

Kenya Wildlife Safari | Trip Report

Sept 13-27, 2022 | Written by Jon Atwood



Guides Alex Mwangia (Cisticola Tours) and Jon Atwood, with participants Mark, Margaret, Ralph, Sheri, Janet, Joyce, Polly, Priscilla, Raj, and Craig.

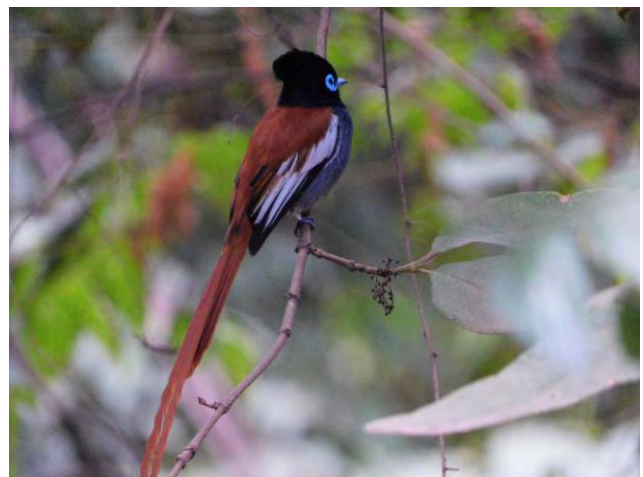
Mon., Sept 12 Early Arrivals

Some of our group arrived a day early, in order to give ourselves time to recover from the long plane flights. From the airport, we drove through the bustling city of Nairobi to our home for the first four nights, the Ole Sereni Hotel. Leaving the airport we got a taste of the safari experience, with the road lined by wonderful sculptures of wildebeest, cheetahs, lions and warthogs. Arriving at the hotel we unloaded our luggage underneath a tree occupied by a colony of about 30 Speke's Weaver's, with a few Baglaffeht Weavers also present. With night and day turned around for all of us, we had dinners at various restaurant options in the hotel and turned in for the night.

Tues., Sept 13 Official First Day of the Tour, Nairobi

As we waited for the arrival of remaining tour members, including two who had come directly from Uganda, we ate breakfast on a long, outdoor porch that overlooks Nairobi National Park. Common Ostrich, Speckled Pigeon, Little Swift, African Palm Swift, Marabou Stork, Yellow-billed Stork, Black Kite, and Hamerkop, and African Pied Wagtail, Red-rumped Swallow, as well as a distant herd of plains zebra and an African buffalo were visible from our tables.

Excited about the prospect of a morning in Nairobi before our scheduled tour activities actually began, we spontaneously decided to add an unscheduled morning visit to the nearby Nairobi National Museum and adjacent botanic gardens. Fabulous – a great introduction to Kenya's distant and recent past, a chance to enjoy current African art, displays of Kenyan birds and mammals, and many birds in the grounds of the museum and botanic gardens: Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, Fork-tailed Drongo, African Paradise-Flycatcher, Pied Crow, Common Bulbul, and Superb Starling. We all began to appreciate the contributions that each group member brought to our experience – sometimes only a photograph allowed us to identify a quickly seen bird. With so many unfamiliar species, even experienced birders could feel that excitement that some remember from past years when every sighting was "new".



Returning to our hotel after lunch, and meeting with our last two group members, we had our first orientation meeting with Alex Mwangia, safari guide with Cisticola Tours. We were to learn that not only was Alex a master at Kenyan bird identification, but was

completely competent in logistical matters and planning. We knew that we were in great hands, and as we ate dinner together at Ole Sereni hotel, we looked forward with anticipation to tomorrow's adventures.

Wed., Sept 14 Karen Blixen Museum; The Giraffe Centre

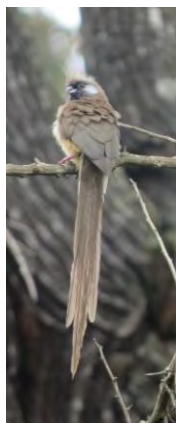
After breakfast on the deck overlooking Nairobi National Park, we headed off to our two destinations of the day, and were introduced to the two remaining – and super important – members of our team: David and Bensen. The traffic congestion in many of Kenya's cities is a bit overwhelming, and throughout our tour we would comment on how grateful we were for the careful and safe driving skills exhibited by our drivers, David and Bensen. Not only were these men wonderful at navigating almost impossible traffic challenges, but when we got into the field they were great at spotting and identifying birds and animals. What a wonderful team Cisticola Tours had provided for us.

For some of us, the Karen Blixen Museum was a terrific surprise. Not only were the surrounding grounds full of fabulous birds – Spot-flanked Barbet, Black Cuckooshrike, African Black-headed Oriole, White-eyed Slaty-Flycatcher, and Hartlaub's Turaco to name a few – but the chance to see Karen Blixen's home made us feel that we were a part of *Out of Africa* (no, we didn't see Meryl Streep or Robert Redford, but this was the exact world that Isak Dinison's book revolved around).

Next a fabulous lunch, where there were so many birds that it was hard to find time to eat: Speckled Mousebird, Black Sawwing, Abyssian Thrush, White-browed Robin-Chat to name a few. Then off to another highpoint, still within the city bounds of Nairobi.

Our next stop was The Giraffe Centre, a local attraction that breeds the endangered Rothschild's Giraffe and repatriates them back into the wild. After feeding and interacting with the giraffes, we hear a short lecture about the conservation work being done here. Birding afterwards introduced us to several new species, including Bronze, Amethyst, Scarlet-chested, and Variable sunbirds. This family, which specializes on feeding on nectar, ecologically resembles the New World's hummingbirds; many sunbirds also share the dazzling beauty of hummingbirds.

We returned to Ole Sereni for dinner, reviewing our sightings from the day, and getting ready for tomorrow – our first full field day as we explore Nairobi National Park, the 29,000 acre park located on the edge of Nairobi.

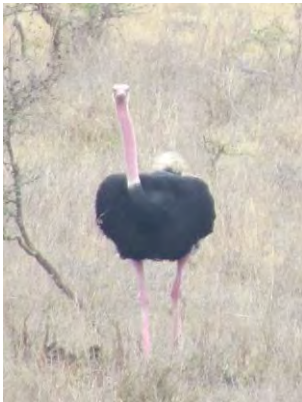


Thurs., Sept 15 Nairobi National Park

Although located on the edge of a major metropolitan area, Nairobi National Park offered a glimpse into what we would later experience in the Masai Mara National Reserve. Nowhere else can you see the animals of the African plains – lions, giraffes, zebras – within sight of the skyscrapers of a major urban center.

Today we drove, in our two “pop-top” Land Rovers, looking for whatever we could find. It took us a while to get used to the idea that we needed to make our observations from within the vehicles. Still, with

the vehicles acting as our blinds, we were able to see baboons, vervet monkeys, black-backed jackals, zebras, warthogs, giraffes, buffalo, Thomson’s and Grant’s gazelles, impalas and white rhinos. The highlight for most of us was having a male lion walk right alongside our vehicles; then, as he walked away, he stopped and roared to the delight of those videotaping this majestic animal. And birds were everywhere: ostrich, Egyptian Goose, Helmeted Guineafowl, Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove, Black Crake, Spotted Thick-Knee, Blacksmith Lapwing, Three-banded Plover, African Darter, African Sacred Ibis, African Fish-Eagle, Blue-naped Mousebird, and Malachite and Pied kingfishers. And that’s just a very partial list.



After returning to our hotel in time for showers, dinner, and our daily checklist review, we all learned our first Swahili phrase, “Lala salama”, which means “Sleep peacefully”. Tomorrow we leave Nairobi for the next stage of our adventure.

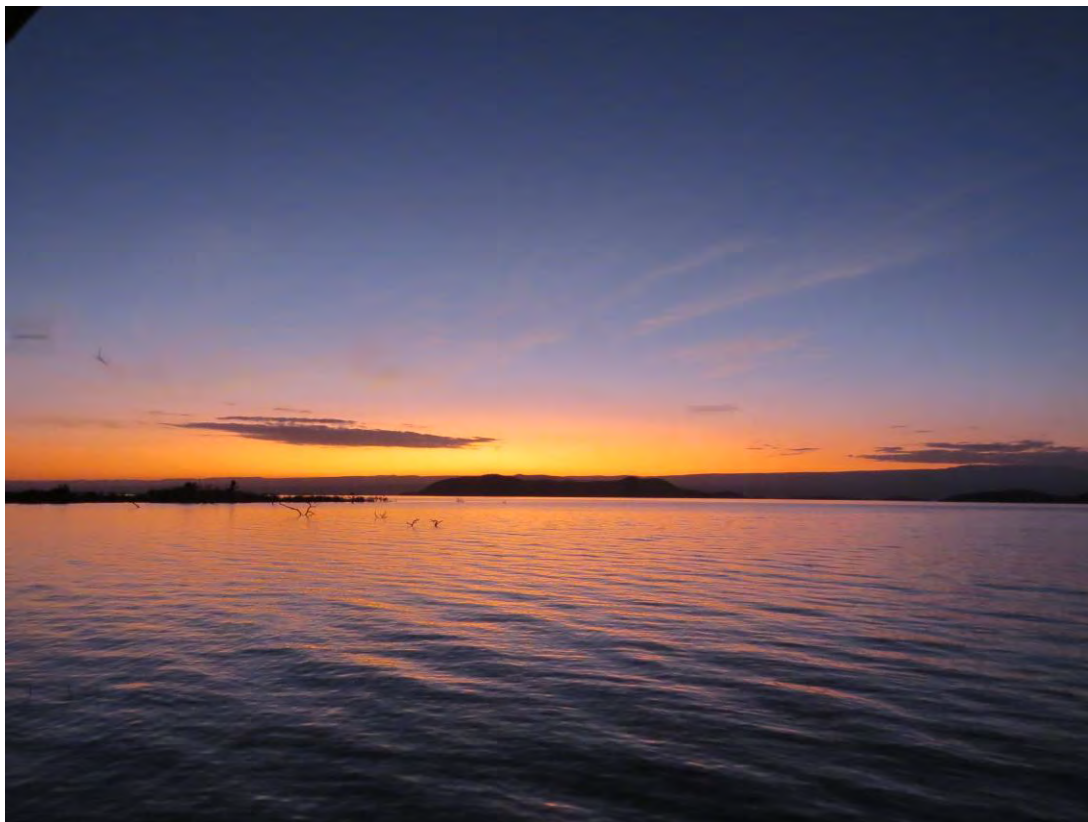
Fri., Sept 16 Lake Baringo; Rift Valley

From Nairobi, we departed early to begin our adventure into the mighty Rift Valley. After navigating the congestion of Nairobi, we stopped at a viewing point on the edge of the valley to enjoy the landscape spectacle. We also stopped at the signed equator location for photo ops as we crossed into the Northern Hemisphere.

This was a long driving day, and it gave us a chance to appreciate the great diversity of areas that this trip will take us to. Many agricultural areas, livestock feeding on the sides of the highway, small and largish towns, open areas where you could look for many miles over essentially undeveloped land. Within the Rift Valley are numerous lakes that we’ll visit over the next days; today we ended up at Lake Baringo, where our simple hotel provided night-time escorts to make sure that we don’t bump into any foraging hippos as we walk from the dining hall to our rooms.

After lunch we met up with the first of our local bird experts – Wilson – who had scouted out some specialty birds to show us near our hotel. Northern White-faced Owl, African Gray Hornbill, Red-fronted Barbet, Three-banded Courser, White-bellied Go-away-bird, Slender-tailed Nightjar, Brubru – by this point, our minds were swimming with species names that were so foreign to us that it was hard to keep track. Wow – even with a long drive this was an amazing day.

“Lala salama”. We went to sleep dreaming of our visit tomorrow with the flamingos of Lake Bogoria.



Sat., Sept 17 Lake Bogoria

This beautiful soda lake is located on the Rift Valley floor and regularly hosts one of the biggest congregations of both Lesser and Greater Flamingos in the world. Although hypersaline, the lake is highly productive with



abundant cyanobacteria that feed the flamingos. As we walked to the lake shoreline from our Land Rovers, we were able to watch close, and distant, flocks of both species – the Lesser being brighter pink and darker-billed than the Greater. An amazing sight almost impossible to describe. Little and Eared grebes, and Cape Teal, also gave us good looks. A Diderick Cuckoo, beautiful in its glistening green plumage, was pointed out to us by a mobbing

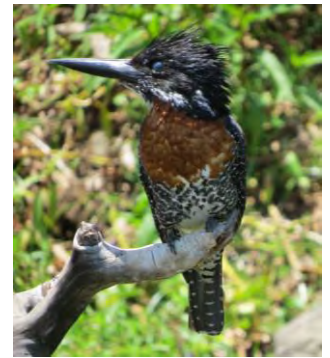
weaver – the field guides informed us that this cuckoo species specializes in nest parasitism of weavers, a fact that the lengthy mobbing behavior that we watched clearly reflected.

Later, expertly guided by Wilson, a visit to the Baringo Cliffs yielded a pair of Mocking Cliff-Chats, Grayish Eagle-Owl, Red-winged and Bristle-crowned starlings, Silverbird, and Lanner Falcon.

For the last night at our Lake Baringo hotel, we were treated to a surprise dance and song performance by representatives of the local Turkana tribe – a taste of their traditions that are maintained to this day. It was beautiful.

Sun., Sept 18 Lake Baringo; Drive to the Kakamega Forest

We started this day with a glorious boat ride on Lake Baringo, considered by some participants to be the high point of our trip. Herons were everywhere, and diverse: Little Bittern, Gray Heron, Goliath Heron, Purple Heron, Great Egret, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Squacco Heron, Striated Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron. So were the kingfishers: African Pygmy, Woodland, Striped, Giant, and Pied all checked in during the boat ride and subsequent lunch stop and drive to our evening destination. Madagascar Bee-eater, Lilac-breasted Rollers, Gray-backed Fiscal, Dusky Crested-Flycatcher, Ruppel's Starling. African Fish-Eagles put on wonderful displays, as our boat drivers tossed fish to birds that had obviously learned this routine before. Our photographers delighted in knowing exactly where to point and shoot as the eagles swooped down to grab fish out of the water!



When we arrived at our lodging for the night at the lovely Rondo Retreat Center, we very obviously had shifted ecologically. Contrary to the arid lowland habitats we had visited near Nairobi and in the Great Rift Valley, the Rondo Center was located in the moist uplands of the Kakamega Forest – the only portion of the Ugandan Equatorial Rain Forest that extends east into Kenya. Many of the species that we'd grown accustomed to seeing during the last 5 days were now gone, and we had a whole host of new birds (and mammals) to discover. White-browed Robin-Chats sang us to sleep after a delicious dinner.

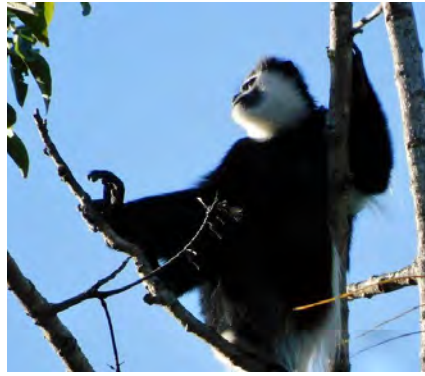
Mon.-Tue., Sept 19-20 Kakamega Forest

For two days we delighted in the cool and moist forest of the Kakamega Forest, with the Rondo Retreat Center nestled in its midst. Huge trees stretched into the sky, and lower vegetation formed a dense, almost impenetrable wall of green. Fortunately we had help from an expert local guide – Winstone – who amazed us with his knowledge of bird calls and songs. As anyone knows who has birded in dense tropical habitats, sound is always the first way to locate a bird, and time and again Winstone helped us see species that, without his help, we never could have found.

Highlights of the two days we spent in the Kakamega Forest included Ross' Turaco, Blue Malkoha, African Emerald Cuckoo, Black Cuckoo, Red-chested Cuckoo, Long-crested Eagle, Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill, Blue-headed Bee-eater, Lesser Honeyguide, Golden-crowned Woodpecker, Brown-throated Wattle-eye, White-chinned Prinia, and Black-faced Rufous-Warbler. The list could go on and on.

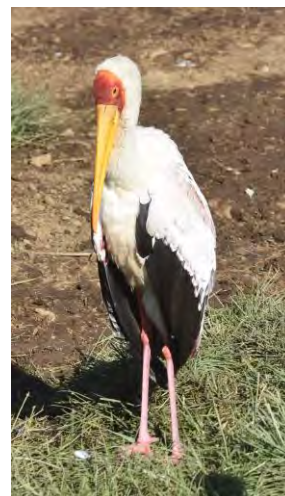
Three speciality birds, though, deserve particular mention. The Crowned Eagle nest, located outside the Rondo Center's registration office, was far more accessible for photography and observation than I ever would have imagined. One morning Winstone took us to a special place to look for the Great Blue Turaco – a 2 ½ foot long, spectacular blue turaco that is kind of the mascot of the Rondo Center; we saw the bird within about 10 minutes of our arrival at the right location. And, although it took 3 tries for some of our group, nearly everyone who was able to join in the search successfully saw the White-spotted Flufftail, described in the field guide as "tiny secretive rails which are extremely difficult to see." Wow! It is very safe to say that the majority of birders who visit east Africa never see a flufftail!

Not surprisingly, the mammals of the Kakamega Forest were also radically different from what we had seen in the lowlands. The striking black-and-white Mau Forest Guereza *Colobus* monkey was seen regularly, and I am now able to add Stuhlmann's Blue Monkey to my list of tropical primates that have peed on me while I was looking into the canopy for birds.



Wed., Sept 21 Kakamega Forest; drive to Lake Nakuru National Park

After a last walk in the Kakamega Forest (and a final hunt for the flufftail) we headed back down to the Rift Valley, this time with Lake Nakuru National Park as our destination. We arrived late in the afternoon, with just enough light to see Gray Crowned-Crane, Great Cormorant, and large flocks of Great White and Pink-backed pelicans.



We settled into our fabulous lodging, had dinner with views of Lake Nakuru and the surrounding park, quickly reviewed our observations from the day and plans for tomorrow, then “lala salama”.

Thurs., Sept 22 Lake Nakuru National Park

Today we explored Lake Nakuru National Park, with morning and afternoon game drives. Black-backed jackal, a sleeping leopard, zebra, white and black rhinos, giraffes, buffalo, common eland, Thomson’s and Grant’s gazelles, waterbuck, impala – how amazing that all these creatures exist in our modern world, and how fortunate we have been to see so many on this trip. And these have not been distant sightings, but animals usually viewed less than 100 ft away. Special birds from today included Red-billed Duck, Greater and Lesser flamingos (I know – they’ve been listed before from other sites, but how could flamingos not be considered “special”?), White-browed Coucal, White-fronted Bee-eater, Cardinal Woodpecker, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, and Spur-winged Lapwing. Although most of the birds we’ve seen are resident species, we saw migrants, too: Ruff, Little Stint, Common Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Marsh Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, Northern Wheatear. These birds, like us, were all a long ways from home, having flown from their northern breeding grounds to spend the winter in east Africa.



Fri., Sept 23 Lake Nakuru National Park; Drive to Masai Mara

We were up and out early this morning, and as we exited Lake Nakuru National Park we proceeded to nearby Lake Naivasha, another lake located within the Rift Valley. As soon as we exited our Land Rovers the birds were so spectacular that it was hard for us to get into the boats. Black-tailed Godwits (migrants from Europe and Scandinavia), Crowned Lapwing, African Jacana, Intermediate Egret, Hadada Ibis, African Spoonbill. And a heron that many people only dream about after watching David Attenborough documentaries – the Black Heron, which forms a canopy with its wings covering its head, using the shaded water and its yellow feet to attract fish, which then become the heron's lunch. Fabulous behavior – and readily visible in a bird that was foraging near our boat loading area.



Our experience on the boats, like at Lake Baringo, was almost beyond description. Black Crakes ran everywhere on the lily pads, Goliath Herons stalked at lakeside, Giant Kingfishers posed for their photos. Yellow-billed Ducks and Red-knobbed Coots (without their breeding condition red knobs, giving all of us an excuse to come back at a different time of year).

After leaving Lake Naivasha we headed for the final destination of our tour – the Masai Mara. We arrived in time to get settled into our almost unbelievably wonderful rooms at the Pride Inn Mara Lodge; this lodging was the most luxurious of our trip. When we met for dinner after getting unpacked, more than one group member commented, "They're never going to be able to get me to leave this place!"



Sat., Sun., Mon., Sept 24-26 Masai Mara

Or the next three days we settled into a routine, with morning and afternoon game drives located within the extensive Masai Mara Natural Reserve. This is one of the most famous and important wildlife conservation and wilderness areas in Africa, and is world-renowned for its exceptional populations of lion, leopard, cheetah and elephant. Although similar in habitat to what we encountered in Nairobi National Park, the Masai Mara is over 10X larger in size. This means that some species, notably elephants, have adequate range within the Mara. Also, the Masai Mara is really just the northern part of the extensive Serengeti ecosystem, most of which occurs in the neighboring country of Tanzania.

As we explored the Masai Mara, each day we were treated with close observations of elephants – mostly in family groups that included adults, teenagers, and babies. They were so wonderful to watch as they munched on grass and interacted with each other.

The size of the Mara also made it an excellent landscape for predators, and we repeatedly saw lions, leopards, and cheetahs. A serval cat also made its appearance – this species has relatively long hind legs, which make it possible to leap high in the air to catch flying birds! One of our cheetah sightings was an animal that was carrying a recently killed baby gazelle, allowing for some pretty fabulous photo opportunities.

As seen on TV, the Big Show in the Masai Mara often includes large numbers of wildebeest and zebra swimming across the Mara River – a risky passage because of waiting crocodiles that take advantage of these vulnerable ungulates. On the day when we visited this area, we watched as a group of zebra came tentatively down the bank to the water's edge, drank, but then backed away, probably because they could sense a couple of very large nearby crocodiles waiting for them to attempt the crossing. Eventually these zebra, along with large numbers of wildebeest, will have to cross this river, and some will succumb to predation by crocodiles. But on

the day we were there to observe the spectacle, all we saw were a group of nervous zebra having a drink. Nature is always unpredictable, yet always exciting.



The massive number of ungulates on the Mara plains was impossible to describe in words. In many places, literally for as far as we could see, there were herds of antelope: Thomson's and Grant's gazelles, impala, topi, hartebeest, and wildebeest. Zebra and warthogs were also abundant, and giraffes and elephants not uncommon. It was this moving smorgasbord of prey items that support the predators of the Masai Mara. And at the occasional kills that we found, scavengers were there to clean up the scraps: black-backed jackals, spotted hyaena, White-backed Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, and Ruppell's Griffon.

Although mammals were clearly the focus of our time in Masai Mara, we saw lots of birds, too. Repeated, close sightings of Secretarybirds – large, long-legged raptors that stomp their prey to death – were favorites of many of our group, but Bateleurs (an eagle with a super-short tail), Southern Ground Hornbills (large black birds about the size of a turkey that walked determinedly across the grassland), and the impossibly-colored Lilac-breasted Rollers were sometimes able to distract us from the elephants, giraffes, lions and zebra. All of our group will hold these memories forever.



When we returned nightly to the Pride Inn Mara Lodge we feasted and rested in luxury. Night-time escorts, all dressed in Maasai garb, walked us to our rooms, just to make sure that no one mistakenly bumped into a wandering elephant, hippo, or lion. After dinner on one night we were treated to a performance of traditional Maasai song and dance, and on the last night of our stay the kitchen staff moved our dinner outside, where we ate near a roaring fire under the stars, and watched the Maasai dancers leap into the air in a scene that must have been played out for generations. Unbelievable.



Mon., Sept 27 Masai Mara; Return to Nairobi and Flights Home

On this last morning in the Masai Mara we had one last game drive as we headed to a small airstrip located within the Natural Reserve; by flying from here to Nairobi we saved ourselves a lot of time, and gave ourselves a few more hours to enjoy the grandeur of the Masai Mara. This was a place that all of us felt we could explore for decades, yet never see it all. What an experience!

After stopping briefly at the Ole Sereni Hotel, we were shuttled back to the international airport. We said our goodbyes, promising to stay in touch – this experience had begun to knit us together as a family, and we couldn't wait to share our memories through shared photos and e-mail.



Photo credits: Jon Atwood, except where otherwise noted below.

Sept 13 – African Paradise-Flycatcher, Raj Naraparaju

Sept 14 – giraffe feeding, Priscilla Pattison

Sept 15 – Pied Kingfisher, Raj Naraparaju

Sept 17 – Zebra and flamingos, Sherri Foote

Sept 18 – African Fish-Eagle, Janet Baker

Sept 19-20 – Great Blue Turaco, Raj Naraparaju

Sept 19-20 – Colubos monkey, Raj Naraparaju

Sept 19-20 – Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill, Janet Baker

Sept 19-20 –Blue-headed Bee-eater, Raj Naraparaju

Sept 23 – sunset with zebra, Craig Zalk

Sept 24-26 – sleeping leopard, Raj Naraparaju

Sept 24-26 –Lilac-breasted Roller, Sherri Foote

Sept 24-26 – cheetah with prey, Raj Naraparaju

Sept 24-26 –lion, Raj Naraparaju

Sept 27 – group photo, Alex Mwangia