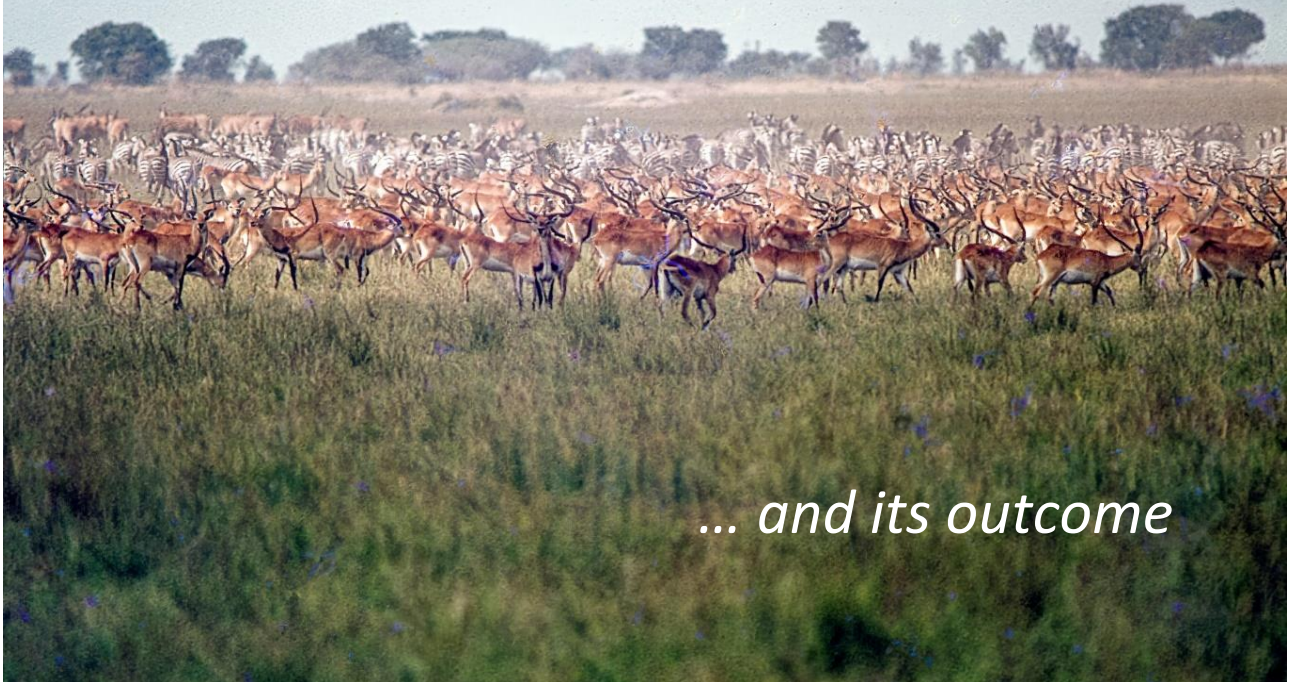


## *The Lochinvar debacle*



By mid 1972 Lochinvar had become almost a second home to me. Its 428 square kms lie on the southern edge of the Kafue river and it is an internationally recognised wetland, famed for its prolific and diverse birdlife. On the margins of the wetland were found eland, zebra and large herds of the Kafue lechwe. It was a quiet and compelling place!

I had begun to fancy myself as a photographer of birds. In order to facilitate this, and to further the illusion, I took an old canvas tent, acquired from a departing expat, and hacked it around to create what I imagined would be a suitable hide in which to spend long, fruitful hours. It was large enough to sleep in, to live from at a push!

The most important feature was a trunk-like sleeve hanging from the far, closed end of the tent. This was fashioned from offcuts of the original. It would allow my large telephoto lens to be slipped into it and gripped at the lens hood end by an elasticated cuff. The second bit of genius was the cutting of a letterbox slit in the side wall of the tent. This would enable me to view the wider world, on one side at least. The slit was covered by a neat overlapping 'privacy' flap, again of surplus removed tent material.

The tent was supported at either end by aluminium A frames, separated and held upright by an aluminium ridge pole. The usual spread of guy ropes and tent pegs completed the hide. In colour it resembled a faded Microsoft blue, as in the header banner in MS Word.

\*

Sometime around late September this manifestation of my talents was taken to Lochinvar, the intention being that it would be erected late in the afternoon a few metres from the waters edge, that I would spend the night there and, at first light, would awaken to photograph the shore-line and the early birds as they foraged. I forget whether you and I travelled in two vehicles, or everything was piled into your Land Rover for the trip.



*This was the edge of the flood plain, a 180 degree sweep of flat wetland.*

In due course you drove us along the winding, rutted track, down through the scant woodland and out on to the plain itself, perhaps a fifteen minute drive. We selected a suitable spot some way from the end of the track and there we turned and drove out close to the waters edge. The details may not be precise, but it matters not.

What did matter was that you were there to help me unload the hide, and erect it, that you helped transfer my camera, a tripod and lenses, my small camping bed and sleeping bag, some water and food for the night, and my 'anything else you might need' bag.

All of this was achieved an hour before sundown. With the tripod inside, and the camera mounted and its large lens outside (though inserted into its blue canvas trunk), my bed set up along the long wall (below the letterbox viewing slot), and all other stores to the left side of the tent... I was ready. A final check of the guy ropes and you were off for a leisurely bird-viewing drive back to the lodge for the night.

The sound of your Land Rover diminished and then was gone. I surveyed the scene. Under a clear blue sky the water shimmered, its surface broken by the short grasses rooted just below the surface. Distant specks, water birds and far away antelope, could be made out. In the far distance a green haze of vegetation stretched across the horizon. A lone tree was just tall enough to show against the sky. The sun was setting away to my left. I laced the door flaps tight together and settled into my hide for the night.

As darkness fell, and having seen nothing, I slipped into my sleeping bag and prepared for sleep. One last peep out of the letterbox, lifting its covering flap gently, revealed nothing. It was the beginning of a night to remember.

My anticipation was that I would wake to a wonderland of birds feeding in close proximity to the hide. What species might appear would be down to sheer luck, but I would be ready!



*This was what I had in mind as I settled to sleep.*

I may have slept a while; perhaps I had dozed. A sudden sharp, loud clattering sound had me wide awake. Again and again it came. Now closer, now further away, but still it persisted. Half a minute of silence and then another fierce clattering as of Morris Dancers settling an argument with their staves after a night's drinking. Eventually the echoes died away, but the effects still gripped me. I was in the middle of a flood plain, far, far away from the nearest known human. I did not feel like sleep. Rather, I did not like the vulnerability that it would bring.

A little later the hide/tent fabric started to rustle, the stirrings of a breeze. Over time this became a rhythmic flapping. I groped for my 'anything else' bag, found my torch and briefly surveyed my world. All was in order though the tent walls were now bowing, this one in and that one out. I lay down again, hearing only the low beating sound of the canvas. Then I sensed some change in the light outside; was there a moon rising? An awkward peer through the now misbehaving letterbox showed me little of the land, but revealed a now thunderous sky against a darkened heaven.

A drink of water; a biscuit or two; more water: they passed the time. I huddled in the sleeping bag, drowsy but sleepless.

Then the gentle pattering sound on the canvas grabbed my full attention. Even as I asked myself 'Who?' or 'What?' the answer came in a flurry of heavier raindrops, easing and then repeating, borne on the waves of wind.

It eased for a while, then died away completely.



*This photo, from another day and another place, gives a (brighter) indication of that mid evening.*

Had the clouds passed? The answer came with sudden brightness illuminating the interior of the hide, followed shortly by a comfortingly distant roll of thunder. I twisted to see out of the letterbox and was met by a violent flash of lightning, arcing down to the distant belt of greenery. This time the thunder came sooner, louder.

I sat, balled in my sleeping bag, with plenty of time to think. And as another flash and another roll filled my tiny world I realised that I was sat beneath two metal A frames, the tallest features in many square miles of Lochinvar plain. Should I leave, and if I did, would I prove to be a more tempting lightning conductor? The unknown 'clattering noise' angst of the earlier evening had not left me: the new element of trial by lightning was now added. To say I was in low spirits would be a very generous understatement.

The wind returned and a sudden wave of stinging raindrops hit the canvas by my shoulder. The sound was deafening, and now continuous. In the inky darkness, with the buffeting canvas and the constant downpour and the occasional flashes of lightning, I was locked into a new lunatic scenario. Thoughts of home, of chuckling children, of life as I had known it, flew to the surface to be dashed away by even heavier rain. A frantic gust of wind swept across... and the curved tent wall finally collapsed in on itself a little and the letterbox became a funnel as it curved away from the wind and the privacy flap no longer sealed the slot.

The water cascaded in, over my shoulder, cold and constant. I rolled from my camp bed, groped for and found the torch. It revealed a sad scene. The bed was soaked, a growing puddle steadily filling its canvas curve as the letterbox torrent poured in. Hastily I dragged the empty lens box to the centre of the tent and perched awkwardly on its 8" wide lid. I re-arranged the sleeping bag, turning down the sodden top area and creeping as far down into its warmth as I could. I managed to fold the bed in half, tangling it with the already collapsed mosquito net. The rain continued. The wind continued. The 'peeping slot' funnel now fed the cascade to the ground inside the tent wall.

For the first time I looked at my watch. It was just after one: hours before daybreak. A mouthful of water. A biscuit. The torch 'fluttered'. I turned it off, promising myself to check the situation only every hour.

It was just ten minutes later that I switched on again, briefly, probably the longest ten minutes of my life! Again in darkness I listened to the wind and the rain and thought great thoughts and bathed in self pity.

Eventually the storm abated: the wind still curved the tent wall and the rain still fed the letterbox spout, but the world was calming. When I next used the torch I could see the water encroaching slowly from the camera end, inching forward towards my box perch. I switched off quickly... torch to be used in emergencies only. I gathered the sleeping bag beneath my knees, all well clear of the dampening ground. And yes, the storm had almost passed. My confidence began to return.

That all changed when next I turned on the torch. I didn't look at the watch. I wouldn't have looked at a Playboy centrefold displayed before me. Instead I stared at the long brown snake coiled loosely on the box on which I perched. I knew little about snakes, just enough to not interfere with it. Some 2" in girth at its fattest it had taken up all the space between my feet, warm inside the sleeping bag, and the end of the box. I moved the beam from the dying torch to one side, keeping my companion in view at the edge of the beam. The ground was now completely submerged under several inches of water. The beam grew ever more dim. I turned off the torch.

Perhaps it was a harmless species; perhaps it wasn't. But it was clear that we were both in the same predicament and had found the same solution. With that philosophical thought, and with no other options available, I agreed to share. I did not move an inch, not a flicker of movement for what seemed like a lifetime. The rain had passed and the wind was much reduced.

It was still dark when I last used the torch. The smudge of light, as I moved it slowly to reveal the end of 'our' box revealed a total absence of snake. The torch died. I lived on, with other unanswerable questions crowding my mind.

\*

Dawn arrived, and with it some clarity. No snake, just dark water everywhere, tangled mosquito net, limp sodden tent walls with a permanent slit of letterbox, and a tripod with camera affixed and lens still mounted in its external 'trunk'.

A few minutes of gentle seated callisthenics and muscle movements, a mouthful of water, and I was strangely alert and ready to play photographer.

Was the lens still dry? I stood in the slippery, muddy pool and and peered into the viewfinder at the outside world. It was still dry and the picture good! The mud slime squelched between my toes as I very slowly started panning the camera, from west to east.

Light cloud filled the sky; the horizon was a distant smudge of green. It was calm; I was in a different world. The grey water ruffled gently.

A patch of distant black specks, when focussed, became ducks, busily diving and surfacing. I paused a while to watch them. It was leisurely, surreal. Too far away for me to guess at their species, nonetheless in their simple activity they were an antidote to the last of my depression. Slowly I panned further. Wow! A large image entered the screen; a nearby lechwe daintily easing through the shallows, nibbling at the shoots of grass. Beyond it a few ducks, line astern, feeding.



The sun is breaking through. A few more minutes and the light is stronger. And now the lechwe is curious, is coming closer. It pauses, uncertain. The feeding flotilla of ducks has gone.



For a second it turns to face me. I fumble to move the camera for a vertical picture. It wheels around... stares, sniffs at the wind and then it is off, leaping and splashing towards the sun.



*The final portrait.*

I sat down on my box amidst the chaos of the hide, wrapped in mingled tiredness and elation; the good fortune that had followed the bad. A few minutes of reflection, then a biscuit or two, and another mouthful of water.

The eerie silence and calm was broken by another sound... and then again; the sound of a motor horn. I untied the fastenings and threw open the flaps. Straight ahead of me, some hundred or so yards away, was the rescue team; you John, standing on a trailer and waving, and with you a Game Guard sat on the tractor.

Never was I so pleased to see anyone. I stumbled from the hide and splashed a few yards towards you through the shallows. I suppose we shouted to each other, but I don't remember the conversation. Enough to know that you and the guard were walking gingerly out on to the wet, slippery plain and we needed to make haste.

By the time that you reached the hide I had removed a few sodden items and a bag, and the box on which I had spent the bulk of the night. Already the waters were receding a little. Time for one last photo....



*The debris of the night.*

As we emptied the tent you told me of your waking during the night to a powerful storm, and the realisation that I would be in an uncomfortable (if not worse) situation. A rescue must be mounted.

But the track down to the plain would be extremely difficult after the rain and the black soils of the plain would be as slippery as ice. Rather than risk failing to reach me by Land Rover you sought out and woke one of the camp staff and persuaded him to make the journey with you, and by tractor.

You set out in near darkness.

Whether the choice of this man was just good fortune, or an inspired selection I do not know. I do know that he was a jovial colossus of a man. He strode towards the hide and surveyed the scene.

We found the pegs and guy ropes and soon the hide was a heap of heavy damp canvas. Between us you and I collected as much as we thought we might carry. I was anticipating two trips to collect everything.

The colossus collected up the substantial remainder (well over half) and placed it on the canvas, folding this into a large bundle, and lashing it quickly with a couple of turns of the guy ropes. He heaved the weighty, sodden mass up and over his head, where he settled it down securely, and from where it dripped ceaselessly over his broad shoulders. Looking around to check that all was recovered from the shallow swamp he saw me struggling with the box. It was not heavy, just very awkward. With a broad smile he took this from me, tucked it under his free arm and set off for the tractor and trailer.

He strode comfortably as we slipped and slithered behind him.

He had, as I seem to remember, a very distinctive Old Testament biblical name, beginning with a 'J'? Joshua seems too simple, Jeremiah might be possible, or even Jehoshaphat. I would love to be able to tie the right 'label' to him. He deserved that, and I would be honoured to remember him correctly.

\*

I have few recollections of the rest of that day. Once I had reached the trailer I was done, both physically and mentally.

In due course (and I was probably very poor company throughout) we were back in Lusaka.

Oh! And some time during that day you, or I, or together we solved the mystery of the drunken Morris Dancers battling with staves. Two lechwe had met and disputed the territory, charging at each other and locking horns repeatedly until one backed down and departed.

I was, that night/day, in awe of your quick thinking and the quality of your intervention, and always have been down the years. It was for me a short, sharp unforgettable chapter, more favoured in the remembrance than in the experiencing!

\*

When my slides of this adventure were returned from processing I saw, and was very proud of, the Kafue lechwe photos, probably showed them to some folk at the camera club in Lusaka. Someone suggested that the Wildlife Conservation Society might be interested in using them. I forget the links in the chain, but the outcome was WCSZ making use of the 'portrait' photo, which appeared as one of their fund-raising Christmas cards for that year. (The quality of reproduction was poor, but I suppose were all used to that in Zambia at that time.)

The lechwe had brought my name to someone's attention, for shortly after the decision to use the slide was made I was contacted by a Professor Dennis (or Denys) Morgan. He was then on the WCSZ Executive Committee, may even have been its then Chairman.

We met up and talked. I think some of it was at cross purposes. When and how had I come to Zambia? What was I doing? What was my career to date? ... and so on. He also asked me where I had been educated and I answered "Latymer School and St Pauls." I am sure he recognised the first, and took the second to be St. Paul's School, a place of educational and social significance, rather

than St. Paul's Teacher Training College, acceptable but not in the same status league! In a month or so my contract at Kabulonga would end, but I was happily considering trying to stay on there, though there was the chance that I could be posted to somewhere in the back of beyond. That would not have suited the rest of the family with their now strong social ties to Lusaka with its available schooling.

These discussions resulted in my being called for interview. Among the other candidates were Phil Berry and Ian Manning, both very good 'bush' people with great wildlife experience and sufficient skills with local languages to at least 'get by'.

It seems that bush skills were not required; experience of education and presentation were. I joined WCSZ on my return from leave, around April 1973.