

Northern Tanzania: Wildlife & Birding Safari Oct. 12 - 23, 2025
Post-Tour Extension to Amboseli & Nairobi Oct. 23 – 28, 2025
Trip Report by Stephen Grace



Naturalist Journeys Tour Leader Stephen Grace with Gene, Teri, David, Jan, Brian, Lori, Don and Chris



Sun., Oct. 12 Arusha

Everyone arrived early—eager to explore and shining with that first-time-in-Africa glow. Some went on a bonus birding excursion to the Lark Plains north of Arusha, where the horizon seems to go on forever and the wind carries the song of grassland larks. Others of us stayed at the lodge and let the birds come to us.

We began in the company of Martin Joho—raised in a Tanzanian mountain village near the coast, where he once hunted birds to help feed his family. Now he’s devoted to birds in a different way: field research on Tanzanian endemics with conservation partners, mist-netting for careful measurements and drawing blood samples to learn whether scattered populations represent distinct species. He’s the kind of birder



who seems to hear and see with his whole being—and the kind of human who started a youth bird club back home so the next generation can know, and care for, the birds that share their village and fields. We were lucky to begin under his wing.

Before the tour even officially began, our bird list was already telling a story. Overhead, African Palm Swifts darted and swooped in erratic arcs—their long, pointed tails and narrow, angular wings giving them a silhouette of pure motion, all sharp angles and speed against the morning sky.

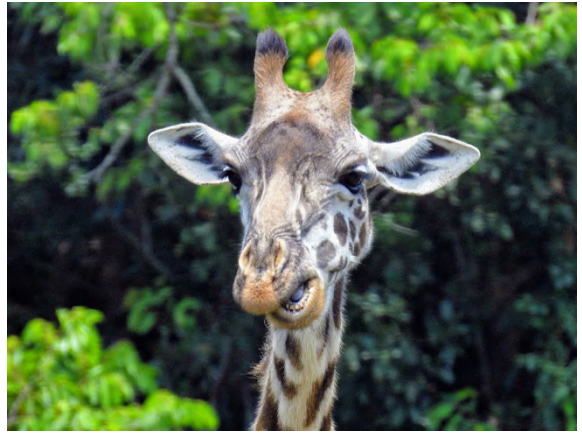
On the Lark Plains, some of our crew found Beesley's Lark—one of Africa's most range-restricted birds, known only from the Engikaret Lark Plains north of Arusha and critically rare even there. Back at the lodge, a White-browed Coucal called from deep cover, while a Black-headed Oriole fluted melodiously from the treetops. European Bee-eaters traced ribbons of color across the sky, migrants moving south at this season, and African Pied Wagtails stitched black-and-white zigzags across the patio flagstones—an adaptable species as comfortable near people as along wild rivers.

Our first sunbird—the Variable Sunbird—flashed into view, the male's head lit like a drop of oil in sunlight, the bill elegantly curved. Sunbirds and hummingbirds are a textbook case of convergent evolution: both sip nectar and shimmer with iridescence, yet sunbirds typically perch while feeding, hovering only briefly, and their tongues are tipped with brush-like filaments rather than the tubular pumps of hummingbirds.

Life at our feet was just as vivid. Agama lizards basked on sun-warmed stones—their red-orange heads and cobalt bodies glowing in the late light—while leopard tortoises ambled through the grounds like living mosaics from the savanna.

That evening, we gathered for dinner—the whole group together at last. Conversation flowed easily; binocular brands were compared, field-guide pages fluttered, and laughter bridged our differences. We raised a toast to the journey ahead. For all eight guests, this was a first visit to Africa. The birds had already begun their welcoming chorus. The adventure promised to be epic—not in grandeur alone, but in the way shared attention transforms moments of discovery into lifelong memories.

The word *safari* comes from the Swahili for “journey,” itself derived from the Arabic *safar*—to travel. Its roots are simple, yet its meaning deepens with experience. A safari is not merely a search for animals, but a passage through landscapes and stories, through connection—with nature, with people, and with the self that awakens in wild places. In that sense, our journey was just beginning.



Mon., Oct. 13 Arusha National Park

We were joined on our first safari by our Tanzanian guide, Martin, along with our two exceptional drivers, Peter and Amini—both of whom would be with us for the entirety of the Tanzania tour. Together, the three formed an outstanding team: deeply knowledgeable, endlessly good-humored, and completely dedicated to making our experience both safe and unforgettable. Peter and Amini navigated city traffic and rough rural tracks with calm precision, somehow managing to spot wildlife and identify birds while keeping everyone laughing. The camaraderie among them was infectious—three colleagues so personable and in sync that traveling with them felt like journeying with old friends.

We set out early, the light soft on the savanna, and among our first birds of the day were the local corvids—Pied Crows, black and white and so large they seemed the size of raptors as they wheeled across the sky. We stopped at a roadside patch of reeds and palms that Martin knew would be productive, and his intuition proved right. The morning shimmered with color as Taveta Golden-Weavers flitted among the reeds, the males blazing yellow with a chestnut wash on their heads—bright as Western Tanagers from home, yet wholly African. Their nests were marvels of craftsmanship: oval spheres of fresh grass woven and suspended from slender stems, often over water where predators struggle to reach. We watched males carry strand after strand, twisting and knotting with precision born of instinct.

The weaver family (Ploceidae) is among the most diverse and widespread in Africa—ingenious engineers of grass, reed, and palm fiber who build everything from simple domes to elaborate hanging structures with entrance tunnels. On our tour, we encountered an impressive twenty species of these master builders across wetlands, woodlands, and savannas—a vivid display of avian artistry and adaptation.

From the nearby trees came the croaks and wingbeats of hornbills—first Silvery-cheeked Hornbills, their oversized casques amplifying calls that rolled through the forest, and then the smaller African Gray Hornbills flashing across the sky. Like New World toucans, hornbills share a large bill and a fondness for fruit, yet the resemblance is purely a product of convergent evolution—just as sunbirds mirror hummingbirds in both form and feeding style. Hornbills' nesting habits rank among the most remarkable in the bird world: the female seals herself inside a tree cavity with a wall of mud and droppings, leaving only a narrow slit through which the male passes food until the chicks are ready to fledge and she breaks free.

Black-and-white Colobus Monkeys moved through the canopy, their long, flowing tails trailing like banners. Their leaps from tree to tree were fluid, almost balletic—a quiet elegance amid the morning bustle of



birdlife. The name *colobus* comes from the Greek *kolobos*, meaning “mutilated,” a reference to their reduced thumbs—an evolutionary adaptation that streamlines their hands for swift, hook-like grasping as they swing through the forest. Elegance, in their case, is born of absence.

Competing with the birds and monkeys was a kaleidoscope of butterflies and dragonflies, flashing every hue imaginable as they drifted and darted through the sunlit air. It was hard to know where to direct our attention in a place so alive with motion and color.

We climbed back into our Land Rovers and headed toward Arusha National Park, its heart dominated by Mount Meru—the great volcano that defines the region. Rising to nearly 15,000 feet, Meru is Tanzania’s second-highest peak, an elegant, steep-sided stratovolcano whose collapsed crater shelters forests, waterfalls, and grassy slopes alive with wildlife. Its fertile soils and cool, moist climate shape the park’s extraordinary diversity—from montane forest to savanna—and its silhouette anchors the landscape much as Kilimanjaro does farther east.

As expected on our game drive, we saw zebra, giraffe, and gazelle—and then came an unexpected gift. Elephants roam Arusha National Park year-round, yet sightings are uncommon. The forested slopes and dense undergrowth conceal them easily, and the park’s small, hilly terrain supports only a modest population. So when a family emerged from the trees and stepped onto the road right in front of us, it felt like a rare privilege—living proof of how wild and intact this landscape remains.

Roadside stops among the charismatic megafauna brought quieter delights: in a marsh, a pair of Saddle-billed Storks—black, white, and crimson—stood tall and motionless, their reflections trembling in the shallow water, while in a nearby tree a Common Cuckoo perched obligingly. The cuckoo was a traveler from far away—a Palearctic migrant that breeds across Europe and Asia before spending the northern winter in Africa. It was one of many such visitors we encountered on our tour: Eurasian Bee-eaters, Yellow Wagtails, even a Steppe Eagle—all crossing continents to share Africa’s abundance for a season.

Nearby we spotted our first Hamerkop, an odd, dusky-brown bird named for its hammer-shaped head and crest. With its long bill and broad, flat crown, it resembles no other species—and indeed belongs to a family all its own. Revered and sometimes feared in African folklore, the Hamerkop is also an architectural marvel, building immense domed nests of sticks so strong they can support the weight of a human.

Later we joined a ranger for a walking safari. Arusha National Park is one of the few places in Tanzania where walking among wildlife is allowed, thanks to its lack of large predators and its well-trained armed



guides. The thrill of being on foot—feeling the ground under us, smelling the dust of the plains and the dampness along riverbanks—was unforgettable.

We paused to watch Red-billed Oxpeckers busily picking ticks and biting flies from the backs of Cape Buffalo, a partnership of mutual benefit: the birds gain food, and the buffalo gain relief from parasites. Nearby, warthogs dropped to their knees to graze, bending their front legs so their short necks could reach the grass—an ungainly but efficient posture that leaves dark calluses on their knees. The ranger drew our attention to the great swellings on the males' faces—thick pads of skin and cartilage that serve as shields in battles with rivals.

He lifted a bleached warthog skull, showing how the long upper tusks curve outward while the shorter lower tusks grind against them with every chew, keeping the edges sharp as blades. “These,” he said, “are canine teeth—sharpened against each other like whetstones.” Then he smiled and added, “Elephants have tusks made from their upper incisors.”

A few steps farther, he stopped beside a mound of freshly turned soil. Outside a burrow lay a scatter of dark, pellet-like droppings. “Aardvark,” he said, pointing to claw marks around the entrance. The elusive aardvark is among the hardest mammals to see in Africa, a shy, nocturnal digger that spends its days underground and emerges at night to feed on ants and termites. Its droppings near the den mark the entrance to its territory, a quiet signature of occupation. To stand above its burrow in daylight felt like finding a footprint in time—evidence of a secret life thriving in the dark.

Zebras grazed nearby, their stripes rippling in the heat. We hiked past wildflowers to a waterfall where cool mist touched our faces and nourished ferns along the rocks. Beyond the trees, in an open clearing, two young male giraffes were “necking”—swinging their long necks in slow-motion combat, testing strength in a ritual that may one day decide who earns the right to mate.

Birding highlights came thick and fast: White-fronted Bee-eaters flashing coral and emerald as they posed for photographs against a background of dry savannah, Black-backed Puffbacks with ruby-red eyes gleaming in the trees, a drumming Nubian Woodpecker, and a male African Paradise-Flycatcher—still striking even without his breeding streamers, his rufous wings and long tail glowing in the soft light.

We worked hard for glimpses of a Sombre Greenbul after hearing its rich, fluty song close by—a subtle reward for patient listening. Common Bulbuls, true to their name, were everywhere: dark-headed, yellow-vented, and noisy, the quintessential voice of East African woodlands. They became consistent



companions and our yardstick—unfamiliar birds described in relation to them: “larger or smaller than a Common Bulbul?”

After our bush walk, at a picnic spot we watched Blue Monkeys—also known locally as Sykes’s Monkeys—their gray-blue fur and white throat patches catching the filtered light. These arboreal guenons moved through the branches with curious confidence, hoping for handouts we did not provide. Primarily fruit eaters, they also forage for young leaves, flowers, and insects, playing an important role in seed dispersal within the forest. What captivated us most were their expressive faces and gentle, intelligent eyes—so full of curiosity and emotion. Mothers cradled their infants close, grooming them with delicate fingers while the young peeked out shyly from the safety of their arms. Social and cohesive, the troop moved as one, their chatter and motion adding a lively counterpoint to the stillness of the woods.

After lunch, in our Land Rovers we circled Momella Lakes, the string of alkaline and freshwater basins that glimmer within Arusha National Park, each one a different hue depending on its mineral content and resident algae. Birding along the lake’s edge was superb. Reed Cormorants, also known as Long-tailed Cormorants, perched on snags beside the road, their slender necks and long tails giving them a delicate profile compared to their larger cousin, the Great Cormorant.

In a nearby grove, we found Nubian Woodpeckers and Mountain Gray Woodpeckers tapping at acacia trunks, while a White-eared Barbet worked methodically among the fruiting branches. Barbets are another marvelous example of convergent evolution: Africa’s Old World barbets, like the White-eared, are not closely related to the colorful New World barbets of Central and South America. The resemblance is superficial—both groups evolved thick bills and frugivorous habits independently. In fact, Old World barbets belong to a lineage that also gave rise to woodpeckers and honeyguides, while the New World forms are kin to toucans.

At the lakeshore, both Greater and Lesser Flamingos glowed in the late-day light—pink, white, and rose shimmering against the mirrored surface. We stopped to admire and photograph them, enchanted by their grace and impossible color. The Greaters sifted for invertebrates in deeper water, while the smaller, pinker Lessers fed closer to shore, filtering microscopic algae through their bills. Around them swam Southern Pochards, Cape Teal, and Little Grebes, their ripples turning to molten gold in the slanting sun.

On the treed and grassy shores surrounding the lake we encountered our first members of the cisticola family, the small, subtle songbirds that test every birder’s patience and skill. Found mainly in Africa, these drab little warblers are better known by ear than by eye, their identity revealed through song and habitat more than plumage. A Tawny-flanked Prinia flitted low in the grass, and nearby a Trilling Cisticola lived up to its name, its bright, rippling call carrying across the afternoon air.



As the day waned, golden light poured across the flanks of Mount Meru. On the drive out, zebra, giraffes, and warthogs grazed in the long shadows, the savanna alive with movement. Back at the lodge, we tallied our species checklist and shared a delicious buffet dinner—fresh fish, local vegetables, and ample laughter. It was hard to believe that so much wonder had unfolded in a single day.

Tues., Oct. 14 Arusha | Lake Manyara National Park | Ngorongoro Highlands

We left Arusha after breakfast, the road winding through bustling villages and open rangelands where the Maasai still move their cattle much as their ancestors have for centuries. Draped in red and blue shúkà cloth, they watched us watching birds—two worlds intersecting on the edge of the savanna. The Maasai are Nilotic pastoralists who migrated south from the Nile Valley centuries ago, following the rhythm of rains and grass. Cattle remain central to their culture—symbol of life, wealth, and identity—and their presence across this landscape speaks to a deep, enduring connection between people and grasslands.

In the city we stopped briefly at the Arusha Art Museum, a convenient rest stop that proved unexpectedly rich in birds: Red-winged Starlings chattered on the eaves, Black Kites circled overhead, and a falcon, possibly a Peregrine, stooped through a cloud of Rock Pigeons, scattering them in a burst of wings.

Farther along the highway, Amini, ever alert behind the wheel, spotted an Augur Buzzard perched on a roadside acacia. We pulled over, set up the scope, and admired its rufous tail and stark black-and-white plumage gleaming in the sun. Nearby, a White-bellied Go-away-bird let out its nasal, laughing call—the source of its name—while showing off its elegant gray crest and long tail.

At another stop we found Rufous-tailed Weavers and Red-billed Queleas—both members of the weaver family, yet each with its own architectural style. Rufous-tailed Weavers built their nests in loose colonies from the branches of acacia trees—sturdy, untidy bundles of grass with side entrances. Nearby, the queleas had taken nest-building to another scale altogether: vast, bustling colonies where hundreds of tightly woven grass nests crowded the same thorny trees. The Red-billed Quelea is thought to be the most numerous wild bird on Earth—its population measured in the billions—and when these immense flocks take to the air, the sky itself seems to ripple and darken with the movement of countless wings.

By midday we reached Lake Manyara National Park, a narrow ribbon of forest, savanna, and wetland nestled at the base of the Great Rift Valley escarpment. Here the African continent is literally splitting apart, a vast geological fault stretching thousands of miles from the Red Sea to Mozambique. Groundwater



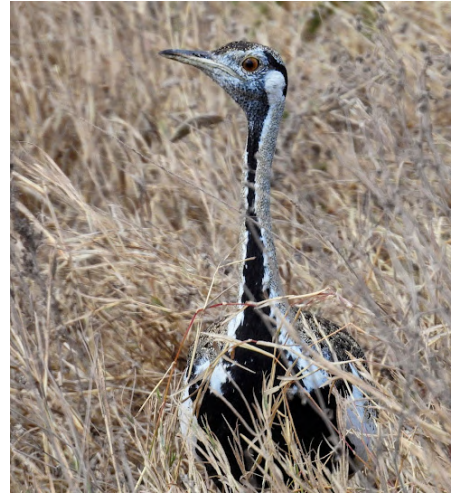
seeps from the escarpment into the lake, which expands and contracts seasonally with the rains. Recent studies show more complex trends than simple shrinkage or rise: the lake is in a closed basin (no outflow) and is extremely sensitive to changes in rainfall, land use and catchment erosion. Records indicate rising levels in tributaries and increased inundation of forest on the lake's edge; reports cite sedimentation, agricultural water use and declining inflow as threats.

The park's future is uncertain. When water spreads too widely, it can drown the groundwater forest that sustains many trees and birds; yet if water levels drop, the wetland and shoreline wildlife lose vital habitat. Researchers warn that the interplay of climate change, upstream land-cover change, water abstraction—the pumping or diversion of water for farms, towns, and industry—and increasing sediment loads makes the system fragile and unpredictable.

Still, on the day of our visit, life flourished all around us. Elephants emerged from the forest, including a massive bull in musth—a periodic state of heightened aggression and sexual readiness, marked by dark fluid streaming from the temporal glands. The word comes from the Persian *mast*, meaning “intoxicated,” an apt description of the hormone-fueled intensity that drives these males to roam in search of females and challenge rivals. His mood was unmistakably intense as he approached within meters of our vehicle before veering off into the trees. Troops of Olive Baboons lined the roadside, grooming, squabbling, and carrying infants, while the forest canopy revealed new primate faces: the shy Manyara Monkey, a local variant of the Blue Monkey, and the ever-present Vervet Monkeys. At one point two Crowned Eagles hunted through the treetops—Africa's most formidable forest raptors, capable of taking monkeys in mid-leap with talons as long as a lion's claw.

Over the lake we spotted a striking white Palm-nut Vulture—an unusual species that feeds on fallen fruit as readily as carrion. Overhead, White-backed Vultures soared, wingtips splayed like fingers as they searched the plains below. One settled near the road, allowing us to study it closely—each feather edged in pale ivory. Though reminiscent of the Andean and California condors, the resemblance is superficial, once again born of convergence: two distant lineages, divided by a vast ocean yet shaped by evolution to fill the same essential role—soarers of the skies, cleaners of the deserts and plains of North America, and of the savannas of Africa.

A tangle of shrubs ahead came alive with color—Red-and-yellow Barbets, six together, their plumage glowing against the thorny trees. In a nearby acacia we heard the chattering notes of a Greater Honeyguide, as if telling us its own remarkable story. This bird has evolved a unique partnership with humans, leading honey-hunters to wild hives in exchange for the wax and larvae left behind. Across Africa, people still heed its call—a dialogue between species that may be as old as human language itself.



By late afternoon we began our ascent toward the Ngorongoro Crater, stopping at a scenic overlook as golden light poured across the highlands and spilled into the vast caldera—the largest intact volcanic basin on Earth, formed when an ancient volcano, once rivaling today’s 19,341-foot Kilimanjaro, collapsed inward on itself some two million years ago. Far below, animals dotted the placid crater floor: zebra, buffalo, and wildebeest appearing as tiny brushstrokes across a canvas of grass. Northern Anteater-Chats flicked from rock to rock, flashing white patches in their wings as we leaned on the railing and took in the view of this African Eden.

The road wound upward through misty forest to the Ngorongoro Serena Lodge, built of stone and wood on the crater rim. One of the world’s great ecolodges, it blends into the hillside as if grown from this stunning natural setting. Dinner was a feast—gourmet fare served by friendly waitstaff, the Nile perch a favorite among our group. Later we stepped outside to find a dome of stars so brilliant it felt close enough to touch, the night air alive with distant calls—frogs, hyenas, and unknown voices whispering from the dark world below.

Wed., Oct. 15 Ngorongoro Crater

We arose before dawn, had breakfast, and watched a stunning sunrise spill over the crater rim. The air was cool and clear, and the vast bowl of Ngorongoro lay below us in shadow, waiting for light. Before descending, we birded the lodge grounds, where the morning’s first glow brought a shimmer of color to the flowering shrubs. Our first Eastern Double-collared Sunbird appeared—a jewel of the highlands, its green head and scarlet breast flashing like stained glass. Nearby, an Amethyst Sunbird fed among blossoms, the male’s black plumage alive with hidden colors that flared into turquoise and violet when his head caught the sun.

We called hopefully for a Schalow’s Turaco, that elusive forest ghost, but none replied; our turaco quest would continue. Other birds rewarded our patience—a male Baglaffeht Weaver with a black facial mask and pale eye, and a White-eyed Slaty-Flycatcher, its soft gray plumage set off by its namesake white eye ring. The Old World flycatchers belong to a different family from their New World namesakes, unrelated despite similar habits of sallying out to snatch insects from the air—yet another classic case of convergent evolution.



Then we began our descent into the crater. The road wound down through forest and open slopes until the immense floor unfolded before us—an entire world contained within walls of stone. Few landscapes on Earth rival the Ngorongoro Crater for scale and wildness: a volcanic caldera twelve miles across and 2,000 feet deep, a self-contained Eden where grasslands, lakes, and acacia woodlands teem with life, protected by the steep crater walls from encroachment and poaching.

We stopped for our first Helmeted Guineafowl—comical and regal all at once—their powder-blue heads topped with bony casques, their plumage finely spotted in white. They would soon become familiar companions, but we savored this first encounter. Two Tawny Eagles perched side by side in a fig tree while an Augur Buzzard circled overhead. Out on the plains, herds of Thomson's and Grant's Gazelles grazed—Thomson's smaller and sharply marked with a black flank stripe, Grant's taller, paler, and longer-horned. All around them moved the classic cast of Africa: buffalo, zebra, wildebeest, and giraffes grazing the grassland sea and browsing the scattered acacia islands.

Unlike the vast herds of the Serengeti, the crater's wildebeest are mostly residents, confined within this great natural amphitheater by its steep walls and abundant year-round grazing. Elephants here are nearly all males, many of them old bulls with enormous tusks—descendants of generations that have sought refuge in this sanctuary.

Our first lions appeared—two males walking slowly across the heat-shimmering floor, their tawny coats and manes blending with the grass. The view was distant yet electric, a promise of closer encounters to come. And soon they came.

A pair of males lay in the road ahead, one sprawled across the track, the other just beyond. We watched in reverent silence, close enough to see the curve of their teeth when they yawned, the flies on their whiskers, the slow rise and fall of their breath.

Then came an unexpected gift: a Serval hunting right beside the road. This slender, long-legged cat—like a miniature cheetah built for pouncing—moved with exquisite precision, listening intently, then leaping high and striking. We watched it catch a rodent, shake it once, and eat—wildlife documentary brought to life before our eyes.

Amini called, "Cracking on," his favorite phrase when it was time to move along after a sighting—a bit of British safari slang that has found a home across East Africa. And so we did. As we cracked on, a gilded shape moved through the grass ahead—a Golden Wolf. Once known as the Golden Jackal, genetic studies



have shown it to be more closely related to wolves than to true jackals. Sleek and watchful, it slipped through the tawny grass and was gone again—like a thought passing across the plain.

Birdlife filled every habitat on the crater floor. Kori Bustards, the heaviest flying birds in the world, strode among the grasses near smaller Black-bellied and White-bellied Bustards. In the wetlands, both Greater and Lesser Flamingos fed side by side—the taller, paler Greaters wading in deeper water, sifting small invertebrates with their pink bills tipped in black, while the smaller, rosier Lessers fed in the shallows, their darker crimson bills perfectly shaped for filtering microscopic algae from the lake's alkaline water.

Among lounging Common Hippopotamuses we watched Egyptian and Spur-winged Geese, Red-billed Ducks, and Blue-billed Teal. The shallows teemed with shorebirds: Common Sandpipers, Ruffs in nonbreeding plumage with orange legs, and other seasonal visitors from Eurasia. The Ruff is a Palearctic migrant, breeding across northern Europe and Asia and journeying to Africa for the austral summer—a reminder of how these wetlands link continents through the passage of birds.

Elegant Black-winged Stilts and Pied Avocets stepped gracefully through the shallows—the stilts with impossibly long pink legs and straight, slender bills, the avocets distinguished by their upturned bills, which they swept side to side in delicate arcs to sift tiny invertebrates from the water. Along the muddy margins, Three-banded Plovers darted among stones, while on the nearby savanna, Blacksmith and Crowned Lapwings strode through the grass, their sharp calls ringing across the plain. The Blacksmith's name comes from that metallic *tink-tink-tink*—a sound like a hammer striking an anvil in the African morning.

Glossy and Sacred Ibis probed the shallows—the latter named for its veneration in ancient Egypt, where it was mummified as a sacred offering. Overhead, Lappet-faced Vultures soared—giants among scavengers, their powerful beaks built to tear through hide and bone. A Montagu's Harrier quartered a marshland, silver and soft in the light, while Wire-tailed Swallows skimmed low over the grass, their tails trailing fine filaments as they hawked insects on the wing.

At our picnic site, we shared the shade with Marabou Storks—those bizarre “undertaker birds,” named for their dark, cloak-like wings, bare heads, and solemn, deliberate gait. When viewed from behind, their black backs and white underparts resemble a Victorian undertaker's coat, and their habit of standing motionless beside carcasses only deepens the impression. Their pendulous throat pouches and funereal patience give them a look both comic and macabre, scavengers waiting with eerie composure at the edge of the



feast. Black Kites wheeled above, ready to snatch food from unwary hands, so we ate our lunches inside the vehicles, then ventured out to bird the area.

Fan-tailed Widowbirds fluttered over the marshes and perched among the reeds, their black plumage flashing reddish shoulders—an echo of the Red-winged Blackbirds of our North American wetlands. Both favor reedy marshes and perform similar display flights, yet they are not closely related—another striking case of convergent evolution, linking an African species new to us with a familiar bird from home, a resemblance our group delighted in noting.

Later we visited another wetland, where a lone bull elephant—a great tusker—climbed a hill above a pool crowded with hippos. Dozens of Black-crowned Night Herons roosted among the reeds, joined by a menagerie of waterbirds from Eurasian Moorhens to Sacred Ibis. The scene below felt timeless, a vision of Eden—Ngorongoro at its best.

As we drove back toward the crater rim, we stopped in a forest alive with new sights and sounds. A Common Scimitarbill flashed among vines, its long, curved bill glinting in the last light. Near the top of the crater we saw giraffes among the trees—creatures never found on the crater floor, where the steep descent keeps them to the rim’s wooded slopes.

Back at the lodge that evening, Maasai performed traditional dances and astonishing acrobatics, their chants echoing through the night air. We completed our species list amid the rhythm of drums, then dined together, recounting the day’s wonders. Later, walking back to our rooms along the crater rim, we paused to look up at the stars—brilliant, innumerable, and silent above this great bowl of life.

Thurs., Oct. 16 Serengeti National Park | Gol Plains | Mawe Camp

After another stunning sunrise above the crater, we left Ngorongoro and began the beautiful journey toward the Serengeti, stopping often for birds and wildlife. In the forest along the crater rim we glimpsed our first turaco—a Schalow’s Turaco. Everyone saw pieces of it through the thick foliage: flashes of luminous green and blue, and then that dazzling scarlet as it flew. Most birds appear green through structural color—the way light refracts through microscopic feather structures rather than true pigment—but turacos are different. Their emerald tones come from *turacoverdin*, and their brilliant red from *turacin*—both copper-based pigments found in no other birds on Earth. When a turaco takes flight, those



pigments ignite in sunlight, a living fusion of chemistry and light. The encounter was fleeting but unforgettable. Our quest for a more soul-satisfying turaco view would continue.

When we left the forest, in a roadside tree on the savanna several D’Arnaud’s Barbets glowed with intricate mosaics of yellow, orange, and black—colors shifting like facets of a gem as they turned in the light.

Descending from the crater rim, we passed scattered giraffes and Maasai herders with their cattle, living much as they have for centuries along the edge of the wild. At a Maasai village we were welcomed with rhythmic dances and soaring leaps, and joined in with our own clumsy moves but big smiles. We visited a school, where we donated supplies and shared laughter with the children, then learned about the Maasai’s deep bond with cattle—the measure of wealth, sustenance, and spirit in their culture. Later we stepped inside their homes, or *enkang*, where small fires burned and the air was scented with smoke from dung and dried plants used as fuel. The walls, made from a mixture of mud, grass, and cow dung, glowed softly in the firelight—humble, enduring, and warm with the life of the family within.

Farther west, the land opened toward the plains. The name *Serengeti* comes from the Maasai word *siringet*, meaning “endless plains,” and the meaning could not be truer. Even before we entered the park, birding was lively. At the busy entrance gate, Superb Starlings dazzled us once again, shimmering with turquoise, violet, and orange as they drank from puddles beneath a dripping faucet. Nearby, Hildebrandt’s Starlings showed subtler plumage—red eyes and no white chest band—distinguishing them from their more flamboyant cousins. White-rumped Shrikes perched conspicuously nearby; Africa seems to abound in shrikes, those sharp-billed songbirds whose “butcherbird” nickname comes from their habit of impaling prey on thorns to tear apart or store for later.

Martin used his keen ear and experience to find trickier species: a Brubru, a Tropical Boubou, and a Browncrowned Tchagra—members of the bushshrike family, whose rich duets and skulking behavior make them the songsters of the thickets. Endemic to sub-Saharan Africa, bushshrikes fill the same ecological niche as true shrikes elsewhere: stealthy hunters with hooked bills and voices of unexpected beauty for such fierce little predators. Martin also located a Red-throated Tit, a relative of North American chickadees, and a Redfronted Barbet, its crimson and yellow plumage blazing from a dry brown branch like a spark of life in the dry season.

Once through the Naabi Hill gate, Amini and Peter showed their mastery of the rough Serengeti roads—and almost immediately, a shape materialized on the horizon: a Black Rhino. Smaller and far more elusive than the White Rhino, it is a browser rather than a grazer, using its pointed upper lip to pluck shrubs and acacias. Shy and wary, it moved off quickly, leaving us thrilled yet hoping for a closer look another day.



Soon after, two cheetahs rested beneath a shade tree, sleek and exquisite. Their apparent gentleness belied the power within; cheetahs are primarily diurnal hunters, an adaptation that helps them avoid conflict with lions and leopards—the dominant nocturnal predators of the plains.

Not long afterward we found lions on the kopjes—those ancient granite outcrops, remnants of Precambrian rock that rise from the Serengeti like islands of stone. A mother and her cubs gazed down with ageless calm—a scene straight out of *The Lion King*, as several in our group exclaimed, giddy, exhilarated, and speechless all at once. We were floored. Nearby, a few females descended to prowl the grasslands, intent on the hunt. The light, the space, the silence—all combined into a moment so elemental it felt mythic, a vision shaped by deep time and born of story.

Late in the afternoon we encountered another pride, including a magnificent male with a full, dark mane. Only our two vehicles were present—no other travelers in sight. The lions passed within yards, so close we could hear the low rhythm of their breathing. Yet the day still held surprises: a Barn Owl roosting in a crevice of the kopje, and a final climax—lions feeding on a freshly killed hartebeest. The dominant male's roar reverberated through our vehicles as he defended his meal, the sound both terrifying and thrilling in equal measure.

We reached our tented camp, Mawe, whose name means “stone” in Swahili. It was a beautiful outpost set deep in the wilderness, unfenced and alive with nocturnal voices. Escorts guided us to our tents after dark to ensure safety from wandering wildlife. That night we lay awake listening to the grunting of lions nearby and the chorus of unknown creatures—nature's symphony beneath the African stars.

Fri., Oct. 17 Serengeti | Gol Plains | Mawe Camp

At sunrise, the Serengeti lived up to its name. The sun rose as an orange orb behind umbrella acacias, painting the endless grasslands gold. Before breakfast we birded the camp surroundings: a Red-chested Cuckoo showed brilliantly in the early light, while Speckled Mousebirds tumbled through the trees in animated clusters and a pair of Yellow-winged Bats—large, golden-furred bats that roost openly by day—flew in to settle among the branches overhead. Breakfast itself was a revelation: fresh fruit, chapati, and gourmet dishes prepared with impossible skill in this remote camp.

We set out for a full day exploring the Gol Plains, where the short grass shimmered with heat and life. Double-banded Coursers ran ahead of the vehicle—plover-like birds adapted for sprinting across open



ground. A pair of Saddlebilled Storks waded along a river, their massive bills marked with yellow “saddles.” Our first parrots appeared: Fischer’s Lovebirds and Meyer’s Parrots, both vibrant splashes of green against tawny grass.

Black-lored Babblers chattered in the shrubs—gregarious members of the laughingthrush family, full of mischief and noise. Then came a playful troop of Banded Mongooses. There are no meerkats this far north, but the resemblance was striking as the mongooses stood upright to survey the plains before dashing off in tight formation.

At our picnic site, Speckle-fronted Weavers and Gray-capped Social Weavers gathered in expectant flocks, joined on the ground by Chestnut Sparrows and Black-faced Waxbills, each species busy in its own social whirl. A Striped Kingfisher watched from a snag, its powder-blue tail and chestnut eye stripe bright against the pale bark—an insect hunter of the dry plains rather than a fisher of streams.

After lunch we stretched our legs and were delighted to spot a Rock Hyrax—first at a distance and then directly above us, feeding on leafy branches. It’s remarkable to think that these small, furry creatures are the closest living relatives of elephants, linked by shared traits in skull structure, dentition, and the unique pads on their feet that help them grip rocky surfaces. Nearby we found an Abyssinian Scimitarbill, its long curved bill catching the sunlight, and finches such as Reichenow’s Seedeater and White-bellied Canary adding flashes of yellow and motion to the dry grass and thorn scrub.

As we watched the avian pageant, someone remarked how sorry we felt for non-birders on safari—those who focus only on the “Big Five” while overlooking the 500-plus bird species of the Serengeti, each with its own story to tell.

The term *Big Five* dates back to the early days of colonial hunting, when these five species—lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo, and rhinoceros—were considered the most dangerous to pursue on foot. Today the phrase survives in the language of tourism, a relic of that era, even though it excludes other charismatic megafauna such as hippos, cheetahs, giraffes, and zebras, not to mention the extraordinary diversity of birds that fill the savannah, forests and sky. Our group agreed that a true “Big Five” of Africa should include the winged ones too.

Of course, the great mammals held us spellbound as well. A leopard and her two cubs lounged on a distant kopje, and soon after we found another pair draped at close range in the branches of an acacia, perfectly camouflaged in the dappled shade. Herds of elephants passed nearby—family groups led by matriarchs, so different from the solitary bulls we’d seen in Ngorongoro.



Later a cheetah appeared, moving through tall grass with effortless grace. We watched from a respectful distance as it climbed a fallen log to gain a higher vantage, scanning the golden sea of savanna before slipping away once more—vanishing like a shadow into the grass.

At a nearby wetland, hippos lifted their massive heads and opened their jaws in slow, yawning threat displays, revealing tusks capable of crushing bone—reminders that these giants are among Africa’s most formidable creatures. Along the muddy banks, Nile Crocodiles basked in the sun, their armor glinting like ancient bronze. These relics of a primordial age can exceed sixteen feet in length and weigh over a thousand pounds. Unlike alligators, with their broad U-shaped snouts confined to the Americas, Nile Crocodiles bear narrower jaws—tools of precision and power, built for seizing large prey. They can go months without feeding, sustained by an austere metabolism, yet when the wildebeest herds surge across Africa’s rivers, they erupt into motion—masters of patience and sudden violence.

As formidable as a Nile Crocodile may be, it’s said that a hippo can bite one in half with its immense jaws. Watching these great beasts yawn wide while crocodiles lay nearby, their saber-like teeth glinting in the sunlight, was exhilarating—and from the safety of our Land Rovers, we felt both awe and relief in equal measure.

Showers swept across the plains as we drove through a vast expanse with no other vehicles in sight. Rainbows arched over the horizon, and by late afternoon the skies deepened to slate. The rains came in earnest that evening—lightning flashing, wind gusting, and rain blowing through the open flaps of our tents until we hurried to close everything and wait out the deluge. It was exhilarating, the raw elemental power of nature on full display. When the storm passed, the air felt scrubbed clean; the sky cleared of dust and smoke, the roads darkened with rain, and the land itself seemed renewed.

At Mawe Camp that evening, a feast awaited—soul-nourishing soup, roasted meats, fragrant curries, and fresh-baked chapati served under the soft glow of lantern light. As star-sprinkled darkness settled over the savanna, we listened to the nocturnal symphony beyond our tent walls: the low grunts of lions, the steady chirr of insects, the distant whoops of hyenas. The Serengeti held us in its vast embrace—timeless, unending, and profoundly alive.

Sat., Oct. 18 Serengeti Central Plains | Tukaone Serengeti Camp

Some of us rose before dawn for an optional balloon safari—a chance to see the Serengeti from the air. Our pilot, Captain Rosa from Barcelona, guided the balloon into the pre-dawn calm. The world was



hushed except for the occasional rush of the burner flame. From above, the Serengeti looked infinite—gold and green, brushed with morning mist. Giraffes looked up as we drifted overhead, their long necks tilting toward the silent shape above. Herds of buffalo and zebra rippled across the plains, hyenas loped along faint game paths, and hornbills flapped below us, their broad wings dark against the sunlit grass. We even floated over a small group of elephants, their forms massive and peaceful, before touching down. It was an extraordinary experience—serene, timeless, utterly unlike the drone of an airplane engine.

We reunited with the rest of the group and continued west, leaving the eastern Serengeti behind. Along the way we spotted a Secretarybird—one of Africa’s most remarkable raptors, like an eagle perched on stilts. With long crane-like legs and a crest of quills behind its head, it strides across the savanna hunting snakes and lizards, striking its prey with precise, powerful kicks.

On the plains, Lilac-breasted Rollers were common birds of uncommon beauty. Their stunning palette of turquoise, violet, green, chestnut and white glowed against the drab grasses of the dry-season savanna—color incarnate in a colorless land. When they took flight, the wings unfurled into even greater brilliance, flashing bands of sapphire and ultramarine. With the patient help of Martin, Amini, and Peter, we positioned ourselves near the road where the birds perched on acacia snags, poised to drop and roll after insects. Cameras ready, we tried to capture them in flight—an elusive challenge, but one that made the moment even more thrilling. Even when we missed the shot, we didn’t miss the wonder.

We also found their rarer cousin, the Purple Roller. Subdued in color when perched, this larger, more solitary bird revealed deep cobalt and indigo hues when it spread its wings—a quieter beauty, but no less striking. Together, the two species reflected the Serengeti itself—subtle and splendid, its beauty revealed in motion and light.

New birds appeared as we moved through dusty scrub and verdant woodland. A Pygmy Falcon—hardly larger than a sparrow—perched boldly atop a thorn bush, the smallest raptor in Africa yet fierce in demeanor. Then came the striking Black-headed Gonolek, its crimson chest blazing against black wings, and the aptly named Gorgeous Sunbird, shimmering with green, violet, and gold.

In an open grassland, a Yellow-throated Longclaw stood poised among the stems. We admired its elongated hind claw—the hallux—which helps it balance on uneven ground while foraging, a perfect adaptation to life among the blades. Much like the Longspurs of North America, which have also evolved this trait for life on the prairies, the longclaws of the African savanna show how distant lineages can arrive at the same solution when shaped by similar demands.



It was yet another reminder of a theme that echoed throughout our tour: the power of convergent evolution.

That night we settled into another tented camp, surrounded once more by the living pulse of the bush. The darkness filled with sound—zebras braying, hyenas laughing, some unseen creature snuffling just beyond the canvas walls. Both sunset and sunrise were unforgettable: the light flaring into fire, fading to embers, then returning in gold.

Sun., Oct. 19 Serengeti Central Plains | Tukaone Serengeti Camp

We headed north toward the border with Kenya and the Masai Mara, hoping to catch up with the Great Migration—that immense seasonal movement of wildebeest, zebra, and gazelle following the rains and the new grass. This is one of Earth’s last great wildlife spectacles: more than two million animals moving in an endless clockwise circuit between Tanzania and Kenya, a living river of hooves and dust. The timing of their passage is guided by rainfall and renewal—driven by the search for fresh grazing, water, and safe calving grounds. It is an ancient rhythm written in grass and storm, and the pulse of life itself across the Serengeti.

As we made our way north in search of this spectacle, lions slept beside the road, unbothered by our presence. Elephants paraded across the plains, their measured pace and quiet grace mesmerizing. At a waterhole we paused to watch zebras—each one uniquely striped, no two patterns the same. Research now points to their stripes as an effective defense against biting flies: the alternating black-and-white pattern confuses the visual systems of tsetse and horseflies, making it harder for them to land. Other ideas—camouflage, predator confusion, social recognition—may play smaller roles, but insect deterrence now stands as the most convincing explanation. Whatever the reason, the effect is undeniably beautiful.

“Cracking on,” as Amini would say, we continued north. Two Southern Ground-Hornbills strode through the grass, their red wattles glowing against jet-black feathers. These heavy, long-lived birds are the largest hornbills in Africa and hunt on foot for reptiles and small mammals, playing an essential role as predators of the grasslands.

A long line of vultures drew us next—a feeding frenzy on a carcass. Dozens of birds jostled and hissed, their bald heads buried in the remains. We spoke about their vital role as nature’s sanitation crew, cleansing the land of decay and recycling nutrients back into the ecosystem. Where vulture populations have crashed—due to poisoning, habitat loss, or contaminated carcasses—carcasses linger, diseases like anthrax and



rabies spread more easily, and even human health suffers. These misunderstood scavengers are essential to the balance of the wild.

Then, cresting a rise, we saw what we had come for: the Great Migration. The plains below were carpeted with wildebeest—thousands moving together, their grunts and lowing part of an ancient rhythm that filled the air. The wildebeest’s long forelegs and slightly shorter hind legs give their bodies a forward-sloping posture—an adaptation for endurance rather than speed, allowing them to lope for miles across the plains in their endless search for fresh grazing.

Among them moved zebras, wildebeest, and Thomson’s gazelles, each feeding in turn on a different layer of the grassland. Zebras crop the taller, coarser grasses, opening the way for wildebeest, which prefer the medium-height growth that follows. Finally, the gazelles graze on the shortest, newest shoots, rich in nutrients. This subtle niche partitioning allows the three species to share the same landscape without directly competing for food. Together they form a living procession across the Serengeti, each dependent on the others, all alert to the ever-present threat of predators.

Nearby, a lion and lioness lounged in the shade, so close we could see the flies around their eyes, their amber gaze unbothered by our presence. Surrounded by such plenty, they were content to rest through the heat of the day. Amid this abundance came one of the avian highlights of the tour: two Gray Crowned-Cranes standing beside the road, their golden crests glowing in the light. These elegant birds—the national symbol of Uganda—seemed to embody the splendor of East Africa itself.

As the afternoon waned, we set out in search of a Martial Eagle—Africa’s largest raptor and one of the most powerful eagles in the world. With sharp eyes and teamwork, Martin, Peter, and Amini found one soaring above the plains. We watched it descend and followed to where it perched, admiring the bold spots on its chest and massive talons. This formidable hunter can bring down prey as large as a young impala or a monkey—a true monarch of the skies.

As we drove back toward camp, someone remarked that after the Martial Eagle, we must have seen it all—but we knew better. The Serengeti holds endless discoveries; we had seen so much, yet barely scratched the surface of this legendary ecosystem.



Mon., Oct. 20 Serengeti Central Plains | Olduvai Gorge | Mayara Serena Lodge

We savored one last Serengeti sunrise, the light spilling across the endless plains, then began our return journey south. Along the way, we paused often—admiring impala males standing alone or gathered in bachelor groups, while nearby herds of females grazed under the watch of a single dominant male. During the rut, these males expend enormous energy defending territories and mating rights; afterward, they retreat to bachelor herds, where competition subsides and they can graze and rest in relative peace. These calm interludes help them rebuild strength for the next breeding season.

In a treetop we spotted a Long-crested Eagle, its gothic crest stirring in the breeze. A striking raptor of Africa's open woodlands, it hunts small mammals and birds from elevated perches, dropping swiftly to seize prey.

After leaving Serengeti National Park we retraced our route toward Olduvai Gorge. This time we stopped to explore this world-famous paleoanthropological site, called the Cradle of Humankind. Here, in the layers of ancient volcanic ash, Louis and Mary Leakey uncovered fossilized bones and stone tools that revealed the deep evolutionary roots of our own species. Standing at the rim of the gorge, we could almost feel time stretching beneath our feet—millions of years of life, extinction, and adaptation written in stone.

After absorbing this history, we turned our attention to the present—and to some fabulous birding on the museum grounds. One shaded grove beside the visitor center was astonishingly productive. Brian quipped that it felt as if someone had opened a bird book and every species had flown out. The trees seemed alive with motion and color—so many new birds it was hard to keep pace, a problem every birder loves to have.

Among the highlights was an African Paradise-Flycatcher—unmistakable even in nonbreeding plumage, with its long tail and chestnut wings—surely among the most elegant of African birds. The wonderfully named Mocking Cliff-Chat appeared on a stone windowsill that mimicked its rocky-slope habitat, its bold black-and-chestnut plumage striking even in silence. A pair of Slate-colored Boubous—all-black bushshrikes—traded mellow duets from the undergrowth, while Yellow-breasted Apalis, Black Bishop, and Rufous Chatterer flitted busily through the shrubs. Northern Gray-headed and Kenya Rufous Sparrows joined the



mix, and two dazzling waxbills held our gaze: the Purple Grenadier, glowing violet and chestnut in the sun, and the Red-cheeked Cordonbleu, as delicate as its name suggests.

From Olduvai Gorge, in our Land Rovers we climbed once more toward the Ngorongoro Crater, pausing along the rim to try again for turacos—but the forest stayed quiet.

By late afternoon we descended the crater rim and stopped at a cultural center and art gallery showcasing African craftsmanship—paintings and carvings. Skilled artisans demonstrated how they transform raw blocks of mahogany and teak into lifelike animals using only chisels and other simple tools. We tried our hands at polishing a few pieces and quickly gained new appreciation for the patience and precision behind these masterworks. Some of us browsed the gallery and purchased carvings or pieces of tanzanite—a rare blue-violet gemstone found only in northern Tanzania, formed in metamorphic rock at the base of Mount Kilimanjaro. Its rich color comes from traces of vanadium locked within the crystal lattice of zoisite—hues born of the same elemental forces that forged the mountain itself.

Other members of our group lingered outside, watching weavers—the feathered kind—building intricate grass nests in nearby acacia trees.

Then we headed to our lodge atop an escarpment overlooking Lake Manyara. The Rift Valley view was spectacular—the lake spread below like a sheet of glass reflecting the evening sky, with the lights of small villages twinkling along its shore. Dinner was served outdoors in the soft, warm air of the highlands. The manicured gardens and polished elegance felt like pure luxury, yet many of us confessed to missing the wilder rhythm of the tented camps—the night chorus and the nearness of the untamed. We would return to that world the next day—eager and full of anticipation.

Tues., Oct. 21 Tarangire National Park

Morning birding brought an absolute bonanza of species on a short walk around the lodge grounds. Bronze Sunbirds gleamed metallic green, while Golden-winged Sunbirds flashed yellow in the morning light, mirroring the rising sun. African Green Pigeons fed quietly in fruiting trees. A Northern Red-fronted Tinkerbird—a tiny barbet with a bright red forehead—called with its steady, metronomic *tink-tink-tink*. A Yellow-spotted Bush Sparrow—a bush-dwelling member of the Old World sparrow family—flitted through the acacias, its namesake yellow throat patch a subtle spark of color amid soft brown plumage. Every tree seemed alive with movement and song, a perfect finale to our stay on the Rift Valley escarpment above Lake Manyara.



After breakfast we packed up and drove into a montane forest high on the slopes of Ngorongoro crater rim, hoping once more for turacos. Once again they eluded us, but the forest offered other wonders: a dazzling African Emerald Cuckoo, a clear favorite among the group; a Little Sparrowhawk perched amid the violet blooms of a jacaranda tree; and a swirling flock of Bronze Mannikins, tiny waxbills flashing in coordinated flight—a murmuration in miniature.

By midday we descended from the highlands toward Tarangire National Park, entering a very different world of acacia savanna, winding rivers, and ancient baobab trees. Tarangire, named for the river that flows through its heart, is one of northern Tanzania's great dry-season refuges. As water elsewhere vanishes, animals gather here in astonishing numbers, creating a density of wildlife that rivals any in East Africa.

Before reaching our lodge, we enjoyed a game drive and some superb roadside birding. Ashy Starlings, a Tanzanian endemic confined largely to Tarangire, perched on thorny branches in the sun. We found Bearded Woodpeckers—large and strikingly patterned—along with familiar Nubian and Mountain Gray-headed Woodpeckers in excellent view. White-browed Sparrow-Weavers were everywhere, their sharp black-and-white head pattern unmistakable as they chattered and busied themselves building grass nests. Around them, dozens of inquisitive Vervet Monkeys leapt through the branches and prowled the picnic grounds, curious about everything and everyone.

The highlight of the afternoon was a cluster of Pearl-spotted Owlets. One of these birds would have delighted us; instead, we found four in a single tree, fluttering and calling—a burst of activity from tiny predators whose double-spotted napes mimic eyes to deter attack from behind.

The park's mammals were equally captivating: elephants and giraffes browsing calmly, baboon troops with infants clinging to bellies or riding on backs. Yet the baobab trees may have stolen the show. These ancient giants—some thought to be more than a thousand years old—store immense reserves of water within their spongy trunks, allowing them to survive months of drought. Tarangire's rocky soils and long dry season suit them perfectly, creating a landscape of massive, sculpted trunks where elephants seek shade and sometimes strip bark for moisture.

From our lodge patio we gazed out across the plains to the river below, where hundreds of buffalo, antelope, and elephants crossed in the golden evening light—a scene of breathtaking scale and tranquility. Yellow-collared Lovebirds, another Tanzanian endemic, landed close to us, their colors luminous in the setting sun, while White-bellied Go-away-birds crashed noisily through the branches above. Hornbills seemed to be everywhere—Von der Decken's Hornbills, with males bearing red-and-yellow bills and females all black, and Northern Red-billed Hornbills, both sexes with bright scarlet bills—the species that



inspired Zazu in *The Lion King*. Even the open-air lobby of the lodge hosted birds: Red-winged Starlings perched in the rafters, chattering softly overhead.

As darkness fell, we tallied our ever-growing species list and shared another delicious buffet dinner before being escorted to our tents through the night. Along the path, flashlights caught the silent shapes of elephants feeding nearby. Lions had been seen here days before, we were told—but never a conflict, only mutual respect and caution. Lying in our tents, we listened to the low grunts of lions and the hoots of owls—a stirring lullaby of the wild heart of Africa.

Wed., Oct. 22 Tarangire National Park

The day began with a memorable sunrise—an orange orb lifting through a veil of mist to illuminate the ancient baobabs, their branches silhouetted like roots reaching upward into the sky. In that golden light we followed a tip from the camp cook and found an African Scops-Owl roosting low in a tree. Eyes closed, perfectly camouflaged, it seemed sculpted from the bark itself. Unlike the diurnal Pearl-spotted Owlets we had watched the day before, this nocturnal species demanded quiet respect. We whispered our awe, took a few careful photos, and left it undisturbed to sleep—so it would wake renewed for the night hunt ahead.

Our first destination was a buffalo carcass we had discovered the previous afternoon. It had drawn a congregation of vultures—Rüppell's Griffons among them, new for our list. Named for the German explorer Eduard Rüppell, these giant vultures are among the highest-flying birds on Earth, with one famously recorded colliding with an airplane at 37,000 feet. Their ability to reach such extraordinary altitudes comes from a specialized form of hemoglobin that allows them to absorb oxygen efficiently in thin air. With powerful beaks and down-covered necks, they are built for this essential work on the savannah: recycling death into life.

We then set out across the park, exploring a new sector that led toward Tarangire's great swamp. The route carried us over vast, sun-bleached plains before we crested a rise and saw, to everyone's delight, a sudden wash of vivid green—an oasis nourished by the swamp's permanent water. While pausing for a quick bathroom break before exploring the swamp, we admired White-headed Buffalo-Weavers at close range, their red rumps flashing as one bird chased a Superb Starling from its nest.



The swamp itself was alive with motion and sound. African Jacanas strutted across the floating vegetation, their impossibly long toes spreading their weight as they walked on lily pads. In jacanas, the usual roles of the sexes are reversed: females are larger and more dominant, holding territories and courting multiple males, while the smaller males incubate the eggs and raise the chicks.

Rafts of White-faced Whistling-Ducks paddled through the reeds, their melodious calls filling the air when they flew; among them we also found larger Fulvous Whistling-Ducks. A pale Eastern Chanting-Goshawk perched sentinel-like in an acacia, true to its name with rhythmic, flute-like notes, while above us a Bateleur soared—broad-winged and acrobatic, its short tail giving it a tight, tumbling flight. Nearby a Brown Snake-Eagle perched in regal stillness, its massive head and piercing yellow eyes commanding our full attention.

Everywhere were elephants. Peter showed us how to tell males from females—not by tusk size, which varies widely—but by subtler clues: males with broader, rounder foreheads, females with narrower, more angular profiles. He also explained that elephants, like humans, have dominant “sides.” Their preferred tusk—the one more worn or shorter—is their version of handedness.

We watched families at close range, so near we could hear them tearing grass and see their dexterous trunks in action. Each trunk contains around 40,000 muscles—compared to just 600 in the human body—a miracle of strength and finesse. Calves must learn to control theirs through trial and error, awkwardly swinging it at first. Like us, elephants spend years with their parents learning how to live in their world. Looking into an elephant’s eye, the kinship feels unmistakable—life knowing life.

On the return drive we encountered an endless parade of elephants drawn to Tarangire’s lifeline river in the dry season, a Red-billed Parrot flashing orange in flight, and a flock of cartoon-like White-crested Helmetshrikes whose yellow eye-wattles caught the sunlight. A Nile Monitor swam powerfully through the rapids of a river channel, a reptilian reminder of the park’s ancient pulse.

After lunch and a short rest, we set out again for an afternoon game drive and more birding. Along the dusty tracks we encountered Crested Francolins scurrying into the grass, numerous Red-necked Spurrow, and a couple of Buff-crested Bustards—a new bird for us. The bustards, with their elegant crests and cryptic plumage, blended perfectly with the tawny earth until they broke into a run, their forms vanishing into the tall grass and heat shimmer of the savannah.



That evening we joined park rangers for a night game drive in open-sided vehicles. The rangers operated powerful flashlights—miniature focused suns—as they drove, casting shifting cones of brightness that revealed creatures in the blackness we would never see by day. A Flap-necked Chameleon froze on a roadside branch, allowing close inspection of this beguiling reptile. The eyeshine of Bushbabies glittered from the treetops; these small, big-eyed primates watched us curiously from the shadows, their presence more sensed than seen.

We revisited the buffalo carcass, now taken over by Spotted Hyenas in the dark. Their ghostly forms circled the remains, crunching bones with jaws capable of cracking femurs. Social and intelligent, they are far more than scavengers—cooperative hunters whose clans are matriarchal and highly organized. They paid little heed to our lights, intent on their meal.

Further along we spotted an African Wildcat, nearly indistinguishable from a tabby house cat—its domestic descendant. Common Genets prowled the ground and tightroped across tree branches, while an African Civet slinked through the grass. Though cat-like in form and stealth, genets and civets belong to a different lineage, sharing ancestry with mongooses rather than true felines.

A Slender-tailed Nightjar roosted motionless on the road ahead, its mottled plumage blending perfectly with the dust. When our lights reached it, the bird flushed suddenly, flashing a bold white patch in each wing before vanishing into the dark. Then, to our delight, we saw Springhares—the so-called “African kangaroos.” Despite their name, they are not hares at all but unique nocturnal rodents, bounding away in great hops powered by muscular hind legs and balanced by long tails.

The climax came when the spotlights caught two lions bedded in tall grass beside the road. We watched in silence for several minutes, so close it seemed they could leap into our open jeeps—yet they barely stirred, conserving strength for the hunt to come. Later, as we returned to camp, roars echoed through the river valley below our tents—a deep, resonant farewell from the wild heart of Tarangire.

Thurs., Oct. 23 Return to Arusha | Departures and Kenya Extension

The long drive back to Arusha carried a blend of satisfaction and wistfulness—the feeling of a journey fulfilled yet not quite ready to end. Over a celebratory group lunch we thanked our local guide and drivers and raised a toast to shared success and camaraderie, savoring memories that had already begun to slip into legend. It was time to bid farewell to Gene and Teri, who needed to return home to attend to business.



Their warmth and humor had brightened every day, and though they would be missed on the Kenya extension, we celebrated all we had shared—too many moments to recount in a single meal.

That afternoon, Martin, Amini, and Peter generously offered an unscheduled bonus birding session for the six remaining guests—Chris, Don, Jan, David, Lori, Brian—and me on the Maasai Steppe. This vast landscape of rolling acacia woodland stretched beneath a boundless sky, a habitat reminiscent of what we had explored in Tarangire and elsewhere on our journey yet lying on the western fringe of the range for many species. The blend of familiar scenery and new birds was exhilarating.

Martin played a recording of the Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird, and almost instantly the air filled with life—a teeming mixed flock that seemed to materialize from nowhere. Among the newcomers was a White-headed Mousebird—a thrilling find and the only time we saw the species on the tour. It completed a trio of mousebirds for the day: the familiar Speckled and the handsome Blue-naped, all three sporting tall crests and long, graduated tails that made them instantly recognizable in flight. True to their name, they bounced through the branches like nimble little rodents, a distinctive motion that always brought smiles to our faces.

Then came a burst of brilliance: a Green-winged Pytilia, new for the tour, its scarlet face and emerald shoulders glowing against the pale thorn scrub—a real stunner that drew gasps from the group. Also new was a Pygmy Batis, while the Chinspot Batis—one of the first birds we'd seen on the tour—made a return appearance. Batises are tiny, active insect-eaters of the African bush, relatives of the shrikes but far smaller and more delicate, their bold patterns of black, white, and chestnut giving them a dapper, almost toy-like appearance. Nearby, Blue-capped Cordonbleus flashed soft azure and cinnamon—jewels in the dry bush—while Purple Grenadiers flitted among them, their violet and chestnut hues every bit as lovely. Even the females, in subtler tones, held their own in the contest of color.

In the same patch of brush, a Red-fronted Prinia moved restlessly through the branches—a small, active member of the cisticola family, its rufous crown glowing in the light. Its tail was cocked and wagged from side to side, the movement visible even through the cover; then the bird flew in close, offering us an excellent view before vanishing again into the tangle of thorns. Nearby, a Yellow-bellied Eremomela—another lively cisticola relative—flitted through the acacias in quick, darting bursts, its yellow underparts bright against the pale bark. Like others of their clan, the prinias and eremomelas were more easily heard than seen, their quick, repetitive calls weaving through the soundscape of the East African drylands. Abyssinian Scimitarbills cut striking profiles as they perched among the flurry of smaller birds, their long, decurved bills gleaming like orange scythes in the afternoon light.



As dusk gathered, we returned to our lodge for the final species checklist of the main tour—pages dense with names, each one a story. Conversation turned to favorite sightings, favorite moments, and the quiet wonder of realizing how much we had seen and learned in such a short span. Tomorrow we would rise early to begin phase two of our adventure—the Kenya extension—but for this night, we rested content, the sounds and sights of wild Africa still alive in our minds.

Post-Tour Extension to Amboseli & Nairobi National Parks

We skirted the bustle of Arusha on rural roads, pausing at a small wetland where a rich lineup of waterbirds greeted us: African Spoonbills gleaming white in the sun, Sacred Ibis probing the shallows, and both Little and Great Egrets standing side by side—the smaller with its black bill and yellow feet, the larger tall and elegant with a dagger-like yellow bill.

When we arrived at the Lark Plains in the rain shadow of Mount Meru, two Lanner Falcons stood on the ground, one suddenly pouncing on unseen prey. These sleek hunters recall Peregrine Falcons in shape and bearing, sharing the dark malar stripes that shade their eyes from the sun. Yet their plumage is warmer—the upperparts slate-gray brushed with brown, the underparts streaked rufous—and their hunting style is more earthbound than aerial. Peregrines take to the heights, stooping from cliffs or city towers; Lanners sweep low and fast over open ground, masters of pursuit across Africa's grasslands and savannas. Watching them hunt the plain, we felt the harmony of form and function shaped by the open sky.

Our target was one of East Africa's rarest and most localized birds: Beesley's Lark, found only on a few square miles of these arid plains near Engikaret. With the help of Maasai community guides—participants in a conservation project that compensates them for protecting the lark's fragile habitat and leading birders to its secret haunts—we soon had it in view. A small, earth-toned bird blending perfectly with the stony ground, Beesley's Lark is a master of understatement, its presence known more by soft trills than by motion. To see it here felt like both a privilege and a responsibility—a reminder of how community stewardship safeguards even the most range-restricted species.

Nearby, a Capped Wheatear performed its buoyant flight display, fluttering upward on white-edged wings before gliding back to the ground with a cheerful *chit-chit-chit*. Perched atop a low termite mound, its white cap gleamed against the dun-colored plain—a spark of brightness in the vast expanse.



From there we drove north toward the border, crossing into Kenya at Namanga. It was time to bid farewell to our Tanzanian team—Martin, Amini, and Peter. We might one day forget some of the birds we saw or the encounters with megafauna, but we will never forget Amini’s smile, Peter’s laughter, and Martin’s kindness. This big-hearted trio left us as fond of the people of Tanzania as we were of its wild creatures.

On the Kenyan side we met our new guide, Kalama, and our new drivers, Charles and another Martin. When the introductions brought laughter about the name confusion, Kenyan Martin quipped that the Tanzanian Martin was the “Plain Martin” and he was the “Banded Martin”—a nickname that stuck immediately. True to his name, “Banded Martin” promptly found us a new bird from the driver’s seat: a Rosy-patched Bushshrike, its salmon-pink breast glowing in the thorn scrub—a delightful omen for the days to come.

After driving east along gravel roads, we entered Amboseli National Park—a land shaped by water and time. The park lies in the bed of a long-vanished Pleistocene lake, its name derived from a Maasai word meaning “salty, dusty place.” Subterranean springs fed by the snowmelt and rains of Mount Kilimanjaro emerge here, sustaining lush green swamps that attract both wildlife and birds in abundance. It is a landscape of contrasts: mirages shimmer where the heat bends light, yet the marshes pulse with life.

Our progress to the lodge was slow in the best possible way—every stop revealing another marvel. Along the shallow pools, two new plover species—Kittlitz’s and Chestnut-banded—picked delicately through the mud. The latter, a Near Threatened species of Africa’s saline and soda lakes, had followed the shifting rains and food supply to Amboseli’s pools, drawn by the same mineral-rich waters that give the park its name. Red-knobbed Coots, with their namesake scarlet bumps gleaming above white frontal shields, floated in tight-packed rafts, the birds so close together they seemed to merge into a single dark mass as they fed on aquatic vegetation. A White-backed Duck, one of Africa’s few true divers, disappeared and reappeared in smooth rhythm—slipping beneath the surface and rising again with effortless buoyancy. Above the shallows, Whiskered, Gull-billed, and White-winged Terns hovered and dropped toward the water, snatching insects and small fish in agile dives. Goliath Herons, the tallest of all herons, stalked the reeds, while Great White Pelicans glided across the mirrored expanse, their reflections wavering in the heat haze. It was a land of giants—pelicans and herons immense against the shining water sheets that spread across the vast plain.

And soon the greatest giants of all appeared, rising from the marshes in stately procession—elephants wading through the reeds, their reflections rippling in the shallow water, the living embodiment of Amboseli’s wild heart.



At our lodge, Taveta Golden-Weavers flitted among the trees, their yellow plumage glowing against the greenery, while Red-billed Firefinches added sparks of crimson to the grass. As night fell, bats swooped through the warm air, and beyond the electric fence, zebras, wildebeest, and elephants grazed under the stars. Even lions and hyenas sometimes patrolled just beyond that narrow perimeter, their voices drifting through the darkness. At dawn, Hadada Ibises delivered their raucous greetings from the lawns—Africa’s alarm clock.

Inside the dining hall that evening, the atmosphere was warm and full of life. John, the chef, served a generous buffet—spaghetti, pork chops, Indian curries, and fresh salads—while our attentive waitress, Susan, delivered savory soups and made sure everyone felt at home. Midway through dinner, a birthday celebration erupted. The lodge staff broke into rhythmic song and dance as they paraded a cake to the table of a lucky guest. Their harmonies filled the room—rich, joyful, and utterly contagious—a reminder of how deeply the culture of song and dance runs through Africa.

Our spirits soared. We had two full days ahead in one of the continent’s legendary landscapes—a haven for elephants, birds, and dreams alike.

Sat., Oct. 25 Amboseli National Park

For our first of two full days of safari in Amboseli National Park, we needed only to drive a few hundred yards beyond the lodge gates to find a flood of life. We watched Winding Cisticolas at close range, their tails flicking as they flitted between low perches. Mosque Swallows and Lesser Striped Swallows perched and flew among the ubiquitous Barn Swallows, their chestnut rumps catching the sun. A Gray-headed Kingfisher flashed its vivid red bill and a dazzling wash of blue across its wings and tail. Along a marshy verge we found a Common Snipe, joined by a wealth of shorebirds—from Green Sandpiper to Common Greenshank—feeding busily in the shallows.

Black Crakes, unusually confiding members of the rail family, walked boldly in the open, their yellow bills and crimson legs gleaming in the light—a striking contrast to the shy Virginia Rails and Soras of home. Overhead, Egyptian Geese wheeled past, flashing broad white panels across their wings as they flew, every motion reflecting the vitality of the landscape.

Memorable elephant encounters filled the morning. We often switched off the vehicle and sat quietly, listening to the soft tearing of grass and the low rumble of communication among these giants—sounds



that include infrasound, vibrations so deep they travel through the ground for miles, carrying messages between distant herds.

Amboseli is known as the “home of elephants,” and rightly so. The park shelters one of Kenya’s largest elephant populations—about 1,500 individuals—and offers unparalleled opportunities to watch them in their natural habitat. Fed by underground water from nearby Mount Kilimanjaro, Amboseli’s marshes and woodlands sustain vast herds even through the dry season. The elephants here have become remarkably accustomed to vehicles, allowing close observation of their family interactions—the quiet play of calves, the gentle authority of age.

It was here that Cynthia Moss began her groundbreaking long-term study more than fifty years ago, revealing elephants as deeply social and emotional beings. Her research documented the vital role of matriarchs as repositories of knowledge—remembering routes, drought refuges, and even the calls of long-lost kin. Today, Amboseli remains both a refuge and a living laboratory for understanding elephant society. Yet their future depends on protecting wildlife corridors that link the park with surrounding rangelands, for these animals roam far beyond park boundaries. With climate change and rising human pressures threatening the springs that sustain Amboseli’s marshes, the need for connected landscapes has never been more urgent.

Watching a matriarch lead her family across the shimmering plain, Mount Kilimanjaro rising ghostlike beyond the haze, we felt both awe and humility. In their patient steps and low, seismic voices lay the story of Africa itself—ancient, enduring, and profoundly alive.

Across the parched plains we searched for larks, discovering many Red-capped, Fawn-colored, and Short-tailed, their sandy hues rendering them nearly invisible until they moved. Perfect camouflage for survival—if a bit maddening for birders new to Africa’s subtle palette of savannah larks. Fortunately, we were in expert hands with Kalama, Charles and Martin, who found even the most cryptic forms.

A Greater Kestrel stood boldly on the ground—a thrill to see, like an American Kestrel on steroids, larger and paler but with the same sharp, predatory energy. Tiny African Silverbills tested our eyesight as they flicked through thorny acacias—little finch-sized waxbills so perfectly matched to their surroundings they seemed to vanish between the thorns. Easier to spot was the Eastern Chanting-Goshawk, perched high atop the same tree, regal and motionless, its slate-gray plumage gleaming in the sun.

After lunch and a brief rest, we set out again. Pied Kingfishers hovered and dove for fish, their sharp calls carrying over the water. An African Fish-Eagle perched beside the road with a freshly caught fish, its white head and tail gleaming in the sun. Its bold plumage and fishing prowess recall our familiar Bald Eagle—its



close relative in the same sea-eagle genus—yet its ringing, yodeling cry sets it apart, echoing across Africa’s waterways as an emblem of the wild. Like its American cousin, this African eagle is both a skilled hunter and an opportunist, as ready to steal a meal as to earn it with a plunge of talons.

Over the wetlands, Collared Pratincoles wheeled and swooped—graceful aerial hunters with forked tails and swift, swallow-like flight. Though close relatives of coursers, which run across dry ground, pratincoles have taken to the air, hawking insects on the wing above the water’s surface.

An African Spoonbill swept its spatula-shaped bill rhythmically through the shallows, while a Malachite Kingfisher—no larger than a child’s fist—glowed jewel-bright on a reed stem. Yellow-necked Spurfowl scuttled everywhere, and we paused to study a Mourning Collared-Dove, noting how its plumage and call differ from the ubiquitous Ring-necked Dove we’d encountered daily. On the road ahead, an Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove revealed its subtle beauty—its wing spots appearing black until caught by sunlight, when they flashed brilliant green.

Nearby, White-winged Widowbirds flitted through the grasses in their modest nonbreeding plumage—brown, streaked, and easily overlooked. In the breeding season, males transform dramatically: their tails lengthen into streaming plumes, and their bodies turn inky black with bold white wing patches that they display in fluttering courtship flights over the savanna. Even without their finery, these birds carried the promise of that spectacle, another reminder of Africa’s endless cycles of change and renewal.

As the light waned, a Kori Bustard strode through the grass, appearing enormous against the sunset. A hippo grazed voraciously where the spoonbill had earlier probed for invertebrates, while flocks of Glossy Ibises winged past, their sickle silhouettes crossing the crimson disk of the sun. Amboseli glowed with evening life—the park’s wetlands mirroring the fiery sky. And yet our time here was not done; one more day awaited us to explore its many wonders.

Sun., Oct. 26 Amboseli National Park

At the start of our morning game and bird drive, we found another Common Snipe, probing the soft mud with its long, flexible bill—and then came a real surprise: a Greater Painted-Snipe. Much larger and more colorful than the other snipes we’d seen, this species belongs to an entirely different family. Unlike true snipes, which probe deep into mud for worms and grubs, painted-snipes walk slowly along the marsh edge, picking insects, snails, and seeds from the surface.



We had excellent views of the male, his plumage patterned in soft browns and creams, but the female—the more striking bird with chestnut tones and bold white crescents around the eyes—remained hidden in the reeds. In this species, the usual roles are reversed: females court males and defend territories, while males incubate the eggs and care for the young. Even unseen, she added a touch of mystery to the encounter—a hidden partner in one of nature’s surprising pairings.

Next we set out on a “cat quest,” hoping to witness lions or cheetahs on the hunt. Within minutes, drama unfolded: a Spotted Hyena was being harried by a Plains Zebra, tables turned in a reversal of roles. Soon after, we located lions in tall grass—females with a cub—while a Black-backed Jackal barked defiantly nearby, perhaps defending a hidden den. The lions vanished into a thicket, and moments later a clan of hyenas appeared. One female lion burst from cover and charged, scattering them in an explosion of power. When the dust settled, she retrieved her cub and melted back into the brush.

The rivalry between lions and hyenas is as old as the savanna itself—two apex predators locked in eternal competition. They often steal kills from each other, and both species hunt the other’s young when given the chance. Hyenas outnumber lions and rely on teamwork and endurance; lions rely on strength and surprise. Their encounters are tests of dominance played out across the plains, shaping the balance of Africa’s predator hierarchy.

Farther on, a bull elephant stood alone before the snowy crown of Mount Kilimanjaro, a quintessential Amboseli scene. As we watched an elephant herd nearby, another hyena chased a Thomson’s Gazelle, which responded with energetic stotting—vertical leaps that advertise strength and fitness. The gazelle escaped, proof of that evolutionary message.

While we drove, Common Ostriches dotted the plain—at least two dozen in view, including a remarkable group of eight females. Ostriches practice communal nesting, with several females laying in a single nest tended cooperatively. The drab brown females blend into the grass by day as they incubate the eggs, while the black-plumed males take the night shift, their dark feathers concealing them as they sit in darkness.

A pair of Little Bee-eaters added color to the sere savanna, as they had many times on our tour. One bird sallied from its perch and returned with an insect in its beak, a flicker of green and gold against the tawny grass. Next, a Banded Parus kept us entertained, flitting back and forth between two trees like a tennis ball in play. Much larger and impossible to miss was a Martial Eagle—its immense form commanding attention even from a distance. The lack of dark chest spots marked it as an immature bird, yet its bulk still dwarfed the Black-winged Kite we spotted moments later—a vivid lesson in contrasts of scale and power.



Word came of lions ahead. We arrived just in time to see them fleeing—not from us, but from a herd of Cape Buffalo. The predators had likely attempted to isolate a calf, but buffalo are formidable defenders, forming a circle with horns outward while dominant bulls charge. The lions retreated across the plain, their pride momentarily humbled, their speed astonishing. We marveled at our timing; moments later, as other vehicles arrived, the scene was already over.

On the drive back for lunch we admired a pair of Spotted Thick-knees resting near the road—nocturnal hunters with big, owl-like eyes that stalk insects by night. We'd seen many Water Thick-knees, always near water, but this dry-country cousin epitomized adaptation to arid life. A few hundred yards farther on, a lone Spotted Hyena trotted beside the road, vanished through a culvert, and re-emerged on the far side, padding toward a shallow pond where flamingos stood mirrored in pink reflection.

After lunch and a rest, we ventured into the heart of Amboseli one last time. Birding was superb: a Pearl-spotted Owlet sat in plain view, mobbed by a boisterous mixed flock—Black-necked Weavers, a Yellow-spotted Bush-Sparrow, a Tropical Boubou, and a Buff-bellied Warbler among them. Such mobbing is a collective defense against small owls that prey on songbirds. The Pearl-spotted Owlet's own "false eyes" on the back of its head help deter attacks from behind from larger raptors.

A Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike then stole the show—impossibly bright, its lemon-yellow and orange chest and bold black mask gleaming among acacia branches. Despite its skulking habits, we all had satisfying looks.

As evening deepened, we watched another Malachite Kingfisher poised above a pool where hippos grazed, and beyond them, flamingos traced soft pink reflections across the water. The setting sun turned the lake to molten orange—the sky, the birds, and the land glowing as one. It was perhaps the finest sunset of the entire journey, a perfect farewell to Amboseli's wonderland.

Just before we reached the gates of our lodge, a pair of Gray Crowned-Cranes stood silhouetted in the trees—the only cranes in the world that roost above the ground. Their tree-roosting habit is thought to be a holdover from ancient ancestors that nested in forests long before the open grasslands of Africa spread and our species evolved here. As their golden crests caught the last light of day, all the timeless beauty of East Africa seemed to gather in those birds—poised between earth and sky, dusk and dawn.



Mon., Oct. 27 Drive to Nairobi | Nairobi National Park

We left Amboseli with hearts full and cameras brimming. Before we reached the park gate, an enormous tusker stepped onto the road ahead—his ivory nearly brushing the ground.

A tusker is an elephant—usually a mature bull—whose tusks each weigh more than a hundred pounds. Once common across Africa, these giants have become vanishingly rare. Decades of poaching for ivory have stripped the continent of its largest-tusked individuals, favoring those with smaller tusks or none at all. In some heavily hunted populations, more than half of all elephants are now born tuskless—a stark example of evolution unfolding within a single human lifetime. Amboseli remains one of the last refuges where these great bulls still roam.

He came steadily toward us, vast and deliberate—a living colossus—and we backed up, keeping a respectful distance; he kept coming, and we kept retreating. The air itself seemed to hold its breath as he passed, a moving monument of endurance and power, the embodiment of Africa’s wild inheritance. Long after we left, his presence lingered with us—the measure of true greatness.

While waiting at the park gate to exit, we admired Gray-capped Social Weavers busily entering and leaving their neatly woven nests. Among them appeared a Northern Crombec—its tail so short it seemed tailless, a hallmark of this group of African warblers. Crombecs belong to a family of Old World warblers—relatives of cisticolas and prinias—quite distinct from the vividly colored New World warblers familiar to North American birders. Both groups fill similar ecological roles, their resemblances shaped not by kinship but by convergent evolution on separate continents—a story that echoed throughout our tour.

Leaving the park behind, we spotted a small group of Gerenuk—a male and three females. These graceful “giraffe antelopes” are perfectly named: with long necks and slender limbs, they stand upright on their hind legs to browse high shrubs, stretching for leaves beyond the reach of other antelope.

Turning west onto the highway from Mombasa to Nairobi, we began our long drive to the city. After weeks immersed in wild landscapes, entering the bustling metropolis felt surreal. Traffic roared where elephants once walked.

Our hotel—a gleaming tower of glass and steel—overlooked Nairobi National Park, a living paradox of wilderness and modernity. Established in 1946, it remains one of the only national parks on Earth that borders a major city. Lions, rhinos, and giraffes roam against a skyline bristling with skyscrapers—a



powerful reminder that the wild and the urban need not be enemies, and that humans can, with care, coexist with our wild kin.

An afternoon shower rinsed the sky and settled the dust. After lunch we headed back into the park as the clouds parted, the scent of petrichor lingering in the air—a fragrance born when rain meets parched earth. The smell comes from plant oils that build up during dry periods and from an organic compound released by soil-dwelling bacteria when raindrops strike the ground. It’s the same scent that rises from the deserts of the American Southwest after a long drought, or from the dusty savannas of East Africa at the end of the dry season—an aroma that carries both memory and renewal.

It was our final safari, and after glimpsing familiar birds like Fork-tailed Drongo and Speckled Mousebird, our long-awaited turaco quest reached its triumph. A Hartlaub’s Turaco flew toward us and landed in full view on a snag, its emerald and blue plumage and crimson wings glowing in the freshly washed light. It was among the most spectacular birds of the tour—a living jewel against the soft green backdrop of the hills.

We cracked on, spotting a Marabou Stork perched high in a tree with a pair of African Hawk-Eagles resting below. Farther on, a wetland shimmered with life. African Darters, close relatives of both cormorants and New World anhingas, spread their wings in the sun—striking a gothic pose that earned them the nickname “Count Dracula birds.” When swimming, their bodies stay submerged while only the long, sinuous neck and head rise above the surface, creating the illusion of a serpent gliding through the water and inspiring another name: “snakebird.” Like cormorants, darters dive for fish but have feathers that are only partially waterproof—allowing them to slip easily beneath the surface yet requiring them to dry afterward in the open air, a familiar sight along Africa’s wetlands and rivers, and another new bird for our tour.

A large eagle perched nearby proved to be a Steppe Eagle, distinguishable from the more common Tawny Eagle by its longer gape that extends behind the eye—a traveler, like us, crossing continents in its search for sustenance.

Deeper in the park, game was initially sparse—just a few female impalas grazing—but then the landscape seemed to awaken. We came upon lions lounging on both sides of the road, including a magnificent male with a full mane. Beyond this regal beast stood two Black Rhinos, thrilling to behold—massive, shy, and critically endangered. Later, Common Eland, the largest of antelope, moved through the grasslands, their swinging dewlaps and spiraled horns catching the light.

Then, around a bend, our driver Martin pointed ahead—“There!”—and delivered on his promise of White Rhinos. An adult and her calf grazed in the distance, the youngster’s second horn still just a stub, not yet fully formed. The square mouths of these grazers—so different from the hooked lips of the browsing Black



Rhino—were perfectly adapted for cropping grass, a design sculpted by millennia of evolution on Africa's open plains.

Moments later, a report crackled over the radio: more White Rhinos close to the road we had just traveled. We backtracked and found them—a mother and calf so near we could hear the soft tearing of grass. The mother fed peacefully while the youngster darted about playfully, the setting sun bathing them in rose and gold.

As we drove on through dusk toward the park gate, two rhinos wielding enormous horns stepped onto the road, forcing us once again to back up—bookends to a day that had begun with a tusker in Amboseli pressing us into reverse.

Rhinos are among Earth's most ancient mammals, their lineage stretching back over 50 million years to the Eocene. To see them here, surviving at the edge of a modern city, was profoundly moving—a living link across geological time, a testament to the ability of our species to preserve the wild. As darkness fell, we left the park and crossed again into Nairobi's glowing sprawl, passing from one world into another.

That night we gathered for our final checklist and farewell dinner, toasting the extraordinary journey we had shared—from the highlands of Arusha to the endless plains of the Serengeti, from Tarangire's baobabs to the elephants of Amboseli, and finally to the rhinos beneath a sunset fading into city lights.

As our journey was nearing its end, the stories of the land and its life remained intertwined in our thoughts—the adaptations, the convergences, the echoes across continents and species. Even the creatures that felt most familiar to us—sunbirds recalling hummingbirds, hornbills resembling toucans, longclaws evoking meadowlarks, weavers mirroring the artistry of orioles—had been shaped by convergent evolution into forms and behaviors we recognized, yet they belonged to a world apart. And still, all life is ultimately one, for we descend from a common ancestor and all living things follow the same fundamental laws. The rules of the Serengeti—the balance between cooperation and competition, birth and death, energy and renewal—govern life at every scale, from the cells within us to the ecosystems that sustain us.

To travel here is to glimpse that unity, to feel evolution's hand shaping forms both strange and known, and to sense our own place within that ancient story. We left Africa changed—humbled by its wildness, uplifted by its beauty, and profoundly aware that the circle of life we witnessed is also our own.

Tues., Oct. 28 Departures from Nairobi

Our final morning offered time to gather our thoughts and prepare for the long journey home, while still savoring the richness of Africa one last time. Some guests returned to Nairobi National Park, seeking a final glimpse of its wild inhabitants beneath the city skyline. Others visited the Karen Blixen House—once home to the author of “Out of Africa”—and the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Orphanage, where orphaned elephant calves are cared for until they can return to the wild.



By afternoon, thunderheads were building on the horizon—the short rains beginning. This season, which typically lasts from late October through December, brings intense, localized downpours separated by bright intervals of sun. These rains revive the land after months of drought, painting the savanna green again. The smell of wet earth rose through the city, that familiar scent of renewal, as we said our goodbyes.

We left Kenya as the rains returned, the cycle continuing—dust to water, drought to bloom. The storms rolled over the savanna, washing the plains we had crossed and the rivers where elephants drink. Circles and cycles, endings and beginnings. We carried Africa with us, knowing that while our journey had reached its end, its echoes—of thunder, birdsong, and memory—would go on.

Photos: Group (Stephen Grace - SG), African Savanna Elephant (SG), Plains Zebras and Maasai Giraffe (SG), Von der Decken's Hornbills (SG), Blue Monkey (SG), Taveta Golden-Weaver (SG), Masai Giraffe (SG), Arusha National Park (SG), Plains Zebras (SG), African Buffalo (SG), Little Bee-eater (SG), Maasai (SG), Serval (SG), African Lion (SG), Eastern Double-collared Sunbird (SG), Common Hippopotamuses and African Savanna Elephant (SG), Black-bellied Bustard (SG), Marabou Stork (SG), Plains Zebra (SG), African Savanna Elephant (SG), Spotted Hyena (SG), Ngorongoro National Park (SG), Cheetah (SG), Ngorongoro National Park (SG), Maasai (SG), African Lion with cub (SG), African Leopard (SG), Saddle-billed Stork (SG), Serengeti National Park (SG), Balloon Safari (SG), Masai Giraffe (SG), Southern Ground-Hornbill (SG), Long-crested Eagle (SG), Speke's Weaver (SG), African Buffalo (SG), Common Wildebeest (SG), African Scops-Owl (SG), Kirk's Dik-dik (SG), Sunrise at Tarangire National Park (SG), Lilac-breasted Roller (SG), Common Warthog with Piglet (SG), African Leopard (SG), African Savanna Elephants (SG), Flap-necked Chameleon (SG), Purple Grenadier (SG), African Savanna Elephant (SG), Mount Kilimanjaro viewed from Amboseli National Park (SG), African Fish Eagle (SG), Spotted Hyena (SG), Lesser Flamingos (SG), Spotted Thick-knee (SG), Common Ostrich (female) (SG), Malachite Kingfisher (SG), African Savanna Elephant (SG), Great White Pelicans (SG), Spotted Hyena and Lesser Flamingos (SG), Pearl-spotted Owlet (SG), Nile Crocodile (SG), White Rhinoceros (SG), Nairobi on right / Nairobi National Park on left (SG)