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## KENYA TRIP REPORT February 2012

**Preston Mutinda (Preston's Birding Safaris) and Peg Abbott, guides.**

With nine participants-- Alex, Ty, Linda, Ginger, Laura, August,  
Louise, Marcyes, and M.J.

*And our marvelous driver-guides, Henry and Alex*

### Feb. 4      Arrival in Nairobi



Our group met to celebrate that the long flights were behind us. With a cold Tusker beer in hand, served on the porch of our restaurant as the sun went down over umbrella acacias and a distant herd of zebra, we knew we had arrived in Africa. For three of our group, Ty, Peg and Alex, it was a return journey, and as we knew the pace and satisfaction of safari life ahead of us all, we savored the arrival intently.

Our hotel overlooked Nairobi National Park and views of distant Zebra and Wildebeest as well as a steady stream of bird sightings kept us raising binoculars as we dined. Helmeted Guineafowls, Common

Fiscals, African Pied Wagtails, and a Eurasian Nightjar hunting moths in the hotel lights at dusk were some of our first species of the trip.

The hotel was modern with beautiful artwork; painted Zebras stared out at us from the wall. Our rooms each had windows overlooking the park.

### Feb. 5      Elephant Orphanage / Karen Blixen Museum / Nairobi National Park

We had all elected to come in a day early, rest up from the flights, and see a few of the sights of Nairobi. Topping the list was to see Daphne Sheldrick's Elephant Orphanage, a safe haven for elephants that lost their mothers to poaching. While just seeing elephant babies at close range is extraordinary, we learned a lot from their keepers. Repeatedly they talked about how stress could kill a young elephant. They'd lost one new arrival that morning. It had lived just six days at the Center; weak and in mourning, it did not make it. At the end the commentator went through each elephant, naming it and describing the life events that brought it there and its prospects for life again in the wild.

The elephants we observed lived in groups assigned according to age, and while each had experienced trauma, here they became a herd. Several of the elephants had become close friends, so their handlers calibrated their return to the wild to preserve these bonds, which increased their chances for survival in the wild.

Our impressions of visiting were good – it was fun to watch the interactions both between keeper and creature and between the elephants themselves. August noted that while elephants came in distinct sizes, all appeared to be miniature adults – the three-month-old a pygmy version of the three-year-old and onwards – the younger stages just more innocent, naive, and vulnerable.



People watching was almost as good as elephant watching; we all enjoyed seeing the joy as young and old got to touch the rough hairy skin of an elephant. All keepers were not created equal, particularly for the youngest elephant; one man seemed to be his focus and the elephant sought him out again and again. The keepers fed the babies formula in giant bottles, and several enjoyed a dip in a small pool. It was amazing to watch their trunks, which seemed to have lives of their own as they played with a stick, the water, the rim of a bucket. The orphans are only allowed to be with people other than their keepers for an hour a day, a critical hour to keep funding coming in for the projects and for educating visitors to their plight. The rest of the day they roam, browse, and feed, and at night they return to stalls to bed down with a blanket, tucked in for the night.



After this we went to Karen Blixen's home, now a National Museum. Several toured the home while others walked the lovely grounds, watching sunbirds feed on bright blooms of the Poinsettia trees. Butterflies were abundant and we watched as Cinnamon-breasted Bee-eaters caught them on the wing and returned to perches to pummel them, discard the wings and feeding the body to their almost adult-sized young. We had great close up looks at White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher, Red-cheeked Cordon Blues, and Hadada Ibis, an impressive bird which had feather color that flashed iridescent in the sun. Alex found a great wide branch to linger on, taking it all in.

It was a grand day, with puffy clouds and blue sky as a backdrop to the home; one could picture the life of this place as a busy coffee farm. Outside were parked old tractors and aging carts. For all who had watched the movie "Out of Africa," the scene of the wide drive and front porch brought that drama to life. For young Kenyans, including our drivers, this era of Kenya's history is fast fading away, so fortunately this lovely home will remain as a remnant of pioneer white-settlement times.

Another part of the once 6000-acre estate is now a restaurant, and on a Sunday afternoon we found it was a lively place, with Kenyan families intermingling with tourists as all enjoyed dining outside. We relaxed as kids played, an artist painted, and smells of a barbecued meats wafted through the gardens.

We ate too much and with jet-lag were all sleepy, but our first safari drive called - as Nairobi National Park lies just outside the city. We went in the main gate so all could see the pile of ivory that Kenya burned, a pile worth 60 million dollars to a country emerging and in need of cash. Burning the pile was a bold statement to the world that wildlife was not to be a part of commerce and had rights of its own to exist on the land.



From this site we watched Nyanza Swifts and an Augur Buzzard, and then drove on to a small pool where we encountered our first kingfisher, a Malachite that kept splashing into water to feed. A pair of Gray-crowned Cranes stole the show, preening and drinking water, light playing off their feathers. Marsh Sandpipers and some juvenile Black-crowned Night-Herons were also there, as well as a sleeping pair of Emperor Geese. For many of our group, seeing the mammals was just a thrill; the first Giraffe, first Zebra, and first ungainly, crazy-looking Warthog. Watching giraffes move was eloquent; the impression given is that of jigsaw puzzle pieces set on moving muscle. We learned about Whistling Thorn Acacias, the varied shapes of gazelles and Coke's Hartebeest or Kongoni. We stayed until dusk, arriving at the exit a mere three minutes before sunset closing time. Back to enjoy some wine and beer on the porch, dinner served on Kenyan time, and rest!



## Feb. 6 Morning of Travel to Amboseli National Park / Amboseli

We had about a three-hour drive to Amboseli National Park, tucked down by the Tanzania border. This was punctuated by a rest stop, which in Kenya translates to a stop at a tourist shop if one wants to find porcelain toilets (vs. an African bathroom - a hole in the floor). To get to the bathroom we walked through aisles of handicrafts: wood carvings, beaded objects, soapstone carvings, batiks, musical instruments, and more. A team of men from this Kamba tribal region were there to assist and their quiet, relentless optimism resulted in many of us leaving with items we had no initial intent to buy. Peg had a drum, Louise a lovely Maasai beaded necklace, Alex a stunning carving, and Ginger various bracelets and small carved animals for gifts back home. This was the first of our shopping adventures though we were not yet adept at bargaining.



We turned off the main highway into Amboseli in the late morning. Right away we started seeing birds: Fischer's Sparrow Larks, Red-capped Larks, African Harrier Hawks, Pale Chanting Goshawks, and of course, Lilac-breasted Rollers with their kaleidoscope of twenty-seven colors. Mt. Kilimanjaro, standing at 19,340 feet, makes its own weather, and this afternoon clouds hid the summit. The mountain's lower skirts shone through and our driver, Alex pointed out a small

spatter cone on its flanks that marked the border with Tanzania.



What impressed us first was just the physical beauty of Amboseli. August remarked that for him it was quintessential Africa, and four strutting giraffes coming towards us convinced us that was so. En route we had our first sights of pastoral Maasai in their colorful, red traditional dress, and their bomas, which are clusters of mud-walled homes within a traditional ring of shrubs cut to make a safe enclosure for people and their cattle.

We went fairly directly to our lodge where lunch was served, and then took a break in our comfortable tented

cabins where we had full baths with showers, furniture, lovely bed coverings and each a covered porch facing the slopes of Kilimanjaro. Some took a quick nap while others walked on paths of the lodge to look for birds, the most remarkable being Paradise Whydahs. The males have long streamer tails with a large bump fashioned into it, and a neck with colors of cinnamon and tan. The swimming pool was a great place to rest and bird, with African Pied Wagtails, Firefinches and Chestnut Weavers taking drinks from the edge. White-bellied Go Away Birds, Speckled Mousebirds, and an incredibly bright Beautiful Sunbird were in flowering acacia trees all around.

We met again at 3:30PM for a game drive, taking time to watch a foursome of bull elephants. Preston spotted a Fringe-eared Oryx, a fairly rare find of a range-restricted species here at Amboseli. We delighted in finding a Grey Crowned Crane with a very new chick, a wonderful photo opportunity. But what stole the show for the afternoon was time with elephants. Several were in the water, and when they'd emerge their dark legs against pale, mud-clad bodies were startling. There were SO many elephants! With them were ample numbers of Grant's Gazelles and Zebras. Tiny Thompson's Gazelles had young, as did jaunty warthogs, trotting with their tails up. Everyone was introduced to Long-tailed Fiscals, Superb Starlings, and Lilac-breasted Rollers, impressive birds and, with luck, fairly common. We made a loop drive, and on the way in we spotted a lone, but very healthy looking, Spotted Hyena.



Dinner was a buffet, with one of the choices being pizza made in a most ingenious oven - a circular stack of charcoal bins, each red hot and ready for a round pizza pan, delicious and made to order. Though tired, several of us worked on the birds list, as our numbers were accumulating quickly and we feared we'd lose track if we did not stay on top of it. Walking back to the tents, a near-full moon lit the path. Most of us slept like rocks, waking to sounds of Spotted Hyenas and jackals.

## **Feb. 7 Amboseli - Morning and Afternoon Game Drives**

Today was the date of full moon over Africa. We saw it rise from the poolside bar, after a full and wonderful day in Amboseli. We'd fit a lot in, leaving at dawn and driving out to where tall umbrella acacias framed views of Kilimanjaro. Snow gleamed from the top; in early light pink hues outlined the ridge.

Kilimanjaro is the source of water for myriad underground rivers and springs at Amboseli, and today we visited two marshes, each a stunning oasis full of life. We watched herds of Zebra with young, the little ones frisky, and often hiding behind their moms. Occasionally we'd hear the bray of the male, and we observed herd dynamics, watching a dominant female discipline another with just a short switch of her ears. Mostly we were mesmerized by variations in the stripe patterns - particularly on their faces but also flanks and bellies. Preston convinced us they were indeed white animals with black stripes - such are questions of life in the bush!

A group of massive male elephants soon caught our attention. They had enormous tusks, and alternated feeding with throwing dust up over their backs and onto their bellies. They moved slowly, and at one point crossed the road very close to the vehicles. In fact at one point Laura described that Henry had to back up to give way for a female intent on not veering from her path. Amazing to be so close to these giants! At the second marsh we observed herds of females and young with numerous babies, yearlings, two-and-three year olds. The age mix made for playful encounters; we had ample time to photograph, watch and wait for things to happen. We watched a young male vie with one of the mothers, extending trunks, pushing, and then breaking their game to travel in line with the herd.

Wherever we went this day we saw elephants. One group in the marsh rested by a small rock outcrop; a tiny

baby asleep stretched out while the adults slept on their feet. We watched that group from a rock outcrop where we kept company with a Martial Eagle and watched African White Pelicans soar at eye-level. We found two Hippos that lay sunken into the marsh. A variety of birds used them as perches: Cattle Egrets, African Jacanas, and Glossy Ibises. Nearby we found Egyptian Geese, African Spoonbills, Black-capped Herons, and two very impressive Goliath Herons, the latter being the world's largest heron and standing seven feet plus. Farther up the road we had great looks at a Steppe Eagle perched on the ground, then a Martial Eagle perched low on a fence. With so much to eat they likely lead easy lives. Three Hippos standing out of the water were a treat to find, likely a mother and two young of past years. She looked pregnant enough to pop.

The road we took went up to a scenic lookout. It was nice to get out for a stretch, and we were fortunate to have the company of a Martial Eagle. We decided mid-day was a good time to visit a Maasai village nearby and continued on in that direction, showing up unannounced other than by the dust of our vehicles coming over their hills.

This turned out to be a fun experience for all, and when adding up our purchases and entry later that evening, Louise figured hosting our afternoon visit bought the villagers a cow, one of their most treasured possessions. David was our host, interpreting and coordinating the dancers, singers, those who demonstrated making fire, and the medicine man's discussion of herbs. Little kids played alongside the mud and dung huts, which were neatly placed in a continuous circle. The women were beautiful in all their beads; men showed their skills at jumping high, while singing a guttural rhythm.

We had the opportunity to go inside the houses to see the cooking and sleeping areas, beds placed low to the floor with a mattress of thin cowhide. We met several of the families and our group asked many questions, which they patiently answered and occasionally laughed at. We bought bangles and beadwork and carvings, though we were mystified at pricing and bargaining as we'd not yet gotten our bearings. Lunch called us onwards, so we sang them a good-bye song (You are My Sunshine) and waved good-bye, passing through herds of zebras, elephants and a sighting of our first Black-backed Jackal and a Spotted Hyena en route home.

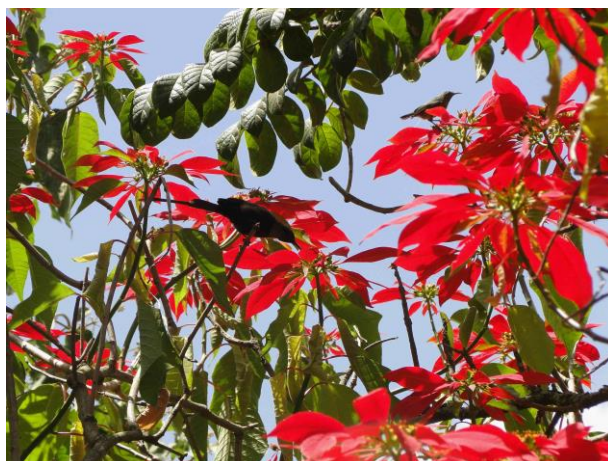
The evening game drive was a short one but highly rewarding as we positioned ourselves within view of long lines of elephants parading back from their day at the marsh, back to the wood where they would rest, over vast stretches of open plain. Stunning! Amboseli is the place of Cynthia Moss' life's work on elephants and at the close of this day we could see how the place utterly captivated her.

## **Feb. 8 Travel day to Nakuru**

Today was mainly a travel day, and while we'd hoped to make it to Nakuru for lunch, various stops and a lot of construction and traffic delayed us. We opted to have lunch at Lake Naivasha, and it was great to have a chance to stretch and walk about the lawn. We then entered this beautiful national park through an east side gate for a couple hours' safari ending at our lodgings within the park.

We spotted a number of birds, Rothschild's giraffes and two Black-backed Jackals, one with prey. Going in to camp we spied a male Zebra in trouble, limping and with obvious wounds from a scrape with a lion. Henry thought it could survive as the wounds were closing up. In subsequent days we did not see it again.

The staff at Flamingo Tented Camp gave us a warm greeting. We love the place; it is well-thought-out architecturally, with comfortable tents and great public areas with African fabrics, colors and art. August





bought a round at the bar to toast our arrival, and we enjoyed an excellent dinner. We were escorted to our tents (to avoid Hippos and other possible mammals en route) and all had much anticipation for tomorrow's early game drive.

## **Feb. 9 Nakuru National Park**

We slept wonderfully in the cool air of Nakuru and breakfast was a gracious feast. The dining room centered around a sculpture of flamingoes, and was open on two sides. There were stations for crepes and omelets, trays of fresh tropical fruits, delicious whole grain bread and a touch of colonial days - orange marmalade. We ate early to be out in the park, excited as Preston announced today was a CAT day for our priorities and all readily agreed.

We bundled up so we could stand looking out the open pop-top of our Toyotas, our route so beautiful under a canopy of Yellow-fever trees that grow lush along the lakeshore. We heard news of a lion sighting from another driver and altered our course, but missed this particular group of lions that had moved into thick brush. We continued down the lakeshore, stopping to view a few raptors, and found a group of Rothschild's Giraffes, elegant in their carriage. Two males sparred a bit; one was quite a bit smaller in size.

At the southern end of the lake, we found numerous Gray Herons, a lone Purple Heron, and several Yellow-billed Storks. There was a massive troop of baboons and we enjoyed their behavioral antics. Laura spotted a Secretary Bird, one of the candidates for our chosen "Birding Big Five." We were lucky as our early start let us find two White Rhinoceros mothers with young, one about two months old. They are just massive animals and we had learned that the mother and calf bond is particularly strong between them. Threats of rhino poaching are again on the rise, a global issue that needs vital attention.

Here the Rhinos shared their range with Cape Buffalos, which number in the thousands. We observed a large group on both sides of the road. Baby buffaloes stretch the definition of cute, but the adults' commanding presence was that of mean temperaments, and no one considered a request to go behind the bus for a pit stop!

We watched the buffaloes for a while, among them Gray-backed Shrikes, Bearded Woodpeckers, and Red-billed Scimitar-bills. Rounding the corner we spied three vehicles stopped and the reason for that became clear as a regal lioness strolled right down right past us, never veering, hurrying or heeding our presence. She was a gleaming mass of muscle with a sleek coat, dark teats and a hint of a milk bag, though she seemed to be alone.

Our vans were well-positioned to turn around and anticipate where she might cross a perpendicular road. She graced us by halting right in front of us, lying in the shade, washing her face, stretching, all oblivious to our bevy of clicking cameras. When a few more vans came up, she'd had enough, and got up slowly, went into the brush, and to our astonishment right up a tree!

Nakuru is known to have tree-climbing lions, but we were still amazed to see this. In every regard she moved like a leopard. She found a comfortable wide branch to rest upon and proceeded to cat nap. Scanning the horizon we spotted a second female up a different tree, perhaps a half mile away. Later we would hear this group of females had seven cubs, tucked somewhere in the bush where we watched the first lioness.



Very happy with the luck of this sighting, we moved on, parking by the end of the lake where we had scores of bird species to observe. There were hundreds of Ruffs, two species of terns (Whiskered in breeding plumage and Gull-billed), numerous Black-winged Stilts, Little Stints, a few Temminck's Stints, hundreds of African White Pelicans, Yellow-billed Storks and both Greater and Lesser Flamingoes. What beauty!

Nakuru is a vivid landscape; seeing animals against such a palette felt grand. At one point a large group of Greater Flamingoes took to the sky. The brilliance of their wing patterns, the sharp contrast of magenta and black against the metallic blue of the lake, was visually stunning.

The morning passed quickly. We made our way up the west side of the lake, stopping to watch pelicans stir up the water to feed. One of the vans found a family of Pied Kingfishers, five individuals lined up on a small vine by their nest hole.



It was nice to have some down time back at the lodge. We had a good lunch, one of the treats being Indian 'naan' cooked with garlic and coriander in an open tandoori oven. The staff loved the show of preparing food, standing with chef hats as they carved tender leg of lamb and more... With free time some napped, some caught up on journals, sorted through photos or just relaxed.



At three we went back out, heading back to the lakeshore where we found Giant Kingfisher (the world's largest kingfisher -- what a bill!), Hammerkop, and, perched in the Yellow-fever trees, a Long-crested Eagle. As we started up the hill to the scenic lookout at Baboon Cliffs, Preston came to a quick stop - Leopard! This magnificent cat was stretched out on a limb, resting comfortably. We had great looks and the light was lovely for photography - a two cat day! Atop the cliffs we had a grand view of the entire lake and time to watch a new mammal, families of Rock Hyrax.

Returning to the lodge we passed large troops of Baboons and Vervet Monkeys, both troops with lots of babies. We enjoyed leisurely conversation over dinner, but decided to put the bird list off until we arrived at Mountain Lodge, too tired from our fabulous day to tally up the riches!

#### **Feb. 10 Travel to Mount Kenya Area / Mountain Lodge**

It was a fun travel day, giving us a picture of rural life in the agriculturally-rich Rift Valley. This feature of Earth is visible from space, one of the most significant landmarks of our planet. We just had to pose by a sign pointing out the view.

We stopped for coffee at the Aberdare Country Club, which was built in the 1920's, a beautiful historic building from the colonial era of Kenya's history. We were served on the lawn and from the tables had fun as we spotted our first Hartlaub's Turaco, one of the most beautiful birds we would see on the journey.

We arrived at Mountain Lodge in time for lunch, and quickly realized we'd not be slimming down here. Laura liked the food best here, and we enjoyed delicious soups, salad fixings, fresh fish and meats all cooked well, and a lavish dessert bar. Naps were in order for some, but we all roused to meet on the top floor viewing deck that faced the forest on two sides, the water hole, and a splendid view of Mount Kenya, this afternoon

enshrouded by clouds.

Many Cape Buffaloes were at the water hole, with their playful young. Late in the day they left and a large herd of Elephants came in, also with young. Everyone was impressed with the beauty of male Bushbucks with their luscious dark coats and smart markings. From the lower level bunker window we could see right into the eyes of feeding Warthogs and inquisitive Baboons looked in through the grating.

Close to sunset several of us craving exercise opted to walk where we could from our fenced-in "ark", which was out to and around the parking area. We had fun chatting as the sun went down, and walked for a half hour or so. The staff got a big kick out of us; we explained that we had to make room for dinner!

After another sumptuous feed, we did a mammal and then a bird list - turning in about 10:30. At Mountain Lodge there can be drama at night, as a spotlight shines on a waterhole and mineral lick frequented by predators and prey. This night a hyena made a small Elephant group nervous, and the male Elephant did not want it around. We think the hyena had perhaps taken a Bushbuck earlier in the evening; we heard their calls all night. Ginger and Laura scored the penthouse suite here - Ginger barely got a wink of sleep with all this action in close view! Three beautiful Spotted Genets came in to feed on chunks of meat supplied on a feeder, and we saw White-tailed Mongoose below.

#### **Feb. 11      A Forest Walk from Mountain Lodge**

Several of us met up on the observation deck at dawn with our coffee, watching pink light play on the slopes of Mount Kenya, which was out in clear view. We had good looks at Tropical Boubous, Olive Thrushes, Cape Robin Chats, Hunter's Cisticolas, and a Blackcap, a migrant from Europe. A parade of hornbills showed up; all in all we saw forty-some Silvery-cheeked Hornbills, stunning, odd bird behemoths that look like something from the dinosaur era. We also had ample time to watch Baboon behavior as the troops moved through by the waterhole.

We enjoyed breakfast, which included complimentary champagne, and soon were out on the trail with Benson, a local resident who graduated with a wildlife degree and returned to work as the hotel's naturalist. He had a dramatic flair that made the walk fun, and his information was excellent. He talked about many of the trees, their growth rates, and the species composition of the forest. He talked about Elephants and Cape Buffaloes, their anatomy and behavior. We will all remember his advice about what to do if approached by a buffalo (go flat) with antics about various ways they could do you damage.

We walked through a lush forest, complex in structure and species mix. Benson pointed out a 400-year old tree that was just massive. He was excellent with the birds, and between him and Preston we sighted a couple of dozen new species for the trip. We started out with great views of Crowned Hornbills. Other highlights included a Fine-banded Woodpecker, Brown Woodland Warblers, Mountain White-eyes, Mountain Yellow Warblers, Montane Orioles, White-starred Robins, African Dusky Flycatchers, African Hill Babblers, a Cabanis's Greenbul, several Mountain Greenbuls, Grey-Cuckoo Shrikes, Cinnamon Bracken Warblers (a pair), three species of Apalis (Black-throated, Chestnut, and Gray), Eastern Double-collared Sunbirds, Thick-billed Seedeaters and Brown-capped Weavers. We also enjoyed watching a Tree Squirrel cut branches and take them into a nest in a huge Strangler Fig Tree.

Back at the lodge we enjoyed watching Baboons - a huge troop displaying mating, dominance and aggressive behaviors, and a good number of pretty adorable babies. Red-billed Oxpeckers came in to bathe, along with Mountain Wagtails.

Linda and Marcyes had a jolt when the lunch waiters asked for their room key, saying the Syke's Monkeys were in there. They in fact ran off with some snacks and toiletries but luckily the damage was not great. We then had the afternoon at leisure, birding from the deck, catching up on our lists, and a few took advantage of the



lodge having Internet access. At 4PM they serve tea, and at sunset we gathered for cocktails. Tough life we have in this safari mode!

<b>Feb. 12</b>	<b>Mt. Kenya Views / Larsen's Camp / Samburu</b>
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We started early, after early birding from the deck and breakfast. We enjoyed seeing life along the way as we drove north, descending from the slopes of Mt. Kenya. Rich volcanic soil makes this a prime agricultural belt; from vegetables to tea and wheat, crops lined the roadway. In the small villages we enjoyed the shop fronts, with their bright colors and names. There seemed to be more vendors waiting for commerce than we deemed possible, each shop a little universe into itself. We stopped at an ATM to resupply our stock of shillings and as this section of road has been greatly improved, we made good progress and time passed quickly.

We headed into the Northern Frontier, en route to visiting two of three game reserves that come together along their life blood, the Ewaso Nyiro River. In the last two years, the river has flooded twice, in March, 2010 and December, 2011. This was the favorite lodge of our previous journey, so we were relieved to find that though the camp had sustained damage, it was still a lovely oasis from which to explore this dramatic but arid part of the country.

The staff at Larsen's Camp greeted us warmly and had lunch waiting for us outside along the river. The wilds of nature surrounded our camp, but we could not have been more comfortable. It was here at Samburu that we slowed our trip pace down and really got into the rhythm of safari life. The dining area appeared idyllic, with arching branches of huge acacias towering over us, water of the Ewaso Nyiro River flowing by.

A young man in Samburu traditional dress kept the resident troop of Vervet Monkeys away. He was a shy young warrior with a lovely smile and we soon found we needed his services as the Vervets were quite bold. They are also clever and multiplying quickly - many small babies were learning tricks from their moms like opening zippers and using tents as ladders to get to the trees. He was more tolerant of the Superb Starlings and Red-billed Hornbills which came close for crumbs, taunting him by flying up to tables once guests departed.

The food was delicious and colorful, each day hot and cold soups, main courses, desserts of all kinds. Freshly brewed Kenyan coffee was great, and we appreciated that beer and wine were included with our stay. The lodge had added a swimming pool and massage since our last visit, perfect for rejuvenation between our morning and afternoon game drives.

The landscape here is stunning, the centerpiece of it being Lolokwe, a tabletop monolith that dominates the northern horizon. A small cone-shaped peak framed the view and marked the route we would take several mornings in search of cats - surprisingly difficult this year to see.

While we were not successful at finding cats, myriad other fine sights made up for it. Preston was never worried as he knew we had time ahead at the Mara. Elephants here were the premier attraction, and they were numerous. We found one female who had just given birth. She had the birth fluids still on her legs and the umbilical cord was still dangling from the baby. Marcyes watched the baby try to stand on widely spread legs and said, "It's just what I've been reading in Cynthia Moss' book, Elephant Memories." Even this dedicated, talented biologist has rarely witnessed births. How lucky we were to see this much - female elephants are known to group around a mother giving birth so it is often very difficult to see. We kept a safe distance but were able to watch for some time.

Often in our time at Samburu, we had to wait for a group of Elephants to pass before driving on, and at such times we'd watch them feed, tearing off tender leaves of acacia. They would trumpet at times, raise their ears, working out their placement and movement in the hierarchy.

One day we drove back through Archer's Post and over to witness the vast difference between two of three adjacent preserves, Samburu and Buffalo Springs. They have different soils, thus different vegetation, and we found the Samburu side, with its red soil, red termite mounds and doum palms striking. We will long remember following fresh lion tracks, seeing big groups of mother elephants and their BIG footprints interspersed with tiny baby prints. We watched elephants nursing, heard trumpeting between the females - all very special. Favorite bird sightings included a pair of Verreaux's Eagle Owls seen so close we could observe their pink eyelids, their talons so powerful, and then within a few hundred yards we found a pair of Pearl spotted Owlets - a two-owl day!

At Samburu everything was set in beauty; at leisure by our tents we admired the channels of the river with colors changing by the hour. Plants were fascinating, entire hillsides of euphorbias, candelabra plants, and another euphorbia in lush bloom along the wetland channel of Buffalo Springs. There is a grand sense of wildness here, more so than other areas we had visited yet on the journey. In our downtime we were fully entertained by birds and monkeys.

Arid land birds included so many new species. Red-billed Hornbills were very common and we would watch them plucking berries from shrubs and tossing them down. One of Alex's highlights was seeing a Palm Nut Vulture, which is very rare; we were able to watch it fly, and then get photos while it perched.

We will long remember returning to big smiles from the camp staff, who were always ready for us with fresh juice and cool, scented towels to freshen our dusty faces. On Valentine's Day they served dinner out by the river, using bright red tablecloths; a lovely table service. We watched sunrise and sunset through the mosaic of branches of graceful palms. Linda will remember an outdoor massage with elephants in view, watching reticulated giraffes with their stunning patterns.

One day we saw three giraffes lying down and Ginger commented that it looked like they were growing out of the ground. We saw a Martial Eagle on its nest, close up views of Bateleur, the Somali form of Ostrich with its blue neck, three species of rollers, two species of barbets calling and interacting, the Rosy-patched Bush Shrike, White-bellied Go-away-birds, Gabar Goshawks, two species of mousebirds (Blue-naped and White-headed), bright Agamid Lizards basking on ancient rocks. One late afternoon we made a special effort to find Greater Kudu females hidden against a cliff in woodlands. Each day we could watch Hammerkops and Crocodiles along the river from our porches, and Peg photographed a Yellow-billed Hornbill preying on frogs.

Other memorable sightings in Samburu included graceful Gerenuks feeding up on their hind legs high in acacias, carefully pulling off flowers. We watched Reticulated Giraffes being groomed by Red-billed Oxpeckers, so close we could photo one pecking around the horn. Our memories will include the fragrance of acacias and watching social weaver nests of varied shape and form waving in the wind like Christmas ornaments on spreading tree crowns. We will remember the morning sounds, and a frog that called all night, thankfully only ONE of our three nights there. We had a "two-courser" drive where we saw both Heuglin's and Somali, and two sandgrouse: Black-faced and Chestnut-bellied. Everyone enjoyed seeing bustards, the beautiful Buff-breasted and the dramatic Kori Bustard, so thick-necked and powerful. African Palm Swifts dashed around by the hundreds, Orange bellied-Parrots calling in their midst. We were dazzled by the explosive colors of sunbirds, Hunter's, Marico, Violet-bellied, and Eastern Double-collared. On several drives we witnessed adult Ostrich on a nest, watching male and female take shifts but sit tight, feathers spread around a large pile of eggs. Huge Crocodiles basked on the river; we would watch them move quickly out of the paths of elephants.

Just around our camp we had lovely species to behold, Grey-headed Kingfishers and Grey-headed Bush Shrikes. Afield we saw Beisa Oryx with ease but had to search for Grevy's Zebra, finding only three males holding territory, their females having moved out of the parts of the park we frequented. One day at our breakfast stop at Buffalo springs, we found striking Vulturine Guinea fowl with chicks and watched them parade down to the water. Superb Starlings flashed their colors everywhere; at lunch we watched one taunting a just-fledged chick with a butterfly, teaching it to go after food. We enjoyed the cool air at dawn and dusk,

great sleeping, sounds of Lions heard from the tents, the final night the call of a Leopard.

What else from Samburu days? On the list would have to be coffee and cookies served to us for wake up calls; champagne for breakfast. Top of the list was Preston's incredible knowledge delivered in a delightful patter, "...Starting a nest - for next thirty days the male will bring her breakfast, lunch and dinner; breakfast lunch and dinner. The chicks hatch and both the parents bring them, breakfast lunch and dinner, breakfast, lunch and dinner." We had found that Preston Mutinda could answer any question from nature to culture yet it took some prodding for us to learn he is one of only eight Gold-level guides in Kenya. We enjoyed his patience, his humor, and his amazing animal sound imitations. When wildlife watching was slow he would tell us tales of lion and elephant adventures and some hair-raising adventures from his many years of safari.

One story specific to Samburu was seeing Elsa, the lioness made famous in recent years that adopted not one, but five different calves of oryx and gazelles, and tried to keep them with her. One she let return to its mother to feed. This allowed them to stay friends for several months and the calf would return often, choosing the lion for its main companion. Preston said the pastors at local churches took this as a sign of the world's end, when the lion would lay down with the lamb. For a season, matatus (local taxis) and buses would come from the churches, just wanting to see that.

<b>Feb. 15</b>	<b>Samburu / Sweetwater Camp / Night Drive – Cheetah Makes a Kill!</b>
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Today we savored one more early morning drive at Samburu, listening to sounds, taking photos of the scenery, checking the Ostrich nest, following fresh lion tracks that seemed to hold so much promise. We really hated to go!

Our drive to Sweetwater Camp passed quickly, taking in the village scenes of Samburu, Archer's Post, Isiolo which was bustling with life. There must have been some sort of festival, as many Samburu in traditional dress walked a section of the road; for us it was like a parade -- so much color! We climbed 2500 feet in elevation, passing back through the gleaming wheat fields, at one point stopping for views of Mount Kenya with its glaciers in the distance.

Roadside margins were busy places, for here people plant small gardens. We saw a man making gravel by hand, goats and sheep and cattle being herded, people carrying water and food, and vendors selling things. The landscape tapestry was so varied in color with the mix of agriculture. We saw occasional greenhouses that serve the floral industry, and more than one of us remarked on how similar this view was to the back, or Idaho, side of the Tetons. We stopped for fuel and at an ATM; August sampled the local grocery, and by lunchtime arrived at Sweetwater Camp in the private Ole Pejeta Reserve.

Coming from Samburu, this place seemed more like a hotel as its busy Florida-style dining room was buzzing with activity. But the food was good, and our tents faced a waterhole where we found a family of Black-backed Jackals, White-tailed Mongoose, many Warthogs, and a good selection of water birds including Abdim's Stork, new for our list. We wanted to see the reserve by day, though the main reason for booking here was to sample a night drive, allowable as it is a private reserve. We enjoyed dramatic vistas, skies painted with billowy clouds and some good bird and mammal sightings.

Those who elected the early night drive had a real thrill - observing a cheetah making a kill! They had followed a Cheetah trotting down the road in the headlights, only to have it suddenly veer and pounce, grabbing a Thompson's Gazelle. The grab took seconds, but the kill several minutes as the cat suffocated its prey, never moving its powerful jaws until it was quiet. The second group was fortunate to still see and sit and watch the now well-fed Cheetah who remained near her prize. Other night sightings included a Serval Cat, Spotted Thick-knees, an adorable clutch of just-hatched Three-banded Plover Chicks, Verreaux's Eagle Owls and jackals on the prowl. We all fell into sleep after a very full day; positioned well to get ourselves to the airport for tomorrow's flight to Maasai Mara, a place many consider the crown-jewel of Kenya.



Our flight was early - 9:15AM, so this morning we just glanced at the waterhole, watched Crowned Hornbills near the lodge, and made our way to the airstrip. This was a 19-seater Air Kenya plane with a friendly pilot, who took us pretty smoothly over the rift valley with its string of lakes. We had to buzz the gravel airstrip by Governor's Camp before landing to make sure the Topi, Thompson's Gazelles, Zebras and Cape Buffaloes got out of the way. Seeing myriad animals and their trails from the air was a thrill. We also recognized circular bomas of the Maasai and saw a matrix of well-used wild animal trails.

Three drivers met us in Land Rovers-- Joseph, Dixon and Peter. Their keen eyes and knowledge were much appreciated over the next three days as we ventured out each morning and afternoon to explore various areas of Maasai Mara, Kenya's portion of the famous Serengeti. Though February is not the time of the Mara's famed wildebeest migration, there were often still thousands of animals in view - zebra numbers to defy the imagination, augmented by Topi, Grant's and Thompson's Gazelles, and then in fewer number, Cape Buffaloes and Elands.

We arrived to lunch, spread out under large shade trees. The tables were covered by elegant linens of a lovely shade of green, and the oasis effect coming from the vast open savannah was quite remarkable. So was the Schalow's Turaco looking down at us, one of two turacos we'd see here - the other being Ross's. We celebrated lunch which seemed like a feast, beer and wine or wonderful, fresh passion fruit juice, and as on other safari days, retired for rest for some, photo pursuits for others. Peg could not remove herself from a nest hole of Double-toothed Barbets at almost eye-level; what a marvel to watch them come and go. We all received a gift as a welcome, a small carved Hippo placed upon our pillow. The décor here was decidedly African with lovely textiles, tiled mirrors and art. Most memorable was the location, though - absolutely in the heart of the Mara, right along the river.

We soon found out what a corridor the river was - first at night, and then during the day, we altered our paths to avoid elephants, and listened to both lion and hyena just across the way. At night we had to go with guards, who called back and forth with radios to let each other know where various animals were - sporting! MJ had elephants up close and personal on several occasions, and one night Preston had to wait several hours to return to his tent. This was certainly luxury amid the wilds!

On our first afternoon game drive, we found out why Preston had never worried that we'd find more Lions. We found the Marsh Pride with ease, resting in the shade along a line of shrubs. Several females lay in an affectionate pile, nuzzling each other, rolling on their bellies with legs held languidly in the air. One female got up and walked over to nuzzle a male, a fairly young and fit male, one of four that had fairly recently taken over the pride. She nudged him sensuously and he responded readily, climbing over her for a quick couple of bouts of mating, giving us quite a show. At one point the male had her whole head in his jaw, and pressing a bit too hard she snapped, gave him a brisk swat and a massive cat snarl. They both settled down and though we stayed quite a bit longer, it seemed they were in for a long nap so we ventured out to appreciate the views, and the herds, the endless herds of ungulates. There were many young zebra, and we watched as two males tussled, getting down on their knees to hit as if they were boxing. Sunset over these vast spaces, with animals milling throughout, and the sun casting light onto lone acacias, clouds playing shadows on the escarpment and plains, was something not to be forgotten. We all had to head in by 6:30 or so, and as we went through the gate we got a salute from a smiling guard. Elephants and giraffes were often very close to camp; we'd watch them in the quick fading twilight at day's end.

That first evening the lodge hosted a Moroccan barbecue, which we rated the best of our three dinners here. It was fun as they cooked everything on the spot, after we'd selected fresh vegetables, meats, garlic and spices. Music came at the time we started dessert, a local band joining the waiters and staff in a long line to wish someone a happy birthday. One of the singers was as agile on his hands as his feet, walking about inverted. It

was a festive show of fun.

The next two days sped by, as there was so much to see. Our guides were out every day, so they knew where our chances were best to find Cheetah, which we were thrilled to see on our second morning. We found a mother and three large cubs, nearly her size, on the move, looking elegant in the long grass. Each had a unique face and it was wonderful to be able to zoom in to study one of the four, or back off and watch their symmetry in motion. Eventually they settled in a dense cluster of shrubs on the ridge - how lucky we were to encounter them while still active. We'd also watched a lone hyena at a den site. She pulled out a portion of a leg she'd stored and chewed on it a bit; we were close enough to hear crunching bones. We lingered here, not knowing that over the hill we'd see vultures, and they'd alert us to a huge clan of some forty hyenas. Even our veteran safari travelers had seen nothing like this. There were hyenas spread in all directions; the carcass was a buffalo, so there was a lot of meat to be consumed. They ripped and tore flesh and ran away with huge pieces, whole limbs, running through the grass and displaying dominance to others until they'd fed their fill. One group brought meat down to a small water pool to soak it, soften it. They splashed and their brindled and spotted coats made patterned reflections; quite a sight. We watched numerous interactions, and wondered what the researchers knew of this clan, as several older members were marked with radio collars. Again we could hear the crunching of bones, audible over the clicking shutters of our many cameras.

Birds were amazing as well. Large species like Secretarybirds, Southern Ground Hornbills and Kori Bustards could be seen a long way off, and the smaller species we'd encounter when we stopped or in camp - beauties such as little Bee-eaters and Rosy-throated Longclaws.

We saw a number of raptors including three species of Snake Eagles: Brown, Black-chested and Southern Banded. Fish Eagles were paired up and considering nesting; migrant Common Kestrels often filled the trees, congregating in groups. We saw a few Lesser Kestrels, Montagu's Harriers, and Grey Kestrels. In small pools we'd find clusters of wading birds, in grand combinations such as Saddle-billed Storks with Woolly-necked Storks, Hammerkops hunting alongside Rufous-bellied Herons. At more extensive marshes we picked up Yellow Bishops, Black Crake and Stout Cisticola. We never tired of watching Topi, odd-shaped ungulates fond of standing on termite mounds, so sleek they looked polished -- a rich burnished buff color to their hides. The grass was so tall it hid Warthogs and Thompson's Gazelles; we'd pick these up when moving, or when they were on shorter grass. One "Tommie" had a very young baby and we watched her lick and nuzzle it, and clean its bum.

The third morning five of our party of ten took a balloon ride and wildlife trip, getting up before dawn so they could watch sunrise from the air. They floated first down the Mara River, then over the plains, finding a Black Rhino, scores of wildebeest, zebra and more. They raved about the experience, especially the thrill of landing near a pride of lions, watching them and not too far away, encountering Bat-eared Foxes.

Those not going ballooning went along the river and watched them float by, beautiful in the morning glow. At a scenic bend of the river our two land rovers stopped. We watched hippos cavort, keeping in contact with their grunting snorts, thrilling us as a female emerged from the river with a very young, likely just a couple of days--old baby. This little pink bundle of Hippo followed the mother over uneven rock for quite a ways, and then jumped in the river to reveal the tiniest pink ears amid a pile of hippos they'd joined. We saw a Coppery-tailed Monkey here with a baby, and so many birds: Water Thicknee, African Stilt, a Ruff and a Striated Heron along the river. A Woodland Kingfisher with its electric colors was a delight. This group continued down to see the crossings that wildebeest use in migration. We could see the topographic features that draw them down to the river, then the steep embankments they must navigate, often hurling themselves into the crocodile-infested river. We had tea and coffee at one crossing, imagining the sounds and sights of that intense event as Joseph and Preston described it in detail.

Peg's birthday occurred on our final evening, a second time over the years she had been in Africa. It was most festive, as two others in the dining room had birthdays so a busy line of dancing Maasai visited them all,

humming and leaping and singing good will.

The Mara felt like an infusion of Africa, one we will keep in our minds to return to for years to come. All elected to take one final game drive, savoring the experience until the end. Our return to Nairobi is a blur, sorting through suitcases, talking about our highlights, one of which was our group. We'd seen so much, shared so many moments; we hated to see it end. My guess is this will not be the last Africa adventure for any of us.

Until the next adventure....