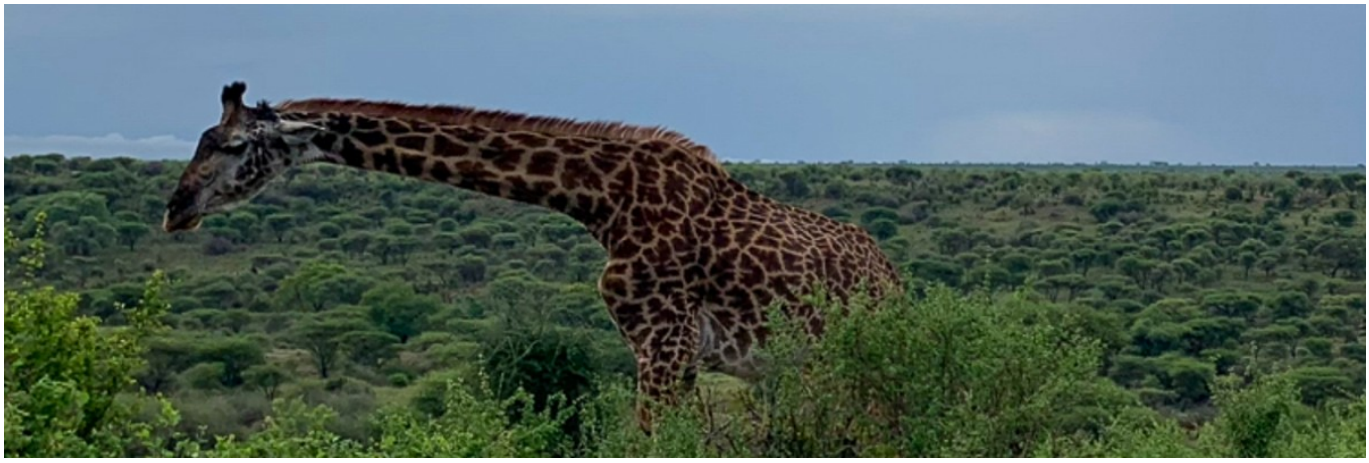
Eagle-Eye Tours



Tanzania Birding & Wildlife Safari Trip Report (Nov 2024)

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We were truly blessed on this fifth Eagle-Eye safari in Tanzania. A sojourn across the famous safari circuit of the north in this big, friendly and peaceful African country. Blessed with the prolonged equatorial highland sunshine of November-December interspersed with refreshing showers of the "short rains". Lovely weather and captivating skyscapes populated by an astonishing diversity of birds and large animals confirmed that we had chosen the perfect timing for our tour. Our four days in the nutrient-rich short grass plains of the eastern Serengeti and in that fabled, wonder of the world, Ngorongoro Crater were undoubtedly the high points of this safari for everyone. To take a picnic in the tree-less vastness of the shortgrass plains surrounded by a million **wildebeest** is an unforgettable experience. It is somewhat unnerving to stand just beside the vehicle, munching on a sandwich, surrounded by countless thousands of beasts, each one battleship grey, gently grunting to each other, as if indecisive about which direction to take: "North!", South!", "North!", "South!". The sound, endlessly repeated in an utterly African and somehow gruff, gnu voice. Definitely the sound, together with the plaintive whistle of the **Sentinel Lark**, of "The Serengeti". Within the throng, "the movable feast" so aptly described by Dr George Schaller, we were both lost in space, yet surrounded and all alone. Mankind-in-Nature. It was wonderful!



Ndutu Safari Lodge at dawn

The next day, a fresh and sunny morning in lightly bushed grasslands (west of the incomparable Ndutu Safari Lodge), magically we came face to face with a mother **Cheetah**. She was out hunting with her three well-grown cubs. And she was walking straight towards us. She swerved to a low termite mound on our left from which she could survey the surroundings for the presence of prey - **Thomson's Gazelle**. Her two boy cubs decided to lie down in the warm grass in front of us whilst their sister veered off to follow and learn more skills from her mother. As she did so, she flushed another, smaller, 'leopard-spotted' cat, a **Serval**! The panicked Serval at first ran towards the mother Cheetah, but quickly seeing her dangerous mistake, she swung around and ran back across our path towards the young boys relaxing in the grass. There ensued some thirty seconds of pandemonium as the young Cheetahs felt obliged to give chase. Our local driver-guide Roger thought at one point that they would catch and kill the Serval. However, mercifully, the Serval somehow escaped. As one participant put it: "That was a truly awesome experience!" The tour had got off to a great start at KIA Lodge and as we left there for Arusha National Park we were treated to great views of a pair of **Gabar Goshawk**, one was all black and the other soft grey and barred. And they remained perched unconcernedly for five minutes right beside the track. In Arusha national park **Baglafecht Weavers** and **Black-and-white Mannikins** performed right beside the road, and we had great looks at **Taveta Golden Weavers** and **White-backed Duck**. A great surprise for the two guides, just inside the park, was a kettle of 22 **White-backed Vultures** circling over a hidden kill on the edge of the extensive grassy glade of Serengeti Ndogo. Two **African Hobby** flew through here, the first of three sightings of what is normally a very hard to find species.



Maasai giraffe © James Wolstencroft



Picnic lunch in Arusha National Park

Maasai Giraffes as always performed brilliantly. I particularly recall the one giraffe beside our Toyota Landcruiser who seemed happy to have an oxpecker perched on the knee of each of his fore legs near the sandy pools of Tarangire National Park. We saw all four of the small **bustards** in Tarangire and one afternoon had great views of a pair of **Bat-eared Foxes** together with some exotically named African passerines in the nearby bushes: **Rosy-patched Shrike, Brubru, Yellow-**

bellied Eremomela, Northern Crombec and Slate-coloured Boubou. That's where we saw our first **Brown Snake-eagle** close to the vehicle, such are the joys of an East African safari, where one can get right up close to most of the wildlife one encounters. Overnight showers brought down Palearctic migrants at several locations including a flock of twelve **European Rollers** that had been passing south overnight, across the glorious African savanna that surrounds Tarangire Safari Lodge. In Tarangire we encountered our first of several **lions**, including a pride of nine who sprawled in the morning sun on either side of "our track". Near there we found all three of the **sandgrouse** to be seen in Northern Tanzania. At the delightful Ngare Sero Lodge, in the foothills of Mount Meru beside a lovely trout stream, we enjoyed a pair of raucous **Giant Kingfishers**, some resplendent **Black-and-white Colobus monkeys**, the superb song of the **Ruppell's Robin-chat**, a family of **African Black Ducks** and much else besides.



Ngorongoro Crater from rim



Ngorongoro highlands forest © James Wolstencroft

Ngorongoro was simply as awesome as always. Even I managed a lifer in the form of a vagrant to Tanzania, a drake **Cape Shoveler**. There was a fantastic number and diversity of water birds at the many new wetlands within Ngorongoro Crater. We simply marvelled at the diversity of nature. To realise that so much wildlife can exist in such a relatively small area is a truly humbling experience. Perhaps one of the most memorable experiences for me, in Ngorongoro, is that of a **Yellow-billed Oxpecker** in watery afternoon sunlight, who flew down in front of us to take a quick bath in a small stream before returning to dry-off on the grizzled tailstock of an old bull **African Buffalo**. Under cloudy skies as we were moving towards the "ascent road" out of the crater at Ngorongoro, we were obliged to spend half an hour following an ambling bull **Elephant** (he was in 'musth'), who simply would not surrender one inch of the track to anybody or anything. In the western Serengeti the landscape was delightfully lush, verdant and the birds were in full song. I was delighted to see both a **Pangani** and a **Yellow-throated Longclaw** in the same dead tree, a very unusual experience since the range of these two "meadowlark look-alike" species - one eastern, one western, used to be considered mutually exclusive. One morning we made a pilgrimage northwards to a rocky eminence called "Mbuzi Maui kopje", where we were able to get distant views of **Rock Hyrax** and to admire the 'footwear' of a unique antelope the **Klipspringer**, after whom this rocky hill is named. Here we also found a pair of the critically endangered **White-headed Vulture**, the only ones logged on our tour. Speke Bay Lodge was as ever a very tranquil haven. After days 'on the road', travelling along gravelly roads through the unique landscapes of Northern Tanzania, its open plains, Acacia-studded savanna and thick bush, here at last we could explore freely on foot. Only the few nocturnal **hippos**, who graze the grounds after dark, could pose any danger to a wandering birder. We observed many species of bird, some of which had until now somehow escaped our eyes, including a particularly obliging "it will rain!" **Red-chested Cuckoo**. A bird we had heard many times. The great lake itself produced numerous attractions and the gardens as ever were full of life: **gonoleks, African Thrushes**, colourful **sunbirds** and a selection of confiding black and yellow patterned **weavers**. Eventually, we had to travel to Mwanza and fly back to Kilimanjaro airport where the tour concluded. We agreed that the safari had been a wonderful adventure and that we had, all of us, seen things that we could not have imagined.



Cape Buffalo from vehicle



Short grass plains near Ndutu



Endoro Forest Walk



Birding Endoro Forest



Our group

[Tanzania bird and mammal list Nov 2024]