buffalo. The flood plains are the only place in Botswana where the puku antelope can be seen. Birding is also available. Large numbers of carmine bee eaters are spotted in season. When in flood spoonbills, ibis, various species of storks, ducks and other waterfowl flock to the area. This is likely Chobe's most visited section, in large part because of its proximity to the Victoria Falls. The town of Kasane, situated just downstream, is the most important town of the region and serves as the northern entrance to the park.

The Savuti Marsh area, 10,878 square km (4,200 sq mi) large, constitutes the western stretch of the park (50 km (31 mi) north of Mababe Gate). The Savuti Marsh is the relic of a large inland lake whose water supply was cut a long time ago by tectonic movements. Nowadays the marsh is fed by the erratic Savuti

*continued on page 34* ➤



*African jacana* ■  
*Actophilornis africanus*  
 with chicks.



■ Left, Southern red bishop or Red bishop *Euplectes orix*, courting and building nest among riverine reed beds. Right, Greater Blue-eared Glossy starling *Lamprotornis chalybaeus*.



■ Baby elephants are absolutely adorable - this one is obviously enjoying playing in the water!





Far left,  
Reed cormorant  
*Phalacrocorax  
africanus*.  
Left, male  
Sable antelope  
*Hippotragus  
niger*.




■ A herd of African elephants *Loxodonta africana* is moving towards the river - the babies are being shielded by the adult females.



■ Top left, Little Banded Goshawk or Shikra *Accipiter badius*; top right, Melba finch or Green-winged Pytilia *Pytilia melba*. Bottom left, Wood sandpiper *Tringa glareola*; bottom right, Water Dikkop or Thick-knee *Burhinus vermiculatus*.





A female African lion  *Panthera leo* clearly shows her displeasure at being approached.

■ Squacco heron  
*Ardeola ralloides*.





■ Top left, African fish eagle *Haliaeetus vocifer*; top right, African sacred ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus*. Bottom left, Great egret *Egretta alba*; bottom right, Black heron or Black egret *Egretta ardesiaca*.

■ *Adult male African buffalo or Cape buffalo Syncerus caffer - old, experienced bulls like this one can be very cranky and usually are extremely dangerous.*



■ African elephant  
*Loxodonta africana*.  
Notice the typically  
short and broken  
tusks usually  
observed in the  
Chobe elephants.

Channel, which dries up for long periods then curiously flows again, a consequence of tectonic activity in the area. It is currently flowing again and in January 2010 reached Savuti Marsh for the first time since 1982. As a result of this variable flow, there are hundred of dead trees along the channel's bank. The region is also covered with extensive savannahs and rolling grasslands, which makes wildlife particularly dynamic in this section of the Park. At dry seasons, visitors on safari often encounter rhinoceros, warthog, kudu, impala, zebra, wildebeest and a herd of African bush elephants. At rain seasons, the rich birdlife of the Park (450 species) is well represented. Packs of lions, hyenas, zebras or more rarely Southern African cheetahs are visible as well. This region is reputed for its annual migration of zebras and predators.

The Linyanti Marsh, located at the Northwest corner of the Park and to the North of Savuti, is adjacent to the Linyanti River. To the west of this area lies Selinda Reserve and on the northern bank of Kwando River is Namibia's Nkasa Rupara National Park. Around these two rivers are riverine woodlands, open woodlands as well as lagoons, and the rest of the region mainly consists of flood plains. There are here large concentrations of the lion, leopard, African wild dog, roan antelope, sable antelope, a

*continued on page 42* >





Left, African Wattled plover or lapwing *Vanellus senegallus*; right, Coppery-tailed Coucal *Centropus cupreicaudus*.




The almost invisible outline of a Nile crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus* silently cruising the Chobe at sunset.





■ Left, Cape spurfowl or Cape francolin *Pternistis capensis*; right, Great egret *Egretta alba*.



A huge Nile  crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus* basking on a riverbank.





■ Top left, Emerald-spotted Wood dove *Turtur chalcospilos*; top right, African harrier-hawk, Harrier hawk or *Gymnogene Polyboroides typus*. Bottom left, Red-billed Oxpecker *Buphagus erythrorhynchus*; bottom right, Common sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*.





Female African elephant *Loxodonta africana* with her tiny baby suckling.



Common ■  
*hippopotamus*  
*Hippopotamus*  
*amphibius* - a common,  
fast and extremely  
dangerous species.



■ The small but exceedingly colorful African pygmy goose *Nettapus auritus* is a very shy and frustrating subject, which can be approached only with great caution and difficulty.



hippopotamus pod and enormous herds of elephants. The rarer red lechwe, sitatunga and a bask of crocodiles also occur in the area. Bird life is very rich here.

Between Linyanti and Savuti Marshes finally lies a hot and dry hinterland, mainly occupied by the Nogatsaa grass woodland. This section is little known and is a great place for spotting elands.

**A CHOICE OF DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS TO VISIT**

So much for an accurate description of the area - but is it worth the trouble and the cost? In a word - yes. The area we visited - the Chobe "riverfront" which spreads for a radius of about 50 km

Left, two Pied  
kingfisher *Ceryle*  
*rudis*; right, African  
openbill *Anastomus*  
*lamelligerus*.

around Kasane, both by river cruise and by car - is exceedingly rich in wildlife, and photo opportunities are countless, especially for birds when shooting from a speedboat on the river. Elephants, hippos and crocodiles are everywhere, and when in the small boats one can get really, really close to them, so that interesting behavior is often observed at ease. We were there during the wet season so the river was running high and water was plentiful everywhere, but we expect wildlife to be more concentrated along the Chobe itself during the dry season when water is less available inside the bush. River liveboards are admittedly very expensive, and most people can only afford a 3- or 4-day cruise, so we rounded that up opting to stay in Kasane (lots of nice, inexpensive bungalows in town) and taking speedboat day trips up and down the river for one more week. One has to choose the boatman wisely, but if the guy is good then good sightings and photos will soon follow. But let's admit it - regardless of costs, nothing beats enjoying an African sunset from the comfort and safety of a luxurious riverboat's deck, with a cold beer in your glass, millions of stars in the sky above and a lion roaring in the distance...so go for it!





■ Southern Ground hornbill *Bucorvus leadbeateri*. This male is possibly displaying a courtship behavior.



African fish eagle *Haliaeetus vocifer* feeding on a large catfish.





*Lesser or Allen's Gallinule* █  
*Porphyrio alleni* - a very shy  
skulker which can only be  
approached with  
much difficulty.



■ Nile crocodiles *Crocodylus niloticus* are almost invisible when swimming on the surface. This is an extremely dangerous and very fast predator.





■ A pair of White-fronted bee-eater Merops bullockoides - the one on the right is feeding on a moth it has just caught. The tiny scales from the moth's wings are clearly visible as they are being shaken off.



Left, adult male Chacma baboon or Cape baboon *Papio ursinus*; right, male African buffalo or Cape buffalo *Syncerus caffer*.





*Nile monitor*  
*Varanus niloticus*  
*testing the air at*  
*the water's edge.*



■ Left, Malachite kingfisher *Alcedo cristata*; right, African fish eagle *Haliaeetus vocifer* feeding on fish prey.



The archetypal Chobe river landscape - reeds, tall grasses, thousands of lotus flowers in the clear water under a bright blue, endless African sky.



*African elephant*  
*Loxodonta africana*  
*at the river's edge.*







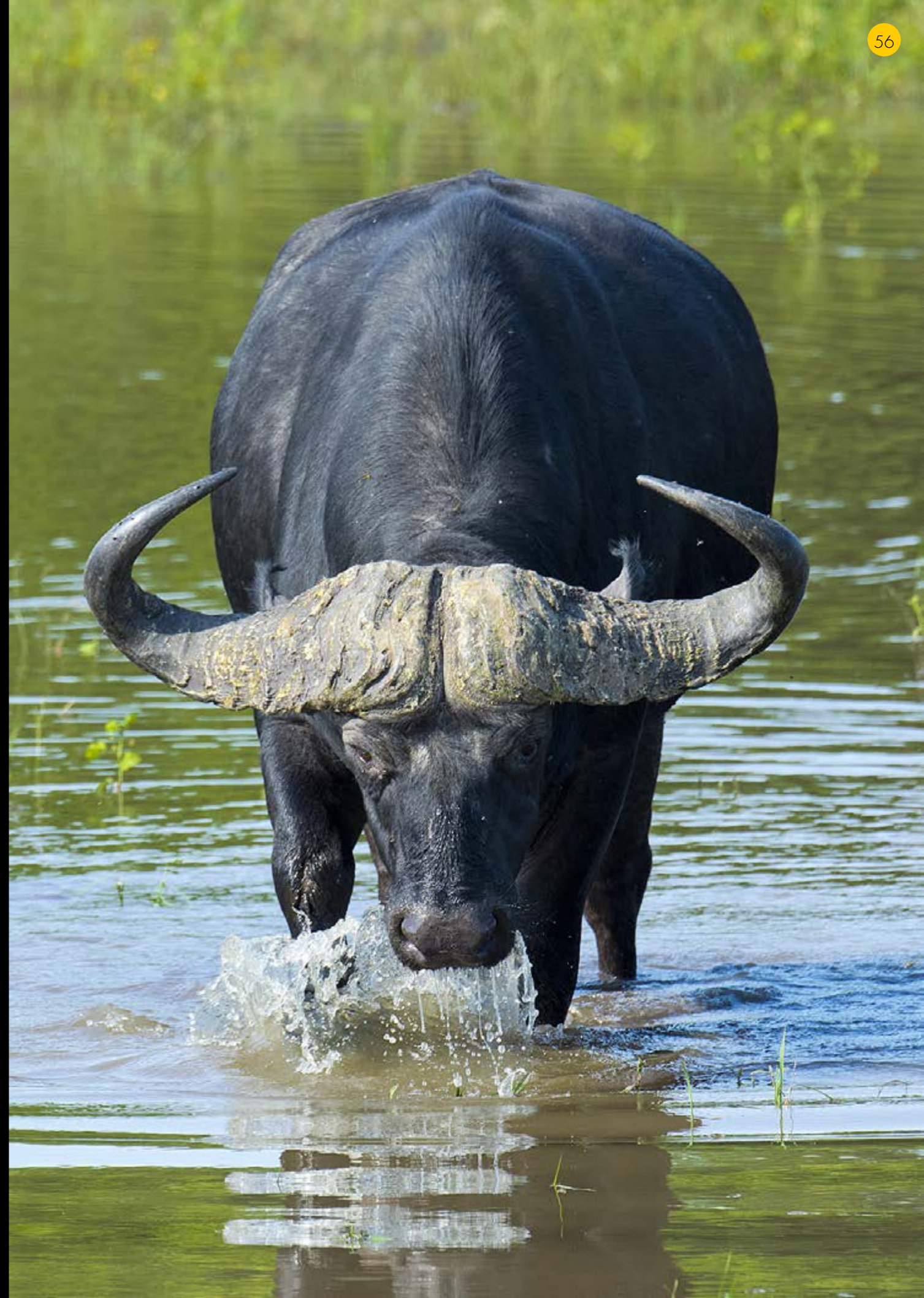
A typically beautiful  
Chobe river scene with a huge  
Nile crocodile *Crocodylus  
niloticus* basking on  
a grassy sandbank.

A Common hippopotamus  
*Hippopotamus amphibius*  
makes a convenient perch for  
an egret. Hippos are still  
plentiful in the Chobe.





■ Left, Long-toed plover or lapwing *Vanellus crassirostris*; right, Cape buffalo *Syncerus caffer* - this is a mature bull showing a splendid set of horns.





*Black heron or Black egret Egretta ardesiaca creating the typical "sun umbrella" with its wings to hunt the small fish it feeds on. The shaded area allows it to see better underwater and at the same time it attracts fish within striking range.*



■ Left, a rare sighting of the forest-dwelling Long-crested eagle *Lophaelus occipitalis*; right, Reed cormorant *Phalacrocorax africanus*.

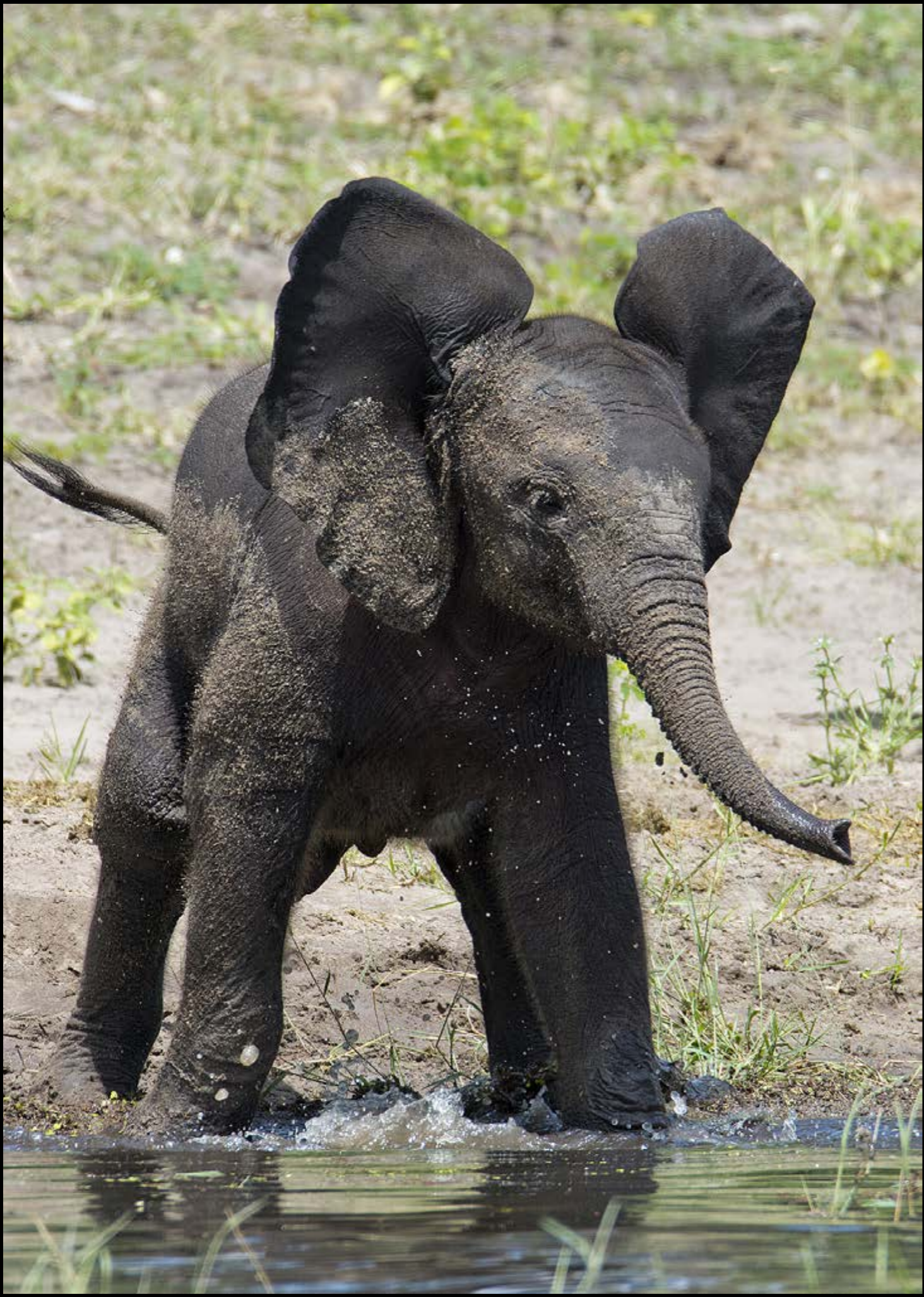


*The Red lechwe* ■  
Kobus leche is a typical  
swamp-dwelling antelope  
which can be occasionally  
observed along the  
Chobe's grassy edges.



*Nile crocodile*  
*Crocodylus niloticus*  
basking in the sun.





■ Left, a baby African elephant *Loxodonta africana* is clearly quite enthusiastic about finally getting to the cool waters of the Chobe; right, portrait of a Malachite kingfisher *Alcedo cristata*, a truly stunning species.

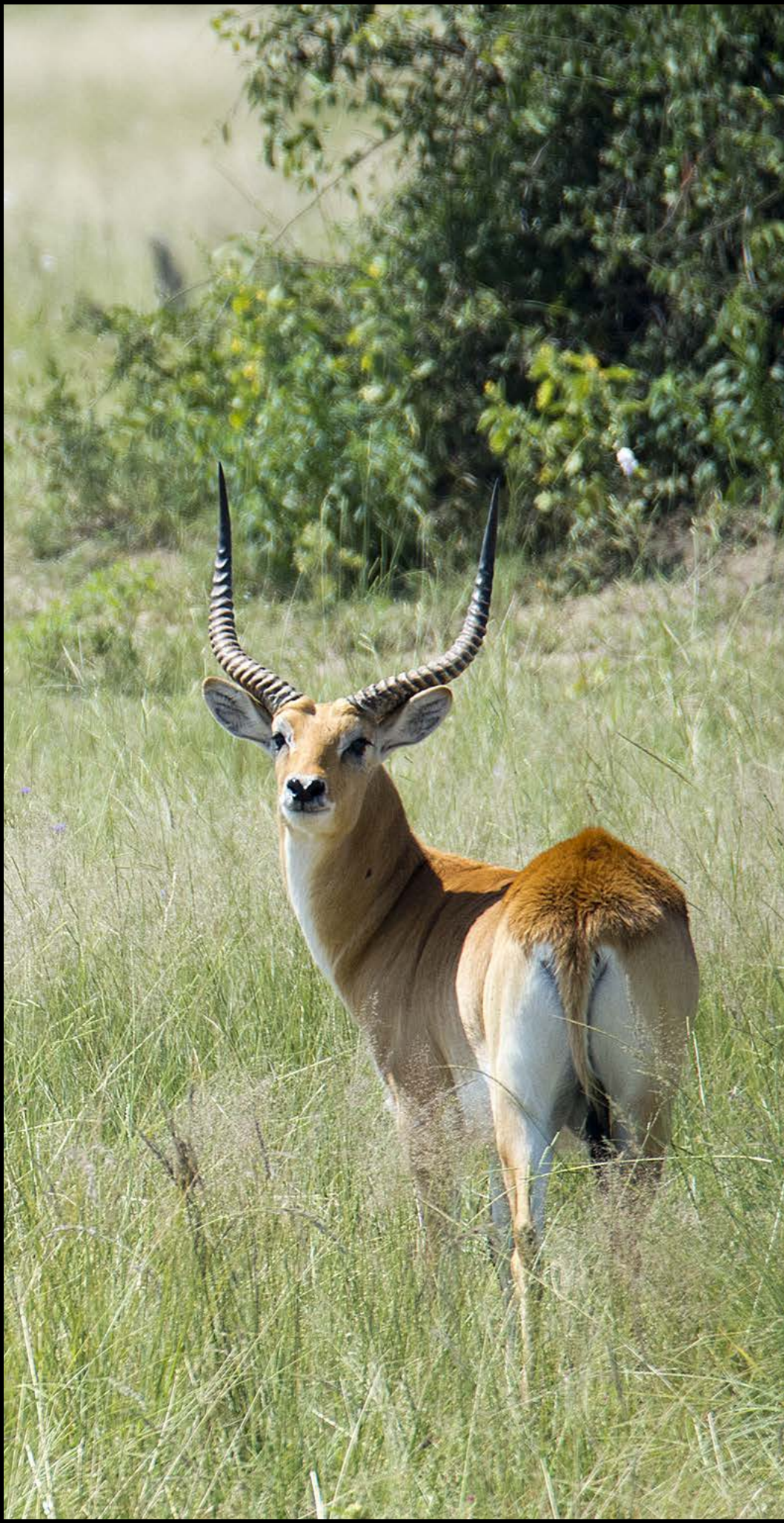




An angry Common  
hippopotamus *Hippopotamus*  
*amphibius* charges our  
speedboat. Hippos can be  
surprisingly fast in the water.



Left, Red ■  
lechwe Kobus leche;  
center, African lion  
Panthera leo; right,  
male Impala  
Aepyceros melampus.





**Red-billed hornbill**  
*Tockus erythrorhynchus*  
preying on a Leaf mantis  
it has just caught despite  
the insect's brilliant  
camouflage.



This is how most of ■ the river photography along the Chobe is taken - liveaboards offer speedboat tenders for the daily excursions.