

Tanzania trip report—Serengeti, Ngorogoro Crater, Lake Manyara 12/27/2005-1/4/2006

This will be a brief report written 18 years after the trip so details will be sparse. This was my first serious wildlife trip other than the regular outings as a child in Alaska where I grew up. I had traveled overseas previously but never in search of animals. To add to the pressure I was organizing the trip for numerous members of my wife's family who were much less interested in animals than I was but were up for a classic safari adventure nonetheless. Given it was my first safari and the internet presence of many lodges was not what it is today, I booked through Africa Dream Safaris www.africadreamsafaris.com and was not disappointed. Our party of ten departed from various US cities meeting in Amsterdam for our flight to the Kilimanjaro International Airport (JRO) 30 miles east of Arusha.

We were met at the airport with a sign that read "Easton Family" then were driven 5 minutes to the Kia Lodge where we were welcomed with fresh juice—a safari custom I quickly learned to appreciate and then expect!

December 28, 2005

After a rough as expected first night's sleep we were up early for the sunrise and views of Mt. Kilimanjaro from the pool area which was on a little hill overlooking the complex. The vegetation and landscape were spectacular as were the birds. We saw Gray Hornbills and many brighter colored species. It was odd to see a snow-capped peak so near the equator. After a great breakfast of fresh tropical fruit and omelets we loaded into our vehicles and drove a little over an hour to the airport in Arusha. Everything turned greener as we drove. We stopped at a small store for rice to fill my bean bag. That bag proved essential to taking photos with a zoom lens. Our charter flight to the Serengeti gave us a glimpse of the different terrain in Tanzania. As we plane made its approach we were treated to our first mammals of the trip—there were numerous antelope species but it was the giraffes that caught our attention.

I bought my first SLR, a Nikon N80, just before the trip and really had no idea how to use it. I only had the basic 70-300mm zoom kit lens but you don't really need much more zoom for most animals in the Serengeti. As a graduate student I was keenly aware that every time I pushed the shutter it cost me both for the film itself and to later develop it. Though I tried to limit myself, I still took more than 500 photos.

Our first 2 days of safari set the standard pretty darn high. We started along the Seronera River. In the busier more developed areas vehicles are required to stay on the roads which limited how close you could get to some animals but preserved the terrain and vegetation for mammal consumption. Our first excitement came from a leopard dozing in a tree along the river. Despite the crowds we quickly added another dozen new lifer mammal species plus crocodile and ostrich. We spent the first night at a semi-permanent camp and the second at a mobile camp site in dome tents. We were spoiled to see two successful hunts up close. At a river crossing a large herd of zebra and wildebeest were cautiously drinking so we crossed to the other side where a dozen Land Rovers were watching a lion

pride around a bend. We had a front row seat as a lioness began to stalk along the edge of the brush nearer to the river.



When she exploded out of our sight we turned quickly around and followed the corner to this view across the river:



It was over very quickly as the lioness clamped her jaws around the wildebeest's throat until it submitted. She looked up at her audience, obviously proud of her success.



She drug the carcass across the clearing, wiping out the tire tracks until she had her prize in the tall grass where she could eat in privacy.



After our good luck we began to joke with our guides Chris and Steve about scheduling appointments for us to see specific animals. We were due for a cheetah and the guides delivered another heart-stopping encounter. We found ourselves all alone on a dirt track when Chris stopped and whispered “Cheetah!” I’m not sure how he spotted the cat in the distance stretched beneath the meager shade of a green bush. Chris directed the driver to approach and we came to a stop looking down at our appointment!



The cheetah seemed unperturbed as we snapped photos. After a couple of minutes it stood up and nonchalantly stretched then walked away from us. At first we assumed we must have disturbed the cheetah but in a moment we had changed our mind



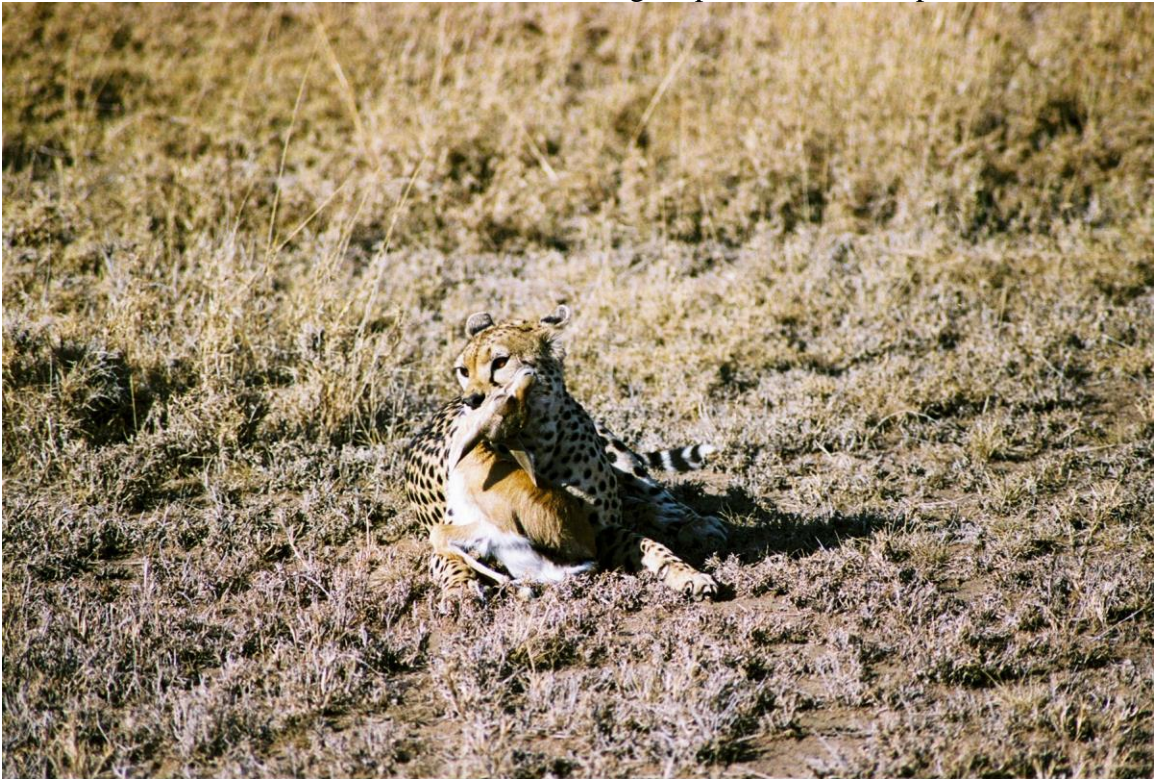
As its pace increased we looked in the distance and saw a Thomson's Gazelle that didn't appear to be concerned. It should have been.



We saw the full acceleration from 0-60 mph and so did the gazelle. It realized the cat was in earnest and sped away, but it was too late.



Seconds later the chase was over and we drove right up for a few more pictures.



When the cheetah had caught its breath and its sides had stopped heaving we left it to eat in peace with no other vehicles in sight.



Our next appointment was with a cackle of hyenas, including some almost cute young ones. It is easy to underestimate their ferocity when they are enjoying family time.



While watching the hyenas someone looked the other way and caught our attention just in time to see a small tan cat bounding away and disappearing into a hole—a caracal!

Periodically we would find a kopje where we could get out of the car and stretch our legs as we hiked to the top for grand views. Later we interrupted a pair of mating lions. The mobile tents meant we had a secluded, and peaceful if not quiet night. With no human noise we could hear the sounds of the African savannah.

December 30, 2005

We had a later start so the camp cooks could prepare breakfast. After another morning game drive we left the Serengeti heading SE towards the Ngorgoro Crater. We arrived at the Olduvai Camp which consisted of 16 permanent tents surrounding a large kopje or granite outcrop. We climbed to the top of the kopje for a commanding 360 degree view of the plains before us. During another tasty dinner a northern spotted genet near the kitchen.



December 31, 2005

We were back to the lodge early today at 4:00 PM. Today was a good time for a shorter day. We left this morning after 8:00 AM driving cross country through the barren plains. It was nice for the drivers to have discretion on the paths—no roads to restrict our route. The rainy season normally begins in December but even at the end of the year the rains had not yet come. The delay of the rains had left the earth parched. We had to put the pop-up cover down and leave the windows closed to keep the dust out. We saw several giraffes right away though they remained more skittish than most of the "big" mammals with the exception of the warthogs. At times we had to stop because the dust was so thick we couldn't see to avoid trees. We passed several Masai warriors with their flocks. They are a hardy lot. The day was pretty uneventful—hot and dry, but in the afternoon as we drove through a dry forest we stopped beneath a massive tree for our last and best leopard

sighting of the trip. The resting cat lifted its head and yawned before going back to sleep.



January 1, 2006

Before descending to the floor of the Ngorogoro Crater we stopped to admire the view. I'm not sure of another spectacle quite like the 100 square mile crater. The steep crater walls leave the roads as the only easy way out and with the steady flow of cars entering and exiting, most animals spend their entire lives in this wild zoo. We had great encounters with cheetahs, lions, and a massive bull elephant and though we missed the elusive leopards in the Lerai Forest, we added several important species to our list: eland, bat-eared fox, African Golden Wolf (which I believe was considered a golden jackal back then), black rhino, bushbuck, and serval.

An interesting feature of the crater was a distinct line down one wall and onto the floor created by a proactive burn. One side after a recent burn had returned in verdant green while the other side remained a dull brown.



A distant serval below:



January 2, 2006

We spent another full day in the Crater. Before the trip I would not have believed we would stop counting the lions seen, but we did at something over 30 for the trip. Despite the common occurrence, I still took pictures every time.



We left the Crater and drove to the Plantation Lodge which was by far the nicest accommodation of the trip, a nice way to spend our final evening on safari in comfort.

January 3, 2006

Our long travel day back to Kilimanjaro included a game drive at Lake Manyara NP. We only added one new mammal, a single Manyara Blue Monkey, but had prolonged views of giraffes relatively close. We bid farewell to Chris and Steve, our guides for the duration of our safari who were expert spotters, patient teachers and friends by the end of the trip. We had a few hours to relax again at the Kia Lodge before transferring to the Kilimanjaro airport for our overnight flight back to Amsterdam.

Mammal Species List (not so technical or scientific, 37):

Lion

Leopard

Cheetah

Serval

Caracal

Banded Mongoose

Dwarf Mongoose

Northern Small Spotted Genet

Spotted Hyena

Black-Backed Jackal
African Golden Wolf
Bat-Eared Fox
Olive Baboon
Black-Faced Vervet Monkey
Manyara (Blue) Monkey
African Elephant
Eastern Black Rhino
Hippopotamus
Masai Giraffe
Cape Buffalo
Burchell's Zebra
Western White-Bearded Wildebeest
Grant's Gazelle
Thomson's Gazelle
Topi
Coke's Hartebeest
Eland
Bohor's Reedbuck
Defassa Waterbuck
Impala
Bushbuck
Kirk's Dik Dik
Steenbok
Warthog
Rock Hyrax
Bush (Yellow-Spotted) Hyrax
Cape Hare