Eagle-Eye Tours



Tanzania Birding & Wildlife Safari Trip Report (Apr 13 - 28, 2024)

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As far as this guide is concerned the most enduring memories, from our Eagle-Eye safari in Tanzania in the second half of April 2024, are of a frequent rekindling of happiness as the group became immersed in the incredible life diversity within a tapestry of landscapes spread across Northern Tanzania. A diversity noted, in the forty-five species of mammal and well over four hundred of birds, encountered along a four hundred kilometre imaginary water-line linking the snowy crowns of Mount Kilimanjaro to the floating papyrus islands of Lake Nyanza-Victoria. Although one is being driven along a relatively short transect, of a large country, the traveller experiences many profound and dramatic shifts in climate and hence in the associated vegetation communities and their wildlife. Not to mention a great diversity of peoples who still manage to maintain unique living connections with this land. 2023-2024 has been marked by an El Niño event. As a consequence there were many days this April when we experienced some rain. However, in the whole month there was only one day, in fact only one afternoon, during which we could not “BirdBig” due to the adverse weather conditions. In Tanzania the green season of April is always accompanied by magnificent skyscapes. Amazing cloud formations that complement perfectly the terrestrial beauty of northern Tanzania. Simply wonderful! If you add to this the incredible diversity of mammals, many of whom are still flourishing, and the lengthy bird list, the insects and the magnificent trees and colourful flowers, the result is a superlative ecological adventure in a holiday of only sixteen days. Witnessing this unfailingly demonstrates the foresight of the founders of the nation of Tanzania, and the sacrifices that have been made by subsequent generations. All to ensure that privileged souls, such as ourselves, may enjoy such unique experiences. Our safari began with a day or two at KIA Lodge followed by two days in the forested slopes of Mount Meru. Here in Arusha National Park we were treated to a close encounter with our first magical herd of Elephant and were introduced to more representatives of uniquely African bird families. Species such as the soon-to-be familiar Speckled Mousebird (an every day bird) and the extremely elusive Hartlaub’s Turaco snatching olive-like Rauwvolfia fruits almost out in the open.



Savannah Elephant © Buzz Crowston



Speckled Mousebird © Buzz Crowston

Thankfully we managed better views of the simply unbelievably gorgeous Grey-crowned Cranes (and saw them very well later on numerous occasions) and we were able to almost drive up to the magnificent flamingo flocks on the brackish Momella Lakes. At a secluded swamp we watched secretive stiff-tailed White-backed Ducks and African Jacanas along the edge of the papyrus beds, and enjoy the vibrant golden buzz of a nesting colony of the very ‘range-restricted’ Taveta Weaver.

Leaving the cool mountains, skirting Arusha city on the new ring road, we descended into the Great Rift Valley to visit Tarangire and Lake Manyara national parks. Here we found more Savanna Elephants, our first African Lions, our first Southern Ground Hornbills, and enjoyed an unrivalled vista of the “quintessential” savanna Africa. A view we could soak-in from the porches of our very comfortable tents. There were scops owls, kingfishers, bee-eaters, great raptors and those equally impressive old-world vultures and a variety of small mammals too: particularly mongooses and ground squirrels; all helping to inspire a growing sense of wonder.



Baobob Tree © Buzz Crowston



Dwarf Mongoose © Buzz Crowston



Lion © Buzz Crowston

On one of our game drives most of us saw a rare and typically nocturnal Bronze-winged Courser, all too soon we flushed it, nevertheless those on the ‘starboard side’ did get very close views of this splendid bird on the ground. In Tarangire we saw a distant White-headed Vulture, nowadays very rare, and we watched, for the first time of three, the cooperative hunting engaged in by a pair of African Hawk-Eagles. In the bottom of the Rift Valley, at an elevation of barely 1,000 metres, Lake Manyara is typically the hottest point on the safari and also the busiest in terms of tourists. Here in the forest we increased our hornbill list with the addition of the scarce Crowned Hornbill. From here we climbed back into the cool highlands of the Wairaqui people and the next morning enjoyed a forest walk in the mist at Endoro above the legendary Gibb’s farm. An organic coffee and vegetable estate further enlivened by a somewhat sleepy family of Verreaux’s Eagle-owls, by various sunbirds, nesting swallows and confiding “big-eyed” slaty-flycatchers.



Verreaux's Eagle-Owl © Buzz Crowston

Leaving the red soils of Karatu town we climbed further into the highlands and the indescribable beauty of Ngorongoro Crater. Most definitely this is a real wonder of our world. I have made a great many visits to this Crater yet each time as we leave, via the zig-zag ascent road to the crater's rim, I have become spellbound by the experience. This year it was the water birds that, for me, stole the show.



Ngorogoro Crater © James Wolstencroft

We were able to eat our picnic lunches in the Toyota safari vehicle completely surrounded by a

glorious variety of wading birds feeding along the brackish shoreline of Lake Magadi. The thousands of shockingly pink Lesser Flamingos were simply outstanding, as they paraded back and forth, all the while gurgling in their utterly exotic communal display. A stand-out bird for all of us, from the damp grasslands of the crater floor, was the beautiful Rosy-throated Longclaw. This is one of three longclaws that we saw on the tour, exemplifying the wonder of convergent evolution, birds that look uncannily like meadowlarks.



Water Buffalo © Buzz Crowston

From the Ngorongoro Highlands, and the classical Maasailand, we descended into and subsequently across the amazing, unpeopled and mammal-rich, vastness of the Serengti plains (and hill ranges) westwards towards Lake Nyanza-Victoria. We stayed first at the magnificent Ndutu Lodge (which is most people's favourite, among the excellent selection of accommodation available on this tour) and then at a relatively new mobile camp beside the western corridor. At Ndutu we were delighted by the tameness of the birds and especially by the abundance of seed-eaters: weavers, waxbills and the incredible whydahs. All of whom were in fabulous breeding plumage. The male whydahs, sporting such outrageous tails, were clearly everyone's favourite. On the second day at noon we found a puddle in the middle of the track and were treated to close views of Grey-headed Silverbill, among the bathing Black-faced Waxbills and charming Cordon-blues.



Blue-capped Cordonbleu © Buzz Crowston



Pin-tailed Whydah © Buzz Crowston

Despite the occasional heavy shower in the Serengeti resulting in some muddy road conditions we were amply rewarded for our perseverance. On our safari local knowledge, and serendipity, enabled us to find for ourselves an absolutely magnificent Leopard relaxing in a low acacia tree close beside the track.



Leopard in tree © Buzz Crowston

This land is busy with big mammals, most conspicuously with many species of ungulate, and with some very special birds. In particular we were pleased to see what was evidently a healthy number of that unique raptor the long-legged Secretarybird. We also saw a good number of Pygmy Falcons. We were very lucky to find a Side-striped Jackal dozing beside an abandoned wildebeest kill in the company of a few mighty Lappet-faced Vultures. Of the three Canids which we very much enjoyed watching on this safari, Side-striped is the least frequently encountered being primarily nocturnal. On the second day we had an awe-inspiring meeting with a family of Elephants who allowed us to park amongst them as the babies and youths rolled around in the damp red soil, lovingly surrounded by their highly protective elders.



Lappet-faced Vulture © Buzz Crowston

After several days observing wildlife almost entirely from within the confines of our open-roofed, long wheel-base, Toyota Land Cruiser it was a great joy to spend many hours wandering in the lake-shore grounds of Speke Bay Lodge. By now we were all becoming a little familiar with the “everyday birds of the safari circuit” and so we could better devote ourselves to tracking down “skulkers” such as the unforgettable Black-headed Gonolek, the ventriloquial Scaly-throated Honeyguide and Grey-capped Warbler. And, by the judicious use of playback, to “pulling out” the Blue-headed Coucal and other avian denizens of the hippo-infested swamps that fringe the property. We walked the grounds along dry tracks and in the flooded grassland we found roosting Three-banded Coursers and were even luckier to find a shy Dwarf Bittern silently hunting frogs deep within the tall grasses. Eventually it was time to fly back from the wealth of waterbirds at the lake, including some tame and iridescent Allen’s Gallinules in rice fields near to Mwanza city, to Kilimanjaro, and to the place where our Tanzanian nature adventure began, KIA Lodge. Here we enjoyed once again several characteristic birds of the trip including a close encounter with Slender-tailed Nightjars as they came to drink and display near the hill-top swimming pool. A Klaas’s Cuckoo called shrilly from its hiding place in a well foliated tree. Then toward sunset the massive snow-covered eminence of Kilimanjaro loomed majestically out of the north. The direction in which, all too soon, we would be headed.



Abdim's Stork © Buzz Crowston



Africa Fish-Eagle © Buzz Crowston



Gray-headed Kingfisher © Buzz Crowston



White-browed Coucal © Buzz Crowston



Lilac-breasted Roller © Buzz Crowston



Yellow-billed Stork © Buzz Crowston



Yellow-collared Lovebird © Buzz Crowston

[Tanzania Birding & Wildlife Safari Species list]