



## Tanzania Birding & Wildlife Safari Trip Report 2023

[Link: Tanzania Birding & Wildlife Safari Trip Report 2023](#)

---

These days it appears that many people, even naturalists, are reassured by numbers. So without further ado, we should say now that our two Tanzanian “spring tours in 2023” exceeded all expectations. That is to say that numerically they were a wild success. Furthermore in terms of the overall experience both tours provided outstanding opportunities to delve deep into the abiding wonder of East Africa. During each of these two, almost leisurely Eagle-Eye safaris, which I guided back-to-back during March and April, across the renowned “northern circuit” of Tanzania (incorporating Mount Meru, the baobabs of Tarangire, Lake Manyara, Ngorongoro Crater, the plains of the Serengeti and Lake Victoria), our participants met with in excess of 400 bird species within the fourteen days. On the first safari the clients were treated to almost exactly 400 bird species. While on the second safari, all those who filled-in the list could have checked-off some 420 species. More species actually, if one adopts any of the more recent bird taxonomies. In fact we did so well that no less than 32 bird species were added to our preliminary Eagle-Eye master checklist, 13 species of which were seen on both of the safaris! In spite of the birds, nowadays, most nature-minded people who make the pilgrimage to Tanzania come to watch the great beasts, the BIG mammals, and specifically to witness what Dr George Schaller once named the “The Movable Feast”. His term for the wanderings of vast herds of wildebeest and zebra, eland and topi and other large ungulates, the grazers and browsers, the swarms of nibbling gazelles, all of whom roam the vast tree-dotted savannas and the open plains of a seemingly limitless Serengeti ecosystem. They also dream of seeing the “apex predators”. And in this too, our participants were far from disappointed. In fact they were delighted!



*Youthful Common Waterbuck © Blythe Nilson*



*Black-backed Jackal © Blythe Nilson*

Early April in East Africa typically sees the beginning of the so-called “Long Rains”. However for the past two years of La Niña conditions the Northern Circuit has received scant rainfall. So when I arrived on March 20, 2023 it was said by all that "the savanna is hurting". Yet it was as if my Norse and Celtic heritage had brought the rains. Yes! On March 22 the heavens opened. And during the course of the two safaris we did experience some rain showers on a few occasions, yet they were

never so heavy as to seriously inconvenience our daily agenda. It should be said that the marvels of East Africa can commence as soon as one exits the terminal building at JRO - Kilimanjaro International Airport. For eastern Africa remains, for the most part, a land that is made by hand. By our human hands, our fire and of course by the billions of invertebrate mandibles and the hooves, the trunks and the claws of a myriad beasts. Beings who would still call this land home were they able to emulate us and to speak out loud. The sounds of African birds are so important in making a safari experience what it is. Those sounds, and the lack of extraneous motor noise as well, only punctuated perhaps by the occasional light aircraft high-up in the nowadays improbable blue of a Serengeti sky. If one arrives "at Kili" overnight, or in the early hours of the morning, one may rise to the sounds of crickets and a dawn chorus of bird song. Vocalisations from wonderfully-named birds: bulbuls, boubous, brubrus, crombecs, cisticolas, eremomelas, gonoleks, go-away birds, queleas and so forth! All of them contribute to the soothing sound of the savanna. Our lodge near to the airport provides an oasis for nature lovers on their way into or out of the greater wonders to behold farther west in Tarangire, the Ngorongoro Crater and of course in "the endless plains of the Serengeti." I have found that one of the things that the first-time naturalist visitor remarks upon soon after arriving in East Africa is the tameness of the birds. Thankfully it remains true to say that birds here lead relatively unmolested lives, compared with those in many other parts of the world. Getting the "Big Five" is easy enough, although seeing Leopard well usually requires some foreknowledge on the part of the driver-guide of our customised Toyota Landcruiser. This was the case in 2023, and on both of our safaris we made contact with this sublimely beautiful predator. Seeing Lions is a far simpler matter, living as they do in prides, and we saw many lions on each of our tours. On the second safari we even saw a sisterhood with two ages of young cubs. Watching their antics, just after a passing rain shower, in the wide serenity of the Serengeti, was a truly uplifting experience for all of us.

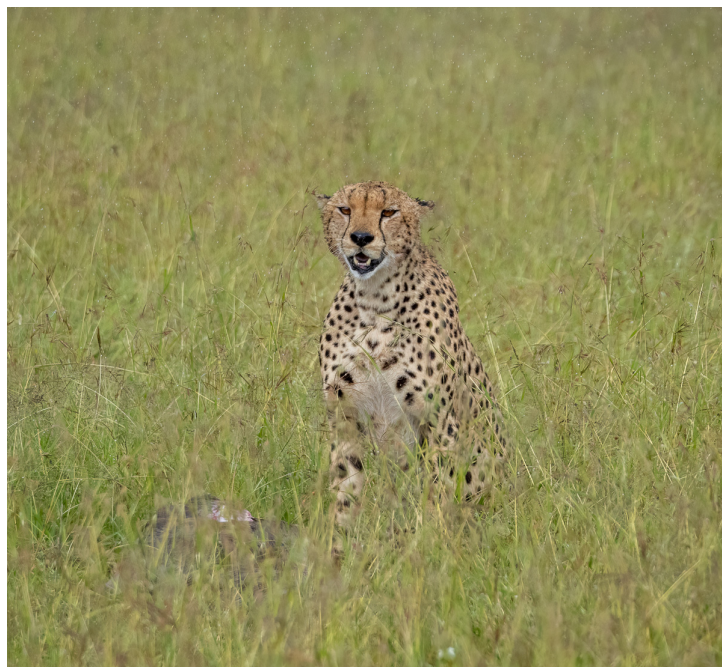


*Lioness relaxing in an acacia © Blythe Nilson*



*Lioness, a mom and cub in the Serengeti © Lily Ponto*

We saw Cheetahs on both tours, almost alone we were, certainly far from the madding crowd, far out there on the short grass plains at Ndutu in the exquisite Ngorongoro Conservation Area.



*Cheetah in the Serengeti © Blythe Nilson*

As to the Elephants, the Black (or Browse) Rhinos and the Hippos? Well, can't even begin to describe the wonders of the Elephants!



*A "retired" bull elephant in the marshes of the Ngorongoro Crater © Blythe Nilson*



*Black Rhino, Ngorongoro Crater © Blythe Nilson*



*Hippopotamus in the Grumeti River © Blythe Nilson*

On each safari we were delighted by the fantastic colours of the birds: of rollers, bee-eaters, sunbirds, bishops, weavers and the waxbill tribe.



*Lilac-breasted Roller perched in a succulent, the candelabra euphorbia © Blythe Nilson*



*Little Bee-eater © Blythe Nilson*

We were charmed by the nest building antics of the utterly unique Hamerkop and by the host of weaver species, who were sometimes creating colonies over our open air dining area in a savanna luxury camp.



*EET group dinner at tented camp in Serengeti*

We did amazingly well for Whydahs, those spectacular brood parasites of the smaller finches.



*Pin-tailed Whydah © Blythe Nilson*

But we also paid attention to the LBJs and we almost “cleaned-up” (as British birders are wont to say) on those admittedly drab Cisticolas which occur in this region. Listening to their spectacular voices and watching their comic antics in the grasslands I hope everyone came to appreciate that appearance isn’t everything! We got great views of some rare birds, birds seemingly from a bygone age, such as the Southern Ground Hornbill.



*Southern Ground Hornbill © Blythe Nilson*

Everyone saw their dream bird, whether it was that rocking sky-haunting eagle the Bateleur, that

giant of flight the Kori Bustard, the sedate Secretary Bird, an Eastern Paradise Whydah or a Beautiful Sunbird - aren't they all?



*Scarlet-chested Sunbird* © Blythe Nilson



*A female Saddle-billed Stork (NB: she has the iris golden, the male has an all dark eye)* © Blythe Nilson

Tanzania remains a wonderful country. It is still a near perfect destination for any travelling

naturalist. No matter whether you consider yourself widely experienced or an amateur. And it's worth repeating that as soon as you step off the plane, at Kilimanjaro airport, then the wonder may begin. For example you can see over 30 bird species before breakfast right there at the lodge, where our groups first meet, beside the relatively infrequently used, i.e. quiet, runway of this international airport, gateway to the Tanzanian safari experience. To emphasise one point: I have found that although everybody who hails from the built-up (a.k.a. "developed") northlands, receives a different overall impression of the Tanzanian safari experience - I have never known someone to be disappointed. On my safaris we strive to ensure that everyone is enabled to have their own unique experience. Everyone will have a different abiding memory. Above all, for me, someone who is primarily a bird guide, naturally therefore it is the birds which stand out in ones reminiscence. So to my examples: the Brown Snake-eagle, that flew 500 metres toward our vehicle in order to catch a metre and a half long snake close-by on the close-cropped grassland beside the oh so pink flamingos of Lake Ndutu, on our first safari of this year; or the pair of Grey Crowned-Cranes, tending their three stumbling chicks at a green and reedy pool in the far western Serengeti on the second safari.



*Lesser Flamingos at Momella Lakes in Arusha National Park © Blythe Nilson*



*Gray-crowned Crane tending a young chick in the western Serengeti © Blythe Nilson*



*Gray Crowned-Crane © Blythe Nilson*

Despite being in a vehicle for much of the day and with up to seven other colleagues, including your driver-guide and myself up-front, admittedly you are often standing up, and always have a large open window beside you, the peaceful intimacy of wildlife-watching on one of our safaris should never fail to raise the spirits.



*Toyota Landcruisers with roof-tops up at Ndutu Safari Lodge*

Sitting, down in the front with Moses the driver, there were countless times in 2023 when we two exchanged quiet smiles as, one after another, the participants expressed out loud their irrepressible joy, as they became fully immersed in the incomparable experience of simply being here, fully alive in-the-Nature; in Wild Africa. It's just as if we are the first, to ever behold this, to be liberated from mundane concerns by the consummate beauty of our natural world.



*A young Von der Decken's Hornbill in the rain © Blythe Nilson*



*Verreaux's (aka Milky) Eagle-owl at Ndutu © Blythe Nilson*



*Vervet Monkey © Blythe Nilson*



*Red-collared Widowbird* © Blythe Nilson



*White-browed Coucal* © Blythe Nilson



*View from Speke Bay Lodge*



*Enjoying breakfast at Speke Bay Lodge*



*Group One at Tarangire Safari Lodge*



*EET Group Two*