

Lizard buzzard days

Track to tarred road.... 1km ^

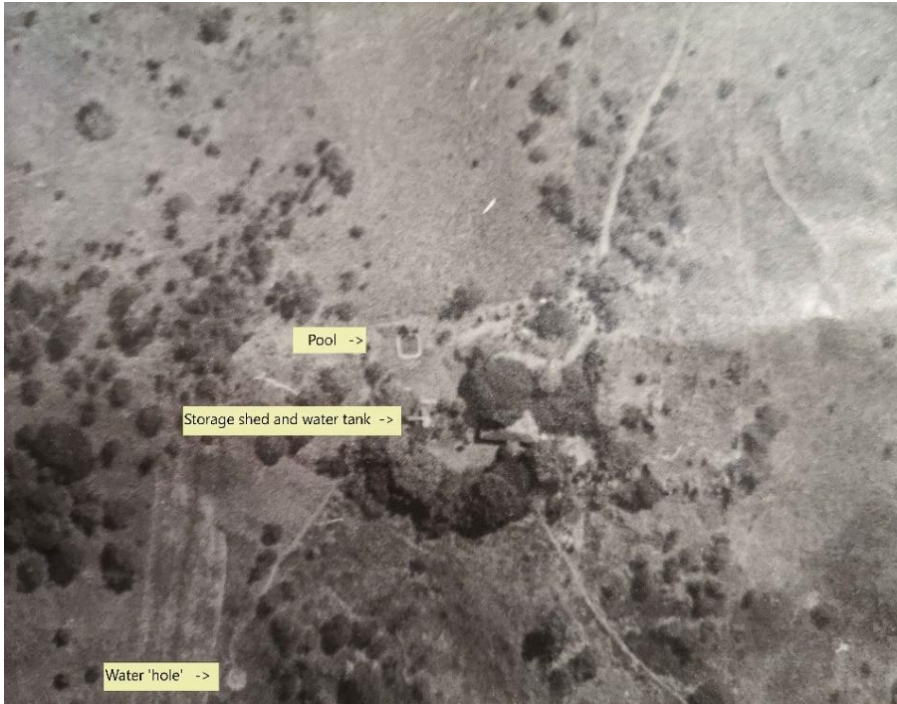
Nearest shanty dwelling 4.5km >

Approximate boundary of 5 acre plot

Staff dwelling

a brief pictorial record

Ian Tanner



Our home, 6 miles west of Lusaka, was set in a small oasis of trees and shrubs, surrounded by grass scrubland punctuated with a few sparse trees.

*Aerial photo of house and immediate environs
c 1950 ...*



*...and me,
at home,
in the
shade of
those
splendid
mature
trees in
1977*



A bushfire crackles through the grasses of the rocky plain surrounding our 'green oasis'. The photo was taken just yards from the edge of the property, from the track leading to the distant tarred road.



We enjoyed several 'passing through' birds of prey, most notably a rarely seen bat hawk.

It visited us three late afternoons in succession, settling in the tallest of the trees behind the storage shed, surveying both garden and the plain spread before it.

A crepuscular bird; at dusk it lazily 'launched' from its perch and silently and methodically quartered the open scrub bush all around, finally disappearing from sight many hundred yards away.

Our bat hawk

This lizard buzzard however, a common and frequently seen raptor, returned to us for two successive breeding seasons. It hunted over a wide area.

A favourite perch was this termite ravaged fence post, its thin drooping wires separating our front garden area from a paddock and beyond that the bush.



Here he is 'calling', sounding not unlike our UK seagulls. I can hear him now!

Male and female are differentiated by size rather than any variations in marking. The persistent calling of the adults from fence posts and treetops would have alerted an ornithologist to the arrival of the breeding season. For me those late September vocal interchanges were simply a joy! I knew nothing of their 'family' life until weeks later when I realised that there was now much coming and going, and, significantly, food was now being carried rather than consumed. The penny dropped!.

I located their nest some thirty yards from the house, fifteen feet up in a solid tree and screened from above by a good leaf canopy. I erected a hide, in stages, over eight or nine days and was then able to spend several hours observing the nest during weekends.



Lizard buzzards lay clutches of one to three eggs which are incubated for around 33 days before hatching. The hatched chick(s), in this case a single chick, will remain in the nest for around 40 days before leaving to explore its immediate environment. Some three weeks later it will be fully independent.

I first saw and met the chick when it had long passed the pink, bald stage and the straggly stage. It was perhaps three weeks or so after hatching.



Parent and chick; early days



A couple of weeks later and the chick, spread-winged and open-mouthed, is not enjoying the heat.



John Colebrook-Robjent, a true ornithologist, visits the nest.

John effortlessly and quietly climbed the tree, eliciting this 'mantling' response from the chick; the adoption of an upright stance, with wings wide-spread and beak wide open, and threatening.

Birds of prey also 'mantle' when they are disturbed while on their 'kill', shielding the food from interlopers.



Three weeks later: a 'chick' no longer.

It has left the nest and now wanders around the nearby branches, occasionally hopping from one to another if the distance is not too great. There is much wing stretching and flapping. Occasionally a combined 'hop-up-in-the-air-with-wings-flapping' is performed. Soon it will be independent.



Perhaps a month further on...

... and the fence post is now occupied an hour after sunset by a different lizard buzzard. I had never seen one perch there other than in daylight hours. The bird was amenable to waiting while I fetched camera and flashlight. It allowed me to take this portrait shot.

‘Fluffier’ and more dapper than the usual (by which I really mean not as ‘worn’ as the usual perch occupant) it also has wings which seem not fully developed. Is this chick-turned-juvenile? Is this an early outing? Why has it not found a safer refuge for the night? Why is it wearing a scarf?

I retreated and the world returned to near darkness. It was gone by morning. I never saw it again, but I like to think that I had witnessed full circle.

On other occasions I tried to catch the lizard buzzard hunting. They are not aerial hunters; no stooping at speed by this bird, or darting and swerving. They take their prey from the ground, often almost 'dropping' on a target from their vantage point.



This, the first of a series of three taken in the woodland shade late one afternoon.



Second in the series.



And the third, carrying its prey.

All these photos were taken during the period early September 1976 to end January 1977. They were taken on a Hasselblad ELM camera using what was labelled, in those far off days, '120' film. This produced 6x6cm transparencies or negatives (two-and-a-quarter-inches square in imperial).

I always developed the black and white film at home, usually within a couple of days of its exposure. The major difficulties I had were in keeping the chemicals at a low enough temperature, and avoiding the dust. If there was a 'news' value to a picture I would also produce a 10"x 8" print in the bathroom/darkroom. Very few 'newsy' prints were made!

When first in Zambia I had sent my colour films to Nairobi for processing, but the loss rate of films sent there was horrific! Thereafter all colour film was posted to the UK. Two to three weeks later, I was able to see the results. Some slides were used to illustrate occasional talks. Most never saw the light of day!

So... the bulk of my photos remained as bundles of negatives, or as boxes of slides, and travelled with me over the years, through six changes of house on two continents.

*

Early in 2019 I finally settled down to digitise the slides and the black and white negatives. The advent of Covid gave me many more hours to fill, its only upside. Digitising was, and still is, tedious; and variously a wonderful, heart-breaking, joyous, depressing, or exhilarating experience....

Each picture is a lottery. Some have experienced a fading or shifting of colours. A few have been attacked by minute moulds, revealed only when finally viewed on the screen as lunatic spider webs straggling from invisible sources. A handful look as if tomato ketchup has been flicked at the emulsion and then blowtorch-hardened. These are the ravages of the natural world over time, and so are forgiven.

Others are an indictment of the photographer: minute specks representing birds at far too great a distance; portraits of animals and birds, finally revealed as unusable blurs due to the exuberant pressing of the shutter release and the movement of the camera throughout the shot.

At a time when photographic film was very hard to find in Zambia (sanctions against our southerly neighbours; the loss of transport routes and consequent restrictions on non-essentials) this photographer was frequently profligate.

It is sensible, though a little churlish, to remind you that the films had to be loaded into the cameras in those days. Light readings had to be taken, apertures and shutter speeds set and lenses focussed manually. The typical fast slide film had a speed rating of 64 ASA or ISO and black and white 'fast' film a rating of 400 ASA or ISO.

Today's top digital cameras shoot 20 pictures a second at a speed rating equivalent to 200,000 ISO (and still rising), whilst also 'following focus' of the target!

If only... if only those long ago opportunities and these today-cameras had coincided in time!

But churlish? Yes. In the 1870's mule drawn wagons trekked for weeks into the then unknown hinterland of America, carrying chemicals in large glass carboys, clean glass plates and a photographic team. The plates had to be coated in chemicals, in the dark, placed in a lightproof holder and then transferred to the plate camera. The chemicals needed to be still moist when the picture was taken.

My admiration of their skills, and the results they obtained, reminds me always that in photography it is only the end result that matters.

What wouldn't I give to have taken some of their photos!