

# Tanzania: Wildlife & Birding Safari | Feb. 8 – 22, 2024 | Trip Report | by Peg Abbott



With guide Washington of Cisticola Birding, masterful drivers Boniface and Peter, Peg of Naturalist Journeys and ten participants: Julie, Katie, Sherri, Denny, Brian, Francie, Elizabeth, Dennis, Tony and Trisha



## Thurs., Feb. 8                      Arrival in Arusha | Ngare Sero Lodge

Our group arrived on various flights, via Amsterdam, London and Doha, meeting up with those from the Kenya extension flying from Nairobi. The lodge staff was so welcoming, offering us cold drinks and a nice lunch until we could check into our rooms. Those who had arrived early already had a good list of birds, including Giant Kingfisher and African Fish Eagle, and for Julie, a Palm Nut Vulture down at the pond. The lodge was originally the home and estate of a German citizen, built in 1905. The original family grew coffee and rubber. After World War II it was owned by a British family and then sat abandoned for years until the current owners found it, recognizing what a gem it was with a pond, hydroelectric power from a rushing stream, fruit and shade trees and





extensive garden plantings. It was one of the first tourist accommodations in Arusha and it continues hospitality today with great charm and attention to details.

We met a local guide, Michael, at 3:00 PM in the garden to explore the property and bird. He first led us to a corner of the property where he knew a pair of African Paradise Flycatchers were, what a snazzy bird to start off with! Dark-eyed Bulbuls and Collared Sunbirds worked the flowering shrubs but around the garden it was pretty quiet so we elected to go down to the pond. Here we saw Taveta Golden Weaver, Little Grebe, Giant Kingfisher and African Black Duck. We walked down the stream channel used for the hydroelectric power and got good views of Montane Wagtail bobbing in the stream runoff. A Black-throated Wattle-eye made us work hard for a view. We saw about twenty species and enjoyed stretching our legs a bit after the long flights.

Dinner was graciously served on a private patio for our group, and we enjoyed introductions and a chance to get to know each other. It emerged that this was a first Africa trip for at least half the group so all would be new — fun! We ate fresh salads with greens and crops from the property, a nice treat, along with roasted pork, eggplant, fresh green beans, and potatoes. Desert was very rich chocolate ice-cream, so delicious Brian would ask for it again the following day. Off to bed!

## **Fri., Feb. 9**                      **Full Day in Arusha National Park**

We were happy to meet Peter and Boniface, excellent drivers that had traveled with Naturalist Journeys before, along with Washington Wachira, our main guide. This year we added a day in Arusha National Park to allow for an easy first day, a chance for any lost luggage to catch up, and to experience what a gem of a national park it is. The entrance was very close to our lodge.

The park is about 90 square miles and we drove several of the roads, first to a crater, and then to the Momela Lakes area. We had beautiful weather and absolutely clear views of both Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Meru. We stopped for photos and at one scenic stop, a small pond, we saw Little Grebes mating on their nest platform and a furtive Black Crake. Along the more open area we spied African Stonechat and Singing Cisticola. Our first mammal sightings were of Buffalo and Zebra across a wide meadow. We then worked our way through lush



forest, the first vehicle getting a flight view of Bar-tailed Trogon and all of us getting fine views of Hartlaub's Turaco. At the viewpoint of Ngurdoto Crater, three kilometers across, we found Gray-crowned Cranes below a herd of lounging Buffalo and in the trees around the parking lot Black-headed Apalis and a very cooperative Black-throated Wattle-eye.

We took a cutover road to get to the Momela Lakes area, and stopped to watch a troop of Olive Baboons that included several young ones, one up and riding on its mother's back. Katie got some good video. There was a Spot-flanked Barbet, and as the habit at got more open, Yellow Bishop, Trilling Cisticola and Moustached Grass Warbler. We had our picnic next to Small Momela Lake with White-necked Ravens watching over us. A Spectacled Weaver was working on its nest over the lakeshore, and we had Abyssinian Scimitarbill and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds to observe.

The view of the more alkaline lakes came quickly as we drove on, and we had a wonderful time watching the beauty of several hundred flamingoes, both Greater and Lesser, for a good comparison. We loved watching them fly, when banking they turned all colors and were so striking. Along the lakeshore there were Cape Teal, shorebirds including Little Stint, Ruff, Common Ringed Plover and two lapwings: Spur-winged and Blacksmith. The sun made for lovely photos but was hot, so we lingered to do our walk later in the day when clouds would be present and cool things down. We met a ranger about 3:30 PM and what a special experience, to walk close to Buffalo, watch Giraffe across a meadow with views of Mt. Meru behind. Pangani's Longclaw teed up on a shrub and sang and sang, and we had both White-fronted and Little Bee-eaters sallying out for insects on both sides of the trail. Denny had studied his birds in detail and finally here they were — in real time! We got to see a lovely waterfall and then headed in, having fully filled the day.

After some refreshing showers we met for dinner set up again on our private patio, this evening enjoying pepper steak, numerous vegetables and salads grown locally, and a rich peanut butter pie for dessert. Each meal started with a homemade soup. We felt very much like family with the style they served, more like a dinner party at a friend's home than a restaurant.





## Sat., Feb. 10                      Ngare Sero Lodge | Lake Manyara | Ngorongoro Crater

Several of us met for coffee early and enjoyed a walk around the grounds and down to the pond. We saw many of the same species but added fine views of a Black Goshawk that was aggressively hunting Glossy Ibis, putting on quite a show. We also watched both Olive and Collared Sunbirds sip nectar from hanging heliconia flowers. Another tourist vehicle grabbed one of our suitcases by mistake, making for some unwelcome morning drama, but we recovered and met up with them at a shopping mall in Arusha. All good to go, we headed west to the wilds. The influence of Mt. Meru gathering water from the clouds faded as we traveled; the countryside grew drier. In ponds along the road, we saw Spur-winged Goose and Sacred Ibis and on wires, Superb Starling.

We passed through open country, turning towards the escarpment of the Great Rift Valley about an hour and a half out of the city. Our lunch was planned so all could take in the incredible view, and en route we saw our first Baobab trees, massive individuals spaced widely on the escarpment just past the entrance to Lake Manyara National Park. With all the recent rains they were fully leafed out and verdant. We dined at a favorite hotel of Washington's, and they welcomed us with big smiles and a real feast, much of its food grown right there on site. Knowing the organic growing conditions we all welcomed fresh salad fixings with abandon and tried a homemade pesto. They brought a delicious soup, then fish and chips, or spaghetti or pizza, then a chocolate flourless cake for dessert. The view was surreal, providing a full view of the lake and the expanse of the escarpment; we even saw a flock of Great White Pelicans gleaming in the distance over the lake.

Continuing on, we did the necessary paperwork at the park gate and headed into Ngorongoro Crater, part of the larger Ngorongoro Conservation area and a World Heritage Site. We stopped at a viewpoint on the rim; being there feels so significant, finally to be standing on the edge of such a beautiful and productive wildlife area many of us had known about since childhood. The crater floor was so green and lush with the recent and out of season rains. We could pick out little dots moving about that turned out to be Elephants, Wildebeest, Buffalo with our scopes. We found three endangered Black Rhino — a fabulous hint of what we'd experience tomorrow.

Our historic lodge right on the crater rim was another treat, a massive structure built of native rock and stone. It had several levels and huge windows in the dining room overlook the crater. We had fine views from our rooms ... nice! We had time to settle in or have a cup of tea before going to the bar for the nightly lodge show, this evening local Massai dancers. They were colorful and so energetic, the men showing off their jumping skills and with the women all singing five songs to us in their native language. Dinner followed, an ample buffet with many choices.



## Sun., Feb. 11                      Full Day in Ngorongoro Crater

We woke to the surreal condition of clouds completely filling the crater, a temperature inversion trapping moisture from the previous night's rain. It was amazing to see sunrise over what looked like an airplane view of clouds. But we figured it would burn off (it did...) and headed out at 7:00 AM as normal, with great anticipation for the day. This is such a fabled site for anyone coming to Africa, the place of much of the early research on all the big mammals, a significant UNESCO World Heritage Site, and today it was our turn to explore!

It was foggy as we descended through the clouds, and we watched Red-and-yellow Barbets and White-browed Coucal in the mist. By the time we got to the crater floor it started to lift and we could see big herds of Wildebeest, the first of many pairs of Gray-crowned Crane, and both White and Abdim's Storks. We turned towards the Lerai Forest track, with hopes of seeing some of the smaller cats that frequent that habitat. We did see Olive Baboon, Vervet Monkey, several huge Elephant, and a host of birds, but today no Serval or Caracal. Birds included Rameron Pigeon, Dusky Turtle Dove and, feeding in fruiting fig trees, African Green-Pigeon. We saw White-headed Barbet, both species of tchagra, Black-lored Babbler and a Broad-billed Roller.

We stopped at a rest area, then headed into more open country, finding both Yellow-throated and Rosy-throated Longclaws, Western Yellow Wagtail and Fan-tailed Widowbirds. To our amazement we saw five Black Rhino, two in one area and not far from them a trio that was probably two females and a one, two, or three year old, not yet full-sized. They grazed, completely oblivious to just how rare their species is, and this sighting was both wonderful and hopeful to witness. Not far from them were lounging Lions, a group of nine, possibly ten, with two big males. One big male was not leaving the side of a female who was either not quite in, or coming out of her estrous, she was not receptive to his nudging and grooming though he kept suggesting positions. Instead, she panted in the heat and kept her belly cool in the mud. A second big male was not far from them but kept his distance while three full-sized females piled close together to rest, despite the full sun and heat. We would pass back by them late in the day and the group had moved very little. At day's end the big male was obviously well fed and rested with feet up in their air like a relaxed dog. All these pride dynamics. With so much prey in the crater, there are numerous Lion prides and this one had prime territory and at least for now, an easy life.





## Mon., Feb. 12                      Ngorongoro to Ndutu | Gnu Camp

We enjoyed time to watch sunrise over the crater from our rooms with coffee and tea, another cloud show and this day more pastel colors. Hunter's Cisticolas dueted from the bushes and we could hear the guttural calls of Shalow's Turaco at dawn.

Before heading out we tried to see the turacos, which called but did not come into our call renditions. We did see Brown-headed Apalis, Chin-spot Batis, Red-rumped Swallows, Rameron Pigeon, Tacazze Sunbird and Dusky Turtle Dove. We marveled at the lush vegetation with Old Man's Beard lichens dripping from huge trees all around the lodge. Thankfully this habitat type has protection in the conservation area as it hosts quite a few higher elevation species and is elsewhere becoming rare.

The drive out along the crater rim and the road descending to the junction of Oldapai Gorge is incredibly scenic. Rimmed by flat-top acacia trees, the view is of a huge mountain and its emerald, green skirts below, dotted by thatch huts of Maasai villages. Once past the villages we started to see Zebra, Wildebeest, Ostrich and one absolutely massive Bull Elephant with enormous tusks. We pondered where he came from and where he was going as he ambled through the vast terrain with ease. We passed numerous Giraffes once we were low enough in elevation to have a lot of Whistling Thorn Acacias and they were fairly close to the road. Between the road and the mountain, they could see some young Maasai walking which kept the Giraffe on alert and at one point an adult and young one catered by us. Trisha with a big smile remarked on how fascinating it was to observe the behavior and rocking chair gait.

We saw quite a few birds along the way, three species of wheatears: Isabelline, Northern and Dark-capped; African Pipit, Rufous-naped Lark and Red-cowled Widowbirds, the males in fine plumage with full-length tails. A lake at the bottom was rich with waterbirds, from African Spoonbill to Blue-billed Teal and Red-billed Duck. Mixed in were Northern Shoveler, Fulvous Whistling Ducks and Washington spied a pair of Garganey. We stopped at the new restroom facility at the junction of Oldapai Gorge, which we would return to at the end of the week. From here we could see huge numbers of Wildebeest and Zebra with Thompson's Gazelle. Migration was in full swing, and we were in the middle of it!



Washington chose a back route into Ndutu so we could stay in the herds, which were intent on feeding. We passed a lot of Wildebeest males and then got into herds full of newborn young, with babies ranging in age from just a few hours old to several weeks. When mothers ran, they kept up, and when the herd lingered, they nursed or laid down taking a rest. How amazing it must be to come from the womb into the vast expanse of the Serengeti ecosystem, of which Ndutu is a part.

We spent the rest of the day immersed in the realm of the world's greatest mammal migration. We had views of the great herds on all sides, 360 degrees with animals dotting the plains as far as our eyes could see. Peter kept saying, look in the distance, those are not acacia trees, those are more and more Wildebeest. We could hear the braying of Zebra and the grunts of these "gnus", and we watched one female starting to give birth, with two legs of the baby emerging as she walked and fed with the herd. We worried for her that the process seemed slow, but our guides said they try to avoid daytime births, she'd feel more comfortable and probably finish closer to nightfall. We had lunch under the shade by a pond, the second location we tried as the intended first big shade tree was completely surrounded by water with close to a hundred Openbill Storks roosting in it.

The animals were impressive, but so was the landscape, so completely empty of humans, it made us feel small. Here all the elements of nature could be played out as they always have been, some raw and difficult but some full of joy. We watched just days-old Wildebeest kick up their heels and run as fast as they could, and baby Zebra nuzzle moms to nurse. There was constant movement in front of us as the herds grazed. Interspersed with them were birds such as Yellow-throated Sandgrouse and Crowned Lapwing. Katie spotted a Secretarybird, one of Elizabeth's top species to see, atop a shrub in the distance, which turned out to be on a nest. We got views of the chick lifting itself up as the adult panted in the hot sun.

A final bonus was finding two female Lions up in a wide-spreading acacia, quite a way up in the branches, likely trying to escape the flies that had emerged with all the rains. They each were trying to get comfortable, wrapping their limbs around tree limbs and using branches for resting their heads. We were the only ones there, so it was a particularly memorable sighting. At the park gate there were loads of birds: Blue-capped Cordonbleu, Purple Grenadier, D'Arnaud's Barbets, Bare-faced Go-away-bird and on the airstrip, noisy Crowned Lapwing. We did the paperwork and headed to the Gnu Migration Tented Camp, our gracious home for the next three nights. We were warmly welcomed and had time to settle in and reflect on all we'd seen this fine day in greater Serengeti.





## Tues., Feb. 13                      Full Day in Ndutu

We woke to sounds of male Lion close to camp, on patrol and roaring. On the other side we heard the whoops of Hyena that called much of the night. We had breakfast with eggs cooked to order and a nice array of side dishes and were soon on our way. The camp sits on a hill surrounded by open acacia woodland, winding through this habitat we often encountered the endemic Gray-breasted Spurfowl, Gray-backed Fiscal, Silverbird, and little mixed flocks with Dark-faced Waxbill, and Swahili Sparrow. Fischer's Lovebirds, so colorful, shrieked overhead as they flew tree to tree.

We passed daily into an open area, the corridor between Lake Masek and Lake Ndutu, with a winding stream and well grazed grassland on the sides. Martial Eagle, Brown Snake Eagle and Augur Buzzard were seen here, and the area was frequented by a large group of Lions. Three brothers seemed to be sleeping each day (all day!) down on the cool mud, sometimes close together, sometimes spread out. Mid-day they would pant and lift their heads, but this area had less flies, so they stuck to it. Their females took to going up in trees and we found them laid out on limbs on more than one occasion. As this area was close to camps, these Lions were often rimmed by other cars and we generally took a look, some photos and headed out to explore more on our own.

We had had good luck in previous years finding Cheetah in the wide-open areas and this year proved no exception. Our vehicles split up, but each found Cheetah, one a big male, the other a female with three almost grown cubs. The Wildebeest were not using this area at this time, still to the north, but Cheetahs are resourceful, and we watched the mother and three take down an incredibly fast rabbit, their movement through the bushes pushed up. It was all over in a second, and that sized animal provided little more than a snack, but it was fascinating to watch the three young one's jostle for food before they took off again, still on the hunt. Views of distant hills and the song of Rufous-naped Lark and displaying Pectoral-Patch Cisticola made for a magical morning. We also saw several huge Kori Bustard, a good mix of larks and pipits, Double-banded Courser, a Pallid Harrier and Taita Fiscal.

We returned to lunch under the spreading shade tree, and enjoyed some free time to download photos, take a nap or watch birds from our porch chairs. A brood of Gray-backed Fiscals had just fledged, and their noisy begging was entertaining, as were the busy Rufous-tailed Weavers making bulky nests in the trees.





We left again at 4:00 PM to make a short circuit to the Lake Ndutu shoreline. We made a quick first pass down the open wetland corridor this side of the lake, finding several Double-banded Courser and lots of Blacksmith Plover. We sought out the den area of Bat Eared Fox and were delighted to find several resting. They barely lifted their heads but it was still fun to see their expressions.

The light was lovely, and it just shined on the scores of flamingoes of both species, and good numbers of Cape Teal, Pied Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Ruff and Curlew Sandpiper. Peter picked out a lone Eurasian Curlew, a nice find. We found at least a dozen Chestnut-banded Plovers, also Kittlitz's Plover and Blacksmith and Crowned Lapwings. Coming and going through the woodlands we picked up other species, but most memorable was a trio of whydahs, all with breeding season tails flowing: Pin-tailed, Steel-blue and Straw-tailed, wow!

The landscape was in its glory with cloud and bird reflections, and blue tones banding the horizon and distant mountains. We had a diffused sunset, but still a pretty glow. What was memorable was just the thousands of birds circling in thermals and landing on the shore and in the lake, mainly Abdim's Stork, and flamingoes (mostly Greater). As we headed in, we checked on the still sleeping male Lions, encountered a herd of Zebra, Kongoni, and male Giraffe close to camp.

Dinner was fun with a show of song and dancing by the staff, followed by our checklist tally, growing daily!

## **Wed., Feb. 14                      Second Full Day in Ndutu**

We started early today, hoping there might be activity at the Bat-eared Fox den. We went right to that location, but once again found them sleeping, tucked up tight together, on occasion raising a head but nothing more. We ventured out and made a circle back to find the same thing, but in the process, we discovered two Black-backed Jackals and had a really interesting interaction between them and a lone Hyena. So much life out there! A Beautiful Sunbird posed for us in white flowers at a distance. Sensing our thrill at seeing it well, Peter tried to call it in using the call of Pearl-spotted Owlet and in doing so cooked up a flock of small birds for us to get great looks at, including Speke's Weaver, several Blue-capped Cordonbleu, Chestnut Sparrow, Willow Warbler, Brubru and Buff-bellied Warbler, wow!



We looked for Leopard in the open woodland while also looking for birds. We drove off road, lush vegetation up to our axels so it was always hard to see anything moving on the ground. We did find the large birds such as Secretarybird, and thankfully most birds were up in trees. We found a Pygmy Falcon pair with the male feeding the female, a big group of male Giraffe, and then got news via the guide's radio of a Leopard. It was not hard to find as we could already see a cluster of cars on the horizon. We made our way through the tall grass and weeds, and in the process surprised a Side-striped Jackal, an animal hard to see in this part of Africa. It trotted through some open areas, and we got very good views. We then continued on to the Leopard, and but this individual was WAY high in a tree, knit among small branches at the top. We saw spots and could discern what direction it faced, but not really good views. And it was staying hidden, for a large Lion was not far away and it was keeping an eye on it. We surmised the Leopard had made a kill from the Hooded Vultures flying around, and the Lion had run the Leopard off. It might be a long wait for any activity, so we headed on.

Driving back to camp, we saw a female Lioness solo, laying at the edge of the woodland where it met the riverine area. As we approached a big male came out of the woods to greet her and in short order they were mating, Happy Valentine's Day! Lunch was served under the large acacia tree that arched over the open area at the camp; today we had chicken and vegetables in a nice sauce and a delicious passion fruit cake with coconut icing for dessert. Tony liked it so much he had two pieces! After lunch we went back out in the afternoon checking the Lion activity, then again finding the Bat-eared Foxes, which were far more active.

Tonight, there were flowers at dinner for all the ladies, so sweet! Dinner was a buffet with beef stroganoff or lightly fried chicken with fresh veggies and a watermelon feta salad, very refreshing, topped off by mango mousse. As it was someone's birthday in the camp we had another fun celebration, a singing and dancing show that was a variation of last night's with some added guitar songs.

Lions were already on patrol and calling as we were walked to our tents. Time to tuck in and sleep.

**Thurs., Feb. 15                      Ndu to Serengeti National Park | Lake Masek |  
 Wildebeest Herds | A Birth & a Kill | Long Grass in  
 Serengeti | Kubu Kubu Lodge**

We wanted to return to the massive herd of Wildebeest that this year were using the northern part of Ndu Conservation Area, close to the junction of Serengeti and spilling over to Oldapai Gorge. We headed out after an





early breakfast and a heartfelt good-bye to the wonderful staff of Gnu Migration Camp who had been so kind and welcoming to us.

We left Ndutu going around the shore of Lake Masek to head north. We had really good views of both Long-crested Eagle and Martial Eagle, a couple of feeding Bearded Woodpeckers, a male Straw-tailed Widowbird showing off his fancy feathers and a “bird party” of Purple Grenadier and Blue-capped Cordon bleu. Peg spied a roosting pair of nocturnal-feeding Three-banded Courser and they gave us great views, sensing they could not be seen as they moved off slowly from our close view along the roadside.

Once in the plains we fanned out a bit, winding through the shrubs and short grass. We stopped for birds, and then spied a huge herd of Eland, several hundred strong with lots of calves, so we got together and headed that way. Peter stopped suddenly and said in an urgent whisper “Cheetah”. It was RIGHT at the edge of our stop, hidden in shrubs and intently watching a group of Wildebeest. Scanning the herd, we could see one of the females was giving birth, we saw legs dangling out and her restless behavior. The Cheetah did too, but the distance was just too far for a Cheetah sprint, and it gave up and laid flat for a time. We stayed put, just our two vehicles and watched as the newborn came into the world, tried to get up on wobbly legs, dried off in the morning sun. A third vehicle saw us and started over, thankfully a thoughtful driver that understood Peter’s signals to go slow and approach to the right. In the outer vehicle, our long lenses were just able to take in the miracle of that birth, while the inner vehicle saw, to their amazement, a lone bewildered orphan Wildebeest, probably attracted to us as the only large things in sight. It was doomed, an orphan without a mother cannot feed and will be killed or starve. This one was walking between our vehicles, and as it caught sight of the herd of Wildebeest it headed there with more purpose. The Cheetah was on it in seconds, not 30 feet from us.

Watching the Cheetah kill was a full National Geographic moment, difficult to observe, but so insightful into the daily drama of nature. The Cheetah did not have an easy time, this was a bulky calf and it put up a fight. The Cheetah had to wrestle it to get a neck hold and it used its long legs to wrap, pull, push and control the calf. At times it felt so intimate, the two locked in an embrace that would be fatal. There was no blood and it took only a few minutes. The Cheetah struggled to pull the still life form into the shrubs as it saw a Maasai boy coming closer, herding goats. One of our vehicles went over to intercept the boy, explaining a cat was in the shrubs with a kill. As few Maasai fear Cheetah (they give way) he said Leopard, and the boy turned immediately back towards



the village beyond the park gate. The Cheetah ran away, and as we wanted it to return to the kill, we departed, picking up our interest in the truly stunning herd of Eland once again.

Peg had never seen so many Eland together, and the drivers agreed. They were on a high part of the plain, with the Naabi Hills behind, quite scenic. They moved as a herd; we kept our distance so they would not run. Their calves were good sized, perhaps two to three months old and interspersed in with the females and calves were a few huge, patterned males.

All this and it was only morning! Some birds of the day included Common Ostrich, Pied Cuckoo, European Lark, various singing larks and cisticolas, Capped Wheatear, a Bateleur and a Tawny Eagle. We sorted Greater and Lesser Kestrel, found a few Cape Crows, and marveled at the hundreds of feeding Abdim's Storks.

We had lunch at the Naabi Hill Gate and enjoyed buying books, maps, coffees and souvenirs at the park store. Attending the feast were Rufous-tailed Weavers (endemic to Tanzania), Superb and Hildebrand's Starlings, and Black-lored Babblers in profusion.

We had such expectations of seeing many animals as we headed off into the magic landscape of vast grassland dotted by ancient rock kopjes. But as the rains had not stopped since November, we found mainly a lush sea of grass, a great grass bank that would feed herds later this spring on their return. For now, it hid everything not on the road! We saw an occasional Zebra or Thompson's Gazelle or Kongoni. One Kongoni appeared just ahead, moving through waving grass! Birds were easier to spot, and we found our first Bare-faced Go-away-bird and several Lappet-faced Vultures. At some small ponds we had water birds including Kittlitz's Plover and two Black-crowned Night-Herons, and we saw Tanzanian Red Hornbill, another endemic for the trip. Magpie Shrikes and White-headed Buffalo Weavers got more common as we made the turn up to our elegant lodge.

It was a rewarding but long day, so we were happy to land with time to enjoy the breathtaking Serengeti view with cold drinks from the deck of Kubu Kubu Lodge. We unpacked with leisure, got some laundry ready, regrouped and refreshed in our marvelous outdoor showers with the same incredible view. Dining in the open air with the view was an excellent end to the day. They had an ample buffet with lots of choices, including sweets. Several of the group heard Spotted Eagle Owl hoot through the night, a big *Bubo* (genus) owl that uses the rooftops to hunt from at night.





**Fri., Feb. 16**

## **Full Day in Serengeti National Park | Optional Balloon Ride | Leopard Quest**

This morning was very early (4:30) for our balloon crew, Elizabeth, Julie, Katie and Sherri. A driver picked them up and helped them identify some night mammals as they wound their way to the launch site.

Serengeti Balloon Ride 02/16/2 4

*Report by Sherri Porter*

Four of us from our tour group took the early morning balloon ride with Miracle Experience, gaining a new perspective on the “endless plain” of the Serengeti. The grasses of the Serengeti were unusually long this year because of the above-normal rainfall, so animals were harder to spot on the ground. From the air, the plain was crisscrossed with animal tracks, and we discovered a new way to describe an animal’s location, namely where it was in relation to the balloon’s shadow.

During the ride, we saw a hyena loping through the grass, a group of Cape Buffalo (looking like raisins from above), a Lion, a group of six or seven Hippos including two that were sparring, a Secretarybird in the top of a tree, and a Lilac-breasted Roller taking flight. The overhead view of the roller’s iridescent blue wings was a highlight! We also enjoyed seeing the kopjes from above.

We were picked up at the lodge at 4:50 AM and had about an hour’s ride to the launch site. At the lodge and during the drive we saw a Genet, two African Savanna Hares, some nightjars, and the back end of a Hippo moving off the road into the grass. When we arrived at the launch site, the balloons were already partially inflated, and there were excellent washrooms and coffee as promised. We were each issued a seat belt that went around our waist and attached to a tether inside the gondola after boarding.

For loading, the gondola was on its side. There were four compartments in the gondola holding four people each. One at a time, we sat on the edge of our compartment and swung our feet in, so that we were laying on our backs and holding onto rope handles for liftoff. As the balloon rose, the gondola righted itself and we found ourselves sitting upright on a narrow bench, and from there we were able to stand. It was very smooth.

The entire one-hour ride was likewise smooth. The burner was noisy, but when it was off we enjoyed the silence and could even hear birds calling below. Our pilot was Jonesy, who explained that he controlled the balloon's direction by ascending and descending: Going higher steered the balloon to the left and lower took it to the right, due to prevailing wind currents. Our maximum altitude during the ride was 1300 ft. The pilot could also turn the basket by using a pulley to open a flap in the side of the balloon.

We sat on the bench for landing, which was also very smooth. The gondola landed upright, and we used small "portholes" in the side of the basket as a ladder to disembark. It seemed strange to be standing in the grass and not inside a safari vehicle! While the ground crew began folding up the balloon, we had an alcohol-free "champagne" toast, and then were driven to the breakfast site. Breakfast was similar to those in the lodges, and the tent was surrounded by Superb Starlings waiting their turn for leftovers. There was also a small souvenir stand and tip jar available at the site. Finally, we were driven to the visitor's center to rejoin the rest of our group. We were all glad we went!



Those not on the balloon did some birding, at one point using the call of Pearl-spotted Owlet to attract in a flock. We had wonderful views of a real owlet that came in inquisitively and of the smaller birds mobbing it: Brubru, Beautiful Sunbird, Buff-bellied Warbler, Rattling Cisticola and Banded Parus. Golden-breasted Bunting gave some a quick view. We found a colorful perched Pangani Longclaw, and above the sea of grass were regal Martial Eagle and Dark Chanting Goshawk. Levillant's Cuckoo posed nicely, a new species for the trip.

We met up at the visitor center anticipating a walking tour with a local guide, but sadly there was a lot of construction and due to a collapsed bridge, the trail was closed. Our guide did his best to tell the story of Wildebeest Migration, show off the bones of many of the animals (great to pick up to feel the weight and compare size) and best of all, to find a few sun-basking Rock Hyrax. We took photos by the park sign, and then set off.





We then drove a LONG way, not fully understanding this was a quest. The guides had gotten word that there was a tolerant Leopard, perched in good view and not likely going anywhere. We drove and drove through the sea of grass (so odd to have tall grass this time of year!) and finally found a jam up of vehicles, though all were quiet and polite, and we got some good views of this magnificent cat from several angles.

Time to celebrate with lunch under a shade tree. At Kubu Kubu we make our own box lunch, so we all had just what we wanted. After lunch we wound our way back, spotting Pin-tailed and Steel-blue Whydahs, Speckle-fronted Weaver, and five types of cisticola: Rattling, Croaking, Zitting, Desert and Pectoral Patch. Thankfully they were perched up and singing and we had our great guides to point them out. Flappet Larks were also displaying above the grass. We found a Pygmy Falcon and a Montagu's Harrier and we tried our luck on getting flight shots of Lilac-breasted Rollers — not an easy feat!

We got back with time for a swim, a nice long shower, or just time to relax. We met for cocktails on that beautiful deck and all expressed gratitude for our good fortune to be there. The Serengeti is a hopeful place, so vast and with so few signs of humankind. It's also a great place for dark skies ahead of the moonrise!

## **Sat., Feb. 17                      Serengeti National Park | Oldapai Gorge | Ngorongoro Crater Viewpoint | Gibb's Farm**

We still had time in the park with lunch planned at the Naabi Hill Gate ahead of the afternoon visit to World Heritage Site Oldapai Gorge, where the Leakey family had mapped out so much of the story of human evolution over decades of research and two generations of the family. We did a small circuit drive around the Hippo pools, finally getting sightings of Nile Crocodile. Boniface spotted a family of Southern Ground Hornbill up in two separate trees and we got striking views. We also found White-bellied Bustard, a good morning ahead of a long drive. At Oldapai Gorge, Washington set up a nice visit with a lecture by a local guide, time to wander in the museum among excellent displays and then a drive down into the gorge to see one of the actual dig sites. Sherri commented on how hard it was to really take it all in, such an impressive effort to map out this evolution of humankind.



We stopped again at the Ngorongoro Crater viewpoint, this time with a week full of memories and so we savored it all the more.

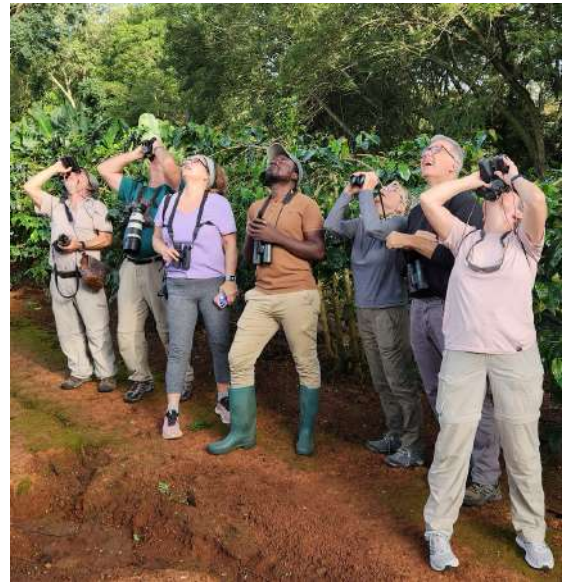
By nightfall we'd end up at a farm the Leakey's used to stop at to enjoy as they came and went on supply runs. They loved it so much they encouraged the owners to open up for guests. One of the first tourism lodges in Tanzania, it retains a level of hospitality today that is so rich and renewing to the spirit. Bryan commented that every detail of the place expressed care. We were surrounded by gardens in full bloom, flowers crowding each other in exuberance of the perfect climate and soil here. There were 30 acres of coffee and many acres of vegetables and we got to sample both at our meals.

## **Sun., Feb. 18                      Lake Manyara National Park | Gibb's Farm | Peg's Birthday Celebration**

A few took a pass this morning to rest up in our enchanting digs. Others took off at our normal time to visit nearby Lake Manyara National Park. Though the accessible part of the park is much smaller than it was a decade ago due to rising waters of the rift valley lakes, it's still wonderful to explore the lush forests of the spring-laden rift escarpment and to scan the view of the lake.

Lake Manyara is a good park to observe primates, and home to a subspecies of Syke's Monkey called the Lake Manyara Monkey. We saw these and Olive Baboon and watched a lot of behavior. There were babies and babies being made, and we observed lots of grooming, displacement by dominance and play. We had an Elephant family road block and were mesmerized as they made their way around our vehicles, one mother and calf choosing the road edge of the brush and coming within arm's reach. We were silent, and just at the end of the pass the big female gave an ear slap to remind us she could have taken us on if need be. The baby was beyond cute, trying to step over a log and grabbing food out of its mother's mouth as she stuffed it in with her trunk. All this in very near view — wow!





Birds were intriguing as well. We found a Eurasian Hobby, got good looks at Red-chested Cuckoo, a perched Crowned Eagle, at the lakeshore African Fish Eagle, Great Cormorant and Great White Pelican, and along the route several Crowned Hornbill, a very close Giant Kingfisher at a small stream crossing, and we ended our morning loop drive with an impressive find by Washington of a perched Eurasian Nightjar, roosting on a limb adjacent to the road.

Back to Gibb's Farm for an elegant lunch in their historic dining room with windows all around, the view of gardens and the rift valley so inspiring. The place is full of art, paintings, carvings, baskets and textiles and each meal's menu was a work of artfully prepared food, almost all of it locally sourced. The afternoon was planned for some down time, and it started to rain hard, enough to make naps feel like just the perfect choice. It let up in time to wander, photograph and explore. Julie and others found a roosting Verreaux's Eagle Owl with large chicks — fun!

Tonight, our dinner was set up on a platform outside — smack dab in the middle of an extraordinary view framed by the limbs of century-old trees. This was Peg's birthday, Naturalist Journeys' founder, and Gibb's Farm could not have made it more magical. The menu was lovely and even though we'd chosen desserts, out came a cake with lots of singing and dancing to present it. Having your birthday on a tour is perfect, with a built-in party as you are here with a group. We had good fun and went to bed feeling very satisfied.

## **Mon, Feb. 19                      Gibbs Farm Birding | Drive to Lake Burunge | Francie's Birthday Celebration**

We met for breakfast and enjoyed the morning in the gardens, sorting out sunbirds, finding Thick-billed Seedeaters and the Verreaux's Eagle Owl family.

After lunch, with our treasures from the gift store packed up, we headed out. This time there was no real African massage, our route was mainly on paved roads, where large numbers of settlers, many of them Maasai, now lived in what was once a wildlife corridor. The country cannot preserve all its lands for wildlife, and choices will grow more difficult as populations grow. Right now its tough for animals to move from Tarangire to Manyara, once an open pathway. The roadside was busy with markets, and vendors displayed large woven mats and



baskets from papyrus reeds, among other items. There were fishmongers selling huge fish from the lake and loads of vegetables.

We arrived at the lodge in time to do some birding from the deck. There were quite a few Dideric Cuckoo, Red-billed Firefinch, and Blue-capped Cordonblue. Joining them were several Dik-dik pairs, Impala and Warthog. A distant view of the lake held the flash of pink — loads of flamingos.

Dinner was a nice buffet with fresh grilled meats and the chance to make your own stir-fry. We sat at a long table with a view of the lake, and before we finished a very long line of hotel staff started to wrap their way around it, singing loudly. This was Francie’s day and she still seem surprised. It’s hard to ever believe all that attention and commotion is coming for YOU. She joined in the fun with a radiant style and cut and shared her cake. Fun!

**Tues., Feb. 20                      Morning Bird Walk | Lake Burunge to Tarangire National Park | Tarangire Safari Lodge**

It rained much of the night and it rained hard; we woke up a bit worried about road conditions. It continued to drizzle so we birded from the porch with our coffees, then ventured out during a break. We did get cut short by more rain (not typical at all for February) but found some good species regardless.

We had lunch at the gate where we got nice views of male Red-headed Weavers working on a nest, and Northern Red-billed Hornbills. We drove leisurely through the park to get to our lodgings, stopping to watch Giraffe, Elephants and birds. We had company from Tsetse flies today, more prominent this year due to the wet conditions. We coped by wearing loose clothing (not dark colors or blue) and shoes, for some reason they love to bite your ankles and feet — argh! Birding and swatting, away we went.

There were thankfully no Tsetses around our camp, they prefer the denser woodlands, so our open patio with a view was most welcome at day’s end. From the patio we could see Hyena down along the river, herds of Elephant, a sunlit Giraffe walking as if on parade, and groups of Waterbuck and Impala.





## Wed., Feb. 21

## Full Day in Tarangire National Park | Silale Swamp

One more day of exploring and this park has scenery beyond compare: red soils, massive Baobab trees that were hundreds of years old, and red termite mounds decorate the hills and river courses. We followed the Tarangire River for a way, then left for an area of low-lying terrain that holds a vast swamp, a favorite place of Elephants.

It's quite a distance on winding roads to get down there but the bird sightings came fast and furious and even on this final day of the trip we were logging new species. We got good views of Crested and Coqui Francolins and we had both Yellow-throated and Red-necked Spurrows show up along the roads. Black-faced Sandgrouse were plentiful, and both species of Go-away-bird (Bare-faced and White-bellied) entertained us from the trees. We had a good study of African Cuckoo, saw lots of Magpie Shrikes, and had fly-by looks at African Hoopoe. Julie kept wishing the hoopoe would perch, but no luck on that today. We did get good looks at Pygmy Falcons with one pair mating, and both Meyer's and Red-bellied Parrots feeding in some of the fruiting trees. Endemic Ashy Starling were everywhere!

The grass was high and even higher at the swamp, but finally in the open water areas we got to see Purple Heron, Whiskered Tern, Squacco Heron, two species of Whistling Duck (Fulvous and White-faced), a Black Crake and about 30 African Jacana. We found a Dwarf Bittern roosting in a small patch of high shrubs and got views from both vehicles — it is such a shy bird, and this was a real find. We enjoyed seeing a perched Brown Snake Eagle and watching a coursing Western Marsh Harrier over the extensive reeds. Black-faced Waxbill and Green-winged Pytilia joined the bird party, regulars in the shrubs, and a group of furiously mobbing starlings and small birds alerted us to a snake, a Rock Python, mostly hidden in tall grass but we got glimpses.

We had almost given up on finding Elephants when we spied a few in the distance coming down to bathe. They were red with dust and mud, and ready to add more to that color. Moms and babies, and an older bull checking out the females put on quite a show for the next hour. Several found a stout tree and used it as a rubbing post, obviously pleased with the scratching as they contorted their huge bodies to get just the right rub. At the water's edge some rolled and some turned on the shower, using their trunks to aim the spray just right. After getting wet they'd pick up dust in their trunks and spray that as well. They continued to graze, multi-tasking with their scratching and bathing. Young ones tried to keep up in the tall grass. We had to tear ourselves away!



Returning home we found Black Stork, Saddle-billed Stork, Yellow-billed Stork, Silverbird, Woodland Kingfisher and European Bee-eater among other species. We heard news of a Leopard sighting but saw only the tree it has rested in. Dennis spotted another family of Southern Ground Hornbills. It was a good day, a full day, and we had one last grand finale event, a night drive. Brendon, one of the lodge family owners, and another staff member took us out in two open air vehicles about 8:00 PM, for spotlighting whatever we could find. They focused on night species not to disturb the daytime animals resting, but we marveled at seeing so many Elephants as we passed. A group of Elephant teenagers were in one of the ponds, making splashing sounds. On several occasions, Elephant trumpeting erupted from the distance, one or more of them unhappy about something. Some were very close to the road and seemed even more massive from our open seating.

The night birds were great to see, Slender-tailed Nightjar, four species of coursers including Bronze-winged and Temminck's, both new for our trip. We got really fine views of Spotted Thick-knee and several Verreaux's Eagle Owl. A Pearl-spotted Owlet stole the show as we found it down on the road, mashing up a frog to feed on. We had seen African Scops Owl well in the day on its roost by the lodge parking lot but enjoyed hearing them. The air and temperature were perfect, and we saw some mammals as well — White-tailed Mongoose, some very active Bush Baby (Northern Lesser Galago), and for one vehicle, Lion. It was a very satisfying way to end our safari on a beautiful night.

## **Thurs., Feb. 22                      Tarangire National Park | Lunch at Mt. Meru Game Lodge | Farewells!**

We were all sad to leave, but also tired and so happy with all we'd seen. It was time to go home, our flock would disperse. Watching sunrise from bed through the screen of our tents felt magical, and enjoying breakfast with a view of the Tarangire River was a delight. We watched Yellow-collared Lovebirds dash from tree to tree, Northern Red-billed Hornbills poke and probe in the ground, and Yellow-billed Storks circling overhead. Packing up seemed a bit unreal, but we now packed so many vivid memories...

Until the next adventure!





Photos: Group photo (Elizabeth Trimble - ET), Giraffe (Peg Abbott - PA), White Rhino (PA), Zebra (PA), Lion (PA), White-browed Coucal (PA), Fisher's Lovebird (Denny Porter - DP), Lilac-breasted Roller (Julie Morgan - JM), Gray-headed Kingfisher (PA), Long-tailed Shrike (PA), Scarlet-chested Sunbird (PA), Impala w Red-billed Oxpecker (PA), Hartlaub's Turaco (PA), Collard Sunbird (Sherri Porter - SP), Eurasian Moorhen (JM), Safari Drive (ET), Ngorongoro Crater (ET), Red-and-Yellow Barbet (DP), Egyptian Goose (PA), African Spoonbill (DP), African Jacana (DP), Lesser Masked Weaver (PA), Wildebeest with newborn and Zebra (PA), Speke's Weaver (DP), Capped Wheatear (DP), D'arnaud's Barbet (DP), Purple Grenadier (DP), Washington and Bonn (Francie Bolter - FB), Gnu Mobile Camp (FB), Marsh Sandpiper (DP), Group lunch (ET), Lion (PA), Chestnut-banded Plover (PA), Marabou Stork (DP), Bat-eared Fox (PA), Black-backed jackal (PA), White-bellied Canary and Blue-capped Cordon Blue (DP), European Roller (PA), Group Sunset (ET), Lunch break (ET), Grey-breasted Spurfowl (JM), Beautiful Sunbird (JM), Giraffe (JM), Vitelline Masked Weaver (JM), Ostrich (JM), Lion (JM), Dik-dik (PA), Cheetah camouflage (PA), Straw-tailed Whydah (DP), Dideric Cuckoo (DP), Lizard (DP), Southern Red Bishop (DP), Von der Decken's Hornbill - female (DP), Fisher's Lovebird (DP), White-headed Buffalo Weaver (DP), Superb Starling (JM), Hildebrandts Starling (DP), Safari car (ET), Dark Chanting-Goshawk (JM), Southern Ground Hornbill (JM), Double-banded Courser (JM), Zebra (JM), Wildebeest (JM), Verreaux's Eagle Owl chick (ET), Little Bee-eater (DP), Bare-faced Go-away Bird (DP), Red-cheeked Cordonbleu (DP), Reviewing maps (ET), African Scops Owl (DP), Saddle-bill Stork (DP), Yellow-collared Lovebird (JM), Giraffe (JM), Elephant (JM), Von der Decken's Hornbill - male (JM), Young Elephant (JM), Spotted Thick-knee (JM), Oxpeckers on Giraffe (JM), Our incredible guides! (ET), Southern Citron (DT), African Pygmy Kingfisher (DP), Bat-eared Fox (PA), Waterbuck (JM)