

Botswana's Mababe Depression offers the perfect mix of resources to sustain buffaloes in immense numbers

In a quiet corner of Africa a dramatic and dusty spectacle unfolds with the arrival of megaherds of buffaloes

BUFFALO HERD: WILL WHITFORD

BUFFALO BEDLAM

Words by SUE WATT

WE

E'RE PARKED UP IN our Land Cruiser on the golden

grasslands of Botswana's Mababe Depression, surrounded by Cape buffaloes caked in mud. "There must be 3,000 of them here," our guide Jonah Seboko says quietly, scanning the scene with his binoculars. "Beautiful, just beautiful."

As grazers, buffaloes influence vegetation dynamics, preventing bush encroachment and promoting the growth of grasses



Heavy horns make formidable weapons against predators and are also used when jostling for space within the herd

That's not a word I'd ever really associated with the notoriously grumpy, graceless buffaloes, known as 'widow-makers' or the 'Black Death' for their fearsomely aggressive and vengeful disposition. Along with elephants, rhinos, lions and leopards, Cape buffaloes belong to Africa's Big Five, the special clique of animals so-called because historically, big-game hunters regarded them as the most dangerous to pursue. Today, the Big Five have become the most sought-after sightings for safari-goers.

Buffaloes, however, aren't quite as appealing as the rest of the much-loved

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BUFFALOES IN MIST: RUSSELL MACLAUGHLIN; FACE-ON BUFFALO AND SUE WATT PORTRAIT: WILL WHITFORD

"Staring menacingly, the buffaloes encircle our vehicle and I can see their sheer power close up"

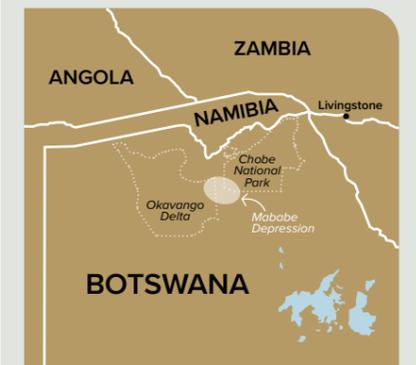
quintet. They're not classed as 'charismatic megafauna', those endearing mammals that charm us into caring about them and their habitats. And unlike the other members of the Big Five coterie, they don't even have their own 'World... Day' to celebrate them and raise awareness of their conservation. Yet they are vital eco-engineers and revered in African cultures as symbols of strength, resilience and unity (see p78).

Those qualities come to the fore in the savage interactions between Africa's largest herds of buffaloes and formidable lion prides. Mababe's plains set the stage for

one of the continent's most intense natural dramas starring these two arch-enemies.

LYING BETWEEN BOTSWANA'S Okavango Delta and Chobe National Park, the Mababe Depression has seen many changes. Since 2007, this previously dried-up ancient lake has become a whole new ecosystem after earthquakes and shifting tectonic plates altered river flows to the area. In the dry season, from August to November, this vast grey and gold basin becomes the only source of water and

Where is the Mababe Depression?



The Mababe Depression in northern Botswana is an ancient lake bed that transformed into wetlands when the flow of the Khwai-Mababe River changed.

Buffalo stance

African tribes have long adopted certain animals as symbolic totems for the qualities they possess, enhancing cultural identity and connecting people with their natural heritage.

The Baete tribe of south-eastern Botswana chose the buffalo as their totem during the Mfecane wars that raged across southern Africa in the early 1800s. They believed the buffalo's courage, power and unity would protect them against enemies. Out of respect, they still don't eat buffalo.

Displaced to the Okavango Delta during the Angolan civil wars in the 1960s, the Hambukushu people adopted the buffalo as their totem for its strength and resilience. "They only killed the buffaloes they needed," says Yompy Kennetseng, Mokete's general manager, whose mother is Hambukushu. "If they found lions on a buffalo, they would cut a piece off that instead of killing another."

The Khoisan community of Mababe, nomadic hunter-gatherers, always had enormous respect for the buffalo, also now seen as a source of ecotourism income.



Red-billed oxpeckers graze on parasites and help to reduce infestations in return



BUFFALOES

The synchronised movement of herds is a marvel of instinct and coordination



Mababe San people showcasing a traditional dance

considering their temperament. From around August, they all congregate here as precious sustenance becomes scarce elsewhere. Come the rains, they'll disperse again.

"Mokete means 'feasts of animals' and that's what this area is all about," Jonah explains as we look through our binoculars to discover elephants and zebras roaming just beyond our buffalo herd, with even more buffaloes in the distance.

STARING MENACINGLY, THE buffaloes encircle our vehicle and I see their sheer power close up. These brawny bovids have coarse grey or black hides, their calves a distinctive reddish brown. But it's the horns I find fascinating, varying hugely in shape, size and markings.

"They're all different - that's how calves recognise their mothers. This one's beautiful," says Jonah, pointing out a female with deep, drooping horns that curve all the way up into a perfect U-shape. Males are easily distinguished by the 'boss' - a mass of bone and keratin where the two horns meet on the top of the head. Whatever the shape or size, buffalo horns can cause fatal injuries. Should the buffaloes charge, they have a reputation for taking no prisoners, turning back to attack, stalk and kill predators or hunters, even when they're injured.

"Buffaloes are unpredictable: they'll charge at any time. If you're on foot and it's too late to run, the best way to survive is to

lie flat on the ground or hide behind a log so they can't hook you and flip you into the air."

I doubt I'd have the fortitude to lie down if a 850kg bovid capable of running at 60kph was hurtling towards me. Thankfully, our herd seems calm and there are no lions around to spook them. Instead, the predators have been feasting on three elephants we'd seen around the concession who'd succumbed to old age in the 40°C heat. Death's fetid stench of rotting meat and disgorged bowels hung heavy in the air as squabbling vultures swarmed around the carcasses.

In 18 years of visiting Africa, I've never witnessed a kill, and I'm not sure I want to. Mokete's head guide, Vasco Tebalo, shows me a video on his phone of five lions suffocating a buffalo amid the dust and din of the herd. It's a tough watch.

"This is true nature," says Vasco. "It's not like TV documentaries, which are edited. When you see it with your own eyes and hear the screaming, it's all too real. It can take an hour for lions to kill a buffalo. People think they want to see a kill but sometimes it brings them to tears."

Next morning, we find six lions covered in glistening bloodstains, crunching the ribs of a buffalo they'd killed for breakfast. Lazy hyenas hang around for skeletal scraps, while jackals quietly wait their turn.

We come across three lions stalking a 'dagga boy', the grumpy old man of the buffalo world whose name means mud in the Zulu language. When a buffalo has passed his prime, he leaves the herd to form his

nutrient-rich grasslands, attracting huge herds of elephants and buffaloes.

Mababe recently attracted its first camp, Wilderness Mokete, after the community that owns this land chose to change from hunting to photographic safaris, granting it exclusive access to their 500km² concession.

Some 400,000 Cape buffaloes (*Syncerus caffer caffer* - one of four subspecies of the African buffalo) roam across southern and eastern Africa. They are classified as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List because of declining populations caused by human encroachment, poaching, disease and degradation of habitats by livestock. Mababe's massive herds are made up of myriad smaller obstinacies, an apt collective noun

"Buffaloes are vital eco-engineers and revered in African cultures as symbols of resilience and unity"

own gang or wander alone, often wallowing in muddy pools to keep cool and protected from insects. You don't mess with these boys. They're known for being particularly belligerent and the lions decide to give this individual a miss.

THEN WE MEET TWO GOLDEN Boys wandering along the track. These indomitable lions, all brawn and rippling muscle, look more grey than gold from the ubiquitous dust of the black-cotton soil, but their swaying manes are the colour of straw and they walk with the swagger of rock stars. One comes up to my side of the Land Cruiser to rest in its shade.

But there's more to Mababe than lions and buffaloes. Giraffes, ostriches, zebras and warthogs intermingle on the floodplains, along with antelopes such as roan, sable, impala, dainty steenbok and herds of russet-coloured tsessebe, all potential prey for wild dogs and hyena. Above the ground, thousands, possibly millions, of sparrow-sized red-billed queleas swirl in entrancing murmurations, darkening the morning sky.

One morning I join Russell MacLaughlin, a wildlife filmmaker, who is making a documentary on Mababe's lion-buffalo interactions. "When I first witnessed the hunts, I was blown away," he says. "This place is so special, I came here for a week and I've stayed for three years."



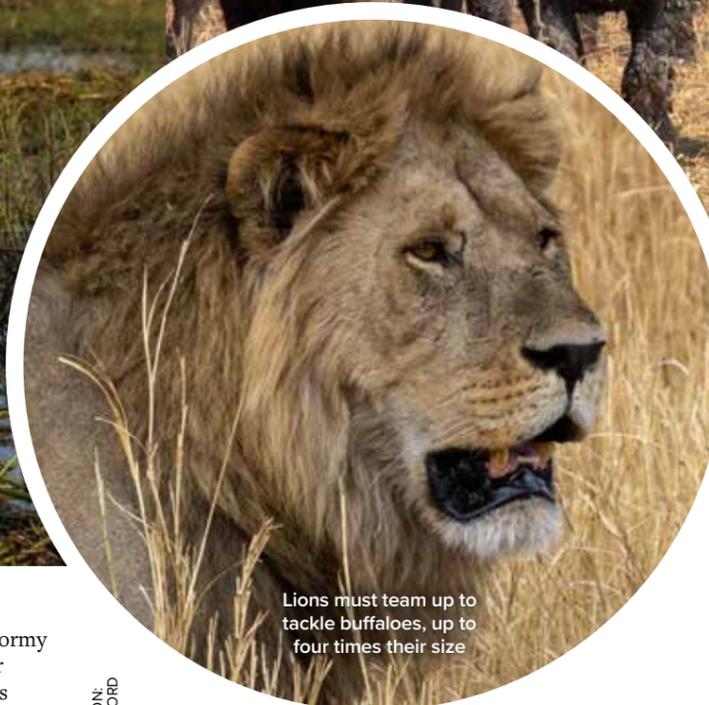
Warthogs are among the many animals drawn to the floodplains of this unique ecosystem

MABABE BUSHMEN: SHUTTERSTOCK; BUFFALO AND OXPECKER: BEN MCRAE/ALAMY; AERIAL VIEW OF OKAVANGO DELTA: AMAZINGAERIAL/ALAMY; WARTHOG: PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM

In a symbiotic bond, cattle egrets feed on insects churned up by hooves and alert the buffaloes to danger



Congregating in large herds to prevent being singled out is one of the buffalo's many anti-predator adaptations



Lions must team up to tackle buffaloes, up to four times their size

“You can almost feel the ground moving when they’re stampeding and lions are chasing them”

On my final drive, distant dust clouds lead us to a 5,000-strong buffalo herd on the move. Interestingly, research suggests that females ‘vote’ on the route of the herd, turning towards the direction they wish to travel. The majority wins and older buffaloes lead the way. They graze on their favourite tall, coarse buffalo grasses that grow here in abundance, then chew the cud while relaxing. As eco-engineers, their role is to clear the plains to make way for the sweeter short grasses preferred by more selective grazers such as steenbok, roan and sable. At the same time, they enrich the earth with their dung.

says Jonah. “They go crazy to protect the herd. For safety, they become one unit, like a big wall, with the young in the middle, making it difficult for predators to penetrate. But lions are smart. They wait until the perfect moment, then they’ll just sneak in, splitting them into small groups and singling out the weak ones that can’t keep up.”

As if on cue, the buffalo herd starts to stampede, grunting noisily, their thundering hooves kicking up the dust. I look around nervously for lions, half wanting to see my first kill, half not.

“Don’t worry,” says Jonah, as they calm down. “They got spooked by warthogs. These guys see warthogs every day but today, they just decided to cause a commotion. And when one buffalo runs, they all run...”

I ask Jonah how he feels about the Mababe buffaloes. “They’re mind-blowing,” he replies. “You get to enjoy the full extent of the herds here because it’s so open and I never get tired of watching them. It’s weird but I miss them when they’ve gone. They’re just magnificent. That’s the only word for it.”

He’s right. En masse, they are truly magnificent. And to be up close to buffaloes, to sense their power, their edgy personalities and their protective loyalty... well, it’s beautiful, just beautiful. **W**

even three years old,” he explains. “They’re massive and muscular because they’ve been killing so many buffaloes.”

Amid the dust and thunder of hooves, the agitated buffaloes stare at the predators for what seems an eternity, maintaining a united, defensive wall. The lions, with full bellies, are in no rush. They will watch and wait until the buffaloes head for the water. Eventually, we leave them to it and Russell describes what it’s like in the thick of the action.

“You can almost feel the ground moving when they’re stampeding and lions are chasing them, and all the dust just lingers,” he says. “Seeing herds that span from horizon to horizon is one of the most incredible sightings. I’ve worked on every continent but I’ve never witnessed what I’ve witnessed here: Mokete has been the pinnacle of my career.”

As we drive, sunrise lights up the floodplain like a band of gold under stormy skies. A lioness is calling gently for her six cubs and the black tips of their tails pop up above the grasses. One plays with a broken tsessebe horn like a kitten might play with a ball of wool. It’s difficult to imagine these cute cubs attacking burly bovines, but they play by their own rules when it comes to predation.

“I’ve got footage of these lions stalking buffaloes at three months old. They’re absolutely fearless,” says Russell. “The Chobe pride hunt in the middle of the day when normal lions are sleeping. This place is wide open and there’s no shade, but they’ve adapted to the heat and they sit and wait to ambush the buffaloes as they come to drink.”

Using his drone, Russell sees a broad black line some 6km long and calculates a herd of roughly 12,000 buffaloes. We drive for an hour to reach them, only to discover that the Golden Boys and eight of the Chobe pride have got there first. “These girls aren’t

BUFFALO AND EGRET: ANN AND STEVE TOON/NATUREPL.COM; BUFFALO AND LION: RUSSELL MACLAUGHLIN; LION CLOSE-UP AND HERD OF BUFFALOES: WILL WHITFORD



Buffaloes don’t go down without a fight and will even face off an attack