Kenya: The Masai Mara & The Laikipia Plateau Photography Tour Report 2017

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by Chris Galvin

Where do you start trying to compile a list of highlights of a visit to Kenya that is concentrating on the Big 5, Cheetahs & the Great Migration? I suppose, in a way, you must take into account about how it met the clients' expectations. Did we achieve what we set out to? Not quite, mainly because no African Hunting Dog were present in Laikipia and had not been for months prior to our arrival. However, in all other aspects, not only did we meet our targets but we surpassed them. The wildlife viewing and photography opportunities on this trip were spectacular.

The group targets started to fall within mere minutes of landing at Olare Orok airstrip when we got sight of our first Cheetah en-route to the luxury tented camp which was to be our base for the next six nights. We would find ourselves photographing Cheetah on nine of the eleven days and big cats on ten days of the trip. Whilst on the Olare Motorogi Conservancy we were at "Big Cat Central" with one of the largest and most successful lion prides in the whole of Africa on our doorstep, with black- maned alpha males, numerous tiny cubs and a large contingent of hunting females. Lions harassing Cheetah, Lions harassing Leopard or Lions being challenged and moved on by belligerent African Buffalo where all witnessed during our stay. There were many tense moments, whether it was watching a Leopard cub sat uncomfortably at the top of a tree whilst six lions waited at the base, or following a female Cheetah, known locally as Selenkyi, trying to get back to her three nine-week old cubs. All the time watched by lions as she made her way back to Noronya Hill.

The group also wanted to see Lions on a kill and, again, even before we reached Kicheche Bush Camp, we witnessed one of the Moniko pride females dragging the carcass of a Blue Wildebeest up Observation Hill. Cheetah on a hunt and of course the enigmatic sight of vultures, Marabou Stork, Spotted Hyena and Black-backed Jackal squabbling over a discarded lion kill carcass; all watched and photographed in the first day and a half.

If The Mara section of the trip was "Big Cat Central", then the Laikipia section was all about the Rhinoceros with both Southern White and Black Rhinoceros present in large numbers. The Laikipia plateau is also higher and drier than the Mara with the early morning light often "crisper", which afforded some great landscape photo opportunities for the group.

The tour commenced in Nairobi where Karen, Deb & Bree were resting after their trip to Rwanda. We all took the short trip through the chaotic Nairobi morning traffic to Wilson airport for our short Safari Link flight to the Masai Mara. Safari Link use small aircraft and restrict luggage to a total of 15KG per person in total including hand luggage. Our group was almost 50kg overweight and had to purchase a freight seat and have some of our personal items flown out to camp the next day. Getting to Olare Orok airstrip meant two flights, with a change at the Governor's Camp airstrip. The first flight was in a De Havilland Dash 8 aircraft which has a capacity or 37 passengers and this flight was not full. This aircraft has a pressurised cabin and can fly higher and faster than the smaller aircraft in the Safari Link fleet, so got us onto the Mara quicker, but we missed out on some of the sights that you see using smaller aircraft. The second flight to, the Olare Orok airstrip, which is a grass strip on the conservancy, was in the much smaller Cessna Caravan which only has a capacity of 9 passengers and was fully booked, hence the reason for the luggage arriving a day later. On arrival we only had to travel a few hundred metres to connect with our first Cheetah of the trip. The aforementioned Selenkyi was resting in the shade of an acacia. We had discussed the targets and "most-wanted" sightings the night before in the hotel and Cheetah was the "most-wanted" for Karen. That being the case today would be a red letter day for her as we connected with a total of eight individual Cheetahs between lunchtime and sunset.

After we checked in to Kicheche Bush Camp and had lunch, we went out for our first drive. Within minutes of leaving the unfenced camp, we found two young male Cheetah lying on the plain. As we settled in to photograph them, we received radio news from one of the other Kicheche vehicles that they had found "The Coalition". This is a group of five male Cheetah that have banded together and hunt together.

Five is an unusually high number of Cheetah to be hunting together, it does though offer certain advantages, namely that they are able, whilst working as a team, to hunt larger prey, such as Wildebeest; and, as a result their strike-rate is improved. “The Coalition” are from three different females and this band of marauding Cheetah would roam widely, as we would catch up with them a couple of days later some 35km away in the Mara National Park. Tonight, though they were hungry and we stayed with them as they marked territory by scent-marking and scratching the bark of a couple of trees and we would witness a short, but ultimately unsuccessful hunt as they tried to get to a herd of female Impala.

The plan for the next few days would settle into a pattern of early starts with thick, black, strong Kenyan coffee would be served with hand-made cookies in the mess tent in a pre-dawn reveille. Chris would find out from the guides the latest overnight sightings, which often involved estimating the direction and distance of the bellowing lions that could be heard overnight, and finding out what large mammals had passed through the camp. There quickly ensued a check on the pre-dawn light to see if a majestic sunrise would be a suitable photographic subject. Day two, though, was a little cloudy but it meant we only travelled minutes out of camp before we came across the remains of a Wildebeest, where the typical savannah sight could be seen of Marabou Stork, White-backed & Ruppell’s Griffin Vultures & Spotted Hyena noisily squabbling over the last few skeletal scraps of Gnu.

Nearby we noticed a large family group of Spotted Hyena getting very close to some Burchell’s Zebra by a dry riverbed. We made our way to get a closer look thinking that the scavenging Hyena may attempt to take down a zebra. There were some tense moments as we watched, but the Hyena moved off without showing any interest. We would catch up with the same Hyena family group further upriver where they took a drink and bathed. At the same crossing, though, the dry riverbed made some Blue Wildebeest a little more nervous, their numbers grew and we watched a mini, dry crossing as the Gnu dashed across the gulley fearing a leopard or lion ambush. The mammal list continued to grow as we encountered two troupes of Mongoose, firstly the diminutive Dwarf Mongoose posed for images and proved to be very inquisitive. Then the larger Banded Mongoose briefly passed us as they scurried across the savannah. Two confiding Kirk’s Dik-dik that were around a small thicket turned and faced us showing the diagnostic small snout that enables this small antelope to graze on some of the thornier shrubs. Whilst watching them we found Yellow-breasted Apalis, White-crowned Robin Chat in the thicket and an Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove fed in the shadows. Whilst still parked searching for more birds in the bush a family of African Elephant, including a three month old calf wandered slowly past us.

Heading back to camp for lunch we found Selenkyi as she headed for one of the pools close to camp for a drink. She was still resting in the shade there after lunch and very slowly led us back to Noronya Hill where, through binoculars we caught sight of her cubs. She had secreted them very well and they were hidden too far away for photo opportunities. We stayed with her until sunset in hope that she would bring them down the hill as the temperatures cooled toward sunset but it wasn’t to be.

Day three dawned and we spent the early hour and a half or so in company of the Moniko pride. They were still feeding on an African Buffalo they had caught the previous night. The power and number of individuals in this pride means that they have a large success rate and the ability to even target species as large as buffalo. It was amusing watching as different generations fed; from adult females, through to the tiniest cubs, all the way to the dominant Alpha male. It was amusing to watch as older cubs chased off any Marabou that got too close. Eventually the King wandered down the hill and some of his cubs followed him wanting to play and trying to tug his black mane. This particular male has been at the top of the Moniko pride for more than seven years, which is testament to his size and ferocity that he has so far seen off all rivals that have challenged him.

From here we moved off to look for a female Leopard known as Fig, she was known to have a 16 week old female cub. We found them both perched up at the top of a couple of adjacent trees. They had been forced up there seeking sanctuary away from the six lions at the base of the trees. The adult female, Fig, was stuck on the uppermost branches completely without shade, whilst her cub was in shade but very uncomfortable. We stayed with them for a while before turning away for an al fresco breakfast overlooking the Mara National Park. Nourished with Kicheche’s secret recipe Breakfast Pie, cereal and seriously good locally sourced coffee we doubled back to find them both still in the trees with the lions still harassing them. We later learned that they both survived the ordeal but had been there till dusk in the full heat of the midday Kenyan sun.

We spent the afternoon up close to a small African Elephant herd, one of which could be easily identified because its left tusk had grown across the trunk. When in this close proximity to feeding elephants we noticed and were able to study the feeding technique of these grazing giants. They would grab a trunk full of short grass and twist it with the trunk, then they would kick the trunk; this resulted in the

succulent, juicy grass roots being ripped from the soil. The remains of the day we spent following Selenkyi who had left her cubs whilst she went out on the hunt. As the light was failing we left the Cheetah and cut away for one Africa's special sunsets. A distant storm was driving rain across the plain and, as the sun was setting, we found a herd of Wildebeest sheltering under the canopy of a single acacia tree. The sky was like an artists' palette, coloured red and orange with purple clouds, against which were silhouetted the wet wildebeest at Ngombe Crossing. A truly spectacular sunset.

Heavy rain continued for several hours with lightning ripping through the thunder heads of the night sky. Very quickly the ground became saturated and we were all thankful for the wellington boots provided in the tents so we could get to dinner without trudging through the mud.

Next morning we were out in the Landcruiser as a fragrant fresh dawn broke with clear skies. Wildebeest were on the move and silhouetted against the sunrise, and statuesque Masai Giraffe made for interesting shots against the horizon. Today was our planned all-day trip to the Mara National Park to see if we could witness a "crossing". The rain overnight meant that the Talek and Mara rivers were swollen and the usual fording points for the vehicle to get to the main Mara crossings were too hazardous as the water was too deep and fast-running. It meant a longer than usual trip to the Mara crossing point for which we were headed. On the way though, our driver, Charles, found a male Leopard in the hollow of a large tree, which distracted us for a while. When we finally got to one of the main Mara crossing points it was all quiet with very few animals at all; we hung around for a little while, still with no action so we headed off to find somewhere for lunch. There was still no chance of a crossing when we returned, but we found a singing Rattling Cisticola and Yellow Bishop close to the car and watched African Pied Wagtails and Common Sandpipers along the river. After a couple of hours, we decided that it was not going to happen today and headed off for the slow drive back to camp. Approaching Lookout Hill, Charles turned us around back to the crossing as he had spotted long lines of Wildebeest heading towards the river. We got back to the river before the Wildebeest arrived and waited and watched as the numbers started to swell. They were on our side of the river, which meant we would watch them as they went away from us. Waiting in the swollen waters of the Mara River were some enormous Nile Crocodile, whilst others were hauled-out on the banks. More Wildebeest arrived with the odd Zebra mixed in and pressure built. Eventually we had a crossing as two thousand wildebeest made their way across the river amid chaotic scenes. It was unfortunately for us, all over as quickly as it began and we headed back towards camp. Still in the Lookout Hill area we found the five male Cheetah of The Coalition and we stayed with them for as long as we could, however, we were still in the National Park and were not allowed to go off road to follow them. Heading back to camp, another storm broke with even heavier rain than the day before. Charles was so worried about the river levels that he decided we would not attempt to cross the rivers back to camp but would head via the main Talek Gate, which has a bridge and exit the National Park that way. We could then use the road through the town of Narok to get back to the conservancy. The light was failing and the rain was getting heavier, a little way out of town we found a single Bat-eared Fox in the near darkness, so they were binocular views only. We arrived back at camp at 7:20pm having spent 13.5 hours out in the field. An epic day!

The following day, in the pre-dawn light, Charles found a new male Leopard we had not seen before, only minutes out of camp. It was heading across the plain towards the cover of Observation Hill where the terrain was too rugged and we would not be able to follow. We made the effort to track him now to get good views but the drive was rough and we hit an unseen hole in the ground which forced us to turn back.

The rest of the morning was spent with the female Leopard, Fig. We found her in a small gully close to the Porini Camp, she was separated from her cub which she must have left in a secure spot elsewhere. Spooked by the voices she heard from the Porini Camp, she bolted across some open ground and sought refuge in a tree. Fig would stay in this tree for the rest of the morning. Heading back for lunch, we stopped for some Southern Ground Hornbill and watched a pair of Tree Agama chase each other around a termite mound.

During the afternoon drive we thought we'd make another attempt to find the tiny Cheetah cubs, however we found two lionesses and their cubs at the bottom of Noronya Hill where Selenkyi had hidden her own cubs. The lion cubs were in a playful mood and followed the adults down to a tiny puddle where one drank alongside the adult in near perfect golden light. Tension was then raised as the lionesses noticed one single male African Buffalo pick up their scent and made directly for them. There was no herd of buffalo anywhere in sight which is what made this sighting even more remarkable. Not wanting to tackle the buffalo, the lionesses took the cubs up the hill but still the buffalo followed. We watched as they reached the top and went over the crest of the hill with the buffalo still shadowing them. It was then that we decided to head to a nearby large hyena den. At the den were several generations of hyena. There was no squabbling as you see at a kill, but youngsters at play with a wildebeest tail or bothering the adults by tugging at their ears whilst they tried to sleep. We

noticed that there was some form of hierarchical structure amongst the group as one of the young females was moved out of a shallow dusty depression by one of the larger adult females when she returned to the den.

We put in one final effort to get to see the Cheetah cubs on day 6, before abandoning it thinking the worst and that maybe they had been predated. It was during this final vigil that eagle-eyed Charles found a Grant's Gazelle that was less than half an hour old. Still sheltered in the grass as we got closer we recorded the fawn's first steps, meanwhile an amorous male gazelle pestered the doe and chased her whilst she was still tending to the newborn. Earlier a distant Black-backed Jackal looked like it was having some fun tossing a stick in the air like a pet dog. Chris looked at it through binoculars and found that it was a small snake it had killed and was trying to eat. Nearby a large herd of Buffalo were at rest and being groomed by flock of persistent Yellow-billed Oxpecker **.** A Verreaux's Eagle Owl perched out in the open brought an end to the day.

The final session was a two-hour drive and we decided to keep close to camp. It was very tense as we spent time with a pride of Lion during which a large herd of Buffalo approached them. As they got closer several of the males decided it was time to move the Lions on and away from their calves. Charles parked the vehicle on top of a small hill and we were in amongst the action as one buffalo charged and scattered the lions far and wide.

Our stay at Olare Motorogi had ended and we made our way slowly to the grass airstrip and our flight back to Nairobi and onward to Laikipia.

We got to Laikipia via a short stop at Samburu. The delay at Wilson Airport and the stop at Samburu meant we got to Laikipia a bit later than anticipated so we had a shortened game drive as we entered the Ol Pejeta Conservancy before checking into the Lodge. An obliging Purple Roller, Reticulated Giraffe and some African Elephants were the highlights.

Ol Pejeta is famous for the number of both Black and Southern White Rhinoceros that are present and, with numbers rising, it came as a surprise that we spent the whole of the day searching without success. It was hard for us to move away from the marsh area in the morning where some great birding kept the shutter count rising. We found an adult Martial Eagle with a noisy juvenile for company. Lilac-breasted Roller in good light was a target for both Karen and John so we spent some time here to attempt flight shots. Whilst waiting, the noise levels rose when half a dozen Brown Parrots fed in a fruiting tree at the waterside. Violet Wood-hoopoe, Bearded Woodpecker, Yellow-billed Oxpecker and Lilac-breasted Roller all checked the same hollows in a tree as prospective nesting sites, whilst nearby we watched a Red-headed Weaver build a nest. We spent the afternoon with Secretarybird, Kori Bustard, Reticulated Giraffe and grazing African Elephants. We had three drives today, morning drive with an al fresco breakfast, a short afternoon drive, then after an early dinner as we went out on a night drive. Eland, African Elephant, Zorilla, Spring Hare as well as Thompson Gazelle & Burchell's Zebra were all spotlighted on the night drive.

It had been cold overnight with a clear sky, so we made the effort to get to an open area of the conservancy so that we could photograph the sunrise from behind Mount Kenya. Kenya's highest mountain is mostly shrouded in clouds as the heat of the day builds and the peak is often not visible. Following on from a day when we couldn't find any Rhinoceros today was "Rhino-tastic". Just the morning session resulted in finding 21 different Rhinoceros with 16 Southern White Rhinoceros and five Black Rhinoceros. At one point we had a crash of 4 White Rhinoceros lying together whilst a mother & calf were about 200 metres away.

With virtually no chance of photographing any African Wild Dog it was decided by the group to go to the Endangered Species Enclosure within Ol Pejeta. This is a 700 acre fenced enclosure where the world's last remaining Northern White Rhinoceroses live, a 44 year old male called Sudan and two females. It is also where a lot of the endangered Grevy's Zebra are kept. Not only were the group photographed alongside Sudan but also feeding a blind Black Rhinoceros called Baraka. The enclosure has no predators so provides a safe haven for the Grevy's Zebra and a place for relocated rhino to settle in before being released into the conservancy. It was here that we found a calf White Rhinoceros that was less than 36 hours old, and still very uncertain on its legs.

The final day dawned and Mount Kenya gave us a repeat performance. We paid a final visit to the marsh area before heading back for breakfast and getting ready for the for the three hour drive back to Nairobi where the tour ended.