

# Mafinga Mountains, 15-24 October 2022

## Quest for the undescribed Mafinga Warbler



This unique trip combines birding & hiking with scientific research, aiming to reveal the identity of what may prove a new species to science. It can be combined back-to-back with the Nyika 2022 tour (8-15 October) and/or recce explorations of Zambia's far north (22 Oct – 1 Nov, please enquire).

**Guide:** Frank Willems

**Chef:** Moffat Gondwe

**Package type:** 'Birding & Hiking' guided safari. Reasonable fitness required. We will be birding and looking at other wildlife while enjoying the amazing landscape on foot. We'll likely not see a single person during the whole hike!

**Accommodation type:** Bush camping in Mafinga, lodging/camping on return from Mafinga

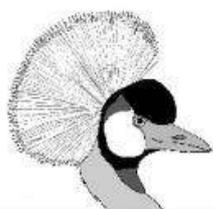
**Package price:**

International: \$1,990 self-drive, own camping gear / \$2,390 self-drive, camping gear provided / \$2,990 transport and camping gear provided.

Resident / SADC, per person: \$1,420 self-drive, own camping gear / \$1,720 self-drive, camping gear provided / \$2,320 transport and camping gear provided.

**Participants:** minimum 2, maximum 10

*Included are all guiding services, catering, tea & coffee, accommodation (on return from Mafinga) and porters (Mafinga). Excluded are drinks and items of a personal nature, plus catering & accommodation on the way to Mafinga (if booked separate from Nyika package). The rate applies to BirdWatch Zambia members only. Non-members pay an additional \$25 with which comes BWZ membership for 2022 and 2023. For each booking, a donation will be made to BirdWatch Zambia and the Mwinilunga Conservation Project.*



# BIRDING ZAMBIA

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## Introduction: Mafinga Mountains: Zambia's highest peak and the Luangwa Source

The term 'Zambia's best-kept secret' certainly is used too lightly in advertisement, but Mafinga does make an excellent candidate to deserve the title. It arguably is Zambia's best place to combine hiking and birding. This magnificent plateau, on the border with Malawi, devote of people and accessible on foot only, towers out some 1.5 km above the adjacent Luangwa Valley, with the source of the Luangwa river hidden in one of its many steep forested valleys. The plateau is largely above 2,000 m asl, with the peak – Zambia's highest point – at some 2,330 m asl. Grasslands and flower-rich shrubland dominate the flat areas on top of the breathtakingly beautiful plateau, while the lower parts are mainly covered with miombo. Among the many afro-montane forest patches – a habitat limited in Zambia to the Mafinga-Nyika area, among Zambia's biodiversity hotspots – is the 40 hectares Mulangale Forest.

A 2018 BirdWatch Zambia survey led by Frank and Leslie Reynolds yielded lots of firsts for the Mafingas, including Blue Swallow (only known to breed on Nyika), Brown-throated Martin of race *ducis* (new to Zambia), and range-restricted Churring Cisticola. The avifauna is dominated by afro-montane species. Forests hold jewels like Bar-tailed Trogon, White-chested Alethe, Moustached Tinkerbird, Starred Robin and Chapin's Apalis, with White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher, Malawi Batis, Yellow-bellied Waxbill and Red-faced Crimsonwing among specials in the edges. Rock Kestrel and Common Quail inhabit the open areas. Sunbirds include the spectacular Malachite and Bronzy Sunbird. Black-lored, Wailing, Churring, Lazy and Wing-snapping Cisticolas all occupy their own niches. We will form our own opinion of 'Winterbottom's Pipit' which is yet to be properly classified.

The avifauna notably differs from that of Nyika, reflecting a closer affinity to the Tanzanian Eastern Arc mountains. Our timing should be good for Silvery-cheeked Hornbill, in Zambia mainly known as scarce seasonal visitor to Mafinga, of which we had multiple excellent sightings in 2021. Placid Greenbul and Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler are restricted to Mafinga in Zambia, and the only record of Sharpe's Starling comes from the Luangwa Source area.

The fascinating herpetofauna includes the tiny and rare Nchisi Pygmy Chameleon, confirmed during the 2018 survey and found again in 2021. The 2018 survey also discovered Spotted Reed Frog and the bat Long-haired Rousette new to Zambia. Although large mammals have been decimated by hunting, Chequered Giant Sengi and Blue Monkey are among mammals likely to be seen.

The Mafinga area is the scope of a new conservation project run by WeForest and Wildlife and Environmental Conservation Society of Zambia (WECSZ) together with the community. Our visit fits the aim of developing ecotourism. We will learn more about the conservation project during our visit.



## The Mafinga Warbler

During Birding Zambia’s Mafinga tour in October 2021, Frank noticed an unknown call. With concerted effort, he could establish that this indeed was the song of a bird skulking in dense bracken-briar. Apart from sound recordings, we managed visuals and some poor images. In total we would find some six singing males / pairs. The birds recall Bamboo Warbler visually. The alarm call also sounds identical, and the habitat is not unlike that species. The song, however, clearly differs from Bamboo Warbler, being equally continuous (hence the initial nickname “Duracell Warbler”) though with the basic phrase consisting of 3 tones. Also, the non-migratory Bamboo Warbler is known only from isolated populations much further west, from Mwinilunga through the Ruwenzori up to Ethiopia – a completely different biogeographical region. It therefore seems plausible to say the least, that this will prove to be a species unknown to science. Which would be extremely exciting, also considering that only a single truly new discovery (contra research of known species leading to ‘splits’) has so far been made in Africa this century.



During this 2022 tour, we hope to catch birds to get DNA samples, biometric measurements and good images, which will confirm its true identity. For this purpose, Frank has teamed up with Gabriel Jamie (Cambridge University & Percy Fitz Patrick Institute). Gabriel will also work on the cisticola species of the area, which just may lead to even more discoveries...

In short: this is your chance to be part of ornithological history in the making!

## Detailed program

### 15 & 16 October

This trip is organized back-to-back with Birding Zambia’s Nyika tour. Birding Zambia’s Inge & daughter Robin will lead on the sections to and from Mafinga, since Frank will also guide the Nyika tour and afterwards continue for ornithological explorations in Zambia’s far north – which is open for participation, please enquire.



**If booked in combination with the Nyika package**, you will travel from Nyika to the Zinsa Valley on the 15<sup>th</sup>. We will park our vehicles at Maliko. From here, it is an easy one-hour (3 km) walk to our first camping site along the Zinsa Stream, which is the closest-by site where we found Mafinga Warbler in 2021. The 16<sup>th</sup> will be dedicated to localising and catching the Mafinga Warbler and enjoying the other rich birdlife here.

**If booked separately**, the package technically starts at the foot of the Mafinga Mountains on 16 October. You are invited to join Birding Zambia’s Inge & Robin – booking a seat in their vehicle, or with your own vehicle - who will travel from Chisamba to Mafinga on 15-16 October. This is an 18-hour drive with an overnight stay in Mpika (accommodation TBC) or closer to Mafinga (not included in rate). On the 16<sup>th</sup>, Frank will meet you in Mulekatembo at 14:00, from where we continue to Maliko Village. Here we park the vehicles and meet our porters. From here, it is an easy one-hour (3 km) walk to our first camping site along the Zinsa Stream, which is the closest-by site where we found Mafinga Warbler in 2021.

*17 October*

The early morning will be dedicated to trying to catch a Bamboo Warbler, as well as birding the surroundings – which may produce the likes of Whyte’s Barbet, Singing Cisticola and Red-winged Prinia, as well some first truly Afromontane species. After breakfast around 8:00, we will pack camp and start to ascend onto the plateau. The first kilometre is a gentle rise, but the second kilometre (in horizontal distance) will see us rise some 400 meters. After that, it is a more gentle walk to the grassy Masuwa area (2210 m asl) during which we hope to see for instance our first Yellow-crowned Canary and both Malachite and Bronzy Sunbird. From here, the track leads through stunning grasslands with rocks and strips of afromontane forest, up to the Musipizi Source area, near the Luangwa Source, where we set up camp for 2 nights (approx. 2018 m asl).



*18 October*

Full day to explore the area around the Luangwa Source. It is here that Sharpe’s Starling was seen in 2002. We will also reach Zambia’s highest point at 2330 m asl. Interesting finds in 2018 and 2021 in this general area included Blue Swallow, Cinnamon-bracken Warbler, Quail, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Churring and Black-lored Cisticola, and, in 2021, our first Silvery-cheeked Hornbills and Nchisi Pygmy Chameleons.

*19 October*

After an early breakfast, we will make our way, while birding, to Mulangale Forest - a 4 km hike through scenically spectacular, undulating terrain. A long list of interesting birds can be expected, including Mafinga’s first Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk in 2021. Camp will be set up at the edge of Mulangale Forest (1900 m asl). Afternoon birding around camp.



*20 October*

Full day in the 40-hectares Mulangale Forest, one of Zambia’s largest afromontane forest patches. At least one pair of Mafinga Warbler was present near camp in 2021. We also have our hopes up high for Silvery-cheeked Hornbill which were very present in 2021. Other forest specials include White-chested

Alethe, Bar-tailed Trogon, Forest Double-collared Sunbird, Placid and Sharpe’s Greenbul and Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler. A nocturnal search may yield Nchisi Pygmy Chameleon and Spotted Reed Frog.



*21 October*

After breakfast, we pack up and hike towards the Masuwa area, a 3-km walk involving some steep descending and ascending. We will take our time birding the forest strips, as well as the Masuwa area - a mosaic of grasslands, rocks and wet forest strips. From Masuwa, it is another 3 km descending off the plateau to our camping spot on the Zinsa Stream.

*22 October*

We may attempt to catch Mafinga Warbler again in the morning, and/or bird some evergreen forest in the Zinsa valley. After breakfast, we will hike to Maliko Village. Here we will say goodbye to the mountain and to our porters, after which we continue by vehicle. In Isoka, the team will split: Frank and Gabriel will continue to Kasama for explorations of Zambia's extreme north, while Inge & Robin will lead the team travelling to Kapishya Hotsprings – a 7 hours drive from Maliko in total. The hotsprings are the perfect destination after a week driving and hiking! Overnight in comfortable chalets.

*23 October*

The early morning is available to further enjoy Kapishya, with another swim in the hotsprings and/or enjoying the great birdlife here, with Bocage's Akalat, White-tailed Elminia, Green-headed Sunbird, Brown-headed Apalis, Yellow-throated Leaflove, Cabanis's Greenbul and African Thrush among birds present at the springs. After breakfast, it is a 6-hour drive to Kundalila Falls, where you will camp near the falls and enjoy a last night of Moffat's fabulous cooking. The stunning falls – amongst Zambia's highest falls - are a short stroll from the campsite. Bocage's Akalat, Grey-olive Greenbul, White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, Eastern Miombo Sunbird, Lanner Falcon and Mountain Wagtail are among interesting birds here.

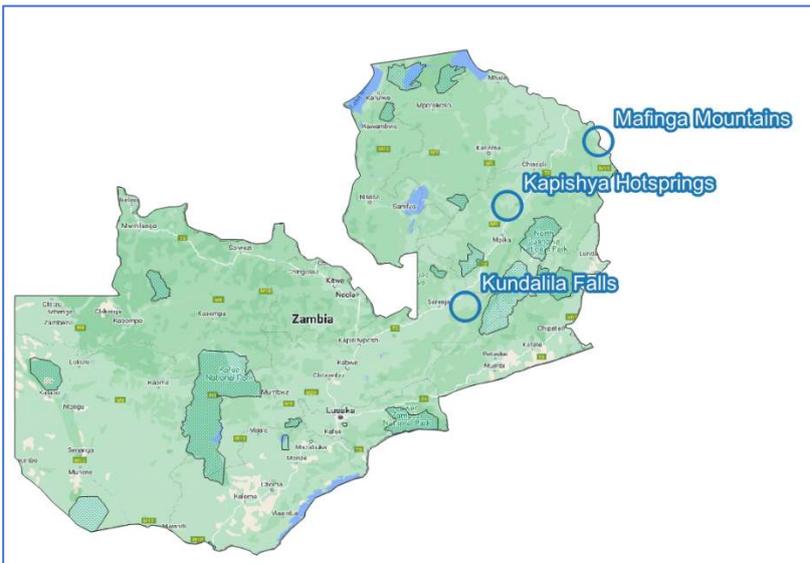
*24 October*

If you haven't had enough hiking yet, the descend to the bottom of the falls is a worthwhile target for the early morning. After breakfast and packing camp, you will head to Lusaka – a 7-hour drive.

*Hiking arrangements and what to bring*

Mafinga Mountains can only be accessed on foot. Hiking requires reasonable fitness. We will ascend and descend the mountains using the route from Maliko Village (1530 m asl) to Masuwa (2210 m asl) – some 700 meter difference in elevation, of which approximately half a steep climb. We will have a porter per participant. Please ensure you are packed lightly to minimize the weight the porters need to carry. Anticipate carrying a small, 5 kg day pack yourself, with water, snacks, rain-/wind-stopper,





camera etcetera. Goods (including additional set(s) of clean clothes for the way back!) can be left safely in the vehicles in Maliko.

Weather conditions are unpredictable in October. We expect pleasant sunny weather, warm but not quite as hot as lower parts of Zambia are in October, with a variable breeze. It may also be overcast with an occasional shower, and/or chilly windy mornings. Ensure to be prepared.

Essential to bring, apart from birding gear: sturdy hiking boots / sandals (no thorns but sharp rocks), a (thin) raincoat / wind stopper, fleece jacket, hat or cap, sunblock, insect

repellent, water bottle, small daypack, large backpack (to be carried by porter). Camping gear needs to be lightweight and include tent, sleeping mat, beddings, chair.

Birding Zambia will provide all catering. Due to weight restrictions, our general setup will be basic compared to other Birding Zambia tours. Note that drinking water, tea and coffee will be provided. You are welcome to request any alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks to be brought by Birding Zambia, or bring your own.

*Disclaimer*

*Although Birding Zambia does its utmost best within reason to ensure your safety during this trip, participation is completely at your own risk. Please ensure you have adequate medical and other insurances.*

