

Predators and prey in Kenyan and Tanzanian wild migration

by [Emilie C. Harting, For The Inquirer](#), Posted: January 14, 2017



A while ago, a fellow traveler and art lover told me that she had been to a number of culturally rich international cities, but that her trip of a lifetime was to Africa. "There's nothing like sitting with your binoculars and watching wild animals cross the plain." How boring, I thought. Why not just stay home and watch PBS animal shows?

Fast-forward a decade, and I was standing up in a Land Rover with my legs spread wide to keep from falling down, my hand steadying a camera on the railing, as we rode over bumpy dirt trails and grasslands, down into ditches, and through shallow, rocky rivers. My husband, Rob, and I booked this particular 17-day trip to Kenya and Tanzania because July through September is the most likely time to observe animal crossings on the Mara River.

Frenetic herds of wildebeest, zebras, and gazelles rush down steep river cliffs, traverse the rocks, and climb up the other side. The herds move in a 1,200-mile oval pattern throughout the year as they search for water and grazing land. Where they are depends on rainfall. I found myself drawn into the complex and fascinating world of animals, birds,

vegetation, and insects with its hidden choreography. Our leader, zoologist Edwin "Eddie" Ongori, helped us understand the patterns of the ecosystem and the interplay between predators and prey.

I used my 20x zoom Panasonic Lumix camera as a picture-taking machine and as binoculars; I could both see and record up close. Throughout the trip, it was my mediator with the animal. At one point, I rotated my camera 360 degrees, getting a video of the thousands of wildebeest, or gnus, spread out like a gigantic black-and-brown carpet in all directions to the horizon. Because of the way their shaggy hair hangs, wildebeest look like moose with unkempt wigs. In fact, they are probably the ugliest animals I've ever seen.

"Notice the lines of zebras embedded in the pack," Ongori said. "While the zebra can sense danger from predators and lead the pack in a different direction, the wildebeest complement them by being able to smell water."

As we traveled along the Kenya-Tanzania border to Masai Mara, and on to the national parks of Serengeti, Ngorongoro, Amboseli, and Lake Manyara in Tanzania, spending several nights at each, I was anxious about the prospect of seeing kills on the trip: predators attacking smaller animals and eating them. After days of seeing various lions roaming aloofly along in the grass, we stopped short because a lion was pacing along in the tall grass next to our vehicle, her pom-pom tail wagging in the air.

"I've got it," said the driver, who eased up about a hundred feet and positioned the Land Rover so we could get shots of the lion devouring a young wildebeest, among lions' favorite meals. "Their sense of smell is very strong and will lead them to their prey. They lie in wait and then suddenly leap forward when they get close, because they don't have the speed of animals like the cheetah. Lions don't waste time on the small prey. They like young wildebeest and the occasional small buffalo. "

Here I was, someone who can't stand the blood even on cop shows, and I was admiring the artful precision of a murderer in the grass. The lion had quickly nipped the little creature in the hindquarters, broken its neck with her huge mouth, removed the horns, and was gnawing on the kidney and liver, rich in protein and iron.

We also watched an energetic group of hyena cubs come up out of a hole and start wrestling while their mothers stood by. Hyenas are very active at night and are better hunters than lions. They kill in a group, falling over one another in layers as they eat away at the downed animal. Often, groups of six to 12 hyenas will attack gnus and lions. At times, there was intense drama. One scene: A 10-year-old lion - by that age, they have black beards - was following four younger lions, obviously hunters, that were chasing a wildebeest. In the same area, hyenas were chasing a zebra. Grant's gazelles, named after Scottish explorer James Augustus Grant, had sensed the lions and were trying to avoid them by running in zigzags. The hunting lions were getting close to several zebras and may have been able to kill them. An impala gave out a loud bark to warn others of danger. In sum, there was all sorts of positioning by those who feared the lions, which, ironically, could walk only straight and lunge when they got close.

The giraffes, by contrast, were gentle souls. Tallest and most majestic of all, they stood high to graze on the tops of acacia trees to reach tiny ants in the pods. They'd nip up high and then descend to nibble on the ground, only to rise up again in a minute and a half because their blood pressure rises to dangerous proportions if their heads are down too long. In a tree laden with vultures, we saw three birds shoot out suddenly and rush like little planes to a spot in the distance, where they saw the leftovers of a fresh kill. Vultures eat what the larger animals leave behind, and then the small birds come to peck at the last little pieces.

Most beguiling were the elephants in Amboseli National Park. They travel in packs, led by a matriarch, and move along slowly in rows, their huge legs lifting up into the air slightly and then hitting the ground with a soft clap, their tusks meanwhile swinging from side to side. Babies follow alongside their mothers and occasionally lift up their trunks to nurse. In the earlier part of the trip, we traveled through tan grassy plains with occasional bushes and acacia trees. As we came east to the Lake Manyara area, the terrain was green, with many more bushes and trees.

"See the primeval forest with the large trees in the middle of the swamp?" our guide asked. "That is where sick and elderly elephants go when the end is near. Other elephants come and cover them with branches as they die."

A massive number of baboons surrounded us when we pulled up under an allee of trees near Lake Manyara. Like dancers with white diaperlike behinds, they scampered about, rode on one another's backs, and often stopped to scratch their intimate parts. One mature female stood behind another, brushing her friend's hair with her claws as though she were an attendant in a beauty salon.

Like many of the other creatures we'd seen, the baboons cast momentary looks as though they were passing us on a busy street. It was eerie, because baboons have the same kind of vision we do and could actually focus on us.

Near the end of the trip, we were geared up for one of the famous spectacles when thousands of wildebeest and their comrades, the zebras and gazelles, cross the river. Many Land Rovers had raced to a spot on the Mara River, and we all had our eyes focused on the distant horizon. Experts had predicted this would be the place. We waited and waited. Soon, tinges of dusk appeared in the sky.

"They are coming soon" was the message on another Land Rover's radio. "It will be a few hours," said another radio from far across the river. We were getting near curfew, and we had to get back to the national park before dark. Most vehicles left the scene. "We'll try to get a special treat on the way back," the driver said, sensing our disappointment. "You've seen four of the big five, the lion, the elephant, the cape buffalo, and the leopard, but we've got to find a rhino." We circled round and round on remote dirt roads for a sighting while crackling radio messages came in, giving advice on which trails to take. Finally, we saw a huge rhino with a menacing look slowly walking toward us. "Get your cameras ready, and we'll make a quick getaway when we get to the shortest legal

distance," our driver announced. I have a photo of an old, dark rhino standing forlorn at dusk.

Before long, I forgot we'd missed the much-awaited river crossing. Back home, I read an article written by a photojournalist who had been there. A wildebeest was flying off a cliff and headlong into a river filled with crocodiles. Perhaps it was better that we were asleep safely in our lodges while the animals roared across. In 17 days, we'd had more than 600 sightings, and I'd taken almost 2,000 photos. I had to delete, delete, delete over and over until the best shots stared me in the eye.

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