



FROM
THE FIELD...

In Search of Wild Canaries in southern Africa

by Tony Bucci, San Pedro, CA

Victoria Falls and the Zambezi River

During my last visit to Australia, I met a pair of travelers at one of the backpackers' inns in Broome (northwestern Australia). Cathy and her traveling partner were on vacation from France. We shared a sailing outing on an old pearling schooner. The next day I had to leave for the town of Catherine in the Northern Territory to join a group of volunteers for the Gouldian count. (See my previous article in *Watchbird*, Sept. 1998). Our encounter was brief, but we did exchange e-mail addresses. The following January, Cathy sent me an e-mail message asking me if I would be interested in a safari through southern Africa in the month of June. She mentioned that the land trip would be inexpensive because she knew three safari guides (also French) named Christophe, Marie Lu, and Babeth who lived in Windhoek, Namibia, and were going on their own vacation. They needed people to share the basic expenses (gas and food). They would use their own Toyota Land Cruisers for the safari.

The opportunity was very attractive to me. I deliberated for several days, considering camping for one month in the wilds of Africa, with mosquitoes, malaria, and other possibilities. I also thought of all the birds I could see!

There are several species of wild canaries in southern Africa and other African birds that I kept in the past. As I explained my dilemma to my wife, Stella, she would smile and shake her head saying, "not me." The opportunity was so rare. This was not one of those tourist trips where you only see things next to the main roads. The safari was to take us into remote areas of southern

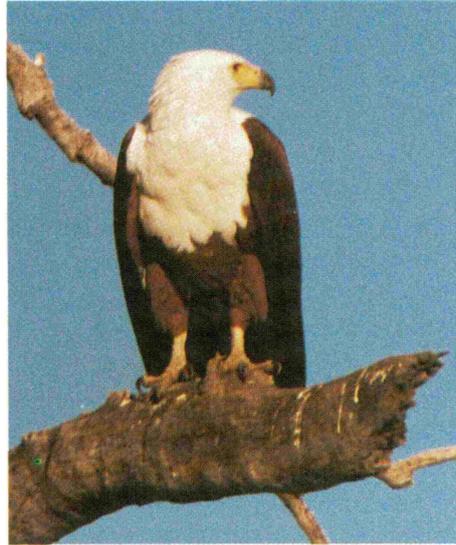


Photo by Tony Bucci

An African Fish Eagle.

Africa. Once I decided to go, I consulted with my doctor who gave me several inoculations against some of the diseases to which I could possibly be exposed, and a prescription to protect me from contracting malaria.

I left Los Angeles on May 29th, flew to New York and connected with a South African airline. After flying for 14 hours, I arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa, at 3:00 P.M. Johannesburg time, where I stayed at a Holiday Inn near the airport for one night. The next day I met Cathy and Sandra at the airport. (They had come from France that morning.) At 11:45 we left Johannesburg on a flight to Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. Christophe picked us up at the airport, and he drove us into town where we met the rest of the group. There I met Marie Lu and Babeth (the other two guides) and two other group members, Caroline and Stephan. They all drove up from Windhoek, Namibia, where they live and work as safari guides.

We set up our tents in a camp-

ground near the town of Victoria Falls. The Zambezi River, which eventually spills over the gorge and creates Victoria Falls, ran next to our campground. In the afternoon we took a cruise on the Zambezi River that took us very near to the upper limits of the falls. The captain of the boat assured us that in case the engine failed, we would not fall over the falls because he would drop the anchor. Suddenly, I wished I had missed the boat. As we cruised along the river, we ate hors d'oeuvres, drank wine, and enjoyed a beautiful sunset. We observed many hippopotamus that came near our boat, and elephants foraging for food on the riverbanks. After the cruise on the river, we returned to camp.

This was my first night camping in Africa. As soon as the sun went down, the temperature dropped. By the time I retired to my little tent, it had gotten really cold. During the night, the temperature dropped to 35°F. It was a miserable night. I could hear baboons running and fighting all around my tent.

Not able to sleep, I got up at the crack of dawn. The others were still in their tents asleep. The baboons were no longer running and fighting. I started a fire and put the water kettle next to it. Later, when the rest of the group got up, they suggested that I do the same every morning. I agreed that it would be my job for the rest of the trip -- if I survived. Mind you, the group members were mostly in their 20s and 30s. I was 69.

After a continental breakfast of toast and coffee, we packed up our camping gear and left for a destination unknown to me. I was the only American, and communications were strictly in French. I was perfectly satisfied with the situation. Just follow the leader. In this case it was Christophe. I called him the "chief." I don't think he liked the title I gave him. Every time I referred to him as Chief, he would look at me with a strange smile.

Christophe was a very capable leader, and a good bread maker. He taught everyone in the group how to make bread, including me. Bread making was a daily evening activity at our campsite. It was sort of a competition each day to see who made the best bread when his or her turn came. The

bread was kneaded in a small basin, then placed in a heavy iron pot to rise. Later, the pot was placed on top of hot coals. Hot coals were also placed on top of the cover and around the pot. About 45 minutes later, delicious bread was ready. Our able chief, Christophe, judged the bread, and a proper critique was given. The bread then became the next morning's breakfast.

We left the campground early in the morning and went to the town of Victoria Falls to make provisions. We used a large icebox to keep our perishables. This time, we collected five days worth of provisions. Our destination was an island on the Zambezi River. While crossing over the Zambezi on a bridge, we saw portions of the magnificent Victoria Falls. It is very hard for me to describe the beauty of the falls. Looking up at the falls from the middle of the bridge, they appeared so intimidating and powerful. The enormous amount of water falling hundreds of feet into the abyss of the river generated a fine mist several hundred feet in the air. You wonder: where does all this water come from?

The bridge is a "no man's land" dividing Zimbabwe and Zambia. After crossing the bridge, we went through border procedures of showing passports and permits to enter Zambia. The customs officials were very courteous and friendly. While waiting for the border gates to be opened, several baboons looked at us as if to say, "who are these strange animals invading our territory?" Not very far from the border fence, and in not very much of a hurry, two elephants were crossing the road. Suddenly, I had the feeling of being in Africa. Where else in the world could you see elephants crossing the road? After crossing the border, several miles down the road we came to the city of Livingstone where we stopped at the house of the owners of the island where we were going to spend 5 days. We made the necessary arrangements, then drove 50 miles upstream from Victoria Falls on the Zambia side of the river.

We reached a typical African village consisting of round mud huts with straw roofs located on the shore of Zambezi River.

The natives greeted us with big

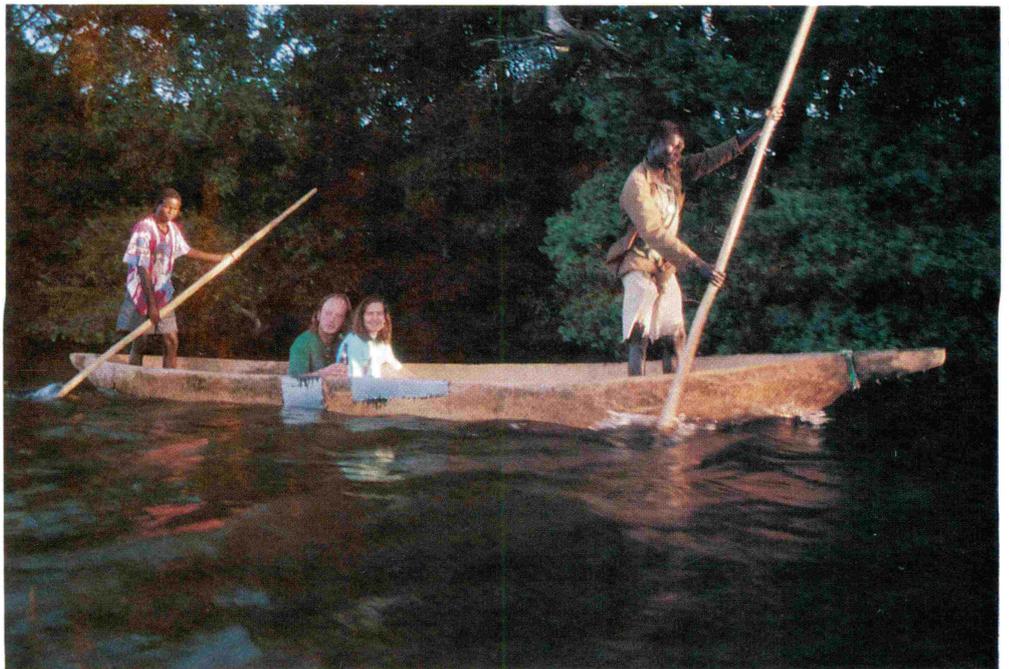


Photo by Tony Buccci

Negotiating the swift and scary Zambesi river in a dugout with no life jacket. Bad idea.

smiles and warm handshakes. Some of them worked on the island and would take us there. As soon as we unloaded our equipment from the land cruisers, the workers placed our equipment in waterproof bags and loaded the bags into dugout canoes. We boarded the canoes with two of us in each canoe. We sat on the bottom of the canoe as two natives rowed while standing up.

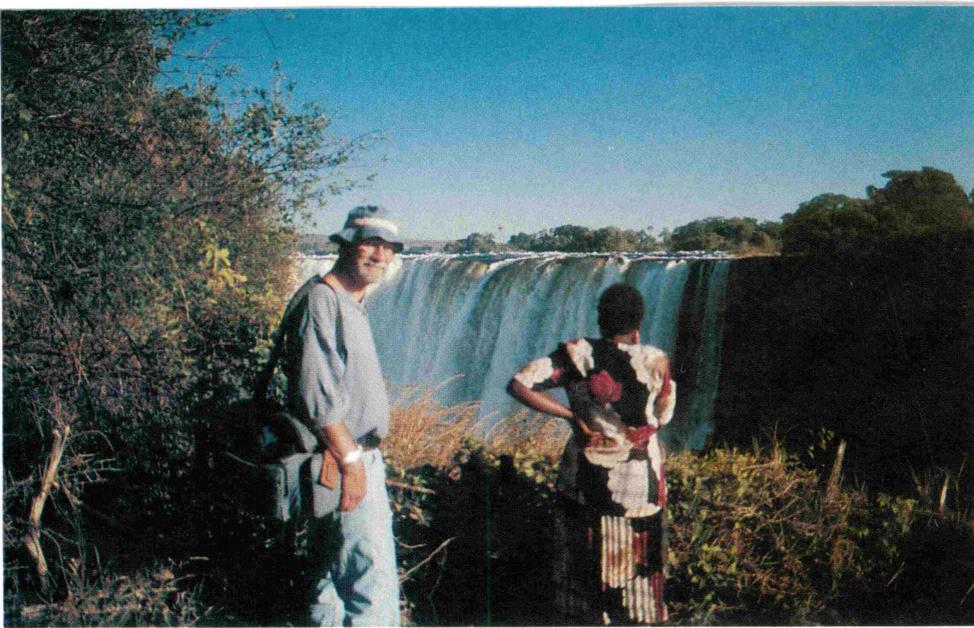
The primitive dugouts had very little room to move about. At first we threaded through reeds and tall water grass, then we reached an open water area. The Zambezi River was very fast and scary, and we had no life jackets! Approaching the island we threaded true rapids. I knew that if we tipped over without life jackets, it would be the end of Tony and Babeth, who shared the same canoe.

Finally, after a short but very scary canoe ride, we made it to the island. The island was called "Jungle Junction." Indeed, the island had a jungle-like setting, with large trees, thick growth, and sandy paths to get about the island—a tropical paradise. Among the huts made of bamboo reeds and grass were a bar and a kitchen where

we would cook our meals. In front of the bar shack there was an area to make a campfire. In the evenings we sat around the fire and socialized. The island was about one mile long and a half mile wide. I had my own private grass shack near the edge of the island with a comfortable mattress to sleep on. At night the rushing water of the river gave the illusion of falling rain.

The first morning I woke to the sound of fighting cats and got up to see the fight. I looked around, but no cats were in sight. Then I realized the sounds came from up above. Looking up in the trees I spotted two good-sized birds with very large beaks. I searched through my bird field guide and found that they were Trumpeter Hornbills *Bycanistes bucinator*. Every morning the Trumpeters would do their catcalls then leave for the day. In the late afternoon they would come back to perch for the night.

One early morning, while listening to the soothing sounds of the rushing river and Trumpeter Hornbills performing their unusual calls, a small bird flew in front of my shack, hopped around and jumped on my feet as



Photos by Tony Buccci

Victoria Falls make a magnificent sight that has awed and inspired people for centuries.



Travels at the southern tip of Africa

I lay in my sleeping bag. As I attempted to reach my camera, the bird flew away. This beautiful bird was a Heuglin's Robin *Cossypha heuglini*.

The night temperatures averaged 50°F, while days were about 75°F in the shade. There were no mosquitoes at this time of the year (the dry season). Most of my days were spent bird watching. Some of the birds I saw on the island include the Cape Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus gracilirostris*, Collared Sunbird *Anthreptes collaris*, Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*, Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*, Green-capped Eremomela *Eremomela scotops*, and the Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*. There were many more I had a hard time identifying.

The last day of our stay on the island, the owner and curator of the island, David Sansenbergh (who looked like the actor, Yul Brenner, with his shaved head and large earring), came from Livingstone to give us a send off party. The natives who worked there brought their families, and the party went on late into the night. We departed the next day, this time wearing life jackets. The owner was present and rules were enforced. The crossing of the Zambezi River from the island to the river shore was as exciting as going to the island. The same rapids ran fast, eventually becoming the waters that spill over Victoria Falls. I would love to go back to Jungle Junction again. It was a great experience. But I was somewhat disappointed not to see the wild canaries.

Again, we passed through Livingstone and headed back to the town of Victoria Falls, crossing over the bridge into Zimbabwe. There we visited the falls at a location where they are more accessible and viewable. Indeed, Zimbabwe's Victoria Falls are the largest and one of the most beautiful waterfalls in the world. From the base of the falls, the Zambezi River flows eastward to the Indian Ocean.

Acknowledgement

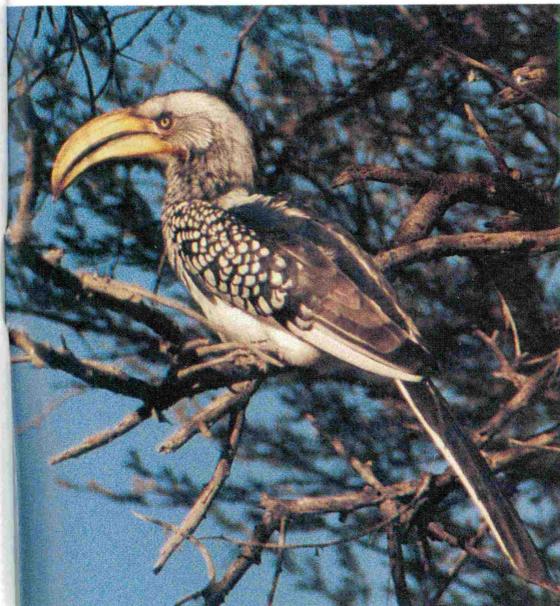
Tony Buccci acknowledges the technical skill and efforts of his son, Tony, Jr., in the preparation of this article.

PART 2 IN THE NEXT ISSUE WILL TAKE YOU TO
BOTSWANA'S CHOBE NATIONAL PARK AND KUBU
ISLAND LOOKING FOR BIRDS



Advertisers Index

Absolutely Aussie	28
Avian Publications	40
Backstreet Birds	35
Boundaries Unlimited	55
Brinsea Incubators	12
Cedar Hill/Bird Expos	21
Cuttlebone Plus	41
Everybody's Bird Mart (Pomona, CA) ..	26
Goodman's Aviary.....	4
Grubco.....	25
Hagen, Rolf C. (USA) Corp.-Tropicana ..	27
Humidair Incubator Company	9
Lady Gouldians/Dalrymple	53
Lima's Exotic Birds	12
L & M Bird Leg Bands	39
Lyon Electric Company, Inc.	15
Magnolia Bird Farm	55
Midwest Avian Research Expo/MARE..	54
Phoenix Cage Co.	53
Red Bird Products, Inc.	53
Roger Bringas/Mutations Unlimited ...	59
Sun Seed Co. Inc.	Back Cover
Timberline	39
Veterinarian Listings	8
W. W. Swalef & Son	5
ZuPreen, Avian Breeder Diet	23



Every morning the Trumpeter Hornbills would do their cat calls then leave for the day.



“I don't know what I'd do without Tippy. My grandchildren are great, but they aren't always here. They all chipped in and bought him for my birthday five years ago. That alone makes him special, but the way he sings makes him my best friend and brings sunshine into my home. He is always happy and active. He sings even on dreary days. Tippy hops over to the side of his cage to greet me whenever I walk into the room.

He truly is my best friend and I give him only the best; Sun Seed, with a wee bit of fresh greens like kale or endive. I wouldn't feed my best friend anything but the best...”

Pet Products Exclusively From
SUN SEED
SUNTHING SPECIAL

*For more information contact us at:
Sun Seed Company, Inc. • P.O. Box 33
Bowling Green, Ohio 43402
www.sunseed.com*