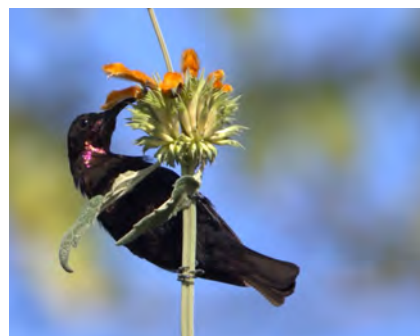


Tanzania: Wildlife & Birding Safari

Feb. 11 – 25, 2025 | Trip Report by Peg Abbott



Guide Washington Wachira and drivers Peter and Amin of Cisticola Birding, with guide Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys and participants: Dick, Jenny, Cathy, Ted, Tamara, Amy, Larry, Lisa, Karen, and Andrew



Early Arrivals to Arusha

Many of our group arrived early to rest up from long flights and found the well-shaded Ngare Sero Mountain Lodge to be a great, welcoming place to do that. Once a private farm, the property has photos hung displaying its history and one can imagine the life of pioneers drawn to this region for its fertile soil and idyllic climate. With a view of Mt. Kilimanjaro in one direction and Mt. Meru in another, we enjoyed meeting each other and



moved together around the main house while having meals, tea or coffee, or cocktails on different patios. Hadada Ibis, Sacred Ibis, and African Fish Eagle flew by; at night roosting on the pond below the main house.

The property's legacy of self-sufficiency continues today with gardens and an active hydroelectric power system. The pond behind the dam creates great habitat for birds, and complimentary with our stay was being able to go out in small boats, eye to eye with Least Grebe, Taveta Golden Weaver, and Grosbeak Weaver - all three species on nests at this time of year. We walked freely around the property and were never long out of view of two species of monkeys: the striking black-and-white Mantled Guereza and the local subspecies of Sykes' Monkey. It was fun to watch the troops and all their antics. The Mantled Guereza were especially vocal early each morning, providing our wake-up calls.

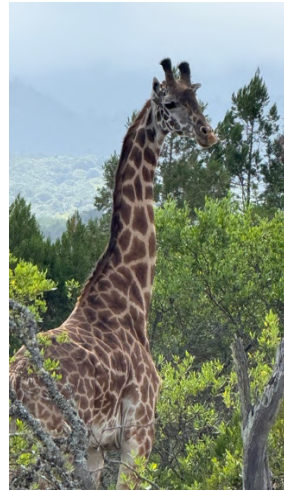
Several took advantage of having Michael, a local guide from Cisticola Birding, available to hire for extra birding ahead of the trip. On two different days he took small groups to nearby Lake Duluti, a small park with a three-mile trail around this scenic lake. We also did an outing to the Cultural Heritage Center - a retail outlet that is functionally a museum with outstanding exhibits of antique crafts from furniture to masks, carvings and metal work. The artwork included intricate beaded works, fabrics, sculptures and paintings. The facility has a multi-story art gallery full of work from over 1000 artists. They also supply tanzanite to many retailers and we were able to see some exquisite examples of Tanzania's famous gemstone.

It was nice to share leisurely meals, visit with each other and move at a slower pace ahead of our journey. Dinner on the 10th was delicious - a mix of dishes including mango and grape salad, beets with feta, fresh garden broccoli, local rice, homemade bread, perfectly prepared Nile Perch, Ratatouille, and red lentils. They had a nice sauce of pureed ginger and garlic and another of chilis. We wanted to be rested up to start our grand safari!

Tues., Feb. 11: Arrival in Arusha | Ngare Sero Mountain Lodge

By today our flock was complete, and in the afternoon, Washington Wachira, our main guide for the trip, led a bird walk around the pond and a bit down the stream that runs over the dam that provides electric power. Giant Kingfisher was fun to see and Eurasian Moorhens were vocal and active, defending their nests. We saw many butterflies as it was a sun-bright day, including Natal Pansy, Citrus Swallowtail, African Blue Tiger and African Sailer. We discovered that, for most of the group, this was a first time to Africa - ensuring that each day would be particularly exciting as so much would be new.

The lodge staff was so welcoming and gracious, and set up our dinner on an outside patio within view of the area's numerous birds that were returning there to roost. We were delighted when a noisy family of Silvery-cheeked Hornbills came in and perched in our view. We had had dinner the previous night in one of the historic



family dining rooms, so eating outside was a change and fun - all a part of hospitality here. Dinner was beef tips, an eggplant dish, several salads and other veggies, homemade bread and a dark chocolate cake, yum! We'd had a full day so we did not linger long, returning to our cozy rooms to rest. A repetitive call we heard each night turned out to be not an owl, but a bat!

Wed., Feb. 12: Arusha National Park

We had an absolutely incredible first day, departing after breakfast, served in view of the pond, to explore Arusha NP. Our plan for the day was to focus our efforts here mainly on the forest birds and mammals, as those of the Momela Lakes we'd see again in Ndutu and other parks.

While Peter did the paperwork at the gate, Peg and Washington pointed out some of the geological features of the almost 15,000 ft. tall Mt. Meru, which was so impressive against puffy white clouds in a cobalt blue sky. We could see the main high peak with its rigid back wall framing a younger ash cone; the rim closest to us having blown out only 6000 years ago. This and Kilimanjaro are relatively young volcanoes, both resulting from the activity of shifting plates astride the eastern arm of the Great Rift Valley. This area is now a globally recognized Geo Park due to its fine example of a stratovolcano.

We enjoyed a walk and stretch at the visitor welcome center, then headed out in our safari vehicles with the rooftops popped open so we could stand up when we stopped for sightings. The sightings came fast and furiously, and we were soon introduced to barbets, sunbirds, tchagras and our first of the African woodpeckers, when a small female Cardinal Woodpecker flew in as we were gazing at the snow-capped Kilimanjaro. We drove out to an area called Little Serengeti, where we saw our first mammals including zebras, warthogs, and African buffalos. They looked well fed after recent abundant rains, and many were simply lounging in the sun. Four stately giraffes were grazing at the back of our view.

We continued up into the forest and were able to get out at a small museum and rest stop at a park road junction. We discovered an African Goshawk, which flew low past us and then pulled up into a tree where we got great views and photos. Five Kenrick's Starlings were fussing with each other over a nest hole, while a pair of White-eared Barbets fed their young in a nearby hole. We were fortunate as we continued to get good views of several Hartlaub's Turacos, and, with patience, a Bar-tailed Trogon that perched near to the road, although a bit obscured by branches. We were admiring it and looking for where it flew off too when Washington radioed with some urgency for us to catch up to them. He had located a Crowned Eagle, with a very full crop, perched in a massive tree out in the open. We all had fine views! Washington had done his Master's degree on this species and later shared with us how they are monkey specialists and very intelligent - a characteristic needed to



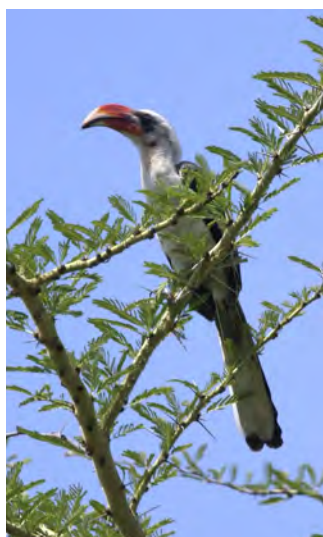
specialize on intelligent prey. He compared them to the Harpy Eagle of the new world. We were thrilled for this good of a look.

We arrived at the Ngurdoto Crater overlook where we could get out and continue our “raptor roll,” when a second large, masterful raptor flew overhead - a Martial Eagle! An African Hawk Eagle was also working the area - wow! In a nearby fruiting tree, we watched a host of smaller species such as Olive-headed Greenbul, Kilimanjaro White-eye, Black-headed Apalis and a Gray-headed Negrita. A troop of Mantled Guerezas were moving through tall trees, the most beautiful tree being a huge Winterthorn (*Faidherbia albida*) tree. We watched them leap across openings and land with their fancy black and white pelage gleaming. Someone said they looked like skunks up in the tree. Down in the crater we saw African buffalos, bushbucks and warthogs.

From here we made our way to the ranger station at Momella Gate. A few of our group wanted to head back, which we could easily accommodate as we had two vehicles. So, five left and six stayed to do a walk with a ranger in an open meadow area. Here, a mowed path led to a scenic waterfall, and we went at a naturalist’s pace learning from Rocky, the ranger assigned to guide our group, about some of the medicinal plants. As we crossed a small stream, Tamara gasped and exclaimed, “it’s not a statue!” At the park entrance we had taken photographs next to an elephant statue, but here, only about thirty feet from her, was a massive male Masai Giraffe. It moved with such grace and elegance. Washington whispered, “Just stay still,” and it looked intently at us as it walked right by, then veered off across a brushy slope. It settled down to eat and we were able to watch it closely, even its very long tongue. It fed on small acacia leaves, bending and raising its head. We learned that giraffes have glorious eye lashes and someone commented that no mascara was needed for them! We found other giraffes as we walked, including two females with a nursery group of several young ones, and on them observed Red-billed Oxpeckers doing their job of preening off insects from the rough coats and manes. What a treat!

The whole walk felt idyllic. Bright sun, puffy clouds, lots of bee-eaters, colorful Golden-breasted Buntings and other birds, all feeding and healthy in such lush conditions. African Buffalos lounged in the meadow, and warthogs fed with gusto on a little steam, some down on their knees to really get after the roots. We found Three-banded Plovers and seven species of swifts and swallows. We enjoyed natural air conditioning with a breeze and shade at Tululusia Waterfall, then later under a massive Strangler Fig. Peter had moved the car to pick us up a bit closer, and other than Lisa’s run-in with some biting ants (ouch!), it was a most peaceful adventure.

We returned before sunset, some enjoying a cold drink or tea on the patio, others a refreshing shower. Dinner was once more a treat with roasted pork loin, and several other dishes, a lemon pound cake for dessert.



Thurs., Feb. 13: Ngare Sero | Ngorongoro Crater Rim

We had a lovely breakfast outside at the lodge, watching egrets fly overhead as they left the roost to feed. A giant kingfisher rattled and the chirping of an African Fish-Eagle was strong as we started our day.

We packed up the safari vehicle, an art, and several of us stored a small bag at the lodge for items we did not need, lightening the load as we headed to Ngorongoro Crater, one of the scenic and wildlife wonders of the world. We drove through the city, watching markets and traffic and the vibrancy of life go by. Outside the city, there were farms, and then the land got increasingly more arid, and we found only Masai herders with sheep and cattle. The transition was harder to see this year as they had had so much rain that the arid land with flowing grass were a verdant green. Peg has come many times and never seen it like this. We did enjoy some roadside birding, including quick looks at Africa's iconic Lilac-breasted Roller.

We went into a private lodge on the rim of the Great Rift Valley for an extravagant lunch with lots of great choices. We really liked the mango onion salad, and tried bitter tomato, homemade pesto hummus, and pickled ginger, ahead of our entrees. The view was just incredible and, as we gathered to leave, a pair of Von der Decken's Hornbills entertained us.

We had a break before heading back to our lodge, so we enjoyed views from the rim of the 12-mile-wide Ngorongoro Crater. This World Heritage Site is spectacular to view from above and below. We got the scopes out and found our first elephants and Black Rhinos - tiny, but distinct, specks below. There were hundreds of zebras and antelopes, and we saw big pink areas in the lakes that were actually a mass of flamingos. We would go down in the crater in the morning and this was certainly a gorgeous preview. We also had fun posing for photos, still scratching our heads that we were really in Africa, on the rim of a place we've all dreamed of seeing for years.

Back at the lodge, we had a bit of free time to take in the view of the crater from our rooms before dinner. A few of us came down to share cocktails and watch a gymnastic group of local Masais - incredible athletes and very entertaining. Sunset over the crater was memorable - almost a light show as shadows grew from rim to rim. Dinner in the lodge's huge dining room was a buffet beyond measure - just about anything you hoped to eat was there!



Fri., Feb. 14: Incredible Day in Ngorongoro Crater

It was remarkable to wake up to a view of Ngorongoro Crater either from bed or the patio of our spectacular hillside hotel that was built with native rock to blend into the landscape. The scale of this landscape felt overpowering and, accompanied by vibrant dawn birdsong, it was particularly inspiring. This morning, there were orange and pink tones to the eastern sky as we headed down to breakfast. Our diligence in getting out early paid off as we were about the fourth car at the entry gate and down into the crater we went to witness this famed wonderland of wildlife.

Descending the one-way crater road was an adventure in and of itself - winding and steep. It took us down through several forest types as we dropped almost 1500 feet to the crater floor. Here, thick forest opened up to more open woodland and finally to wetlands and grasslands, and all these varied habitats are literally teeming with wildlife. Our first big mammal was a massive African Elephant; twisting, pulling and chewing grass, shaking the dust off, and munching, right before our eyes. Everything about elephants is big - they can eat over 300 pounds of vegetation in a day. We drove further, encountering a huge herd of wildebeests in which it seemed that every female had very young calves. The adults grazed on the move with the babies trying to keep up with them. They would run in short bursts, and then plop down to rest, only to get up again when mom got too far away. Mixed in with them were zebras, including many mothers with their young. It was a total delight to have time to watch them, observe their behavior, and look for the unique striping patterns on their faces.

At a road junction, we saw a line of African Buffalos coming down the slope, passing through a small woodland, and making its way to water. Then, we realized that, in this same woodland, there were at least two large female lions! We could see one was very alert and obviously aware of this favored prey. Whether they deemed it too risky or just were not hungry, the lions watched intently, but never gave chase. It was fascinating to watch the drama, which intensified when the elephant bull that we had just seen chose to walk right to where one of the lions rested. She got up and slid away.

Our next exciting find was a serval; a small, long-legged cat, often not easy to find. We watched it move across an open area and got excellent views, even though it was far away. We then watched warthogs digging in the mud and had a lot of fun watching a young zebra encounter a Savanna Hare. The hare was still with its ears pinned back, trying to look like a rock, but the zebra, having nothing of it, finally let curiosity get the best of it. As the zebra approached close enough, the hare took off, with the zebra in close pursuit, and they were like two kids playing tag.



Keeping track throughout the day, we saw over 100 bird species, many associated with the lake that fills part of the crater floor. There were thousands of flamingos, lesser and greater mixed together, and close enough that we could compare and sort them out. With them were Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocets, and strikingly-colored Yellow-billed Storks. We watched an African Spoonbill spooning, moving its head side to side, feeding on invertebrates deep in the mud.

Africa has a lot of large birds and we admired beautiful and stately Grey Crowned- Cranes, many Abdim's Storks, several massive Kori Bustards, and a couple of striding Secretarybirds. We found a tiny, newborn Thomson's Gazelle, still with its umbilical cord hanging, with its mother licking its rump. It was still wobbly as it stood to nurse, and it went over and investigated a Grant's Gazelle, which promptly turned it around and pushed it toward its mother.

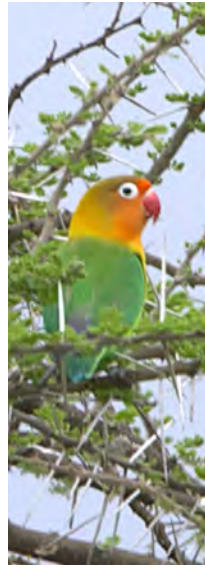
The landscape was of such a grand scale, and after all the recent rains of this particular year, it presented a mosaic of many shades of green. What a wonderful day; to submerge ourselves in this World Heritage Site and make the most of it. We had a picnic lunch, covered most of the roads available to us, and arrived back at the hotel in time for showers and to watch the sunset ahead of a special dinner they'd made for us for Valentine's Day.

Sat., Feb. 15: To Ndutu | A Special Region of the Serengeti Ecosystem

We had breakfast with our last view of the crater, then started a travel day into the fabled Serengeti! We took a back road so that in time we'd make a loop. It was through more settled lands of the Masai at first and, between their bomas, we found some spectacular birds: Jackson's and Red-collared Widowbirds, up in the air doing display flights.

We saw so much wildlife all along the way and plenty of bird sightings. A tower of giraffes was impressive as we got to see them canter against the beautiful landscape. Before the junction to Olduvai Gorge, we picked up a commotion of birds and knew something was up – it was a snake in a tree and they were mobbing it! This was one of the most memorable moments of our trip. The two vehicles lined up to get best views for photos and all the drama. So many birds came in to mob the Boomslang Snake, including three species of sunbirds (Scarlet-chested, Bronze and Variable) and Brown-crowned Tchagra.

Along the way, we had a picnic lunch while parked under the shade of a huge tree - one of several positioned around the lush grassland. We were surrounded by wildlife - birds in the trees and wildebeest on the move. On



the way to the Gnu Tented Camp in Ndutu, we observed 72 species of birds in between admiring mammals. Almost immediately, we came upon something seldom seen here; a couple of Egyptian Vultures - an immature and a full adult. Our guides were thoroughly intrigued and we watched the birds fly with admiration. Helmeted Guineafowl, Coqui Francolin, Gray-breasted Spurfowl, and both White-bellied and Black-bellied Bustards, all roamed the grasslands. Huge Lappet-faced Vulture, Rüppell's Griffon, Bateleur, and both Tawny and Steppe Eagles, graced the skies. We found our first Eurasian Hoopoe (African), and it and the European Bee-eaters vied with Lilac-breasted Rollers for the most-colorful award. We found Fischer's Lovebird, Taita Fiscal, Red-throated Tit, and Rufous Chatterer. The air rang with the songs of Rufous-naped Lark. Northern Anteater-Chat and a variety of wheatears decorated the plains. With all the rains, birds that can be dull were draped with seasonal plumage of long showy tails and we delighted in watching both Pin-tailed and Steel-blue Whydahs.

The friendly staff of Gnu Migration Tented Camp, and, much to Peg's delight, the excellent chef from past years' visits, were waiting to greet us and escort us to our tents. The menu board gave us a sneak preview of every meal: today, Cream of Leek soup, cabbage salad, and choices of chicken or fish along with mashed sweet potatoes, cooked carrots and a pineapple dessert. Our tents were spacious with comfortable beds covered in African-patterned pillows and spreads, racks for hanging clothes, ample solar lights and bathrooms. We quickly settled in, went for cocktails around a fire, and then dinner. We took time to tally up our growing wildlife and bird checklist. This had been an amazing day!

Sun., Feb. 16: Lions, Cheetahs, Vultures, Eagles and More!

We woke to the sounds of two male lions roaring not far from camp, the hoots of Hyena, and a wonderful chorus of birds. The staff was ready for us with hot breakfast and at the end of our breakfast, we looked up and waved at three hot air balloons passing just over the trees of our camp. They had come over us from the launch site to wave at the family of some of the passengers. This was a great preview for a few of our group who would do a balloon ride later in the week.

We were off in search of predators this morning. While fairly focused on that task, we still paused when Tamara found a Leopard Tortoise, and then a chance to observe a Dark Chanting-Goshawk, and several Great Spotted Cuckoos - a migratory species that winters here.

The first predator find was a group of male lions; three brothers still with pink in their noses, suggesting they were not yet seven years of age. They had pulled up into some thick vegetation and were enjoying the shade.



We watched them groom and stretch. Two nuzzled each other and the third did a very thorough self-cleaning. Then, to our surprise, it got up and scratched on the tree like a cat would scratch on a pole. It then reached over to pull down a stick which it shredded with its teeth as if going for a toothbrush. Watching all this was mesmerizing and we commented that it was amazing that anything so cute could actually kill you in a few seconds. Just the power and the size of their paws impressed us at such close observation. We continued to drive and found another group of lions; this one with two young males, some females, and a “teenager”; probably two or three years old. They also were lounging, but we had to stay to snap some irresistible family portraits.

We kept seeing birds of prey and vultures, including at least seven different Tawny Eagles, ranging in plumage from very pale to very dark. We then came upon a kill that we could barely see because it had such a pile of vultures going after it. Obviously, the predator that killed it had its fill and walked away and now the remains were loaded with Hooded Vulture, Big Lappet-faced Vulture, and our two look-alikes - White-backed Vulture and Rüppell’s Griffon. This up-close observation helped us see the differences between those latter two, which aided in sorting for our eBird records. Marabou Storks stood around, looking massive and foreboding.

Moving our eyes away from the massive pile of vultures, we could see across the horizon that the landscape was literally moving with wildebeests (tens of thousands!) as far as our eyes could see - with some scattered zebras and gazelles amongst them. When we got closer, we could hear their snorting and bleating and we watched the tiny calves trying to keep up with the females that were set in perpetual motion. Rather than a purposeful migration, wildebeests move with the growth of grasses, covering many hundreds of miles in a year. The herds are never more concentrated than they are at this time of year in the Ndutu’s short grass plains, where females seek out the nutrient-rich grasses that grow here on fine volcanic soils. It was quite something to take it all in. As we marveled at the numbers and the consistency of motion, Amy said from the back of the Land Rover, “It’s just mesmerizing.”

We had chosen a back-country route and we faced a fairly tricky water crossing. We passed an ample water hole with zebras crowding into drink; the dazzle of their stripes in the water’s reflections was beautiful. They were pouring in and we enjoyed watching their antics with each other - headbutting and an occasional kick - and grooming, all while keeping their feet in motion.

On the horizon, we could see a big jam up of vehicles and, while we don’t particularly like these or go towards them on a typical day, the word was out they saw Cheetahs and we really wanted to see this species, so we



drove in. Thankfully, the crowd was well behaved and fairly quiet and the Cheetahs were remarkably tolerant and oblivious. There were three - a female with two almost full-size grown cubs -lounging in the shade. There wasn't enough shade for all three of them, so they kept getting up and jockeying for a better spot. We were close enough to see the incredible beauty of their spotted patterns and striped tails, and the beautiful black lines that form the signature on their faces.

In addition to the cats, today we also found a den of hyenas with a very full-bellied female with swollen teats - obviously nursing a little one below ground that we couldn't see. We watched their interactions as a group came in and regurgitated food for her. One in particular she didn't seem to like; she displayed her dominance and ran it off while the others seemed more welcome. When they took off, likely to go get more food for her, she plopped down for nap - joined by a remarkable number of flies that she seemed oblivious to.

The birds were plentiful as well and we found quite a few species: Black-bellied Bustard, Kori Bustard, Secretarybird, Fischer's Lovebird and Fischer's Sparrow-Lark. Vultures seem particularly prolific and a few were almost always in the sky looking for an opportunity to feed.

This very full morning went very quickly and we were soon headed home so we could have lunch under the tree at camp and a bit of time for a rest afterwards. We'd seen so much the last few days that there was a lot to process, but, for many, a nap took precedence. About 3 PM, we went back out with a similar progression of amazing sightings, including another vehicle jam up we endured to be able to have fine views of a Leopard - well worth the effort.

This evening, after another well-crafted dinner, our camp crew danced and sang for us, which was fun. The stars were just incredible, and, as our after-dark staff escorts accompanied us back to our tents (due the presence of lions around), we enjoyed the wonderful view of the night sky.

Mon., Feb. 17: Ndotu - The Place to Be in February! Roaming Far Afield...

Early in the morning, we were inspired by Ted, who brought a good star app, to get up early to have a fine view of the Southern Cross. Seeing this was on several people's wish list for the trip – and it was a success!

Yesterday was a big cat day, with lions, cheetahs and then leopards. So, for our guides, the pressure was off. Peg begged to go farther afield, away from other tourists, so our group could get a better sense for the wild nature of Ndotu without so many fellow admirers. We did so and had a fabulous day - very different than the one before, but complimentary.



We wound our way around Double-banded Coursers and noisy Crowned Lapwings alongside the road, out into very open short-grass plains. At a distance we spotted a family of Bat-eared Foxes and were able to watch them interact and then run away at great speed. We were following them when we veered off for another unusual mammal, a Honey Badger. The day was off to a great start! We could see long lines of elands and wildebeests, and went over to observe them. Ostriches put on a super show - a bit of male and female chasing, some long-legged struts breaking into a run, and lots of feeding, wing flapping and more. White Storks dotted the landscape and we saw one in the talons of a Tawny Eagle - quickly devouring it. We found an Eastern Chanting-Goshawk, quite a number of colorful European Rollers, Pygmy Falcons, Red-capped and Athi Short-toed Larks, Gorgeous Sunbirds (which are truly gorgeous) and an assortment of sparrows, weavers, and pipits.

We returned to the camp for lunch and enjoyed time for showers, for some a nap, and others time to wander and bird on the grounds, which held a lot of species. For something different this afternoon, we went to Lake Ndutu and observed waterbirds, which were so numerous that it kept us busy! There were over a thousand flamingos of both species, Gull-billed and White-winged Terns, Great White Pelicans, and fourteen species of shorebirds (the most notable a Eurasian Curlew spotted by Peter in almost the same place we found it last year!), good numbers of Chestnut-banded Plovers and over 400 elegant Black-winged Stilts.

Tues., Feb. 18: Central Serengeti National Park

We said good-bye to our hosts at the camp and ventured out via Lake Ndutu and Maswik. We got good views of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Dideric Cuckoo, Kittlitz's Plover, Black-headed Heron, an Abyssinian Scimitarbill, Mountain Gray Woodpecker, Silverbird, and Brubru. The route was open woodlands with thorn-scrub trees, so quite a few of the species were close and more visible. Common Ostrich, Secretarybird, and Kori Bustard were all seen out amongst the massive herds of wildebeests, zebras, and elands. It was great to have more time with the mixed herd and watch all the behavior and momentum they carried. We saw Montegu's Harrier and one vehicle got views of the powerful Lanner Falcon - hunter of the myriad of larks and cisticolas we passed.

We returned to the national park's main gate, Naabi Hill, a granite Kopje where we had our picnic lunch and our guides could do their permit paperwork, and those going on the balloon ride could get their briefing. After lunch, Washington called up a Pearl-spotted Owlet and it in turn got mobbed by several species including Red-fronted Barbet, Brubru, Buff-bellied Warbler, Black-lored Babbler, endemic Rufous-tailed Weaver, and noisy White-rumped Shrike.



Leaving the gate, we passed by a small pond where a lion drama was going on. A lioness was dragging a kill, but then dropped it to go after her youngsters in the bush. Likely she would return once it quieted down or cooled down, as the mid-day sun was strong. We passed a number of beautiful rock kopjes (knolls of granite and gneiss) that held huge Sycamore Fig and other trees.

After all the many late and strong rains, the grasses were as high as the roof of our vehicle in spots! We were glad we had seen so many short-grass species and cats in Ndutu, for there we'd watched the trees and sky and wetlands. We did stop at a pond to watch Hippos and look for Nile Crocodile. We found Eurasian Moorhen, Black Crane, several lapwings and sandpipers, and quite a number of Black-headed Herons.

Black-winged Kites hovered on the wind and Little Bee-eaters left their perches only to return with moths and bees. We watched colorful D'Arnaud's Barbet (the Usambiro form here) and had good looks at Nubian Woodpecker, then closer to our lodgings, Magpie Shrike and White-headed Buffalo-Weaver, both new for the trip. Peter spotted a just-fledged Verreaux's Eagle-Owl in a tree close to the road and we got cracking views!

After a long travel day, scenic but all on dirt roads, the luxury of Kubu Tented Camp was so welcome! We were greeted and brought out to the long, raised deck for cold drinks and to admire stunning vistas of the Serengeti Plains. Here we could soak in the scale of this vast landscape, watch wildlife, and, for those that wanted to, grab a swim in a wonderful pool. We also all had outdoor showers in addition to those indoors, with the same terrific view!

We all felt that we had arrived and, as this evening was Peg's birthday, it was especially festive and fun.

Wed., Feb. 19: Serengeti Wonders | Optional Balloon Ride | Crack On!

Tamara and Lisa left before sunrise, picked up by the friendly crew of the company that we booked a balloon ride with. While waiting for the lodge escort (lions here as well, evidenced by lots of roaring in the night), Tamara saw a genet right outside her door, wow! They had a wonderful ballooning experience, seeing lots of wildlife from the air, marveling at the trails animals make on the landscape and the groups of various antelopes, elephants and other species. Drifting aloft over the Serengeti was magical... Tamara described the immense sense of quiet up there when the pilot was not triggering the burner. She said it was so quiet when they were passing over a huge herd of Zebra, they could hear them vocalizing. From on high, they could watch giraffes running below, looking tiny but graceful against such an expanse of plain.



The rest of us set out to explore after an early breakfast, but there were so many birds we did not get far. We stopped again and again and by lunch had noted 82 species! Bare-faced Go-away-birds were showy, Klaas's Cuckoo was bright, Blue-naped Mousebirds were new for many, and we found the endemic Tanzanian Red-billed Hornbill. Miombo Wren-Warbler and a pair of Banded Parisomas put on a good show, and we noted Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. Now used to seeing kingfishers away from water, we found two species: Woodland and Striped. We were delighted to find African Paradise-Flycatcher, Flappet Lark, Red-faced Crombec, and we had time to sort out cisticolas and some of the more challenging birds.

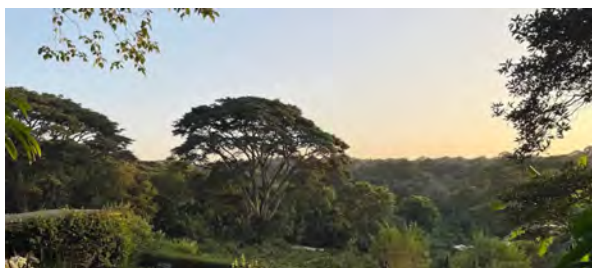
We met back up at the Visitor Center where we found Bush Hyraxes and a number of birds, including Red-capped Weaver, Crimson-rumped Waxbill, Red-billed Firefinch, and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting. We took a walk behind some of the buildings where we got super looks at a big group of Dwarf Mongooses. Driving back to Kubu, we found a herd of Topis (a new antelope for the trip) with several standing up like statues on dirt mounds. We saw many birds including White-winged Widowbirds, Black-winged Bishop, Whinchat, and Village Indigobird.

By now, our whole group had adopted Washington's favorite way to keep us moving by saying "Crack On." The allure of our nice lodge was calling and it was nice to have lunch and time to enjoy our huge rooms, patios, the pool and some downtime. People loved getting back their cleaned laundry and having reliable WIFI to get in touch with loved ones and send off some photos and video. Several took the rest of the afternoon off, with a few intrepid ones venturing back out. In a short drive, less than ten miles, they noted 52 species, and had fun finding Gray-headed Kingfisher, Meyer's Parrot, Slate-colored Boubou, Croaking Cisticola, Eastern Paradise-Whydah parading their long full tails, Pangani Longclaw singing from close-up perches, and one of the prettiest of the small birds, the Cardinal Quelea. Those staying back had the treat of seeing a herd of 50+ impala move through the grasslands, from the pool!

We admired the stars this evening and caught up on our species list after a good dinner and conversation with our most compatible group. We remarked that we had had such fun together and had seen so much! If we had to go home, we'd be satiated, but we had more good stops ahead.

Thurs., Feb. 20: Olduvai Gorge | Gibb's Farm

We enjoyed breakfast at the lodge, and made sandwiches to take on our journey to complete the loop drive we started from Ngorongoro Crater days ago. It is very hard to say good-bye to this lovely place!



We did not rush, enjoying a morning game drive as we worked our way to the national park entrance gate, departing Serengeti after a stop for coffee and shopping at the gate for books and maps we wanted. Our next stop was a fascinating one - time for a visit to the world-famous Olduvai Gorge.

The terrain around the gorge is arid, but the impressive view from the Visitor Center area gives one a sense of looking over ancient time. Here we were, standing on such an important site for our understanding of humankind! We had our picnic lunch in the shade, joined by a few colorful weaver birds. We then met a very good interpreter that gave us an overview of the various geologic layers that we could see and clues that the found fossils opened up about the evolution of humankind to paleoanthropologists Louis and Mary Leakey and other observers. We checked out exhibits at the museum, but as it was hot and getting on in time, we did not drive down into the gorge for that unique perspective. We did see some nice birds while there, and on the drive out, including Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove, a very close Tawny Eagle right next to the road, Northern Red-fronted Tinkerbird, Capped Wheatear, Purple Grenadier, and White-bellied Canary.

In the days when the Leakey's would venture overland from Arusha to their Olduvai study site, it was a multi-day journey and one of the places they loved to refuel and enjoy the social company of friends was at Gibbs Farm. This lush oasis, set on some of the richest soils in Tanzania on the shoulder of Ngorongoro Crater, was a welcome site for hospitality for travelers and it remains so today. We were eager to get there, settle in, and enjoy the gardens and grounds. They also have a lovely happy hour tradition out by the pool which we enjoyed as well. The first night, a young woman sang solo tunes with a guitar; her lovely voice relaxing us after a full travel day.

Dinner was our first meal of many there and we marveled at the menu. It was so hard to choose! All food at Gibbs Farm features locally grown foods with fresh produce and the presentation is lovely! The aroma of fresh-baked breads wafted through the dining room and no one could pass up the desserts!

Fri., Feb. 21: Gibbs Farm | Lake Manyara National Park in Tanzania's Rift Valley

Bird song was so loud and our casitas were spread out under lush forest trees, so several of us were inspired to join the optional pre-breakfast walk at Gibbs Farm. We met at the garden, birding between beds of flowers and herbs, a riot of color not lost on the Bronze Sunbirds and Southern Citrils. Around us, numerous Red-throated Crag-Martins and Africans Palm Swifts danced in the sky. We walked out into the coffee farm, gazing past



shrubs loaded with coffee berries, to find Green-backed Honeybird, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Chinspot Batis, and other species. Grosbeak Weavers were making nests in a small pond on the grounds and we got good views of White-browed Robin-Chat near the buildings.

Breakfast was a work of art with tables full of fresh vegetables, fruits, cheeses, and homemade muffins and scones. On top of that, we could order full breakfast, including avocado toast, fresh from an enormous tree at the entrance, laden with fruit.

After this feast, we had some attrition as this place just invites one to relax. But several of us ventured out for a walk. Rewards were many and included African Paradise-Flycatchers, Black-headed Orioles, a flying Crowned Eagle and noisy Arrow-marked Babblers. The forest of Gibbs Farm adjoins with that of Ngorongoro NP and we could hear Schalow's Turaco, likely joining the African Green Pigeons we saw feasting on fig fruits by the dining room.

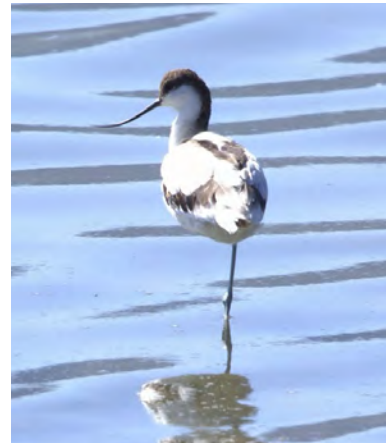
At 2:30 we met to go to Lake Manyara NP, a Rift Valley park made famous by the research of Ian Douglas Hamilton on elephant behavior and family structure. It was hard to pull ourselves away from the farm, nestled under massive trees providing shade and replete with gardens and view. Andrew described Gibbs Farm as a narcotic and we could not fault those that stayed behind...

However, we were in Africa and wildlife and adventure was calling! Our afternoon visit to Lake Manyara was fruitful, with 56 species of birds seen, loads of baboons, two herds of Impala, several big bull elephants and one elephant female with calf. We got good looks at Silvery-cheeked and Crowned Hornbills, had a curious flock of Rufous Chatterers at almost arm length, and saw four species of cuckoos and two species of woodpeckers. The lush vegetation of this park, with views of the Rift Valley wall cloaked with Baobab and other huge trees, was memorable.

We returned for sunset happy hour and another elegant dinner.

Sat., Feb. 22: Lake Burunge, a Rift Valley Lake | Tented Camp

We enjoyed a last full breakfast at Gibb's Farm and a bit of time to wander in the gardens, snap some photos of the view and the beauty of this place that so well blends the mix of art, architecture and nature. It was getting to the time in the trip that people were a bit itchy to pick up some treasures to bring home as gifts or mementos



and Peter knew of a craft store that had excellent wood carvings. He also took us to a shop in the village that specialized in Masai beadwork and textiles.

With our retail therapy accomplished in good time, we headed on, passing around the bottom of Lake Manyara where we saw a lot of fish hanging on racks to dry. Our next lodge was on another alkaline rift valley lake, Lake Burunge, and we turned south from the main road to reach its western shore. We stopped to see birds along the way, including some new for the trip such as Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and Malachite Kingfisher - two gems. We arrived in time to meet the camp staff and have lunch, served on an expansive deck overlooking the lake in the distance and a waterhole visited by elephants and other wildlife in the foreground.

Our tents were very comfortable, spacious and up on platforms that gave us each our own private deck. The area was quite birdy and we had good chances to photograph and study some of the weavers, flycatchers, and the jaunty little Green-backed Camaroptera.

Our outing was down to the lakeshore where we saw lion tracks, huge numbers of flamingoes in the distance, a bevy of 9 Double-banded Coursers, and a variety of dusks, wader, terns and shorebirds. We were the only two vehicles on the lakeshore and the sense of space were inspiring. Cape Teals shone in the sun, bobbing like small corks while a cloud of Little Swifts chattered above us. And, seeing 400+ Pied Avocets along with 300+ Black-winged Stilts was a treat. We watched massive Great White Pelicans feeding and, working our way back to the lodge through the woodland, picked up a host of interesting species, 56 our total this afternoon.

Sunset tonight was extraordinary - a painted sky of red and orange. After this, dinner was served on the patio with us all at a long table. There was a buffet with plenty of choices including some nice fresh fish entrees.

Sun., Feb 23: Lake Burunge to Tarangire National Park | Tarangire Safari Lodge

Early this morning, Washington led an optional birding walk around the grounds, first meeting up on the patio. From there we had good looks at a pair of Gray-headed Kingfishers and a Spotted Morning-Thrush which had given us quite the serenade before we found it. Red-throated Crag-Martins were nesting in the roof thatch, giving us very good views. An Eastern Paradise-Whydah flew across our view as we went to breakfast, pulling its long tail behind like a banner at a football game.

We drove out through rural agricultural lands and got a glimpse of how people live in the region. After birding the entrance road, we headed on to Tarangire National Park, one of the most scenic destinations of the trip with deep red soils, ancient boulders, and several century-old Baobab trees surrounding open grassland areas.



We were worried the rains might cause the tsetse flies to erupt, but they were only a minor inconvenience rather than a full-blown annoyance. This landscape was lush and greener than even the Serengeti and it was dotted with red termite mounds, some over ten feet in height.

We stopped at the park gate, then headed into a fantasy-land landscape. Two species of go-away-birds greeted us - Bare-faced and White-bellied. We found Spotted Thick-knee and two Hamerkops by a huge stick nest. Keen-eyed Andrew spied a small flock of Collared Pratincoles in a sandy area and later a perched Long-crested Eagle. We watched Green Woodhoopoes in a flock flying away, making their “giggling” sounds. It was a good day for woodpeckers as we spotted Bearded, Cardinal, and Mountain Gray as well as our second species of lovebird for the trip, the Yellow-collared. We had 76 species on this scenic drive – sweet!

We stopped a lot along the way for a fresh elephant pie topped by hundreds of butterflies and by a huge Baobab and had fun taking our photos with this grand old giant. Then, we pulled up to Tarangire Safari Lodge, our simple final stop accommodations in just a prime location, with a patio view of the river. We took a scan and were thrilled to find two Ground Hornbills down drinking along with giraffe, and later, elephants. Several birds came in quite close to us as we joined back up after settling in to enjoy a cold Serengeti beer and the view. A Pied Cuckoo came in close, a White-browed Shrike came in and sat on one of the spotting scopes, and Northern Red-billed Hornbills made passes at the popcorn, as did Ashy Starlings. Dinner was excellent with an emphasis on local dishes, served in clay serving pots. The dining room has a high thatched ceiling with poles radiating out from the center, and a split-level floor rimmed with African textiles.

Peg set up our promised night drive with local guides for this night, since people would have their minds on packing the following night. Off we went into the night and under clear starlight, we were able to see a prize for African bird trips, the Bronze-winged (Violet) Courser. We also saw African Scops-Owl, Pearl-Spotted Owlet, and Spotted Thick-knee. Mammal highlights included Bat-eared Fox, African Wildcat and Bush Baby. It felt magical to be out in the African night with all the scents and sounds, including one elephant herd by a pond, parking and listening to all their communications.

Mon., Feb. 24 Exploring Tarangire National Park

We had such a great time in this park with elephants, it’s hard to pull apart the various sightings. Some were from afar, such as the river view of a family crossing, seen from Matete Picnic Site. Or up close, such as the herd that crossed the road all in a single file - one mother pushing her very young baby up the bank with her trunk. We watched them eat, interact with each other, drink water, and trumpet.



And we had fine views of two brother Cheetahs that were on the move. We saw them on one side of the road in an open grass area known as Little Serengeti. We stopped and as luck would have it, they crossed, then moved through the grass to some large trees to inspect them. They separated to go on each side of our vehicles and one reached a tall arching tree first. It hopped right up and climbed to some height, scratching its claws, scent marking and stretching.

We had more time to spend with ostrich and giraffe and still new birds to see such as Red-necked Spurfowl, Namaqua Dove, Black-faced Sandgrouse, Buff-crested Bustard, African Hawk Eagle, and Nubian Woodpecker. We did a morning and an afternoon drive, with a nice mid-day break back at the lodge. They had excellent interpretive signs at the entry and the best gift store of the trip. We made the shopkeeper's day with our after-lunch spending and she had fun listening to our banter and egging each other on to acquire treasures.

Tues., Feb. 25: Return to Arusha | Departures

We had to peek one more time at the adorable African Scops-Owls we found roosting in trees above our tents. We looked longingly down the river, but eventually had to pack up and start the return to Arusha. We birded and watched giraffes and elephants in route to the gate. There, we took a group photo by a massive Baobab tree.

We arrived mid-day at the historic Mt. Meru Lodge and dined together one last time with a buffet lunch served on a deck under large shade trees, with Mantled Guereza in tall branches showing off their huge long black and white tails. Some of us stayed here for an extra night, either going on to Amboseli NP in Kenya, or flying out the following day. One by one, our great team of Peter and Amin dropped people off at the Kilimanjaro Airport for various departures. What a great adventure!

Photos: Group (Peg Abbott - PA), Wildebeest (PA), Elephant old and wise (PA), Amethyst Sunbird (PA), Scenic (PA), Hamerkop (PA), Giraffe (PA), Martial Eagle? (Larry Ausherman -LA), Ngorongoro Crater (PA), Peg and Tamara (PA), Elephant (PA), Zebra (PA), Secretarybird (PA), Giraffes (PA), Helmeted Guineafowl (PA), Hot Air Balloon (PA), Leopard (PA), Black-backed Jackal (PA), Hyenas (PA), Rufous-naped Lark (PA), Ostrich (PA), Safari Drive (PA), Lunch (PA), Kubu Tented Camp (PA), Verreaux's Eagle-Owl (PA), Hippos (LA), Dinner at the lodge (PA), Black-winged Bishop (PA), Woodland Kingfisher (PA), Scenic (LA), Topi (PA), Gibb's Farm (PA), Crowned Eagle (PA), Greater Flamingoes (PA), Singing Cisticola (PA), Collared Sunbird (PA), Tacazi Sunbird (PA), Double-banded Courser (PA), Tawny Eagle (PA), Chameleon (PA), Egyptian Vulture (PA), Pin-tailed Whydah (PA), Pangani's Longclaw (PA), White-backed Vulture (PA), African Paradise Flycatcher (PA), Mantled Guereza (PA)