

# Tanzania Wildlife Safari | Trip Report

## February 6 – 18, 2018 | Written by Peg Abbott



**With Guides Peg Abbott and Preston Mutinda with driver/guides Willy and John and participants Susan, Jan, Bob, Joan, Robert, and Anita**

This safari included a pre-trip extension to Kenya January 31 – February 5, 2018.

### **Sun., Feb. 5 Early Arrivals**

The time had finally come to begin our African safari! Preston and our two that had explored Kenya on the pre-tour, Jan and Susan, met up at Amboseli Gate in Kenya with Rob and Anita, who were coming from time at a private reserve, and they all had a fun morning in Amboseli National Park seeing an incredible array of water birds and many Elephants. Peg arrived at the African Tulip Hotel with some time to rest up and we met up for a nice dinner at the end of the day. Our final two would arrive tomorrow, Joan and Bob, to complete the flock.



### **Mon., Feb. 6 Arusha National Park**

We had a wonderful breakfast with fresh and varied ingredients, and three of us headed out, passing through the bustling city of Arusha on an optional outing to Arusha National Park, a nearby forested area on the slopes of Mt. Meru. It was a lovely day, and at the gate checking in we could see both Mt. Meru and way off in the distance, Kilimanjaro. We read the interpretive signs, and found several species including a Fork-tailed Drongo on her nest.

We stopped at several open areas in the forest for first sightings of mammals (Giraffe, Zebra, Buffalo) and were delighted to find several groups of Black-and-white Colobus Monkeys, always active and playful.



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Two lakes in a chain make for prime birding, and we were lucky to find the only flamingoes of this trip, about 50 Lesser, mostly immatures, and one Greater.

We came and went through the Momella Gate, and though wind affected our finding of a lot of the smaller birds, we had good looks at Collared Sunbird, Isabelline Shrike, Black Sawwing, White-fronted and Little Bee-eaters, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Chinspot Batis, a lone Broad-billed Roller and more. Helmeted Guineafowl, another icon of the region, were plentiful. We had 73 species this day, a good start!



Bob and Joan joined us for dinner, hosted by Peg, and we enjoyed introductions and an overview of the next day. For several it was a first trip to Africa, all would be new! We were all eager to be off on safari in the morning.

### **Tues., Feb. 7 Arusha to Tarangire**

Our drivers John and Willy were all smiles to greet us, and as we headed out for the day we all learned a few important Swahili words, starting with “Jambo!” for hello. The first part of the drive was a kaleidoscope of city and then rural life, with markets, stores, various means of transport including some ox carts, and many school children in uniforms heading off to school.



We made good time on the paved road and soon were in an area of pasture land, with the colorful culture of the Maasai. Small children commanded large herds of goats, sheep, and donkeys, running to keep them off the road with a surprising mastery of the task at hand. Women carried water and bundles on their heads, gracefully walking across fields that held Abdim's and European White Storks as well as cattle.



We saw the turn-off to Lake Manyara and Serengeti to which we'd return, but ventured on a bit more to turn to the south (Bob trying to get his bearings on the sun at noon and its shadows in the southern hemisphere) to Tarangire National Park.



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The gate area has a few massive Baobab trees and it gave us a welcome excuse to stretch our legs and bird for a bit. Yellow-collared Lovebirds were present in number, and two Woodland Kingfishers put on a good show. We spied the first Tawny Eagle way off in the distance, but close at hand the first Lilac-breasted Roller showing off all its splendor of colors. Joan was delighted, this bird being high on her list of those she wanted to see. We browsed the wares of local vendors at the park gate, opened up the roof hatches of our Land Cruisers, and wound our way through the park to Tarangire Sopa Lodge.



This park is one of the most scenic in Africa, other-worldly with its huge Baobabs combined with red soils and high, russet-red termite mounds. Birds and Elephants are plentiful! We found our first improbable Ostrich and admired the very common, but beautiful Superb Starling. Four species of francolins were enjoying the seeds of a lush crop of grasses; Red-necked, Yellow-necked, Crested, and the little Cocoli. Green Wood-Hoopoe probed in the bark of big trees, Gray Hornbills called their repetitive chorus, and we had a good introduction to the gaudy and vocal Bare-faced Go-Away-Bird.



Our lodge was very comfortable. In the night, about 2:00 AM, Jan said a big male Elephant walked right down the path just outside our rooms. We also heard Pearl-spotted Owlets calling. This is Africa!



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### Wed., Feb. 8 The Magic of Tarangire National Park: Baobabs, Elephants, Big Cats & More!

Right off the bat we had a pair of African Hawk Eagles, odd-looking raptors with their colorful and enlarged ceres, greeting us from sculptured dead snag just off the road. A pair of beautiful Black-backed Jackals were making the rounds and marking territory, while a mother Warthog with young trotted away from us with tail held high on alert. Before too long, “binocular eyes” Willy spied a huge black-maned male Lion asleep on the river bank at some distance. This was all good, but the real show this morning was Elephants, so many groups, and by parking near them we took in so much behavior. We watched them dust bathe and drink water from a pool, watched their interactions, and marveled as one huge bull stepped over a rounded termite mound to use it as the perfect belly scratch, pushing on it in earnest to get a good rub. While they are hard as concrete we were amazed it held up to this two-ton test and it was obviously not the first time he’d done this. One adolescent came over to a group of even younger individuals already active and scuffling with each other. He entered into the game, throwing himself flat down on the ground, which caused quite a commotion, with the little ones mounting his larger hulk and pushing him as if to right him, with heads and butts — ears flapping all the while.



It was finally only our grumbling stomachs that urged





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us on. Rounding the bend we saw a few vehicles with people looking to the left — on a prominent dead and down tree stood a lioness looking quite regal as she surveyed the surrounding open country. She was up quite high, and nowhere near as nimble as a Leopard. At one point she started to lie down, missed a step and plopped quite hard, stomach on the limb. She posed there for some time, continuing her survey, and then awkwardly turned around, only to appear regal again, this time in the opposite direction. Two other lionesses were in the grass nearby. Finally, she joined them to rest, and we returned for lunch at the lodge.

They served lunch around the pool, a pretty spectacular buffet with fresh grilled meats and vegetables and an extensive salad bar. Around us were numerous distractions: endemic Red-winged Starling, Rock Hyrax scampering about, and colorful Red-headed Agama. This was a first Africa trip for Bob and Joan and they recounted highlights of the morning, in disbelief at the steady stream of animal sightings, one richer than the next. Safari was well underway!

We took a rest after lunch and headed out at 4:00 PM, the typical time for our afternoon drives. We followed a scenic route down along the Tarangire River, first passing through an avenue of grand old Baobab trees spaced to create a park-like setting. Between them were deep red termite mounds, some as tall as the Land Cruiser. We found a pair of White-headed Vultures comfortable atop a large acacia of the riverine area, a few Rueppel's and White-backed in with them, but no discernable sign of a carcass.

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Across from them several male buffaloes were wallowing in mud, grand old men at the spa. There were quiet displays of dominance as the strongest claimed the best part of the pool. They went in until just heads and shoulders were showing, and came out dripping huge clumps of mud. Near them we watched two delicate Double-banded Coursers in the short grass. Continuing on, Willy stopped the vehicle quite quickly, and to our surprise right above our head's was a Verreaux's Eagle Owl, staring down from us practically right over the road! He seemed massive as he opened his big eyes to see what disturbed his rest.



Time passed quickly. En route back we enjoyed sightings of several Black-faced Sandgrouse, a group of Dwarf Mongoose on red termite mounds, Pangani's Longclaw (a bird that suggests our meadowlark, though of no relation), a curious Kirk's Dik-dik pair, and near to our lodge, the resident herd of Common Waterbuck.



Dinner was served buffet style, with choices of several meats and pasta, and some nice roasted vegetables. All too many choices for desserts! The staff sang for us and their voices rang out strong under the huge thatch roof, magical!

### **Thurs., Feb. 9 Tarangire to Ndutu, Lunch at the Rim of Ngorongoro Crater | Wildebeest Herds**



We had the early part of the morning in Tarangire, leaving as we would most days, at 6:30 AM following breakfast. Preston tried to call in a Pearl-spotted Owl that had called much of the night, but it showed little interest. We checked the latest phase in the building of a Red-headed Weaver pair making a nest, the first day they'd made the frame and today they were busy filling it in. Then we drove out through what seemed to be an avenue of Baobab trees, wonderful!

Today was largely a travel day, with almost 300 km to

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go before we'd reach our lodge at Ndutu. Ndutu is in an area of short grass plains where phosphorous and other minerals in the soil are pleasing to calving Wildebeest. It is the end point of their great migration, and they linger here for much of February in a typical year.



Our route took us up the western wall of the Great Rift Valley, a dramatic climb from which we had grand views of a long length of the escarpment. It was verdant and green, quite in contrast to what we'd find at Ndutu. Atop the rift we entered the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Gate, lands part of the Serengeti ecosystem but managed by the tribes, adjacent but outside of the National Park.

Our first stop past the gate was a viewpoint looking down into the Crater. This was a great lunch stop for our picnic with a view! Willy gave us an overview of the formation and ecological significance of the area.

A great cloud show played on the crater floor, and we could see big herds of Buffalo, Zebra, and Wildebeest as little dots far below. We would venture down into the crater later on in our journey; today was a sneak preview. There were birds of the lush rim forest here: Montane White-eye, Olive Thrush, and an Oriole Finch to name a few. Over the crater several Black Saw-wing fed on the wing and an elegant Marshall Eagle flew by.



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As we left the crater, winding through a very scenic landscape of now mostly-dormant mountain volcanoes, Maasai villages and wind-sculpted acacia trees, we found a curious sight, over 60 Giraffe in a group over on a ridge line. Giraffe are not comfortable with the steep forested descent to the inner part of the crater and are not found there. This group appearing in such density suggested they had backed up at the no-pass zone and now were turning back, working out the next stage of wandering. Even the guides marveled at the number, quite atypical for Giraffe and an impressive sight.



Onward we went, deciding to wait to see Oldapai Gorge on our way back, wanting to get there with time to stop for viewing the herds. We began to see long lines of grazers on the horizon as we passed through the Maasai lands, some of them goats, sheep, and cattle, but many of them Wildebeest, Zebra, and Thompson's Gazelle. Capped Wheatear, Double-banded Courser and several species of larks were present among them. Soon single lines started to converge and we found ourselves looking at just countless numbers of beasts. They were on the move rather than stretched out and grazing, keeping up a steady canter that seemed effortless. A few had calves running along beside them, showing no strain or need to slow anything down. These were tan calves, a week or so old, already moving fully with the herd.



There were gaps between sections of this river of life, but we picked up many more once we made the turn into Ndutu. We stopped often to scan, finding Golden Jackal and spotting several raptors. We wound our way past Lake Masek and on to Lake Ndutu, past its shoreline on the far side to go up to our luxury tented camp atop a ridgeline.



What a lovely and comfortable camp! Our tents had lovely big beds, comfortable seating areas, and ample bathrooms for our well-deserved day's end showers. At dinner we found out they had a good chef and the food was creative — quite something for being so far



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out in the bush!

### **Fri., Feb. 10 Full Day at Ndutu with Massive Herds of Zebra & Wildebeest**

We left with the anticipation of seeing a lot and we certainly did. Today provided a wildlife immersion experience that most people only see on film ... and we were here taking it in in real life!



Large Lappet-faced Vultures and a Black-breasted Snake Eagle were some of the first birds seen, and a pair of White-bellied Bustards closely trailing each other was fun to watch. Atop flat-topped acacias we found Tawny Eagle and both Common and Augur Buzzards. We wound our way up to a plateau absolutely filled with Wildebeest and Zebra. We parked and watched them feed, seeing some very young calves still wobbly on their feet. Other vehicles seemed intent on something, and curiosity got the best of us — it was a Cheetah! A very full-looking



Cheetah, not intent on hunting, but in true Cheetah style, she was quite intent on surveying the surroundings. She stayed in tall grass as the herd fed around her, keeping some distance but not that much if she chose to chase. We got good views and photos, and then left her to rest unbothered by onlookers.



We moved off to a group of Wildebeest and found several to which birth seemed imminent. Watching three births within three minutes, and not knowing which one to focus on, was later mentioned in our top 20 moments of this safari. One mother went down on her side, pushing and straining. It was only a matter of minutes until a little package was delivered, the placenta taking more time to pass, shining in the sun like a red balloon as the little one came on wobbly legs to find warm, life-sustaining milk from her teats. Another mother gave birth standing, her balloon of life descending slowly until gravity broke it and that little one hit the ground with a plop. These two had ample time to lick and smell their youngsters, making for that all-important bond. The third was on a similar

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time frame, with baby just on its feet when a jealous male caused commotion. Rob called out, “He’s chasing the newborn baby,” and indeed he was. The mother got between them and deflected him but he was intent. Several other females joined the chase, the mother most intent, but her young one still stumbling was vulnerable. At one point the male gave it a shove and it went flying, only to pick up and run again. Almost as quick as this started it quit, and she allowed it to nurse, gain some strength and in minutes was back to the birth spot where now three little ones rested (not for long!) on a grassy mound.



Winding our way back, we found no shortage of beautiful Lilac-breasted Rollers and its less-colorful but very striking migrant cousin, the Eurasian Roller. There were White-crowned and Magpie Shrikes, and a strutting, massive Kori Bustard. An Auger Buzzard posed for inspection. We passed a wetland area where we found Three-banded Plover and several shorebirds and watched a coursing Pallid Harrier.



Back for lunch, a rest, and for some a swim. Jan and Peg both gave in to photographing the very active colony of Speke’s Weavers right outside the dining tent. We got good views of Diederik’s Cuckoo and learned that the staff had watched it going in and out of some nests, for this species is a nest parasite and Speke’s was at least one host species.





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We went out again at 4:00 PM, looking along the river for signs of Leopard and appreciating the various antelopes, birds, and landscapes. A Tawny Eagle and another Secretary Bird were among the highlights.

### Sat., Feb. 11 Another Full Day at Ndutu

Morning at Ndutu in February is always magical! Dawn chorus included the calls of a male Lion not far from Camp. We drove out early, but did not find him. We headed out past Dark Chanting Goshawk, Gray-breasted Francolin, Two-banded Courser, and numerous Crowned Plover. Pretty little Fischer's Sparrow Larks were everywhere. We watched a pair of White-bellied Bustard and in the same area found African Hoopoe and Silverbird.



We were ambling along until John got a call from Preston that they had spotted Bat-eared Foxes, a species not easy to find. With luck the pair was bedded down and resting and they remained for both vehicles to get a good view. Alert with those big ears, they sensed our interest and trotted off to a distance before starting to sniff and dig. Working their home range, what a treat!



We came along the fresh remains of two Lion kills, Wildebeest that did not make it, running from the Lions well-positioned on a hill. The two carcasses were several hundred yards apart, just under the hill, where the Lion pack was resting full-bellied and immobile. They'd eaten about half of one and Peg's vehicle remained to watch the vultures come in. There were two on it when we arrived and within 10 minutes it was a seething mass of beaks and wings, all vying for a chance to grab food. There were five species altogether: Rueppell's and White-backed being the most numerous. One of the first was the smallest, the Hooded, and soon came in two commanding giants, the Lappet-faced. Peg's favorite, the White-headed, danced around the mob, picking up crumbs and getting into no squabbles. It looked



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like a girl in a fancy party dress compared to its other cousins. A couple of Tawny Eagles were in the mix as well.

We watched graceful Grant's and Thompson's Gazelles on the edge of the vast herds, then drove into long lines and congregations of Zebra and Wildebeest.

Our two vehicles were separated by some distance, and as John made his way across a brushy area, Peg spotted a Secretary Bird. It seemed interested in something so we took time to park and watch. It stayed tight to one area, circling and intently looking down. Then it made big thrusts with its long spindly legs, stomping prey we could not see. Stomp, stomp, then the head went down, jabbing. Finally, up it came with a BIG snake! It raised and dropped it several times, more stomping and more jabs with the beak. Then it was a series of very big gulps to work it down the hatch, head held high, gulp, gulp, gulp, gone! That was a big wow for all to see!



There were several Wildebeest birthing clusters, and we moved into position not to disturb them but watch. Peg had the video on a female as she laid down on her side. Another female came over to check out the rapid motion of her arriving little one which was bent on breaking its way out of the birth sac. Just amazing to watch the full birth! It was a strong little nipper and it literally ejected itself from the birth sac on the run. No 15 minutes to move like the text book describes, this one was instant, on the run. The mother had to get up to chase it and only caught up as it stumbled, legs flying, crashing to the ground, then up again on the run. It ran through the herd, and had she not been persistent to follow it could have become a lost calf. The will to live and fight and move for these babies is so strong, just amazing to witness that spirit! We watched five births overall this day, in between them finding birds of the plains like Fischer's Sparrow Lark and both Rufous-naped and Red-capped Larks. European Bee-eaters





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also put on a show.

In the afternoon we worked the road between Lake Ndutu and Lake Massek, a wooded area good for birding. We found Impala here, and a Black-headed Heron, a host of songbirds, and three species of woodpeckers. Coy Kirk's Dik-dik pairs stood watch on their territories as we drove by. We had a chance to study an Imperial Eagle perched in excellent view, and on the wing found a well-patterned Augur Buzzard. A Red Bishop was a bright spot, as were male Scarlet-chested Sunbirds. Time passed quickly, and as if posted sentries, we passed the four sleeping lions before returning to our most comfortable digs at Lake Ndutu Luxury Tented Camp.



Returning the sunset landscape was stunning.

The staff here had a surprise for our final night, dinner in a circular enclosed area made to feel like a Maasai boma. The walls we daubed in mud and cattle dung to make an adobe-like surface and Maasai women had painted local animals. With a fire going, the full bar hauled down, and some absolutely delicious barbecue of vegetables and local grass-fed meats, it was a time to be had and very special. This staff had been a lot of fun, so welcoming, and genuinely happy and helpful for our stay. We could have stayed out the month with no problem!

### **Sun., Feb. 12 Ndutu to Serengeti National Park & Kati-Kati Tented Camp**

Our last morning in Ndutu started off with a bang, we saw a large cluster of vehicles, and assuming it was the same four Lions we spied coming and going from camp over the last few days, we almost passed it by. Good thing that we did not, for it was three Cheetahs, a mom and two very large youngsters, finishing off a kill they had made likely just at dawn.



The cubs pranced ahead as they left the scene, dangling part of the hide, still very playful and full of it. Mom's belly was greatly distended, and she got a comfortable distance from the crowd and just plopped in the grass. All seemed content to stay where they were and let her rest. The cubs played and then each found a bush to crash near to each other by themselves. This was our cue to be off to our day. We passed the four sleeping Lions as we crossed the end of Lake Ndutu.

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We had a drive ahead, relocating to Central Serengeti, passing once more through the great herds of Zebra and Wildebeest. Today, with Ndutu's dry conditions and gale-force winds, the herds had their hands full. We passed were sad to see a completely lost Wildebeest calf running back and forth – frantic, searching and calling, no mom anywhere in sight. Like so many lost ones, its short life would end at the good fortune of a predator that also had mouths to feed. We stopped several times to let long lines of Wildebeest and Zebra pass, like channels of a great river they kept coming strong, and we only slipped through in short gaps in the lines.



Out on the open plains the wind was really howling, perhaps a front coming through with much needed rain, but in trying to stand up for views or use optics without fear of the dust, it was difficult. It had been so idyllic the last two mornings, this was quite a different view! Young ones seemed glued to their mother's sides, and we saw no heavy-bodied females lay down to push for life. We wished them well and hoped they could keep the little ones in for another day. All the herds seemed restless, none of their sense working well in the wind, and so many predators around.



We passed a few Ostrich, and then reached the Serengeti entrance sign about 11:00 AM. Out of nowhere came four Maasai children who wanted to smile at us and check us out, hoping for sweets but not begging, just the fresh hope of children for some delight. There was no village in sight. We took some photos of the sign, and then headed to the Park Entrance where we planned to have a picnic and survey the landscape.



A short steep trail led up to a viewpoint here, and when Peg's group got there, Preston's van people (first to arrive) were engrossed in photographing Hildebrandt's and Superb Starlings, along with a huge Red-headed Agama Lizard. As they ascended, they had close views of a Martial Eagle in flight. Peg's crew joined them in time to spot an African Gray



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Woodpecker, a White-throated Robin (Irania), a singing male Brubru, and on a shrub close-by as we descended, a male Scarlet-chested Sunbird, and a Trilling Cisticola.

Rob led out for some retail therapy at the park shop, Jan tracked down photos of Wattled Starlings, we all used the real flush toilets and washed our hands and faces — freshened up and off we went. Serengeti, we were finally HERE!

The first hour or so we kept seeing long lines of Zebra and Wildebeest, south towards the Gol Kopjes, still moving east. We found two groups of Spotted Hyena, and had three jaunty Warthog families with fairly small young, one group found a watering spot and circled it, tails still help aloft. We passed the nest of a Lesser Spotted Eagle, and found two Kori Bustards strutting in the long grass. At a mudhole we had over 40 Speckled Pigeons, striking creatures with their large polka-dot patterns and red around the eyes. Bob spied a bright male Yellow Wagtail, one of four around the shoreline.

There were dozens of Greater Kestrels perched on termite mounds or on the wing, and we enjoyed good looks at two pairs of massive Lappet-faced Vultures. At a wet spot we had Fan-tailed Widowbirds and a lone but striking Winding Cisticola, characteristically clinging to a tall reed grass perch. Our balloon riders needed to go to the airstrip to check in, so Preston took them there while Peg's group took time to carefully scan a marsh area. Score! Along with a Common Moorhen and chicks, at the far end of the marsh in dense vegetation we found a partially hidden Lesser Moorhen, its lime-yellow face plate shining and also a Black Crake. Some graceful Black-winged Stilts fed close-by, as did a pair of Three-banded Plover. The pond's resident pair of Egyptian Geese were busy tending eight large, almost-fledgling chicks. This is where we had our first good looks at Ruppell's Long-tailed Starlings, with their rich purplish iridescence.



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They would turn out to be common at our camp and entertained us there with song.

Notable sightings going the rest of the way into Kati-Kati (Center-Center) Camp included a big group of Coke's Hartbeest with their heart-shaped horns, and well over 100 European Storks positioned widely over the plains, hunting grassland insects. We got in about 5:00 PM, enjoyed cold juice and hot water in our bucket-showers. This is a mobile camp, perched on a hill with a fabulous look back on the Serengeti Plain. It gets put up in January and taken down in March, but gives us many comforts while leaving a light footprint on this wild part of Serengeti. We each had a large tent with a table, sitting area, beds, and behind this a storage area, big mirror (oh dear, we looked dusty and windblown this day!) and our wooden-floored shower and toilet area.

They made us a fire and served beer and wine or soft drinks with popcorn. Dinner was lovely, by candlelight and lantern, we enjoyed tender lamb, nice vegetables including green beans and eggplant, potatoes, and at the start a nice soup. No going hungry on this trip!

Several retired early, but Rob encouraged our guides and some of the staff to enjoy songs, and some music from his iPhone he wanted to share. Fun!

### **Mon., Feb. 13 Serengeti National Park: Kopjes, the African Plains & Shaded River Courses**

Coming to breakfast in the dark, we admired the first hints of light and the southern sky, with Scorpio and the Southern Cross in ready view.

We left at 6:45 AM after a full hot breakfast, omelets, crepes, fruit, and yogurt. We drove out past a herd of Topi gleaming in the sun, their burnished-buff hides looking both plump and polished. Gray Hornbill displayed from the tops of Umbrella Acacias, lifting their wings with each piercing call. This area seemed





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good for Giraffe, over the course of the morning we passed several groups, one over twenty in size, all with young. We made our way slowly to a marsh and lake area, stopping in view of a pile of Hippos all mostly submerged, only pink eyes and ears peeking out, except for an occasional opened jaw or paw as they rolled on their sides. We could hear them chortling and spouting water though they were at the end of an open channel of water and not close by. In close view were good numbers of shorebirds; a Marsh Sandpiper, numerous Common Redshank and Little Stints, the resident pair of Blacksmith Plover we find at every waterhole, a Common Sandpiper, and one Kittlitz Plover with its caramel colored chest in view.

As we sat watching, over 40 Collared Pratincole arrived, weathering out the winds of the morning by tucking in to mud pockets left by the hooves of hippos. Out of the bulrushes came a Spotted Hyena, on patrol, trotting along in and out of the edge of the reeds. When we moved over to the lakeshore itself we found another two Spotted Hyenas doing just the same. And we spotted numerous other shorebirds, the most interesting being a lone Chestnut-banded Plover, a regional specialty with a limited range.

We moved on to an upland area, tall grass waving in the wind, and we encountered a herd of over 500 Cape Buffalo. They were in tall grass, feeding voraciously, and seemingly calm with such a wide view around. Willy spied a Hippo out of the water, walking parallel to the river across the open plain. A stately group of Giraffe then called to our attention, but we put watching them on hold as Willy got news from the bush telegraph (a car stopping as it passed to give us the tip) of very young lion cubs. Off we went, holding on for the bumps were grand and in profusion, and with just one other car we found two females and three less than one-month old cubs resting at the base of a picturesque kopje. We were lucky to get there in time to see one, then in time all three cubs come out of their shady lair to nurse. The two females were so relaxed that one rolled over, four feet to the sky, then went out cold, so much that an agama lizard climbed up on it to survey the terrain, "Oh, something new in my territory" Preston would say. As the cubs retreated to their lair, we did as well, stopping to admire the very large group of Giraffe that were now quite close to the road. We watched them feed and watched the four young of the herd, probably about four months old now, and very cute — perfect miniature adults in every way. At the turn to camp we veered off to



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watch 12 Elephants in belly-high grass. They followed a small stream feature, obviously fond of a particular papyrus grass they seemed to relish feeding on.

Lunch was nice in our open-air safari tent dining room, with a nice breeze blowing. They had a salad of raisins, avocado, and mango chunks with a honey-mustard dressing that was very good, then a beef moussaka, and vegetarian pasta. Bob entertained the local crew with photos of his grand-daughter by a snowman and photos of a frozen lake in his Ontario home. Fruits or a pudding for dessert, and it was not long before Anita declared it was nap time and several followed suit.

Afternoon drives were shorter, starting at 4:00 PM, and this one was one of very little driving, with some great action occurring not far from the camp at all. The first was a group of Elephants down in lush grass along a small stream; they feasted and moved about all in close range of the road and our view. We watched a Wahlberg's Eagle rip apart a small bird, we think a Coqui Francolin, as Gray-backed Shrikes mobbed it. It stayed very alert but ate the whole thing, plucking away some feathers but in the end just gulping it down the hatch. Not far away we caught wind of a sleeping Leopard and went to join the queue, all were polite and quiet and we stayed patient with this sleeping beauty until she finally got up, walked down the massive limb of an Umbrella Acacia, and plopped down to sleep again. That was our cue to head on back, passing through the woodland to our camp on the slopes of a hill.





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A great sunset, conversation, and some libations for those that wished them, and we then called it a day. At night we had an escort back to our tents, as this was home to many large mammals!

**Tues., Feb. 14**

### **Central Serengeti Full-Day Circuit & Valentine's Stories & Celebrations**

Morning dawned with another clear sky and a chance to see the Southern Cross star constellation as we went to breakfast. Today was to be a very full day, going deeper into Central Serengeti. Two of our party left VERY early, picked up by the Balloon Camp staff to meet others for a spectacular balloon trip. The past two days had been windy, and balloons had not launched, so all of us were smiling to see three lovely balloons floating along the horizon as we started our game drive. It turned out the fourth balloon off to the side held our two, in a group of ten plus the pilot, and after launching they had a brief dawn blow that took them almost 27 KM in total, more than the others. They had a grand time and saw among other things, two different groups of Bat-eared Fox, a difficult animal most times to see. Susan described going into the landing that they'd seen almost everything but Lion. Of course, what was waiting for them was a good-sized pride, and only four seemed put off by the large and billowed contraption descending upon them. The balloon skidded a good hundred feet or more, and with that the Lions pulled back to a respectful distance, what a grand finale!

The rest of us passed through open grass plains, Peg finding a Rosy-breasted Longclaw, a bird very much like our meadowlarks but with a magenta hue. There were larks and harriers and lots of Grants Gazelles, Kongoni (Coke's Hartebeest), but alas, no Serval, which we were on the prowl for. We were able to spend time with another Leopard, a regal female balanced on a strong lower limb of a picturesque sausage tree. It took some patience, but in time she



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got up, stretched, clawed the branch, and then sat in the V of the tree looking over the plain. As quick as lightning she chose to descend and in the tall grass became almost invisible.

We reunited the group at the Serengeti Information Center, walking a nice loop trail that winds around a rock kopje with sycamore figs and other dense vegetation. Exhibits and information about the great migration of Wildebeest, Zebra, and Grant's Gazelle was interpreted well, with interesting and appealing signage. It was birdy in the lush vegetation and Preston pointed out a number of songbirds new for the trip and a few favorites put on a show, including a Little Bee-eater. We decided to have lunch here as there were tables and shade, and we shared the area with Rock Hyrax and Dwarf Mongoose. The former liked to lie on unused tables, stretching out as if at the beach. The latter were bold enough to come underfoot, staring up at us with hopes of rewards (which we did not give them).

We spent the afternoon driving and looking, almost immediately after lunch finding a polished looking group of Topi, then not far from them a Cheetah. We were able to watch the Cheetah move through tall grass, then hop up on a series of termite mounds, taking a careful look all around from each one. On the third and farthest mound a Secretary Bird walked very close by and we wondered if there would be much interaction; as the Cheetah stood to stretch it did take wing for a short way, then carried on. Preston's van intercepted the Cheetah on an adjacent road over to get more wonderful views. We both continued on, heading south, finding Elephants in profusion along the riverine corridors. We watched two males sparring quite vigorously, and then watched an absolutely massive bull mingle with the females and calves, but warn those other males to stay on the other side of the drainage. We found three groups of Lions, one with three cubs that wanted to nurse. She and a companion were at the base of a very scenic kopje, Peg pointed out the





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prominent erosional features as if in a geology textbook. They were fairly far away but we could note the cub's antics. A bold Rock Agama Lizard decided to jump aboard the second sleeping female, she merely swished her tail but did nothing otherwise, as the small reptile gained a view from an object new in his territory. We found a second female group with cubs resting on a second kopje, this one quite small but with good shade they were enjoying. Not far from them were the rest of the pride, two males under a bush quite close to the road, one with a black mane we got glimpses of when he lifted his massive head. Several other females were resting under another bush, the most action here was when a young male crossed over to greet them, face-rubbing and then plop — into the sleeping pile. The last group we barely stopped at; we'd had a super full day and lions had been more than good to us!

In all we drove about 100 KM this day, a grand loop full of wildlife, but we were glad to land and enjoyed the comforts of our simple tented camp. Being Valentine's Day they had a really nice dinner, and Peg asked all to tell the tale of where they met their husband or wife. Even our guides joined in and it was really fun.

This night started with the usual sounds of Hyena and in the distance, Lion, above us a Pearl-spotted Owlet. About 2:00 AM Peg awoke with a start as large animals were banging on the shower bucket behind the tent, seeking water. Behind the tent she could not know if it was Buffalo or Elephant, she stayed quiet until one came right beside the tent to munch, all too close for comfort — it was Buffalo! Thankfully they were enjoying green grass and moved fairly readily to the mowed pathway, continuing on past several other tents. A memorable evening!



### **Wed., Feb. 15 Segengeti National Park to Oldapai Gorge & The Rim of Ngorongoro Crater**

Today was a travel day, with wildlife watching along the way, and a stop at Oldupai (Olduvai) Gorge, the fossil site made so famous by the lifetime work of Louis and Mary Leakey.

The highlight of the morning was finding a den site of Hyena, where an adult female had two very dark, chocolate brown youngsters, likely out for one of their very first days. Subadults were fascinated and wanted to get close, the mother would tolerate them only so long. One tried to pick up a baby and that was a limit. We watched for some time, quite fascinated.

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The road out had been graded so we made good time, and stopped to watch Black-bellied and Kori Bustards, Rufous-naped Lark, and near the Simba Kopje on the main road, another pride of Lions, all stuffed onto a small low-profile kopje. In the distance they could see a massive heard of Zebra heading back west from Ndutu, a time of plenty in store for them for sure.



Oldupai is the word for Wild Sisal, a very important plant to early people, and for animal species in the dry season since it holds moisture on which they chew. An early archeologist quoted it wrong so all these years we've spelled it with a "v." Over the last few years the site has gained a wonderful museum, and it is such a welcome sight to see plantings around the entrance gate, parking areas, a staff eager to share knowledge, and fascinating exhibits. This is one of the most significant sites for anthropology, archaeology, and geology, and we enjoyed a good talk that reviewed all three. We had our picnic here, sitting inside the museum, which is built on the round with a open air terrace inside. Then it was on to Ngorongoro Crater, and our most comfortable digs at the Sopa Lodge, where our rooms had a view of the crater. We got in about 4:00 PM, relaxed and showered, and just took in the view.

### **Thurs., Feb. 16 A Marvelous Day within Ngorongoro Crater**

We left early today to descend into the Crater, driving through a beautiful arch of Umbrella Acacia trees. We found animals right away, herds of Buffalo and Zebra. We spied a Secretary Bird sunning itself up on a small tree in a drainage, and several vultures there suggested a possible kill. A Brown Snake Eagle was catching large insects and putting on a good show. But the big show emerged, a group of Lions with



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some young cubs on a Buffalo kill. They had been there a while and only a few were still feeding. The cubs balanced themselves on the still ample carcass. We counted over 25 Spotted Hyena circling, waiting, camped out for when the Lions would go. Somehow, they sensed they had time, and chose not to risk a confrontation. Black-backed Jackals were more scrappy and bold, and we watched them make



runs in to grab meat as they could. We returned past this carcass at day's end and Hyenas fully controlled it by then. Such a big animal must have been a big fight, and it fed many species. Several Zebra walked by, sensing no threat from the big-bellied Lions. Other Buffalo seemed to linger, even bedding down not far away for a time.



Rob called this our leisurely day, we had little driving and lots of wildlife action. A group of 20 or more Gray Crowned-Cranes were beautiful with their reflections in a small pool of water. Zebra came to drink here, and mother Wildebeest with young rested in the sun. Preston spotted African Quailfinch and there were many interesting birds, from Capped Wheatear to Yellow Wagtail and Pink-throated Pipit.



The Hippo pools were active. We found numerous water birds, including Black-crowned Night-Heron and Hottentot Teal. A male Elephant came down to drink, choosing a place in the reeds where the water was cleaner. The Hippos rolled and spouted and sent their dung flying while Eurasian Moorhen walked across their backs. At the lunch stop at the larger Hippo pool, an African Fish Eagle put on a good show.

One van went back earlier, having a few under the weather, the others lingered for good views of raptors, a Kori Bustard, and back up on the rim, quick views of Hartlaub's Turaco and Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters.

This was also the day to visit the Maasai village at the rim and all had a really good time. Susan and

Joan joined in the dancing, big smiles all around. It's not always comfortable to share across cultures but this group made it really fun and all learned a lot about their communal life and its myriad daily chores.

The dining room at Sopa Lodge had the most extraordinary construction here, a massive tall ceiling built on the round, all in natural materials. A fun place to share an enjoyable evening. Peg realized while posting some videos to Facebook that today was Preston's birthday! We had fun wishing him the best at

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dinner, though we did not call out the birthday dancers.

### **Fri., Feb. 17 Ngorongoro Crater to Kirurumu Lodge with a Rift Valley View Extraordinaire**

We left the park mid-morning, stopping at the gate for a little birding spree as a mixed flock was quite active there. Willy completed our paperwork, and we headed on to the Lake Manyara area. The staff welcomed us for lunch, as did the birds with an African Paradise Flycatcher coming in to the bird bath near the dining room!

We enjoyed some birding in the afternoon as an option, though it was hot, and activity did not pick up until about 5:00 PM. We slowly strolled the grounds, watching Spotted Morning Thrush and various songbirds. From the viewpoint by the bar, one could have both a cold beer and see Tawny Eagle and a Taita Falcon, not bad!

Cocktails were in order at day's end, and the light was perfect for photos, Peg caught this one of Bob and Joan just before sunset.



This evening two of our group, Jan and Susan, elected to take the Lake Manyara National Park night drive, an activity offered by a local concession. They had an early dinner and were taken down to meet their guide, and with great luck, found out they were the only ones on for the evening! And oh, what an evening, quiet with brilliant stars, and some

wonderful sightings, including two Leopards, one right at the edge of the road, Large-spotted Genet, two species of Bush Baby, and extremely rare to see Giant Otter, wow! They got to see a half dozen or more Slender-tailed Nightjar and gave it a thumbs up good review.

### **Sat., Feb. 18 Lake Manyara National Park**

Today was a short, but wonderful grand finale. We got off to a slow start, likely just end-of-safari-hate-to-leave going on at the lodge with its fun and gracious staff.

Once inside Lake Manyara National Park the birding was just superb and we had to tear ourselves away.



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En route to the lakeshore, we drove through an arch of Yellow-fever Acacias, spotting both Blue and Vervet Monkeys, and we drove past Zebras with playful young, before heading out to the edge of the wetland area. Entering the wet area, we were on an elevated causeway, with birds very close on either side. Three were shorebirds, wading birds and birds of prey in abundance. Right before us were African Spoonbills “spooning” to get their food, and colorful Yellow-billed Storks by the score. Hippos were common, and we even saw one out of the water. We spied Purple Heron, a real beauty, and our first Squacco Herons for the trip.



Across the marsh we eventually caught up to a Goliath Heron, one massive bird. The light was lovely for close looks at African Jacana, Hottentot Teal, and Black-tailed Godwits. African Great White and Pink-backed Pelicans were both there, and with great excitement we found a gem –the tiny but brilliant Malachite Kingfisher.



The wetland was a fine oasis, an important place quite in contrast to others on our safari.

For now, it was time to return to the city. Upon leaving the park, we got to watch the flow of rural life in Africa once again. Lots of oxen carts, hand carts, and going to market activity.



We made good time, and enjoyed a leisurely lunch recounting our trip highlights once back at the African Tulip. A special treat was having Willy’s family join us, his wife and two boys, for this final lunch. A colleague of Peg’s sent over some books Peg presented to John, Willy and Preston, to whom we were so grateful for all they did to make our safari top-rate.

An added bonus today for Peg was that it was her birthday – fun to celebrate with the group!



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