Tanzania: Wildlife Spectacular Tour Report 2024

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Serengeti, Ngorongoro, these are names that resonate with many keen wildlife photographers who dream of Africa and indeed there is almost nothing that rivals embarking on a safari in Tanzania. It is a wondrous adventure filled with light, wildlife, colours, sounds and smells. The 2024 Wild Images photo tour in beautiful Tanzania had plenty of experiences for every sense and our group of photographers hence assembled in Arusha on the 16th of April with so much enthusiasm at the start of the trip, the excitement in the air was palpable.

I had heard about a number of wonderful sightings our Birdquest trip had enjoyed just prior to the Wild Images tour and, as the leader of the trip, I held my breath and hoped that we would continue on from the success of the Birdquest tour. However, I also heard that the rainy season was particularly bountiful and this would be both a blessing and a challenge.

The two weeks that followed indeed brought us encounters with huge herds on the annual migration, many incredible encounters with Lions (we saw over 80 during the trip), two Leopards up in a tree, Cape Buffalos with their incredible stare, close encounters with roaming Elephant bulls, antelopes of all sizes from giant Eland to tiny Kirk's Dik Diks and even Dung Beetles. The incredible diversity of Tanzania also rewarded us with so many bird encounters that towards the end, we commonly lost track of how many bird species we photographed, probably over a hundred. Since our trip took place during one of the heaviest rainy seasons on record in Tanzania, it was wonderful to see so many beautiful African birds in breeding plumage.

Tarangire

Before leaving Arusha, we already changed the plan, as Lake Manyara NP, our planned destination, was mostly flooded and hence we arranged a day visit to Tarangire NP at short notice. We left Arusha in the early morning and travelled along a plain of flat country dotted with Maasai bomas, herds and shepherds. To our amusement, the first Zebras and Gazelles we saw on the trip were actually grazing in the pastures close to Maasai cows! Two hours later, we arrived at the entrance gate to Tarangire and were greeted by noisy but pretty Yellow-necked Lovebirds. It was our first chance to test out our cameras and get comfortable with taking photos from our vehicle. After checking in at the park gate, we encountered Vervet Monkeys, Olive Baboons and beautiful Hadada Ibis and tiny Three-banded Plovers. The first Giraffes, Elephants and Buffalo appeared but at such distances that we rather focussed on the Barbets, Wood hoopoes and Grey-headed kingfishers which were sitting either on or right next to the road. After a pick nick lunch overlooking the now mighty Tarangire river, we continued and were rewarded with a beautiful close encounter with Dwarf Mongooses and a first herd of Impala carefully guarded by a magnificent male.

Ngorongoro Crater

Leaving Tarangire at around 3 pm, we drove up towards the crater rim and arrived just in time at the rim where we made a stop at the lookout over the entire crater. It quite literally took our breath away, as the altitude of 2300 metre above sea level meant rather thin air. Before and below us was the crater floor with herds of Wildebeest and Buffalo, and so much water. In between gaps in the fantastic isolated showers rushing over the crater floor, even the sun came out and the clouds lifted a bit. All of us were in awe.

We took some photos from the lookout and continued our journey around the crater rim. As the sun went down, we checked into our stunning lodge where all of our rooms had spectacular views over Ngorongoro Crater. We were all speechless about the vista and our first dinner was introduced by an acrobatic show while we watched the last rays of light dance over one of Africa's finest wildlife destinations. What an incredible introduction to one of Africa's most famous wilderness areas!

As a safari guide, you always hope that you can show your clients some amazing species, including and beyond the famous big five. I had a mental checklist that included seeing Elephants, Black Rhino, Lions, Hyenas, Zebras, Buffalo and Wildebeest for the crater days.

What I didn't realise was that our first day in the crater would actually tick off every single box on my mental check list with only one exception. We didn't see a Black Rhino!

We started our three days in the crater with breakfast in the dark, but by the time we arrived in the crater, there was enough light to think about photography. Literally our first subject was two female Lions in a tree about 10 m from the track and they cooperatively changed positions frequently and although it was a cloudy and rainy start to the day, the adrenaline of this first encounter warmed us all. On the crater floor came a majestic Kori Bustard in full display, standing well over a metre tall and one of the heaviest flying birds of the world. The morning continued with more Lion sightings on top of caterpillar building vehicles and a beautiful male that posed for us amongst the many purple flowers. As we continued to the east of the crater, large Elephant bulls were spotted, but most of them were too far for a decent photograph. They come to the crater for the soft grass which they can easily chew with their worn teeth. After a lunch break in a small pocket of Fever Acacia, we drove to the edge of Lake Magadi which was more than twice its normal size due to the heavy rains. This, however, attracted thousands of Lesser flamingos and we spent some time practising our bird in flight techniques until everyone managed to obtain a number of decent flight shots. The much larger Greater Flamingos and a Grey-headed Gull were nice add-ons. Time was flying and as we slowly made our way towards the exit road, we bumped into a Spotted Hyena and then a male Lion who guarded a carcass viciously against Golden and Black-backed Jackals. In the final hour, we photographed Eland, Wildebeest and Cape Buffalo in truly amazing evening light. What an ending to the first day, but in fact it was not: just afterwards in the Lerai forest, an Augur Buzzard mantled over its prey right next to the road and as we stopped, we noticed it had captured a Battersby's Green Snake and was wrestling with it. We watched as the buzzard managed to swallow the snake whose tail was still around its wing. We had spent eleven hours in the crater but it went so quickly. Nevertheless, everyone was tired by the time we reached the lodge but the views over the crater from our balconies were once again a real treat and so was the Maasai show and the dinner thereafter.

The second day in Ngorongoro started dull and grey and after the fabulous encounters of the previous day, we started to concentrate our efforts on the normally not so elusive Black Rhino. However, we found a pride of Lions with cubs of different ages instead and spent over an hour with them, as they were playing with each other and a construction vehicle. The interactions of Lions never cease to elicit a strong photographic response. Afterwards, we checked the area around the lake and we were pleasantly surprised to find a whole group of Hippos out of the water grazing at the lake shore. They came within 10m and allowed us various photographic opportunities, including capturing the Yellow-billed Oxpeckers on their backs. From one set of giants we continued with another, as today was really Elephant day, with enormous males getting very close to us, to the point we could use wide-angle lenses to portrait them in their environment. After lunch, we continued our quest for Black Rhino and eventually found two, but they were so far away that a 5000 mm tele would have been required. Instead, we witnessed a copulation of Warthogs, a rare observation. Even for our driverguide Exaud with over 30 years of safari experience, it was a first.

The beautiful thing about being in Tanzania during the rains is that you see so many wonderful birds in breeding plumage and lots of fantastic behaviour which makes for wonderful photos. We found displaying Black-bellied and Kori Bustards, Pin-tailed Whydahs with their stunning streamer-like tails flying around and got close to desperation trying to photograph Fan-tailed Widowbirds that were always perching nicely but flew off before we could take photos. We managed to capture some beautiful images of Grey Crowned Cranes that were so close we got some great portraits of these stunning birds. I started to wonder if the real magic of this safari was going to be in all the birds we managed to see and photograph. We finished the day with Wildebeest with some really young calves. Just as we started our way out of the crater, we saw a fallen Acacia tree and three Elephants fed on the bark and branches and came so close to us, we could have touched them. The hardest thing about being in Ngorongoro is actually leaving Ngorongoro and getting out before the gate closes. It is always so hard to leave! Today was no different. Once again, we managed to get out of the crater just in time with ten minutes before gate closure.

Enjoying three days in Ngorongoro really gives you a chance to complete a portfolio of sightings there and our third day produced some wonderful encounters once again. As we still were hoping for a decent Black Rhino sighting, we left the main track straight away and we were indeed rewarded with two Rhinos, but at great distance so more than documentation photos were not possible. On the way back, we bumped into the pride of Lions again and watched them for a while. As they were getting tired, we went around the Lerai forest and as we left it, majestic Elephant bulls appeared right next to the road. We opted for an early lunchbreak and while we ate, Black Kites and an African Harrier Hawk circled above us, while Speke's and Rufous-tailed Weavers tried to get some crumbs from our sandwiches. After lunch, we bumped into a two Hyenas and as they had a clear direction, we followed them and in a flooded meadow, a clan of Hyenas was busy eating a Wildebeest. We watched in awe as the dozen or so Hyenas cracked bones and ate at astonishing speed. Newcomers from

other clans were vigorously chased away until most Hyenas were full. Soon afterwards, we noticed a grey lump on the plains and it was a nice solo Black Rhino which gave us better chances for photos than the two Rhinos we found in the morning. While not perfect due to slight heat distortion, it was the best sighting of the trip. At the end of the day, the Lerai forest once again treated us to some close-ups with Elephants, as they passed the car with merely a metre distance. We were positively the last car to leave the crater and arrived at the gate five minutes before closing time.

What an incredible few days of photography. I think at this point some of us were starting to wonder if we would run out of memory cards we'd seen so much. Following our last night saw the staff of our hotel joining us to sing our farewell from Ngorongoro in the morning at breakfast. It made it so hard for us to leave!

From the crater highlands to the Serengeti

To reach the famous Serengeti region of Tanzania, you must depart the edge of Ngorongoro crater and drive past many Maasai bomas to get there. We did not leave particularly early and, after making a stop at a lookout to get our last glimpses of the crater highlands, we continued westwards. On this day, our transit day to the Serengeti, we had our first close encounters with Giraffes of the trip which was very exciting. Even for someone who has seen thousands of giraffes, your first sight of them wandering around in search of food is always wonderful. Our sighting this morning was somewhat special as the giraffes were feeding on *Acacia drepanolobium* trees, a small species of Acacia which produces galls in which ants live. They, in turn, defend the tree against browsing Giraffes, a classic example of a symbiosis or mutualism. The Giraffes, however, were not disturbed and we watched them rip of the young leaves from the top and we found it hard to imagine this not being rather painful with all the long thorns.

We drove further and visited a rather touristy Maasai boma where we managed to see some of the famous Maasai dancing where men leap high into the air. We also managed some lovely portraits of Maasai women in their homes. This was a lovely little village and a warm introduction to the Maasai people in this area. Their smiles certainly lingered with all of us long after we left. I am sure they smiled as well after we left as none of us managed to bargain enough to get a reasonable price for the souvenirs we bought!

We drove on towards the famous Oldupai Gorge, the site of Mary and Richard Leakey's most famous excavations of the world's early hominids *Australopithecus* and *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*. At Oldupai, we took a small tour of the excavation site before we finally left to drive out to the gates of the Serengeti.

Serengeti

Before arriving at the Naabi Hill entrance gate, we stopped as two others cars were parked at the roadside with people looking decidedly to the right. As we came to a halt, we realised that there were three Cheetahs walking across the plains. As we were about to start photographing, they sat down and soon afterwards laid down, so only their heads were visible. Who would have thought that with three days in the Serengeti and four days at Lake Ndutu that this would turn out to be the only cheetah sighting of the entire trip! The short grass plains were either wet or even flooded and if cheetahs do not like one thing, it is wetness.

We continued to the gate and stopped there to have lunch, accompanied by Superb Starlings, Hildebrandt's Starlings and African Grass Rats. Afterwards, we headed to the east to check out the Gol-Kopjes, a famous area for Lion and Cheetah. As the Serengeti was lush and green, the big herds were still in the area and hence we drove through thousands of Wildebeest, Zebra, Eland, and this is where we saw our first Topi and Kongoni (Coke's Hartebeest), Hartebeest species closely related to the Wildebeest. The dark blue clouds in the west should have made us more anxious, but we were mesmerised by the sights, sounds and smells. Three different Lion sightings later, the clouds caught up with us on the way north. Soon tracks became muddy, later filled with water and around 5 pm, we were driving through de facto small streams, so much water was around us. Only the exceptional driving skills of Exaud saved us from getting stuck. In the dim light that surrounded us, all of a sudden a Serval appeared and walked by us without paying any attention to us. He must have been equally glad to have found a part of the road that was not flooded.

As it was getting dark, we finally reached the main road to Seronera and the north of the Serengeti and we were relieved. A bit too soon, just 3 km away from the lodge and in the fading light, I heard a "clunk" and then saw a sight I will never forget: one of our tires overtaking us. We came to a crashing halt and while I thought that we are now stuck in the savannah at night, Exaud immediately said "don't worry, I will fix it". Needless to say, I was still very worried but within 45 minutes, the tire was back in its normal position and we arrived at the beautiful lodge at 8:15 pm. What an exhilarating day and everyone was very tired but glad to be in bed soon after dinner.

With the next morning, we were back to our routine of early breakfast and early departure for a full day of safari with lunchboxes. As we drove into the Seronera valley, we encountered a pride of Lions and they walked next to our car for quite some time, before climbing up into a sausage tree for rest and relief from the flies. This provided us with a wonderful opportunity to take pictures of Lions resting in a tree, a behaviour that was once quite rare but is now observed very regularly. We continued in the valley and found additional Lions, a beautifully perched Grey-breasted Francolin and hence lunch arrived without a warning. We spent it at a nice picnic spot overlooking the valley and as there was a puddle of water, we got avian visitors galore during our break. Three different Weaver species came for a drink or bath (White-headed Buffalo Weaver, Rufous-tailed Weaver and Speckle-fronted Weaver), followed by a Silverbird and finally a Red-cheeked Cordon Bleu. As one of our group members remarked: “I could have stayed here the whole afternoon and I am sure it would not have become boring”. Nevertheless, we continued our quest and were rewarded with more Lions and then we arrived at one of the Hippo pools of the Seronera valley. It was full of males of various ages and this soon showed quite clearly: yawning everywhere, which is an intimidation behaviour and also gape-to-gape stand-offs where ever we looked. It was hard to decide where to focus on as there were so many interactions. Many Hippos were also accompanied by Red-billed Oxpeckers and some landed in an Acacia right next to us. We continued to watch in excitement until it was slowly but steadily getting dark and we drove back to the lodge. The first full day in the Serengeti had brought a set of additional photo opportunities and our Tanzania portfolio was steadily taking shape.

Next day, same procedure, same game drive location: Seronera valley. A Lilac-breasted Roller sat unusually low and allowed us photographs with a nice green background. After speaking to another safari vehicle driver, Exaud increased his speed and after about 15 minutes, we understood why: in a tree about 100 m from the road, two Leopards rested! Actually the bigger one was resting and the smaller one climbed around and tried to get the attention of the other, hence we initially thought this is a mother with a large cub. We watched mesmerised and as a tour guide, I was relieved because with this sighting, we also completed the big five, an outdated but still highly regarded set of observations. While there is much more to a photographic safari than the big five, it nevertheless lingers large in the mind of many people travelling to Africa. Finally, the larger Leopard climbed down the tree, followed by the smaller one and it became clear that we were dealing with a male and a female. As they vanished into the grass, we believed our session with them was over, but the direction of the male was promising. We positioned our car and waited and indeed he came slowly but steadily closer. Unperturbed by the arrival of other cars, we tried to read the behaviour of the male and finally he moved to within 10 metres and finally crossed the track right in front of our car. We now really believed our Leopard session was over, but the female was very keen to not lose the male out of sight, hence she steadily moved through the tall grass towards a termite mound. We prepared ourselves for the moment and then it came: she walked onto the termite mound in the beautiful morning light and stared at the male and at us: surely one of the highlights of the entire trip.

Enchanted by the last hour of Leopard extravaganza, we drove southwards. Along the main road south, we encountered an Egyptian Mongoose and another Serval which unfortunately vanished into the tall grass before we could take any photos. We reached the Gol-Kopjes once again around lunch time. A Wildebeest calf carcass attracted a number of vultures, from the rather delicate Hooded Vulture to the much bigger Rueppell’s Vulture and the huge Lappet-faced Vulture. Each species specialises on different parts of a carcass in order to limit interspecific competition but it seems all were already fed well. We searched the Kopjes for predators, but “only” had luck with the avian kind, many Tawny Eagles rested in the trees and we also found Verreaux’s Eagle Owls, one of the biggest owl species in Africa. The correct exposure for them sitting in the dark shade of Acacia trees involved significant plus correction but we manage to get decent shots eventually. It was finally time to leave the Kopjes and head north again and once again the rain caught up with us, but we managed to get back to the main road safely and in time for another delicious dinner at the lodge.

From the Serengeti to Lake Ndutu

On our last Serengeti morning, we packed up our vehicle and safari’d our way south. Our first sighting of the day was a pride of Lions and the females went to rest in the same sausage tree we saw them in two days ago. Once again we practised lion-in-tree photography. As we were about to embark on a toilet stop in Seronera valley, we were held back by a cute group of Dwarf Mongooses that warmed themselves on the road and we obviously did not disturb them as they went about their normal business after finishing their sunbathing. Further on in the valley we encountered a lone Hippo in a mud pool which got really scared when we arrived and threatened us with a gaping mouth before disappearing noisily into the riverine vegetation. We had to leave Seronera valley afterwards to reach Naabi Hill Gate in time, where we had lunch and watched as the storm clouds got ever closer. What a tremendous way to finish our time in the Serengeti. The developing storm was a fitting farewell to our time in this magnificent, gigantic park.

Lake Ndutu

Our final stop of the tour, Lake Ndutu, was waiting for us, so we took a slow safari drive around the edge of the Serengeti to yet another incredible location. The big advantage of Lake Ndutu from a photographer's point of view is the ability to go off-road if needed. Therefore, everyone in the group was very excited about the prospect of close encounters over the coming four days. Initially, however, the rain intensified and the tracks across the short grass plains became increasingly slippery and hence everyone was somewhat relieved when we arrived on the main gravel road towards the lodge. We decided to have an early finish to the day when we arrived at Lake Ndutu around 3 pm, not only because we were tired but the rain became stronger by the minute and we all just wanted to relax.

I had hoped to have our first dinner there under the stars but the rain continued so we enjoyed a wonderful meal inside instead. The resident Genets unfortunately never appeared that night. Although Ndutu lodge is a little more simple, we all instantly fell in love with it due to the super friendly staff and the homelike feel of this wild bush camp that is still privately owned, unfenced and on the frontier of stunning Lake Ndutu.

The next morning, we woke up again early to enjoy coffee and breakfast with the resident genets who live in the roof of the lodge at Ndutu, before we went off on safari. It was very, very wet as it had continued to rain during the night. We initially did some available light photography with a Long-crested Eagle that really did not want to leave its perch. As we continued into more open country, a group of Bat-eared Foxes appeared with their huge ears, an adaptation to find, i.e. hear, their mostly invertebrate prey such as ants and termites underground. They were a bit weary and it was difficult to get within decent photographic range. As we made our way along the edge of the marshes, we all of a sudden found a pair of Lions resting. The male was in such close proximity to the female that it was clear that this was a mating pair and we had to be patient for about 20 minutes before the female accepted the advances of the male and we witnessed the full behavioural sequence of a Lion copulation. As the light was gorgeous and especially the male particularly handsome with a faultless mane, we stayed for over 90 minutes and witnessed another copulation and several unsuccessful moves by the male. On the way back to the lodge, we stopped to photograph very photogenic male Giraffes and Kongonis. It was at Lake Ndutu where we could finally enjoy a midday break, so we returned to the lodge for lunch under the open sky and had 1-2 hours of rest.

After lunch, we went back out on safari and we headed to the short grass plains in search of Cheetahs, but the plains were really wet, sometimes even flooded. Birdlife stepped in to provide us with very nice photographic opportunities, starting with the wonderful Straw-tailed Whydah which displayed to females right in front of us, followed by immature Gabar Goshawks which practised their developing flight skills by mocking a Verreaux's Eagle Owl. We also bumped into great herds of Wildebeest and Zebra with lots of Thomson's Gazelles in between. The way back was a bit tricky as two usual shortcuts to the lodge were impassable and we had to turn and use the longer route, which brought us back just before darkness. Another delicious dinner with us being pretty much the only guests was a nice ending to the day, this time with genets walking around the beams of the main lodge building.

The next morning saw us facing even more wet conditions as it had rained through the night. Even the main tracks were just a series of puddles. We nevertheless tried to reach the short grass plains but this came to an abrupt halt at 7 am when one of the puddles on top of the black cotton soil proved to be too slippery and we got stuck in the mud. Experienced with these situations, Exaud asked us to collect some dead wood and while he jacked up the hind wheels, we collected dead wood to put underneath the tires to aid with traction. We managed to get free at around 8.30 am and continued onto the open plains. To our astonishment, parts of the short grass plains had standing water. We reached a mixed herd of Zebra and Wildebeest and started photographing their behaviour. A sleepy Hyena emerged from one of the flower beds and the purple flowers provided a nice passepartout for her face. The way back from the open plains was a constant struggle as everything was slippery, but we made it and enjoyed the lunch and the rest.

The rain came back over lunch and as it was rather dark, some of us opted out of the afternoon safari. Those who came along practised high key photography with a Long-crested Eagle in a dead tree, slow shutter speed portraits of a beautiful Impala male standing in the rain and motion blur photography with a large Wildebeest herd that crossed the road in front of us and we could really feel the power of migration as one after the other ran over the track.

The rain eased in the evening and we were somewhat relieved, but we knew that after all this downpour, accessing the open plains in the morning would be impossible. Hence we slept and listened to the rain vanishing and so the next morning brought even a little bit of sunshine as we went around the lake towards the marshes. Just as we were about to cross to the other side of the lake, Exaud, as usual, spotted something in the distance and soon thereafter we were parked next to three beautiful Lion males. They were well fed but one

marked the territory and gave us a rather cool stare before disappearing into the bushes. We continued and were excited to finally have a close photographic session with two Secretary birds which were nowhere near as shy as the ones we encountered in the Serengeti. Pausing briefly for a Lioness with her large cub, we then found two Lionesses with a total of five cubs, the younger ones were only about a month old and still tiny. We watched them for almost an hour as they played and suckled and finally wandered off. A further 500 m on, we found a herd of Elephants with one tiny calf and some older ones and we watched them fetch a drink in the swamp. On the way back to the lodge, a whole group of some 15 Giraffe males were jostling or drinking, which gave us more photographic opportunities. Once again we just made it back to the lodge in time for lunch.

The afternoon brought us to the vicinity of Lake Masek where bird photography reigned supreme. We started off with a dead tree which Fischer's Lovebirds used for breeding and hence allowed us to get close. We were also treated with several cuckoo species, most notably Greater Spotted Cuckoos and a Jacobin Cuckoo. Close to the lake, a group of Eland came rather close so we could even take head portraits of these magnificent antelopes where the bulls can weigh as much as a ton. Next to them came all of a sudden a lonely Wildebeest calf that was probably just two months old and was looking for its mother, nowhere to be seen. As we watched it look around in desperation, we felt sad as the night would probably bring death to it. Another Long-crested Eagle in good light was the finish of the day and back at the lodge we enjoyed a last dinner in the bush, augmented by the sounds of Wildebeest herds and Hyenas calling.

As has been the case with our numerous safaris at Ndutu over the years, it was hard to get everyone to leave. This was despite the fact that the heavy rainfall constrained what we could do.

Our final morning photography safari actually saw us getting bogged in the middle of nowhere south of the Gol-Kopjes where we had a final try to find some Cheetahs! I thought oh no, not today. However, we got out of the mud after an hour and returned to the main road before we left the Ndutu plains to finish the tour.

On our last drive out towards Ngorongoro and then on to Arusha, I think all of us felt a great sadness to be leaving such an incredible safari trip with so many sightings.

What an extraordinary journey through Tanzania! I think we all ended up shooting more than we ever expected to do on a safari tour due to the extreme variety and outstanding sightings but what more can a safari guide ask for? Of course not everything worked out as I had hoped, the intense rains probably constrained our chances of close encounters with cheetahs and we did not witness a kill or a hunt, but you always need a (photographic) reason to come back. My final thank you goes to our wonderful driver Exaud who got us through everything and to my fellow photographers. I was a real privilege travelling with you and I believe we were a real team.

I think the only complaints were that the editing workload from the trip would be huge with so many images and memories to process.

Our next tour to Tanzania will be in April 2025 and I can hardly wait to go back!