



TANZANIA TRIP REPORT March 2009

by Adrian Binns

Day 1 / Mar 9 Nairobi to Amboseli

Our group awoke early, eager to enjoy their first full day in Africa all together. Debbie, Barb and Peter had already completed a one-day pre-tour yesterday, looking for several avian endemics north of Nairobi. The rest of the group, Edie, Donna, Paula, Howard, Janet and Wylie, joined us late last night, beginning a grand trip in Kenya and Tanzania. Hadada Ibis greeted us noisily from the trees surrounding the hotel as Pied Crows flew over the city. We drove south out of Nairobi heading to Amboseli National Park. Along the way, we made our first stop for a Hartlaub's Bustard that caught our attention roadside. Scanning the vast open landscape we



got our first looks at Grassland Pipit, Crowned Plover and Montagu's Harrier, as well as Common Zebras and Impalas in the distance, all of which would become commonplace, but no less wonderful. It also gave us a chance to study the whistling thorn acacias and *balantines*, both abundant flora species in this type of habitat, along with

devils' finger cactus and finger euphorbia. Continuing on we noted three additional raptors, Eastern Pale Chanting Goshawk, Tawny Eagle and Pygmy Falcon.

The picturesque rest stop behind the Paradise gallery in Namanga hosted a plethora of birds, including Pin-tailed Whydah, Straw-tailed Whydah, Blue-naped Mousebird, and Paradise Flycatcher, all sporting their eye-catching, long-tailed, plumages. White-browed Sparrow Weaver, Black-headed Weaver, Jackson's Golden Weaver and Chestnut Weaver served as our introduction to the many weavers of East Africa. Scanning the back fence and beyond, we added Grey-crowned Crane, Augur Buzzard, White-winged Widowbird and Isabelline Shrike. Northern Pied Babbler, Swahali Sparrow, Yellow-rumped Seedeaters and Red-billed Firefinch foraged on the bare ground around the buildings, with a Variable Sunbird flitting about....it was hard to tear us away!

The dirt road leading from Namanga to Amboseli soon produced White-fronted Bee-eater, Spotted Thick-knee, Kittlitz Plover and the first of many Northern Wheatears. At the time, most of Amboseli National Park was dry as a bone, with heat shimmers producing amazing mirages. We traversed the better of the two roads across the dry lake bed, marveling at the illusion of a giant lake, when really there was just heat and whirling dust devils. Impressive silhouettes of Maasai Giraffe, Elephants, Common Zebra and Common Ostriches all seemed to be walking on water!



Quite abruptly the barren dry landscape gave way to a permanent swamp bordering Ol Tukai Lodge. This lush vegetation that cuts a dark green swathe across the middle of the park was teeming with wildlife. Some of the 800 Elephants that reside here were up to their necks in the marsh pulling grasses. Buffalo wallowed, while submerged Hippopotamus came up for air. The waterbirds were excellent with Marsh and Wood Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Long-toed and Blacksmith Plovers, White-faced Whistling Ducks, Spur-winged Goose, Squacco Heron, all the egrets, and the biggest two, Goliath Heron and Saddle-billed Storks.



Herds of Common Zebras and Wildebeest followed by their few-weeks-old calves grazed across the flat, treeless, short-grass plains. Grant's and Thomson Gazelles were easy to spot. Never too far from their prey, a pride of 5 lions dozed close to the road, fully exposed to all the elements. As the afternoon progressed, the snow-capped summit of Mount Kilimanjaro emerged from the clouds, providing great photo opportunities to all.



On the lodge grounds we found Taveta Golden Weavers, Buff-bellied Warbler, Grey-headed Kingfisher (*right*), Cardinal Woodpecker, Grey Woodpecker, Beautiful Sunbird, Willow Warbler, and Thrush-Nightingale. Fearless Yellow Baboons and Vervet Monkeys approached in curiosity. With the help of the Maasai “birdmen”, Joseph and Sapati (*left*), we were treated to the sight of roosting Square-tailed (Gabon) Nightjars, tucked down in a branch pile.



Day 2 / Mar 10 Amboseli to Arusha

We worked our way out of the park, birding along the Enkongo Narok Swamp past the Observation Hill to the Sinet Causeway. In the drier areas we came across Fischer’s Sparrow Larks and Red-capped Larks and a perfectly camouflaged Spotted Thick-knee under a bush. We finally found a couple of Double-banded Coursers and had a few Ashy Cisticolas sit up long enough for us to view. Taita and Long-tailed Fiscals perched conspicuously on nearby shrubs while the more colorful though less common Rosy-patched Bush-shrike showed briefly.

There were considerable areas of open water with Great White Pelicans swimming about as White-faced Whistling Ducks and hippos slept on an exposed mud flat. Goliath Heron, Squacco Herons, African Jacanas and Yellow Wagtails all stalked prey in their own distinctive way.



The Sinet Causeway is a wonderful spot for Black Crakes and Long-toed Lapwings (*above*), and also some displaying Fan-tailed Widowbirds. A small herd of Elephants were busy feeding chest deep in the swamp, including several little ones that always managed to avoid being crushed by their giant relatives.

By late morning we had left Amboseli and entered the border town of Namanga. It took 45 minutes for immigration to process our visas before crossing into Tanzania. Shortly thereafter

avian activity along the roadside enticed us out of the vehicle to bird and enjoy our boxed lunch. A small group of Fischer's Starlings caught our attention along with White-headed Buffalo Weaver and the first of many brilliantly-colored Lilac-breasted Rollers. As a Banded Parisoma,



Violet-backed Sunbird and Yellow-bellied Eremomela flittered about an acacia we found a more subdued White-headed Mousebird and Black-headed Weaver resting in the shade. Feeding low amongst the grasses we patiently waited until Green-winged Pytillia and Black-cheeked Waxbills showed themselves. We thoroughly enjoyed this delightful lunch stop out in the open under some acacias.

We moved on to the extensive Lariboro plains, north of Mt Meru. Very small numbers of the extremely localized Beasley's Lark occurs here but a thorough scan of the grazed pastoral land only produced Athi Short-toed Lark, Capped Wheatear and Isabelline Wheatear. Many in the group were enthralled with the young Maasai goat herders who approached us, eager to interact and practice their English. One on them even had a small puppy, a rare sight on our trip.



We reached Arusha NP just before the gates closed. With light fading fast we saw Spur-winged Geese in the 'little Serengeti' and Black-and-white Colubus (*right*) roosting in the tree tops before entering the Momella Lodge compound as darkness set in.



Day 3 / Mar 11 Arusha NP to Tarangire NP

We spent a few hours this morning at elevation about 5000 feet, in the shadow of Tanzania's two highest peaks, Kilimanjaro and Meru. The tall dense forest is prime habitat for primates, where we easily encountered Syke's Monkeys and Black-and-white Colobus. African Crowned Eagles (*right*) prey on the latter, often picking off unsuspecting victims from the canopy.



Along open stretches of montane forest the tall grasses and shrubs produced Tawny-flanked Prinias, African Moustached Warbler, the stunning Pangani Longclaw, Trilling Cisticola, Isabelline Shrike and a singing Common Nighthingale.



Arusha National Park has a number of seasonal lakes, and the two largest, Big Momella Lake and Small Momella Lake, attract ample waterbirds in winter. We found Southern Pochards and Maccos Ducks amongst many Little Grebes and at another lake, Red-knobbed Coots and Long-tailed Cormorant. A short stroll along the Small Lake track yielded Yellow-throated Apalis, Red-faced Crombec, Tropical Boubou, Nubian Woodpecker, Scaly Francolin,

Rufous Chatterers, White-winged Widowbirds, Yellow Bishop and close, eye-level views at White-fronted Bee-eaters (*above*).

It is about a 2 1/2 hour drive south west to Tarangire, most of this being on a decent paved road. Arusha, the safari capital of northern Tanzania, was bustling as usual, sparking many conversations about the people, buildings, vehicles and culture all around us.

At the entrance to Tarangire National Park we got a taste of things to come. On the short walk to the restrooms we came across Tawny-flanked Prinia, African Yellow White-eye, Red-billed Firefinch, Lesser Masked and Vitelline Masked Weaver along with colorful Black-winged Red Bishops, Blue-capped and Red-cheeked Cordonblues.

We enjoyed a late lunch at the lodge, overlooking the patio and panoramic savanna landscape that stretches well to the south. Raptors, such as Bateleurs and Tawny Eagles appeared from nowhere, gliding effortlessly over the patio including African White-backed Vulture and the largest of vultures the Lappet-faced.

Stately Baobab trees flank our tents on the rim of the bluff, providing the most incredible vista views and photo moments. A few steps away, Yellow-collared Lovebirds (*right*) announced their presence with squeaky chattering, and Slate-coloured Boubous sounded their distinctive tropical calls. Superb Starlings and the endemic Ashy Starlings rummaged in the dirt around the tents and Northern White-crowned Shrikes patiently waited on a low overhanging branch for insects to pass. Red-billed Hornbills and the slightly larger Von der Decken's were seen flying from one tree to the next and a Grey Woodpecker was busy inspecting a natural cavity.



The late afternoon skies darkened as a storm rolled westwards. Our evening game drive was unhindered by the rain; rather, the most impressive sight was a group of over 50 mostly-grown Common Ostrich chicks that sat down with 2 females, all soaking wet. When the shower stopped, they all got up, shook off the water and continued to graze. White-browed Coucals enjoy the rain and could be seen resting on top of a bush.

As we slowed the vehicle to negotiate a large puddle, we spotted a rain-soaked Senegal Lapwing. There was a second lapwing and we checked the field marks to make sure it was not the similar looking Black-winged. In the two large nearby acacia trees, perched a colorful Woodland Kingfisher and Black-headed Oriole but it was other activity that intrigued us. A flock of 4 Green Wood-Hoopoes flew into the nests of Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver and Rufous-tailed Weavers on the outer limbs, causing a great deal of commotion amongst the weavers. The wood-hoopoes (to my knowledge) are only invertebrate eaters, so why would the weavers be so upset, when the wood-hoopoes examined the inside of their nests? Is this a new behavior? Were they concerned for the safety of the eggs or the young?



The deep grunt of a Verreaux Eagle-Owl reverberated across the savanna and soon we were able to locate not one but two birds in a flat-topped acacia. A glorious way to end another day in Africa.

Day 4 / Mar 12 Tarangire NP



The sounds of the African bush surrounded us before daybreak, luring us quickly out of our canvas tents, eager to start a glorious day in Tarangire. The calls of Lions, hyenas and zebras, along with the ever-present ‘*work-harder, work-harder*’ of the Ring-necked Dove, sent delightful shivers up my spine. Before breakfast, we located the African Scops Owl (*left*) in a close tree, and tracked down a Slate-coloured Boubou.

We spent the day exploring the northern sector of the park, dominated by baobabs and acacias, home to many different wildlife species. We enjoyed watching several Helmeted Guineafowl inexplicably running laps in the field around us – maybe we were too close to their nest? A pair of Heuglin’s Coursers herded their small chick under cover, and we found other ground birds such as Double-banded Courser, Yellow-necked Spurfowl and Black-faced Sandgrouse. Hildebrandt’s,

Scaly and Crested Francolins all showed nicely. The day list swelled with great looks of African Cuckoo, Diderik’s Cuckoo, Red & Yellow Barbet, Bare-faced Go-away bird, many Magpie Shrike, Little Bee-eaters, Fork-tailed Drongo, Spotted Thick-knee, Pangani Longclaw, Bearded Woodpecker, Saddle-billed Stork, Hamerkop, Meyer’s (Brown) Parrots in a sausage tree, African Orange-bellied Parrot (*right*) and much more. The weaver family was well-represented with Lesser-masked, White-headed Buffalo, Red-billed Buffalo, Rufous-tailed and White-browed Sparrow Weavers.



An over-sized watering hole buzzed with the activity of shorebirds, waders and waterfowl, as well as Slender Mongoose and Monitor Lizard. We saw White Storks, African Spoonbill, Hadada Ibis, Wood and Common Sandpipers, Comb Ducks, White-faced Whistling Ducks, Egyptian Goose, Three-banded and Blacksmith Plovers, Grey-headed Kingfisher and a striking Malachite Kingfisher.

After our 4-hour morning game drive, we returned to the lodge for lunch and relaxed a bit on our tent-side chairs, overlooking the spectacular valley. We watched Baboons climbing palm trees with a young one, Speckled Mousebirds eating Balanites fruit, Impalas 'ponking,' and White-headed Vultures (*below*) displaying in the broad blue skies.



Our evening game drive did not produce the Leopard target, but showed more wonderful birds, including three Kingfishers species, Woodland, Pied and Striped. Along the river marshes a pair of Saddle-billed Storks were methodically hunting probing their long bills into the water's edge at the first sign of a meal. We came across a pair of Southern Ground Hornbills walking through the taller grasses in the hopes of flushing insects, a rodent or snake.

Day 5 / Mar 13 Tarangire NP; Gibbs Farm; Ngorongoro Crater rim

Again we awoke to the spine-tingling sounds of the African bush at daybreak, including whistling Pearl-spotted Owlet, trilling African Scops Owl and deep-grunting Verreaux Eagle Owl. We found a flock of Northern Grey-headed Sparrows close to the lodge.

As with all of Africa's National Parks, we could spend much more time exploring the vast areas, but our schedule requires us to move on to the next location. Still, the drive back out to the main gate took several hours as we stopped for a Grey Kestrel, and got sidetracked searching for an elusive Serval cat, hunkered down in the grasses. Soon after, we spotted our first Lesser Grey Shrike, while the common Eurasian Roller, Rattling Cisticola, and Rufous-naped Larks were seen at regular intervals. Pangini Longclaw, Winding Cisticola, White-bellied Bustard, Black-bellied Bustard, and Pallid Harrier were seen, along with Double-banded Courser (*right*), Temminck's Courser and a small group of Yellow-throated Sandgrouse that flushed when we paused to view them.



At the gate a short break produced Black Bishop, Speckled-fronted Weaver, Chestnut Sparrow, Red-faced Crombec, D'Arnaud's Barbet, Black-necked Weavers near their nest, and the impressive, orange-billed Abyssinian Scimitarbill. It was nice to visit a park and not see any signs of cattle roaming the savannah. Domestic livestock are susceptible to sleeping sickness carried by tsetse flies, which we seldom encountered during our trip.

Soon after exiting the park we crossed the plains leading to the Rift escarpment. We looked unsuccessfully for Crested Barbet along the way but did have a wonderful view of a Rufous-crowned Roller, showing fine white streaks down a rusty chest.



We spent nearly an hour in the busy village of Mto-Wa-Mbu (which means River of Mosquitoes, though none apparent), providing a glimpse into the culture and daily life of a town situated along the northern, east-west 'safari' corridor of Tanzania. Villagers approached us instantly, selling everything imaginable, including bolts of cloth, necklaces, carved bowls, t-shirts, and even CD's featuring the sounds of the safari! Women clustered on the ground, with their children and goats nearby, trading in milk,

vegetables, fruits and at least 30 different varieties of bananas. We took a brief tour of a small mill that ground grain into flour, a simple, one-room operation.

About halfway along the main road between the escarpment and the crater, a rough dirt track leads north to the Gibbs Farm. This quaint, working, organic coffee farm was our destination for a relaxing, delicious lunch stop. Set on a sloping hill with a profusion of tropical flowering plants, the farm attracts many birds, including Western Citril, Yellow-rumped Seedeater, Bronze Mannikin, Slaty White-eyed Flycatcher and African Paradise Flycatcher. Grosbeak Weavers (*right*) were busy building nests and trying to attract females in a cluster of tall reeds.

Lunch was followed by a cultural visit to an Iraqwi village, where Daniel eloquently described the traditions of his tribe, showed-off a handmade goatskin wedding skirt, featuring beautifully intricate beadwork, and showed us inside a



traditional Iraqwi home. The Iraqwi built their dwellings into dirt banks covered with turf, creating a camouflaged shelter to raise families, hide from marauding tribes and house their cattle at night.

Heading on to the Ngorongoro Conservation area, we stopped at the Loduare gate to complete the usual park fee formalities and use restrooms. A male Olive Baboon showed no fear of humans, exhibiting frighteningly aggressive behavior towards another waiting vehicle. We were reminded to keep windows and doors closed whenever exiting, or the clever primates would snatch anything they could grab. From this point forward, all travel in the northwest corner of the northern safari circuit is on dirt roads, some of them deeply-rutted and dusty.

Ascending the Ngorongoro crater, we stopped at an overlook about 2200 meters above sea level, with incredible views of the world's largest unbroken caldera, the crater floor being about 12-miles wide. This internationally important conservation area hosts myriad species, including some rare and endangered wildlife. From this vantage point we could see the main habitat features such as the Lerai Forest and Lake Magadi. Through binoculars we spotted zebras, elephants and buffalo on the vast open plain.



Continuing along the crater rim, we reached the lovely Serena Lodge, built with large round stones incorporating natural wood materials. The lodge is set low on the rim to blend into the environment, and provide breath-taking views of the crater below. A walk around the grounds produced Eastern Double-collared Sunbird, Tacazze Sunbird, Dusky Turtle-Dove, Brown

Parisoma, Montane White-eye, Baglafaecht Weaver, Tropical Boubou, Great Sparrowhawk and an Eleanora's Falcon, with Schalow's Turaco calling. We retired this evening, with great anticipation of our full day in the crater tomorrow.

Day 6 / Mar 14 Ngorongoro Crater

Today in the crater brought many exciting wildlife experiences and memories to last a lifetime. First thing in the morning we found Mountain Thrush and Scarlet-chested Sunbird in the lodge grounds.

Malachite Sunbird, Red-naped Widowbirds (*right*) were very active in the moorlands and upper montane grasslands of the crater rim. We also saw Red-faced Cisticola and Hunter's Cisticola, Plain-backed Pipit, Tree Pipit, Kenyan Rufous Sparrow, Rufous-naped Lark, and Zitting Cisticola.



We descended down the western side of the crater on the only road available, the Seneto descent road, 8km from the Serena. The steep, slow descent provided ample bird sightings, including Common Rock Thrush, Yellow Bishop, Steppe Buzzard, Black Sawwing, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Northern Anteater Chat, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Ruppell's Robin Chat and Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater all on the way down. Towering Candelabra Euphorbias dotted the hillside around us.



Driving around the crater floor, we enjoyed Black-bellied Bustards, Grey-crowned Crane, Crowned Plover, Capped Wheater, Red-capped Lark, Rosy-breasted Longclaw (*left*) and several Kori Bustards strutting through the plains – this heaviest of all flying birds prefers to stay on the ground. Flocks of feeding White Storks and Abdim's Storks occasionally lifted-up nervously.

Wildebeest, Buffalo, Warthogs and Common Zebras were widely distributed on the plains, feeding in mixed groups. We were tremendously excited to get good looks at 5 Black Rhinoceros (*below*); the crater is one of few locations on earth to find this severely endangered species, and sometimes it is tough to see just one.



Our enthusiasm never waned while watching a Golden Jackal find a Spring Hare, pull it out of its lair, and proceed to skin and eat the creature. Almost instantly a sharp-eyed Tawny Eagle flew in close, trying to scare the Jackal away from its meal. It did this several times, but the Jackal stayed firm, forcing the Eagle to land and covet the meal from a distance. A second, then third Jackal approached the first, and we realized it must've been a family group. The remains of the meal were eventually shared, but not before the Jackal rolled in the carcass, pushing his nose into it, looking very happy!

Saturated grounds kept us at a distance from Lake Magadi (*below*), but we could see a huge concentration of Lesser Flamingos with good numbers of Greater among them. On the shoreline zebras walked through our view as we scoped Marabou, Gull-billed Tern, Grey-headed Gull, Pied Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Curlew Sandpiper, Greenshank, and Yellow Wagtails.



Spotted Hyenas loped across the plains, sometimes coming quite close to our vehicles. These comical-looking predators should not be underestimated when they compete with lions for prey. Speaking of which, we spotted a lioness walking along a grassy hedgerow, and a male lion resting on a knoll.

We had lunch at the Ngoitokitok Springs picnic area along with about 20 other safari vehicles; this being the only location in the crater where people are allowed outside of their vehicles. At least a dozen Yellow-billed Kites circled low overhead, looking to snatch food from unsuspecting picnickers. Many drivers gathered socially to eat underneath the high-clearance land-rovers.



Helmeted Guineafowl walked among the parked vehicles looking for handouts, while Speke's Weavers landed on the open roof for the same purpose. Rufous-tailed Weavers scratched in the elephant dung, and Fan-tailed Widows flew around the reeds. Over the large springs a couple of Mosque Swallows, Banded Martins and Mottled Swifts flew while Red-knobbed Coots, Red-billed Teal and Spur-winged Goose were on the water.

After lunch we explored the freshwater pools in the Mandusi Swamp Hippo pool, where we had Black Crake, Common Moorhen, Long-toed Plover, Three-banded Plover, Cape Teal, Hottentot Teal, Hammerkop, loads of cattle Egrets, and of course Hippos. We came across another sleepy lion, with guineafowl pecking about quite close to him; the lion must've realized it wasn't worth the energy to go after a mouthful of bone and feather!



Reluctant to leave, we ascended back up the crater via the Sopa ascent road, as the much closer Lerai ascent was closed for repair. This added an extra 30km of driving, but more birds for the day-list, including Pin-tailed Whydah, Red-billed Firefinch, Purple Grenadier, White-browed Coucal, and Black-and-white Cuckoo. We marveled at the moss-covered *Acacia lahai* (Red-thorn Acacia) forest through which we travelled along the highland ridge. Golden-winged Sunbird, Green Pigeon, Mountain Wagtail and White-starred Robin were added. Maasai herded their cattle towards home, as the shadows grew longer and the sky shone in brilliant sunset colors.

Day 7 / Mar 15 Ngorongoro; Olduvai Gorge; Ndutu

Some of our group went back down into the crater this morning, while others stayed back to relax. Our morning drive produced several species not seen yesterday, including Great-spotted Cuckoo, Isabelline Wheatear, Speckled Weaver, Fischer's Sparrow-lark, Olive Pigeon, Eastern Violet-backed Starling, White-headed Barbet, Holob's Golden Weaver and Black-headed Heron. We enjoyed close encounters with a herd of elephants feeding noisily in the Lerai forest, along with a large troop of Olive Baboons jumping around the road, busily picking bugs off each other. A lioness lounged in the road ahead, unconcerned with the mounting number of vehicles stopped on both sides of her. Eventually she stood up and walked towards us, passing within inches of our vehicle doors before turning off the road into the vegetation.



Leaving the crater after lunch, our group continued west, stopping for a visit to Olduvai Gorge, named for the Oldupi sisal plant spread widely throughout the area. Assembled at a shelter overlooking the gorge, we listened to Eli, a native docent, recount Leakey's discovery of earliest man, thought to be 3.5 million years old. The gorge in front of us represented 5 distinct geological layers, dating back 2 million years. A small museum showcases many interesting photographs of the Leakey's excavations, including a plaster cast of hominid footprints from millions of years ago. Olduvai Gorge remains an active research site, attracting students and scientists from around the world.



The surrounding acacia shrub always produces some good birds. A Vitteline Masked Weaver was meticulously weaving a strand of grass into its almost-complete nest, and an Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird (*left*) peered out of her own hanging nest. Black-cheeked Waxbill, Speckle-fronted Weaver, Black Bishop and African Mourning Dove all showed nicely.

Leaving Olduvai, we followed the track to Shifting Sands, a black, crescent-shaped dune made of fine ash blown from the nearby Oldonyo Lengai's eruptions. Measuring 25 feet high and 200 feet wide, the dune moves westward at a rate of about 60 feet a year, in a fascinating and mysterious natural phenomenon. Date-stamped markers attest to its path. Situated in the middle of a sea of short grass, the dune

sparks many questions. Why don't other dunes form on this plain? How come this one hasn't dissipated as others do?

We soon turned off the main road and headed west towards Ndutu, located just over the southern boundary of the Serengeti National Park (our later destination). The short grass plains held Cape Rook, Montagu and Pallid Harriers, and Gull-billed Terns. A dozen Caspian Plover, Black-winged Plover, Ruff and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse were well-disguised in some wet tracks, until flushed by our approaching vehicle.



A change in habitat meant a change in birds; entering the open thickets and woods we found Lilac-breasted Rollers, European Roller, Common Rock Thrush, Northern White-crowned Shrike, Red-throated Tit, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Northern Wheatear, Common Kestrel, Coqui Francolin, Helmeted Guineafowl, Red-necked and Grey-breasted Spurfowl (*left*), and African Cuckoo.

We had seen storm clouds from a distance, but didn't realize the amount of rain that had already fallen at Ndutu, especially as our day was so sunny. As we drove on, mud turned into puddles, then pools covering the road. We joked about getting stuck, but fell silent when it actually happened. Our lead land cruiser lost all traction moment's before the second vehicle also got mired in deep mud. Hyenas howled as the sun set quickly, but fortunately we were within sight of our mobile bush campsite. Our ever-efficient drivers never wavered, but worked

quickly with shovels to free the first vehicle and bring people to the campsite. He made two more trips, one for luggage, and the next to pull out the other vehicle with winch and rope. We were glad for our calm drivers and seemingly-indestructible land-cruisers. Though it wasn't raining, the camp was inundated with water, only slightly mitigated by trenches dug around each tent. To further unnerve us, a huge hatch of termite nymphs swarmed around the paraffin lights dotted along the path. We were slipping and sliding in the mud, disoriented in the darkness, dismayed at the water everywhere. But the staff greeted us warmly, with hot towels and cold juice, and soon we were sitting at the mess tent table, ready for dinner. Our meal was delayed another few minutes while the staff lured the deluge of flying nymphs out of the dining area by extinguishing all the lanterns and placing a light outside to draw them away. Still smiling, we toasted our many adventures today. Indeed, we learned how lucky we were, as other groups' campsites were completely wrecked in the day's rainstorms, forcing them to consolidate sleeping quarters, and some other vehicles were stuck in mud for many hours.

Before retiring, a few of us elected to have a hot shower – an interesting experience in a bush camp. Upon our readiness, camp workers climbed a pole outside the tent and poured bonfire-heated water into a suspended canvas drum. Inside the tent, you stepped into a specially-enclosed compartment, zipped it shut, and pulled the cord overhead to allow the water to fall. Five minutes of super-hot, smoke-smelling water was plenty to get clean and feel refreshed. The workers were ready with a second bucket of hot water for your tent-mate, or if you needed more water.

Day 8 / Mar 16 Ndutu



The day broke to sunshine and blue skies. With no rain overnight the ground was beginning to dry out and negotiating the path to breakfast at least did not require someone to hold on to. The night had brought hyenas close to the tent, but lions stayed away as

we only heard a distant roar. The dawn rhythm consisted of a Pearl-spotted Owlet's rising whistle call, tapping Grey Woodpecker on the flat-topped Acacia, Arrow-marked Babbler working their way through camp, and European Bee-eaters flitting overhead.

In high spirits we embarked on our morning game drive. It was a tremendous success, despite the fact that Jonas drove the lead vehicle into an aardvark hole. No one saw the concealed pit; it took us all by complete surprise. The rear right wheel fell deep in the hole, with the front left spinning high and dry at a crazy angle. Bumped heads aside, the scene was rather comical. We all got out, and with the lighter load, Jonas skillfully negotiated his way out of the hole.



Cheetahs (*left*) were a major highlight, with 3 males lounging together in the grass. They were alert but relaxed as several vehicles approached for camera-perfect views. It was another great mammal day, with good looks at Eland, the largest antelope in the world, a group of Spotted Hyenas, a family of Giraffes, Banded Mongoose, Black-backed Jackal and a fleeting Wildcat.

We followed the great spectacle of migration across the savannah, featuring 2 million Wildebeest (*right*), a half-million Common Zebras, numerous gazelles, warthogs and more. Though widely distributed, the animals moved with purpose, grazing all the way. There were many young ones cavorting about, but they always seemed to be able to identify their parents and stick close to them at any hint of danger.



We were drawn to a kill by columns of vultures. Getting closer, we could see many scavengers all squabbling and jostling for position at the carcass, displacing hungry hyenas. The giant Lappet-faced Vultures are the ones who rip-open a carcass hide; Ruppell's Griffon Vultures are most numerous, while the smaller Hooded Vultures hang back, waiting for an opportunity to get their share. White-backed Vultures, Bataleur circled nearby and we came across a Tawny Eagle (*left*) feeding on its own kill.

Ndutu's avian species also included Great Spotted Cuckoo, Black-and-White Cuckoo, Zitting Cisticolas, Abdim's and White Stork, Silverbird, Wattled Starling, Cutthroat Finch, Fischer's Lovebirds, Beautiful Sunbird, Lesser Kestrels and many more. We witnessed a well-camouflaged Kori Bustard on a nest, Crowned Plovers on eggs, majestic Secretary Bird on huge nest and Kittlitz Plover herding tiny chicks... nature's urge to reproduce rings strong in East Africa.

Later that evening we sat around the well-stoked campfire in utter contentment. Smoke wafted in the gentle breeze. Dinner was over, coffee was in-hand, and the conversation lingered on thoughts of another amazing day in Africa. Suddenly, from behind the mess tent we heard the sounds of deep voices singing to the beat of a drum. The voices got louder as a line of men approached, the leader holding a giant cake lit with candles, followed by an enthusiastic percussionist keeping time on a plastic bucket. The entire camp staff sang Happy Birthday in swahili, in honor of Janet's milestone day. Joyous swahili songs continued, as they circled our group before presenting Janet with her birthday cake. Janet has travelled to many parts of the world, but this bush camp serenade was surely one of her most memorable birthday celebrations, and she graciously thanked everyone for the experience; not the only one with a tear in her eye.



Day 9 / Mar 17 Ndotu; Serengeti NP

Leaving camp this morning, we birded along Lake Ndotu, finding Gull-billed Tern, White-winged Tern, Black-winged Stilt, Cape Teal, Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Lesser and Greater Flamingos.

We came across Coke's Hartebeest, Red-billed Oxpeckers on Maasai Giraffe (*below*),

diminutive Dik-Diks and a Helmeted Terrapin basking in a track puddle. Birds included

Buff-bellied Warbler, Double-banded Courser, Isabelline Shrike, Banded Martin, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Chestnut Sparrow, Blue-naped Mousebird, Speckled-fronted Weaver, Pale Flycatcher, Plain-backed Pipit, Nubian Woodpecker, Slate-coloured Boubou, Spotted Morning Thrush, Green Woodhoopoe, Three-banded Plover, Banded Parisoma, Red-backed Shrike, and Woodland Kingfisher. We watched an

Usambiro Barbet fly in and out of it's nest,

which was simply a hole in the ground. Not far away, a young African Hawk Eagle perched on a tree, then leaped to the ground to catch and eat a snake. It was noteworthy that we saw several snakes being eaten by birds on this trip, but never any alive.



Traveling slowly out of the Ndotu area, we found more species including Beautiful Sunbird, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Eastern Pale Chanting Goshawk, Long-crested Eagle, Red-faced Crombec, Red-throated Tit, Pygmy Falcon, Blue-headed Cordonblue, Red-billed Quelea, Kenyan Rufous Sparrow, Von der Decken's Hornbill (*left*). A Blue-headed Tree Agama was one of many lizards found during our trip.

Again, as yesterday, we experienced part of the world's greatest migration spectacle, capturing memories to last a lifetime. We found ourselves surrounded by huge herds of ungulates, mostly wildebeest with their newborns, and lesser numbers of zebras, dotting the landscape to the horizon. As we moved through the endless open short grass, the animals split around us, providing a wondrous experience, where we tried to look in all directions at once. We made our way to a humongous, solitary, flat-topped *acacia tortillis*. The vehicles slowly circled the trunk, drivers and guides closely inspecting the outreaching branches for a hanging tail. Satisfied there was no sleeping cat or hiding hyenas, we were allowed out to spread our maasai blankets and enjoy a wonderful picnic lunch in the savannah. Satiated, we all lay on our backs, gazed into the

tangle of branches that made up the acacia canopy, and contemplated our little world out in the middle of nowhere, and how this was an experience that few have ever had the extraordinary privilege of experiencing. (We also noticed Spotted Flycatcher, Icterine Warbler and Upcher's Warbler in the acacia branches overhead). We took this opportunity to capture a group photograph – every camera needed to have one, keeping Ben busy for a while.



Finding Yellow-fronted Canary, Fischer's Lovebirds, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Hildebrandt's Starling, Diderick Cuckoo and Yellow-breasted Apalis along the way, we reached Naabi Hill, the gateway to Serengeti National Park, around 3pm. Shortly before the Naabi Hill gate, we stopped to watch 5 lions lounging close to the road. There were 2 males, one appearing rather unhealthy, and 3 females, one wearing a thick leather collar. A group of 4 Spotted Hyenas were not far away, one of them looking very pregnant, though it's hard to confirm, as many of them look heavy-bellied.



Beyond Naabi Hill the short grass plains gives way to the long grass plains, in keeping with the park's name; Serengeti means "endless plains." The open habitat hosts Kori and Black-bellied Bustard, Blacksmith Plover, Ruppell's Long-tailed Starling, Woodland Kingfisher, Black-cheeked Waxbill, Gabar Goshawk, Harrier Hawk and more.

At a concrete bridge over a small pool we stopped to study a variety of species. A few waders, Common Moorhen, Common Sandpiper and Black Crane pecked in the narrow mudflats at the rear of the pond. We saw a Common Snipe on the edges, then another, smaller version. It turned out to be a Jack Snipe, considered a very scarce visitor in Tanzania, with few sightings on record, as the species doesn't occur this far south. My excitement hardly contained, I took photos to verify the record.



Continuing through the Serengeti we found pairs of Dik-dik (*right*), Meyer's Parrot, Purple Grenadier and Bare-faced Go-away Birds along the riverine thickets, and Fischer's Lovebird, Steel-blue Wydah, Topi's, Coke's Hartebeest and a Black-backed Jackal in the grasslands. The wildebeest herds, numbering in the thousands, continued to be impressive stretching across a large swathe of the landscape.

With an impressive storm darkened the skies sooner than expected we headed to the picturesque Serengeti Serena Lodge, located in the center of the park. Situated at 4800 ft elevation (1480 metres), it provides amazing views of the surrounding savannah from our room balconies and common areas. Here we enjoyed our sumptuous dinner buffet, and completing the day's checklist with cold drinks in hand.



Day 10 / Mar 18 Serengeti NP

We followed a leisurely pace this morning, exploring various parts of the vast Serengeti ecosystem. We enjoyed our first looks at Golden-breasted Bunting, along with Bare-faced Go-away birds, Magpie Shrikes, ubiquitous Rattling Cisticola, Usambiro Barbet, Grey-breasted Spurfowl, Black-lored Babbler, Ruppell's Starling, Steel-blue and Straw-tailed Wydah, Grey-backed Shrike, Black Coucal, African Paradise Flycatcher, Grey-capped Social Weaver, Flappet Lark, and White-bellied Bustard. Wire-tailed Swallow was one of 4 swallow species seen. Two large Monitor Lizards were lounging near a small wetland.

By mid morning we were visiting the extraordinary Retima Pool, aka "Hippo Pool," where about two hundred hippos congregated in a cacophony of sound and smell. Snorting, grunting, rolling and splashing, these giant mammals spend most of the daytime hours submerged in water. In this concentrated pool they were unconcerned about wallowing in their own dung. Two Nile Crocodiles basked motionless on the far shore, as a giraffe stalked closer to the pool.



Yellow-billed Oxpeckers flew over and Rufous Chatterers moved around the car park bushes.

Abraham got word over the radio that a Leopard was spotted near the Seronera River, below the headquarters. "It's far. Do you want to go for it?" With quick consensus, we left the hippos and started on the journey south. We were diverted briefly by a herd of elephants foraging on the road, giving close-up photos. We passed Defassa Waterbucks and Bohor Reedbucks along



the watercourse. Finally we arrived at the location and were thrilled to see the Leopard in the tree, it's limbs draped over the branches in typical lounging pose. This elusive predator, one of Africa's famous "Big 5" is the most numerous of all the cats, but the hardest to see. A nocturnal hunter, it hides in trees and thickets by day, making it very difficult to find. Word spread quickly, and there were over a dozen vehicles around us when we finally pulled ourselves

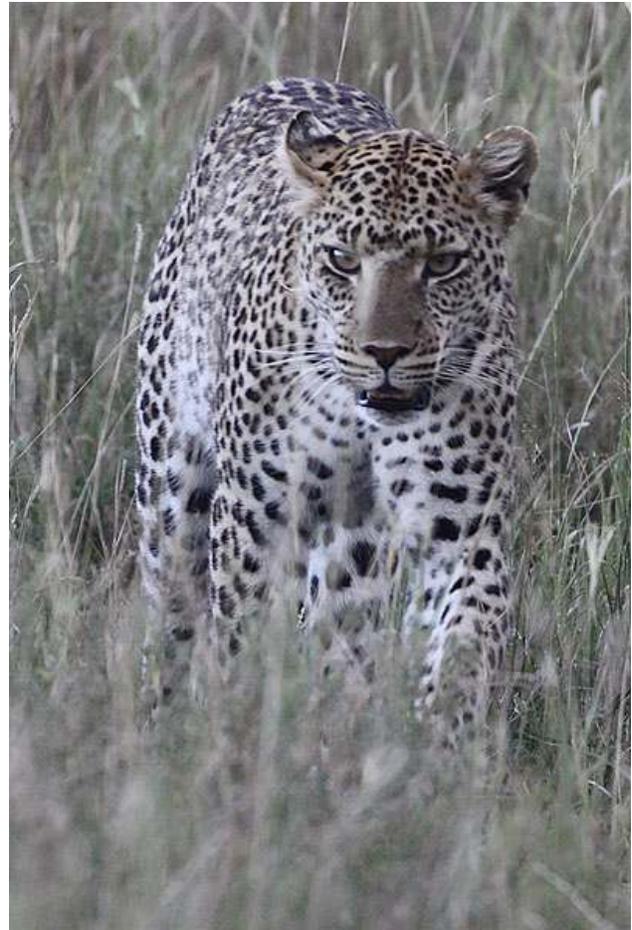
away from this amazing animal. While leaving the area, a majestic African Fish Eagle carrying a giant stick in it's claws circled overhead several times before landing at a nest where it's mate was waiting. We also marveled at about 50 Lesser Kestrels overhead, and a Montagu Harrier hawking grasshoppers. It was a good morning for raptors.

Back at the lodge for lunch, we were delighted that Donna was feeling well enough to join us for the afternoon game drive. We hoped she, too, would get to see the Leopard. Starting out again, we glimpsed a Wildcat on the road, and saw Spotted Flycatcher, Familiar Chat and White-

headed Vulture. A herd of elephants took their time crossing the road ahead, giving us close-up photos of these unforgettable animals; the matriarch kept a watchful eye on a very small one, maybe only a few weeks old. A band of Vervet Monkeys of all ages played around a branch pile close to the road.

We re-located the Leopard very close to the morning location, but this time he was strolling down the road and spraying trees, marking his territory. Our eyes never left him as he traversed the road, paused for a drink in a puddle, then melted slowly in the thicket. An amazing experience!

At dusk a few people saw a family of Spotted Eagle Owls leave the woods and fly up to the buildings. Brooks and Tropical House Gecko peered at us during our dinner hour, the perfect ending to another wonderful day in Africa.



Day 11 / Mar 19 Serengeti NP; Olduvai Maasai Village; Lake Manyara NP

We awoke to the pre-dawn sound of European Nightjars churring in the distant woods. During breakfast we watched a Yellow-winged Bat flying into roost in one of the garden acacias. A Red-fronted Tinkerbird was seen as we headed back to our rooms to pack. Sadly we had to leave the very special Serengeti.

Leaving the park we passed a party of Banded Mongoose, including several very young ones, all sitting up in curiosity as we slowed to watch them, unflinching at a fly-by Eastern Pale Chanting Goshawk. We stopped at the Serengeti Interpretive Center on the way out, stretching our short time allotment into a well-spent hour absorbing the beautiful sculptures, informative signage, interesting photographs and ample bird activity on the grounds - Marico Sunbird, Spotted Flycatcher, African Flycatcher, Meyer's Parrots. It was interesting to learn that African animal populations were already declining steeply by the late 1800's, due to over-hunting, rampant ivory trade, and habitat degradation. We were happy to see that wildlife conservation was the strongest message in the center.



Rock Hyraxes scampered among the rocks at the Center, and also basked on the nearby kopjes, granite rock outcroppings. Rock Martin, Lesser-striped and Red-rumped Swallows flew around the kopjes. By mid morning we had our last looks at herds of Wildebeest migrating across the Serengeti plains, also seeing Grey Kestrel, Kori Bustard, Yellow-throated Longclaw and Spotted Hyenas before reaching the gate at Naaibi Hill.

Our stop to a Maasai Village provided a most fascinating glimpse of local culture. We watched the village men give us their “welcome dance” involving chanting and jumping in line formation. The women added a jumping dance, inviting Edie, Paula and Barb to join them. We split into small groups to tour the inside of their tiny homes, where we had to duck to enter. Inside the dark mud huts we saw wooden pallet beds, plastic jerry cans for water, large simmering pots of maize-porridge, and ceilings blackened by ceaseless smoke. We learned that men can marry up to 10 wives, and the women manage the home in which their husband spends alternating evenings. Children ages 4-6 go to school for a few years to learn numbers, counting, Swahili and English. Most of them leave to tend goats and cattle, though the village may send one or two exceptional children off to school each year in a far-away city. The community of about 100 people had 24 houses and kept about 160 cattle inside the boma – a circle of thorny shrubs meant to enclose the animals and keep out predators.



Continuing east, we stopped for lunch at Ngorongoro Serena lodge overlooking the crater, adding a few more memories of this spectacular area. After a brief restroom break at a roadside T-shirt shop, where we saw nesting Purple Grenadier and Brimstone Canary, we reached the Manyara Serena at 3:45 pm, with time for a late afternoon game drive in Lake Manyara National Park.



We drove through the woods on a shady dirt road, sighting Syke's Monkeys (*below*), Warthogs and Olive Baboons (*left*). The latter were fearless, even jumping onto our slow-moving vehicles; we pulled our heads inside the pop-tops, to avoid confrontation with temperamental baboons.

Hornbills were numerous, with Crowned, Silvery-cheeked, and Grey, along with oversized Southern Ground Hornbills running on the ground. We found Meyer's Parrots, Spotted Morning Thrush, Emerald-spotted Wood Thrush, Icterine Warbler, Northern White-crowned Shrike, European Bee-eater, Amethyst Sunbird and Black-chested Snake Eagle.

At the freshwater hippo pool, we set up scopes to study myriad waders and shorebirds. The wetland habitat attracted Goliath Heron, Yellow-billed Stork, Great White Pelican, a lone Pink-backed Pelican, Sacred Ibis, Hadada Ibis, Ringed Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Reeve,



Common Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Spur-winged Plover, Water Thick-knee, Pied Kingfisher, and Collared Pratincole. A Marsh Mongoose wandered amongst the long-legged storks, and the surrounding shrubs held White-browed Coucal and Eurasian Roller (*left*).

Back at the lodge, the evening ended with a Greater Galago in front of our room at dusk, yelping distinctively.

Day 12 / Mar 20 Lake Manyara NP



On our morning game drive in the park, we enjoyed a variety of species, many of which we were already familiar by this time in our trip. We spotted Silvery-cheeked Hornbills (*left*), Violet-backed Starling, Red-winged Starling, Grosbeak Weaver, Lesser Masked Weaver, Black-backed Puffback, Cliff Chat, female Purple Cuckoo-shrike, White-headed Barbet, Yellow-spotted Petronia, Village Indigo, Red-faced Crombec, Ashy Flycatcher and a Martial Eagle high overhead.

A few people glimpsed a Four-toed Elephant Shrew moving in the shadows of a fallen log, though we got fine looks at Black Bishop, Purple Grenedair, and Red-cheeked Cordonblue in the same shrubs. At the picnic area, large flat-topped acacias provided shade from the

hot sun for Slate-coloured Boubou, Green-winged Pytilia and Spotted Morning Thrush. From here we chased our first *Irania* as it flew from bush to bush. Admiring a giant termite mound, we caught sight of an African Crowned Eagle soaring high overhead. Natal Pansy and White-banded Charaxes flitted in the sunshine. We were lucky to find several Kenyan Crested Guineafowl (*right*) feeding slowly along the forest floor.



We returned to the lodge for a late lunch and relaxed for the remainder of the afternoon in preparation of our night game drive. Some of us were allured into the lovely lodge pool, situated at the edge of the escarpment so it seemed the water flowed right over the edge. Swimmers were treated to eye-level views of the vast sky over the Rift Valley.

Others birded the grounds, finding Yellow-bellied Greenbul (*left*), White-browed Robin Chat, Spotted Morning Thrush, Mocking Cliff Chat, Black-headed Oriole, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Upcher's Warbler, Red-winged Starling and Black-backed Puffback.



Savoring our final dinner all together as a group, we eagerly anticipated our Night Game Drive in Manyara. We departed at 7:45pm to spend over 3 hours in the park, traveling many of the same roads we'd explored this afternoon. It is difficult to describe the amazing perspective of driving through the African forest in total darkness, with only a flashlight and the stars to illuminate the surroundings. Our ears quickly attuned to the sounds of the night. Each of the two vehicles took

different tracks through the park, yielding different sightings. Our vehicle had 3 White-tailed Mongoose, Genet cat, a White-bellied Hedgehog (*above left*) sitting in the middle of the road and excellent views of both Lesser and Greater Galago (bushbabies). There was a steady stream of nightjars as we entered the open short grasslands, all of them Square-tailed Nightjars (*right*). Ben's vehicle managed to find a Dusky and Slender-tailed amongst their nightjars, and a small African Scops Owl wide awake on his evening perch. In addition, they saw 4 Crested Porcupines, a Black-backed Jackal and a pair of lionesses on a fresh wildebeest kill, with hyenas howling in approach all around. Nocturnal hippos walked on dry land, feeding on grasses. The Night Game Drive was a major safari highlight for all.



Day 13 / Mar 21 drive to Arusha - Kilimanjaro airport

Following our late night, we enjoyed a leisurely morning stroll around the gardens and pool area before breakfast, finding Holub's Golden Weaver, Bronzed Mannikin, Yellow Bishop, Bronzed Sunbird (*right*) and Swahali Sparrow. As our bags were loaded into the vehicles, we spent our last minutes at the Manyara Serena Lodge watching a Black-headed Weaver expertly weaving the first strands of his nest above the reception area.

We drove down the Rift Valley escarpment and into the plains through the city of Arusha. By late morning we were relaxing with cold drinks on the



open lawn of the Serena Mountain Village, a colonial style lodge, landscaped with a profusion of flowers, and distant views of a large lake. Collared Sunbirds flitted about the flowers as Red-headed Weaver, Black-backed Puffback, Spot-flanked and Brown-breasted Barbets could be seen in the canopy of the trees below us. Taveta Golden Weavers were moving through the bushes on the edge of the gardens. Epaulette Fruit Bats were roosting in the palms by the main door and a Golden-banded Forester (*top right*) darted in and out of the shade along one of the paths. We took lunch in the formal dining room, then returned to the car park to find a pair of African Wood Owls roosting in the tree just a few feet from our vehicles.



We drove to the Kilimanjaro airport, thanked our very capable drivers, then took the short flight to Nairobi. From there, we said our goodbyes to Donna, Paula, Howard, Janet and Wylie, who were ending their East African safari adventure. Our two-week safari in Kenya and Tanzania was an incredible experience, finding 525 bird species, over 70 mammals, numerous butterflies, reptiles and plants, and countless memories to last a lifetime.

Debbie, Edie, Barb and Peter continued on with Ben and I, flying to Mombassa later than evening to begin our week-long Coastal Kenyan extension, adding many wonderful new experiences and memories.

