

# Keen On Kenya

Alexander Meyer



## **Pre-trip:**

It was December 2020. I had hardly joined Tomer Ben-Yehuda's last-minute Uganda trip before I was already adding Kenya. This had long been a highly desired destination of mine. Ever since missing the last captive Hirola at Gladys Porter Zoo by a few months, I vowed to see one in the wild.

I arranged for a ten day trip through Ian Green with Greentours. I found this company by scanning trip reports for mentions of Hirola. I drew up an itinerary with Greentours based around seeing new mammal species that can't be found in captivity. I found them to be a reasonably priced option who mostly set me up for success. There were, however, some logistical issues along the way.

Greentours paired me with a wonderful driver/guide named Shem (WhatsApp# +254-724-395560). His decade's worth of experience shone brightly across our trip. He continually proved to be a skilled driver whether it meant enduring a full day of driving or evading aggressive elephants. He was quite knowledgeable about larger mammals and birds and was motivated to learn more about the smaller mammals we encountered. I've already begun to recommend him out- in fact, he just finished a multi-week trip guiding for THE Jon Hall!

Like Tomer had done for Uganda, I posted my trip online, offering space for additional travelers. After receiving varied interest, Swiss researcher Sandra Heldstab ultimately agreed to join. She had visited Africa numerous times, including during 2020's Covid summer. She was intrigued by my unique target list and the promise of daily night drives. She even did my trip in reverse and visited Uganda after we finished Kenya. Sandra was a welcomed addition. Her enthusiasm and constant willingness to assist with night photography made for fantastic company.

## **Itinerary & Key Targets: (February 4 – February 13, 2021)**

**Day 1:** Nairobi to Nairobi NP (**White Rhino, Thompson's Gazelle**) to Tsavo East NP (**Hirola, Desert Warthog, Fringe-eared Oryx**)

**Day 2:** Tsavo East NP

**Day 3:** Tsavo East NP to Arabuko Sokoke NR (**Golden-rumped Elephant Shrew, Sokoke Dog Mongoose, Ader's Duiker, Harvey's Duiker**)

**Day 4:** Arabuko Sokoke NR

**Day 5:** Arabuko Sokoke NR

**Day 6:** Arabuko Sokoke NR to Tana River Primate NR (**Tana River Red Colobus, Tana River Mangabey**) to Bura

**Day 7:** Bura to Nanyuki (**Crested Rat, Southern Tree Hyrax**)

**Day 8:** Nanyuki to Aberdare NP (**Giant Forest Hog, Southern Tree Hyrax, Ochre Bush Squirrel, Black Rhino, Bongo, African Wild Dog**)

**Day 9:** Aberdare NP

**Day 10:** Aberdare NP to Nairobi Airport



## Day 1: Nairobi NP to Tsavo East NP

Following an uncanny two weeks in Uganda (<https://www.mammalwatching.com/2021/05/21/new-trip-report-uganda-8/>), I landed at Jomo Kenyatta International around midnight. I haggled over taxi prices before finally arriving at my Airbnb. Ready to sleep for a week, I only had five hours before our journey began.

Shem, picked me up at 6am sharp in an open top safari Land Cruiser. I tried to shake off my grogginess with the promise of wild rhinos. We rendezvoused with Sandra at Four Points Hotel and arrived at Nairobi National Park within the hour. The broad savannah backed by Nairobi's skyline was a striking juxtaposition. **Eastern White-bearded Wildebeest, Coke's Hartebeest, Common Impala, Eastern Warthog and Eastern Thomson's Gazelles** were all readily seen. A sizable herd of **Cape Buffalo** straddled a dirt road which then led to a group of **Grant's Zebra**.



Eastern Thomson's Gazelle



Common Impala





Coke's Hartebeest



Grant's Zebra



Cape Buffalo



We skipped past a few sleeping **Southern Lions** and tracked down the top target in just over an hour. Seven endangered **Southern White Rhinos** lumbered past us like organic tanks, complete with hitchhiking *Oxpeckers*. The front horn of the largest male was remarkably long. The shaved-down horns on captive Rhinos can't begin to compare. A cute Rhino calf skipped nimbly around the adults. I was thrilled by our temporal efficiency so far, and suggested we begin our long drive to Tsavo East early. As we exited, the Lions never budged, but we were at least treated to three towering **Masai Giraffes**.









Eastern White-bearded Wildebeest









It took about seven hours with traffic to reach Tsavo East National Park's Voi Gate. A delay at the entrance left precious few daylight hours in the park. We still managed to squeeze in a smattering of **Vervet Monkeys**, **Peter's Gazelle**, **Hinde's Dik-dik** and **Ellipsen Waterbuck** just before sunset.

We drove the Pipeline Area that first evening, which proved to be our most successful. Very lucky that we insisted this drive be added to our itinerary, after it had been curiously left off. I noticed a **Senegal Bushbaby** playing hide and seek in the branches next to the car while we waited for an armed escort. Each photo attempted was comically a moment too late. Our spotlighting began just after dusk with two rodents scurrying across the road, likely **Emin's Tateril** followed by **Nairobi Grass Rat**.

An **African Civet** remained hidden behind grass, but a **North African Wildcat** gave a good showing. Keeping the feline theme, we spied the tall ears of an **Eastern Serval** poking above the already tall grass. This was an emotional find. For two weeks prior in Uganda, Tomer had high hopes of locating his first Serval. So now, we of course find one on the very first night after he left. Sometimes life just isn't fair. Before the night concluded, we also collected **East African Gerbil**, **Spotted Hyena**, **Cape Hare** and a *Marsh Owl*.



Ellipsen Waterbuck



Hinde's Dik-dik - male



Hinde's Dik-dik - female





Senegal Bushbaby







Emin's Tateril



Nairobi Grass Rat



East African Gerbil



Emin's Tateril



Nairobi Grass Rat



East African Gerbil





North African Wildcat



Eastern Serval





Cape Hare



Marsh Owl

## Day 2: Tsavo East NP

Today there would be one focus: **Hirola** aka **Hunter's Hartebeest**. There had already been some bad news on this front. The day before landing in Kenya, I got an email claiming it was no longer safe to visit the Ishaqbini Hirola Conservancy as planned. With yesterday afternoon lost, our only chance at the trip's greatest prize was narrowed down to the next day and a half at Tsavo East. And the numbers were not in our favor.

Hirola were always rare, and endemic to the unstable border between Kenya and Somali. Then, in the 1980s, a virus decimated 90% of the Hirola population. Their remaining numbers have since dwindled to roughly 400 worldwide. Ishaqbini boasts one third of this total, while only "one or two animals remained at Tsavo East" according to Greentours. This was not going to be easy.



Our morning began with a **Yellow-spotted Rock Hyrax** and its closest-living relative, unexpectedly the **African Bush Elephant**. The former in the lodge's entry driveway and latter at the restaurant's watering hole. Interestingly, the Elephants here are reddish from being covered in red clay. At dawn we set off for the Aruba sector - where Shem had last seen Hirola. Our eventful 20-mile drive included **Olive Baboons, Masai Giraffes, Black-backed Jackals**, more Elephants, and a terrific encounter with an inquisitive male **Gerenuk**. A marked difference from the shy animals I barely glimpsed in Aledeghi, Ethiopia.





Gerenuk - male





Pulling up to Aruba, we passed a sign for Ashnil Aruba Lodge, mere minutes from the Hirola habitat. I was incensed that our tour company hadn't booked this lodge, as it would have put us in the best position for maximum Hirola opportunities. I implore anyone interested in this species to request a stay at Ashnil or nearby Satao Camp. Although the trade-off would be that night drives aren't allowed in this area.

Gerenuk - female



Somali Ostrich- mating dance



We spent the next four hours canvassing large swaths of Aruba. We found two female Gerenuk and witnessed a marvelous mating ritual performed by a male blue-legged *Somali Ostrich*. There was a ton of activity around a man-made watering hole near the windmill. A large herd of **Grant's Zebra** dominated the area, joined by **Desert Warthogs**, **Peter's Gazelle**, and a lone **Fringe-eared Oryx**. All of the Warthogs were female or juvenile, making it difficult to distinguish from Common Warthogs. However, the boxed appearance of the ears gave me hope. Sure enough, post-trip I verified Desert

Warthog's ear tips point backwards, giving them a boxed shape head on. The species is also smaller, less hairy, and the males have droopier facial warts when compared with Common Warthogs. Ungulate expert Brent Huffman, who had a history of delivering disappointing news about previous hopeful ID's, was pleased to concur.





Peter's Gazelle - male



Peter's Gazelle - female



Fringe-eared Oryx







In an abundance of caution, we inspected any large antelopes we came across. I had become a pro at recognizing **Coke's Hartebeest** from a distance - the two-toned reddish-brown body against whitish hindquarters was the best indicator. Thus far, all candidates ended up being Coke's or **Ellipsen Waterbuck**. It was starting to feel like finding a needle in a national park sized haystack. Reasonably, Sandra began to doubt our odds.

Hirola-less, we retreated to Voi Lodge. A pitstop at the park's mechanic shed presented a colony of **Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bats**, panting like dogs in the mid-day heat. At the Voi Gate, I suggested we further investigate the Hirola situation. The first few mentions were met with blank stares. They had never heard of a Hirola. Not a great start. Eventually, we met with a manager in an air-conditioned office who connected us directly with the Hirola Research Team. Thankfully there were actually 18 Hirola in the park, which the team had the ability to track electronically. We had a tentative plan to join the team the following morning. I couldn't have dreamed up a better strategy.

As the sun set, we waited by one of the rock-formation signposts, known to house **Common Dwarf Mongoose**, but this Mongoose hotel was vacant. Instead, we caught a momentary glimpse of an **Ochre Bush Squirrel**. Armed guards again in tow, we were ready for more spotlighting. I suggested we try new terrain, so Shem led us to the Kanderi Area. We were rewarded with new additions in **Common Genet** and **Bat-eared Fox** as well as two more **North African Wild Cats**. Before returning to the lodge, we were hit with a harsh reality. Tomorrow's research team would be unable to join us with such short notice. If we were going to find a Hirola, we were going to have to do it ourselves.



Coke's Hartebeest



Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bat



Bat-eared Fox



Common Genet



North African Wildcat





### Day 3: Tsavo East NP to Arabuko Sokoke NR

This was it. The last chance to see. I formed a new plan: stake out the Aruba watering hole/windmill area starting at daybreak. We had seen such diversity there the day before and I remembered one of the trip reports had photos of Hirola near the windmill. We passed through Voi Gate at 6:30 am, as they were opening. A majestic **African Leopard** watched over the park from an elevated rock. We continued to monitor the rocky signposts, this time finding **Yellow-spotted Rock Hyrax** and a playful family of **Common Dwarf Mongoose**.







Yellow-spotted Rock Hyrax



Common Dwarf Mongoose

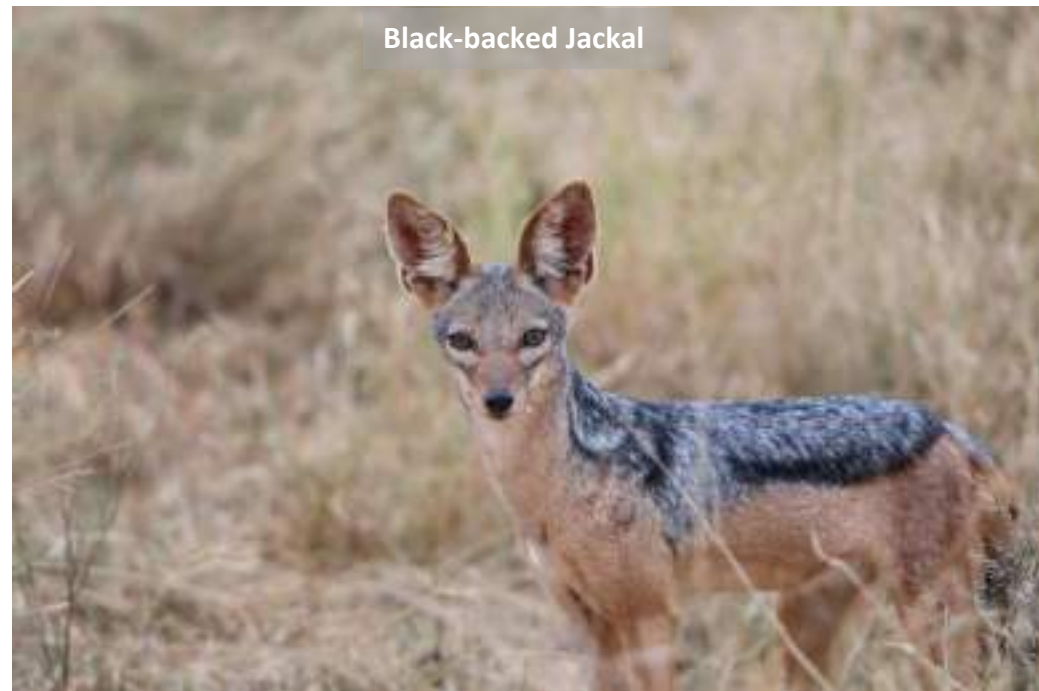


Southern Lion (center)



We arrived at Aruba windmill to quite the scene. A male **Southern Lion** had commandeered the watering hole while anxious **Grant's Zebra** waited in the distance, transfixed on the big cat. Peering through a 50x monocular, I scanned the horizon. Immediately five or six large antelopes appeared in view. My heart skipped a beat until coming back down to earth. "Just more Coke's" I declared, defeated. Scanning further in the distance I found another antelope grazing, with only the tips of its long horns visible. "Probably another Waterbuck, but let's see the head..." I waited in doubt for a few seconds and then the animal lifted its head. In an instant, I knew. **Hirola**! With unmistakable lyre-shaped horns, it was like a giant Impala mounted onto a Hartebeest's body. Even from this distance I could make out the elegant inverted white chevron between the eyes. I triumphantly pounded my fist in the air. A calm rushed over me, washing away the growing doubt. It felt like taking a time-machine to make up for missing the species in the past. We kept pace with the critically endangered gem for 45 minutes, as it gradually drew closer to the road. We seized moments of grazing to speed ahead and close distance, until we were only 20 feet away. Simultaneously, **Black-backed Jackals** approached our vehicle with a curious vigor. Then the rare antelope engaged one of the Coke's, indicating their prominent differences side by side. Moments later, the **Hirola** galloped away.

Beaming with smiles from ear-to-ear, we advanced to Tsavo East's Sala Gate. We noticed the lion had gone, reopening the watering hole to patient Zebra and **Desert Warthog**. Along the way we added **Southern Lesser Kudu**, **Unstriped Ground Squirrel** and a pack of **Banded Mongoose**. One of the buildings at Sala Gate contained more **Little Free-tailed Bats**. Amazingly, in less than two hours' time we'd be staring at an ocean.





Hirola







Hirola



Coke's Hartebeest (left), Hirola (right)



Southern Lesser Kudu









Banded Mongoose



Little Free-tailed Bat



Somehow, I never realized we'd be on the coast. Granted, the name Ocean Sports Resort was a clue. After two weeks in land-locked Uganda, imagine my surprise when rolling up to gorgeous white sand Watamu Beach backed by a calm blue-green Indian Ocean. My first thought- do they offer whale or dolphin watching? They did! So, of course we reserved a future trip. Following a brisk check-in, we were off to explore the Arabuko Sokoke National Reserve.





At the forest offices we were assigned a mandatory local guide named Willy (after originally being told it was optional). Before driving 50 feet we got the region's greatest target: the endemic and endangered **Golden-rumped Elephant Shrew**. Two shrews sat along the offices' long driveway in the late afternoon. After such a nail-biting *Hirola* search, it was amusing to stumble onto this target with such ease.

With spirits riding high, we drove the forest's Mida Route. In the remaining daylight, we enjoyed long looks at a **Zanj Sun Squirrel** and the blur of a **Harvey's Red Duiker** streaking across the dirt road. Willy claimed he heard **Caracal**, but I had my doubts. Once darkness fell, branches shook with **Kenya Coast Galagos** and a pair of **Northern Greater Galagos**. Foot traffic was high along this road, with three **Rusty-spotted Genets**, two **Four-toed Elephant Shrews** and an exceedingly cooperative **Coastal Suni**. All this success put us behind schedule to beat the Covid curfew. Even rushing back we managed a roadside **Four-toed Hedgehog**. Another Wild Family Lifer in the books! Because the kitchen closed at 8:30pm, we arranged dinner to be waiting for us at the front desk - a helpful plan we repeated every night here.



Zanj Sun Squirrel



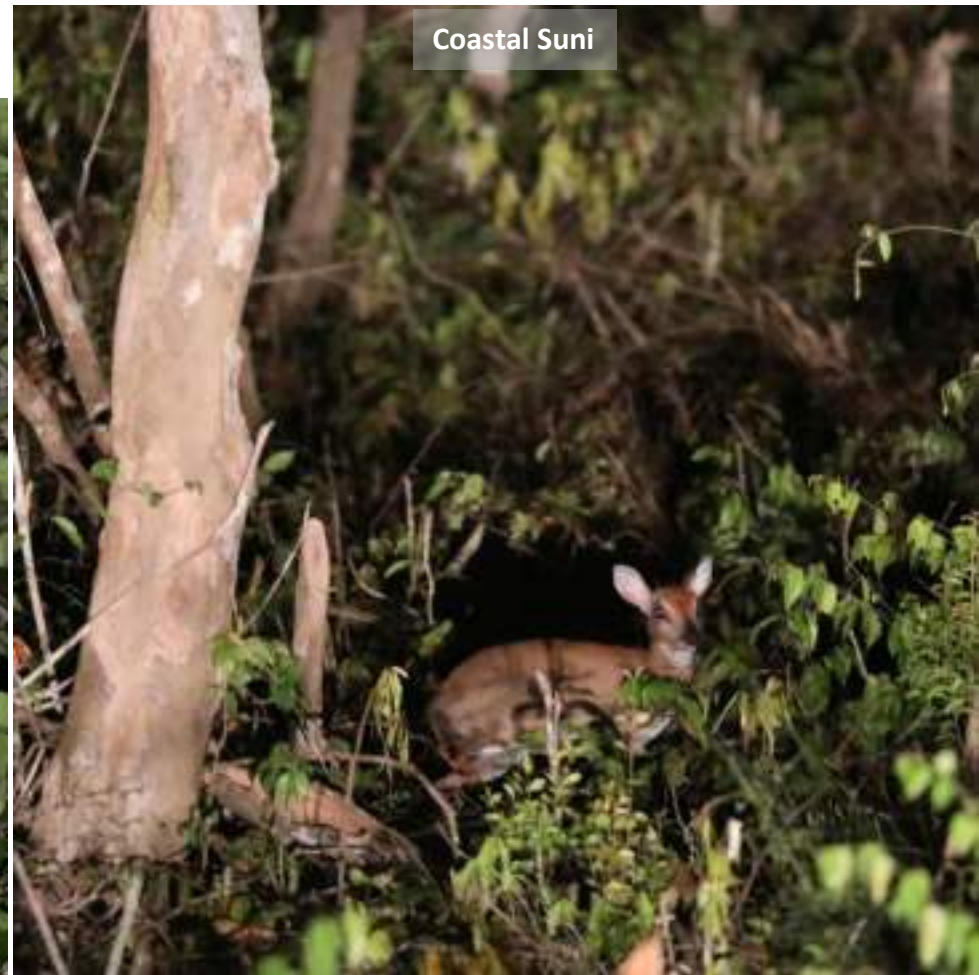
Kenya Coast Galago



Northern Greater Galago



Coastal Suni



Rusty-spotted Genet





## Day 4: Arabuko Sokoke NR

From reading Jon Hall's report, the bats at Arabuko were a big draw. Jon had connected me with Kenyan Bat expert Dr. Paul Webala who in turn connected me with an Arabuko cave guide named Kajengo (WhatsApp +254 791 940698). Together, we planned the caves to visit, which I relayed to Greentours. However, I recently received a worrying email saying that Frank (Shem's boss) had met with Kajengo and "he wasn't too impressed." On top of that, I was now being told that Kajengo's not licensed as a guide and we would need to hire an additional one. Meanwhile, Willy confidently assured us he knew all the caves in the area. Dismayed and confused, I reluctantly canceled on Kajengo last minute.



Golden-rumped Elephant Shrew

We spent the morning tracking down more **Golden-rumped Elephant Shrews** along the short, well curated pathways near the forest offices. As the morning warmed, the shrews became more active. Every 15 minutes or so we came across another pair, usually first hearing their pitter-patter across dry leaf litter. On foot it was difficult to get a clear shot before they dashed into the brush.

Time for spelunking! Things started off well enough. Willy brought us to the entrance of Watamu Cave, near the police station. But he refused to enter because "he didn't like the smell." Instead, a local led us down some haphazard boulder stairs to find a large colony of **Egyptian Fruit Bats**





Egyptian Fruit Bat



Egyptian Fruit Bat

blanketing the rockface. I asked if there were any bats in the smaller cave on the right and I was assured there weren't. I looked anyways, and of course found a small group of **Sundevall's Roundleaf Bats**. Lesson learned - always check for more bats! Having survived the smell, we climbed back out and headed to the hotel for lunch and relaxation.

En route, I peppered Willy with questions about the other caves to visit. He made a call speaking Swahili, but began with, "Kajengo?" Sandra and I looked at each other with disbelief. Why would he be calling the man I just canceled on? Panicked, I queried, "Willy was that the same Kajengo from before!?" He replied sheepishly, "No, different." This was a lie. Later, we came to find out the remaining caves were ON KAJENGO'S FAMILY'S LAND!



Sundevall's Roundleaf Bat



Willy needed to call him to get permission to visit them, which of course Kajengo didn't wish to give at this point. Kajengo isn't a licensed forest guide, but he's absolutely permitted to guide guests to his family's caves. What a colossal mix-up. I prayed we'd be able to sort it out later. The afternoon proved to be a repeat of the morning with more fast Elephant Shrews plus a pair of daytime *African Wood Owls*. For the evening drive we tried the Arabuko Route through the forest offices. While driving, Shem saw movement in one of the trees. A large **Red Bush Squirrel** slowly peaked out from a hollow branch, eventually revealing its impressively bushy tail. Great spotting by Shem! Further down the road, we found



Sykes' Monkey



Red Bush Squirrel



ourselves surrounded by a troop of **Sykes' Monkeys**. A large male showed off a set of impressive fangs that would make any vampire jealous. Earlier at the hotel, Sandra had even seen these monkeys outside her room. The rest of the night proved less fruitful than the one before: more **Kenya Coast Galagos** and another *African Wood Owl*.

Back at Ocean Sports, Sandra and I enjoyed a delectable shrimp dinner on the patio of our rooms while several **Four-toed Hedgehogs** scampered across the grass. Now with Wifi access, I attempted the delicate process of damage control from this morning's embarrassing mistake. I would have to wait until morning to know if we'd be able to visit any of the caves I had hoped for.



Four-toed Hedgehog

### Day 5: Arabuko Sokoke NR

It was Wanjiru to the rescue! Wanjiru had been doing research with Kajengo and helped reassure him of our honest mistake. We had a meeting set for 1:30 pm. Phew! I'll be forever thankful to her for this.

We passed a **Rusty-spotted Genet** just outside the hotel at dawn, before returning to the Mida Route. Hopeful for a **Caracal**, we instead got a better look at a **Harvey's Red Duiker** (still too shy for my camera) and comical stylings of a **Golden-rumped Elephant Shrew** standing on two legs.



Golden-rumped Elephant Shrew



Golden-rumped Elephant Shrew





Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin



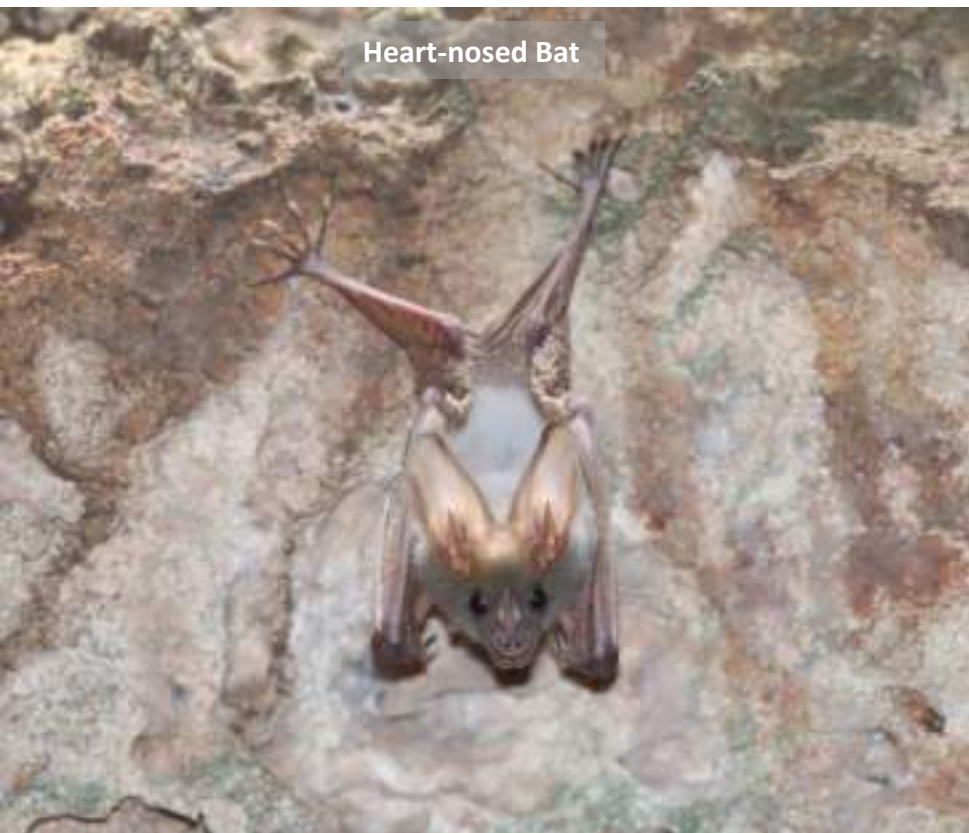
Later that morning was our dolphin watch. Because of low tide, we waded knee deep in water and climbed over a sandbar in order to board the boat. Battling language barriers, I tried to emphasize my interest in **Indian Humpback Dolphins**. Sandra and I both kept watch at the bow of the boat. There!



Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin

A few quick hints of smallish gray bent fins. I begged the captain to stop, but he thought I had only seen a scuba diver who was in the same area. Alas, we pushed onward toward the crowd-pleasing **Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**. What a helpless feeling. Sandra and I were both 100% sure we had seen dolphins. The size and speed comparisons were evident when we caught up to the larger, showier Bottlenoses. A group of 25-30, including young, swam in every direction around us. As exciting as these playful dolphins were, I couldn't help but yearn for the more unique ones we so callously left behind. The second half of our





Heart-nosed Bat



maritime adventure was dedicated to snorkeling. I utilized this time to catch up on sleep on the roof of the boat. Following an epic shrimp lunch at the hotel, we were finally off to meet Kajango.

Our hero Wanjiru joined as well, equally enthusiastic to experience the caves. Kajango more than



impressed. With lifelong knowledge of the caves, he knew them like the back of his hand. He was the first guide identifying bats at species level. We kept a steady pace to visit four separate caves before dark. A bit of a hike (and sometimes a drive) was required between each. First up was Pangayambo Cave. This appeared more like a magical rock formation, with dust-filled beams of sunlight invading the cavern at every turn. Hundreds of **Heart-nosed Bats** fluttered through the well-lit cavern like hurried butterflies. A few **African Sheath-tailed Bats** were also found, hugging the walls.

Next up was the much larger Kaboga Cave, teeming with many thousands of bats. One even landed on Sandra's arm! As we walked amongst the swarms, bat urine rained down from above. The ground pulsed with insects feeding amongst the guano. It



was charming and disgusting all at once. Diminutive **Least Long-fingered Bats** made up the majority with a dash of African Sheath-tailed Bats mixed in. At the center of the cave's ceiling was a conspicuous colony of sizable **Striped Leaf-nosed Bats**. The grand Ali Baba Cave was next, featuring two different entrances. The first entrance yielded **Sundevall's Roundleaf Bats**, African Sheath-tailed Bats, **Hildegard's Tomb Bat**, **African Trident Bats**, Least Long-fingered Bats. The latter two were both Family Lifers, often side by side! The Trident Bats impressed with a trio of noticeable forehead spikes (hence the name). The second entrance featured far fewer bats, only Trident and Sheath-tailed.



African Sheath-tailed Bat



Hildegarde's Tomb Bat (left), African Sheath-tailed Bat (right)



Least Long-fingered Bat



African Trident Bat





Least Long-fingered Bat (left), African Trident Bat (right)



Sundevall's Roundleaf Bat







Lander's Horseshoe Bat

Darkness loomed as we last entered Lion Cave. Seemingly empty at first, I was determined to find one more bat species. A lone **Lander's Horseshoe Bat** did the trick, along with more Heart-nosed Bats. We then rushed to the office to pick up Willy (somehow still required) and armed guards for one last night drive along Mida Route.

Bringing Kajango and Willy together produced some expected awkwardness, but it quickly dissipated once we began spotlighting. A rather slow night bore another *African Wood Owl* and our best views of two different **Four-toed Elephant Shrews**. We thanked Kajango and Wanjiru again and returned to the hotel.



African Wood Owl



Four-toed Elephant Shrew



### Day 6: Arabuko Sokoke NR to Tana River Primate NR

An early start brought us to the Tana River Primate National Reserve before noon. This stop was Sandra's most anticipated. Already a primate lover, she relished the opportunity to observe two endemic species, rarely seen by outsiders. A man nicknamed The Professor received us at his living quarters on-site and led us into the woods. **Syke's Monkeys** were an early false alarm, but three minutes later we stood under a troop of **Tana River Red Colobus**. With a rust coloration only on their forehead, they were far less red than the species I had seen in Uganda weeks earlier. Mothers with young were a reassuring sign for this vanishing creature. Now we needed to find some Mangabeys.





Tana River Red Colobus



Tana River Red Colobus





The Professor brought us to the edge of the Tana River, pointing out Ishaqbini Hirola Conservancy across the water. Apparently, the boat between the two reserves was out of service, leaving a circuitous drive as the only option. Out of curiosity, I asked his opinion of Ishaqbini, and he thought it to be safe. I knew it remained off limits for us and reminded myself how lucky we were to see both **Hirola** and **Desert Warthog** at Tsavo East.

As always, I inquired about bats in the area. The Professor excitedly brought us to his sleeping quarters. We unzipped the tent's entrance and peeked inside to find a lone **Large-eared Slit-faced Bat**.

We still needed to figure out where all the Manga-be? Two plus hours of searching had come up empty handed. While we broke for a packed lunch, the Professor left with another guide to search a different area. Poking around the campsite, I noticed a **Red Bush Squirrel** high in a spiky palm tree. Mid-squirrel photography, the Professor returned with good news- they had tracked down a troop of **Tana River Mangabeys**! We jumped into the car and raced over there. We parked at the edge of the forest and hiked the rest on foot. I noticed the Professor wearing sandals, so I figured I'd be fine in shorts. I was sorely mistaken. As we're dashing through the forest, I stopped for a moment, looked down and saw my legs covered in biting ants. So as Sandra and the Professor were approaching their first Mangabeys, I was cursing under my breath, picking ants off of my exposed legs. Fortunately, the Mangabeys hung around long enough for me to arrive debugged. We spent an hour watching Mangabeys of all ages. What a relief to find our second critically endangered primate and just before the skies opened up.



Large-eared Slit-faced Bat





Tana River Mangabey





Tana River Mangabey



Tana River Mangabey

The downpour lasted until we arrived at Tana Palace Resort. Smack in the middle of a more populated area, this would be the only night without any animal excursions.

### Day 7: Bura to Nanyuki

Another early start, as we prepared for the longest drive of the trip. Mammal sightings were sparse, although early on we saw a group of domesticated **Dromedary Camels** as well as a lone **Unstriped Ground Squirrel**.

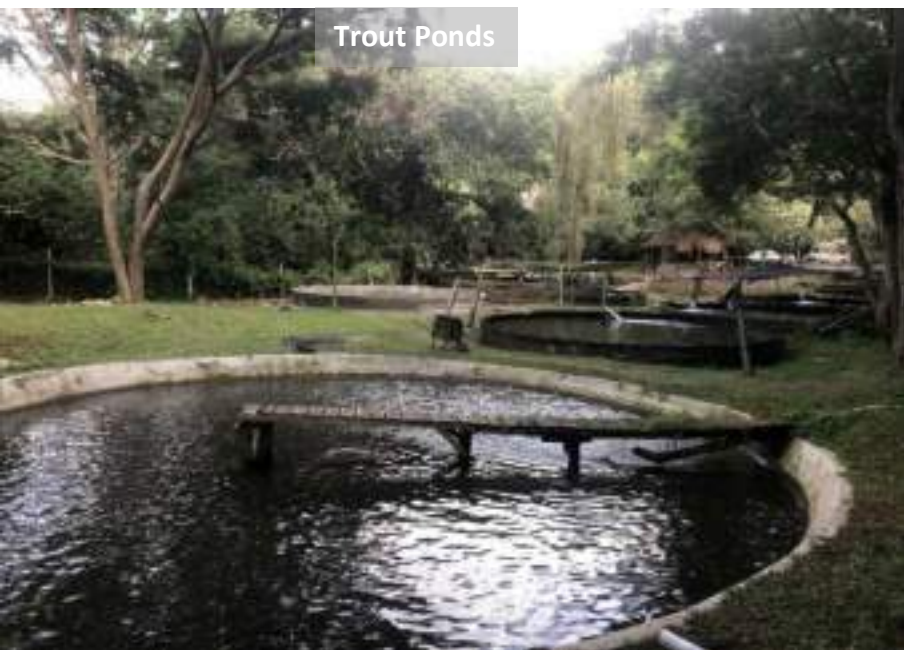
The 10 hours moved along more quickly with the help of mammal themed road-trip games. For instance, trying to guess which Carnivore species have had more than 50 births in captivity (a topic Sandra had researched.) I got all 114, with only a handful of wrong guesses. Long stretches of dirt road were under construction resulting in a very bumpy and dusty ride. Unfortunately, some unique roadkill included **Eastern Warthog** and **African Civet**.

We pulled into Trout Tree Restaurant/Creaky Cottage around dusk, just in time to see our first **Mount Kenya Guereza**. The manager was expecting us and had set up a plan for **Maned/Crested Rats**. First, we would leave out some cabbage and carrots at several locations the rats are known to





Unstriped Ground Squirrel



Trout Ponds

frequent. I would then stake out these areas until heading to bed, at which point several night watchmen roaming the grounds would wake me if they saw the beast.

But first, it was high time to enjoy a fresh grilled trout dinner. The Trout Tree Restaurant closes early, but Creaky Cottage offered a delicious home-cooked meal, delivered right to our quant, rustic chalet. Furry, unexpected dinner guests watched eagerly from the rafters, likely **Ruwenzori Thicket Rats**. After dinner, Shem and Sandra each caught up on rest, while I quested for Crested.

Thermaling around, I saw tree rats, probably more Ruwenzoris, and some sleeping **Olive Baboons**. The trees too were alive with the screams of **Southern Tree Hyrax**. They raucously called out to each other, sounding like what I can only describe as a demonically wheezy donkey, I was careful with my steps, so as not to fall into one of the property's many trout ponds. I split time between the three baited areas - underneath the restaurant where there was a nest, and two areas along a



Ruwenzori Thicket Rat



Southern Tree Hyrax



Southern Tree Hyrax





stream. Lots of waiting, but unfortunately no Maned Rats. At one point a **Rusty-spotted Genet** investigated the restaurant bait. By 1am I joined a night watchman to slog all over the estate, but still no luck. Reluctantly I went to bed after 2am, praying for a wake-up call.

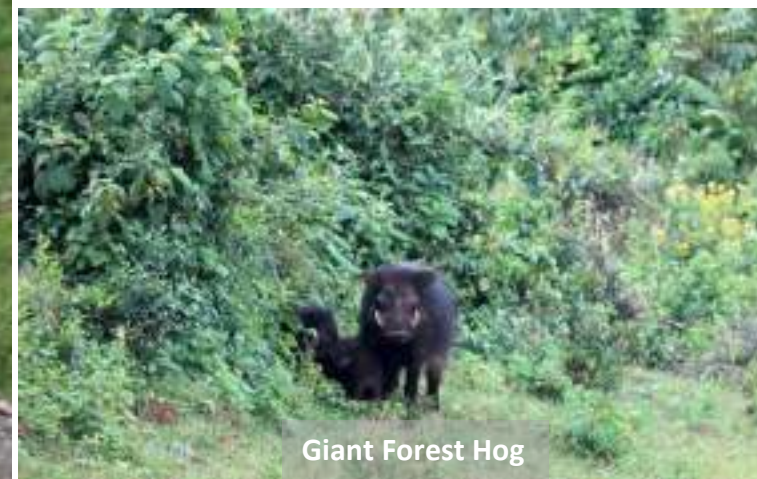
No such call came. Apparently, one of the night watchmen did see a Maned Rat returning to its den under the restaurant around 5am. But it disappeared underground before he could reach me. In hindsight, I could've waited at this specific den at night or early morning to catch it exiting or entering. Two subsequent visits by Jon Hall and Venkat Sankar in July of this year yielded Maned Rats along the stream at 5am and near the trout pounds at 10pm.

## Day 8: Nanyuki to Aberdare NP

Our breakfast view featured **Mount Kenya Guereza** from the treehouse-esque Trout Tree Restaurant. After a brief stop in Nanyuki town for an emergency shoe repair for Sandra, we reached Aberdare National Park in about an hour. **African Bush Elephants** and **Cape Buffalo** living that montane forest life were plentiful along our drive. A small troop of **Olive Baboons** crossed in front of us on the gravel road. 40 minutes into the park



Olive Baboon



Giant Forest Hog





Cape Buffalo







we witnessed our first **Giant Forest Hogs**. Famous in Aberdare, I salivated over photos I had seen from here and my brush-obscured shots taken in Uganda left much room for improvement. The Hogs we saw out in the park were quite skittish compared with the ones at The Ark Lodge. Set in the heart of Aberdare, it's modeled after a marooned Noah's Ark. Even the interior follows the maritime theme, making guests feel as though they're aboard a cruise ship. At the "stern" is a deck overlooking a man-made watering hole and salt lick which is floodlit overnight. Despite being expensive, I highly recommend at least one night here. It was easily Sandra's favorite lodge of the trip.





White-tailed Mongoose



Rusty-spotted Genet



Upon arrival, a male **Cape Bushbuck** was resting near the lodge's entrance, while **Defassa Waterbuck** mated behind the watering hole. I looked for **Ochre Bush Squirrels** along the short trail at the "bow" however, they've stopped putting out squirrel-enticing bird seed during Covid. It was still daylight when **Rusty-spotted Genets** started emerging in droves. They even jumped up onto one of the side-decks right next to us. Watching them hunt and play and fight was highly entertaining, especially for a carnivore fan like Sandra. We enjoyed a delightful dinner gazing out giant glass windows to the watering hole. We took many breaks to run outside and photograph the constant activity. A lone Giant Forest Hog took its time meandering around the watering hole, while three **Spotted Hyenas** approached from a distance. Eventually five more Hogs joined the party, along with a **White-tailed Mongoose** suffering an identity crisis in black tail morph. Lodge staff mentioned **Brown Greater Galago** and **Southern Tree Hyrax** were both possible, but would be difficult since night walks were prohibited.





The Ark also featured an alert system for overnight wildlife. One bell for Elephant, two bells for **Leopard**, three bells for **Black Rhino** and four bells for anything unique like **Bongo**. I wasn't asleep long before hearing one bell. Sure enough, a massive Elephant lumbered around our backyard, dwarfing the so-called Giant Forest Hogs. All told, being one of a handful of guests in a four-star hotel teeming with nocturnal wildlife was an unforgettable experience.



Giant Forest Hog

## Day 9: Aberdare NP

We drove the park early in search of Duikers but wound up instead with more **Spotted Hyena** and **Cape Buffalo**. The latter held us hostage by refusing to move out of the road for what felt like an eternity. Here the roads are cut into thick foliage, so usually one can't simply drive around an obstacle. Although, later that day, Shem got to show off his evasive maneuvering skills in evading two aggressive Elephants. We zoomed off-road and down the side of a hill to wind up back onto the main road and away from danger. Back at The Ark, the watering hole featured families of **Eastern Warthog**, **Giant Forest Hog** and **Cape Bushbuck**. Out front a **Mountain Suni** stealthily snuck across the road and I finally got the million-dollar Giant Forest Hog view I'd been waiting for!



Spotted Hyena





Cape Buffalo



Cape Bushbuck - male



Giant Forest Hog



We had a lunch with a side of Covid tests at nearby Aberdare Country Club. Just through the gate we got our first **Striped Ground Squirrel** while a female Bushbuck hung around the parking lot. As our tests were administered, I saw movement through the window. I couldn't believe it- this lifer **Ochre Bush Squirrel** was taunting me while I was indisposed. Mercifully, I was assured they are common at the Club and we did indeed see plenty more. After lunch, we took a wildlife walk with a local guide. The unexpected contrast of Warthog and **Grant's Zebra** roaming the golf course was something I knew my dad would appreciate. Further along the walk, a **Slender Mongoose** darted past us into some bushes. The apex of the hike featured a clearing with more Zebra, **Common Impala**, **Reticulated Giraffe**, and a family of **East African Eland**.

After my **Maned Rat** failure at Creaky Cottage, I was looking for redemption. Asking around the Country Club they claimed to have seen both Maned and **Cane Rats** at night. The Country Club doubles as a hotel and coincidentally shares management with The Ark. Though, unlike at The Ark, night walks ARE permitted here. The gears in my head were turning. On a whim, I switched my room over to the Club at no extra cost, while Sandra understandably chose to remain at The Ark.





Cape Bushbuck - female



East African Eland







The Park closes at dusk, and I needed to get in and out of The Ark before then. What should've been a leisurely drive turned into a race against time when an African Bush Elephant aggressively blocked our way for over 30 minutes. I documented the ordeal in case we were questioned by park security, but they ended up being very understanding. At last, I checked out from The Ark, and bid farewell to Sandra for the night.

Back at the Club, with daylight fleeting, I was treated to an **Southern Tree Hyrax** near the roof of the restaurant. A guard knew of a vacant cabin with **Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bats** hanging from the roof along with more Hyrax. After a satisfying buffet dinner, I hatched a plan with the night guards. They showed me the best areas to look, and like at Creaky Cottage, they would wake me if any large rodents came their way. I spent the better part of the next four hours roaming the grounds with my thermal. Accompanying a rain delay were numerous **African Savannah Hare**, three groups of **Mountain Suni**, and a **Grant's Zebra** who appeared lost, but no rodents. I begrudgingly went to sleep at 1am, donning a beaver shirt in hopes of manifesting some rodent luck.



KNOCK, KNOCK! Groggily, I checked the time. 3am- this could be good! The guards had just seen a large rodent walking down the steps leading behind the kitchen. As we waited there, I thought to myself- too much time has passed, it's probably long gone. Then the guard pointed excitedly, "There!" A large rat was rummaging for food behind the garbage bags. I couldn't believe this actually worked! Was it my t-shirt? I moved in for a better angle and saw the unmistakable face of a **Southern Pouched Rat**. Not quite a Maned or Cane Rat, but a lifer all the same! This clinched having at least one new mammal species for each day of the trip.



Southern Tree Hyrax



African Savannah Hare



Mountain Suni







Southern Pouched Rat

## Day 10: Aberdare NP return to Nairobi

I fought through a lack of sleep to make the 6am pick-up time. After dropping me off the night before, Shem had seen an **African Civet**, but we couldn't find any today. We picked up Sandra and breakfast at The Ark. She had just finished pointing out a **Giant Forest Hog** practically pressed against the window to a grateful family that missed them the day before. Turns out I didn't miss anything new from last night plus the Lodge was surprisingly crowded now due to a convention in the area.

Today's plan took us far up into the Moorland through many a muddy roadway, hoping to find **African Wild Dogs** or **Duiker**. We instead settled for more **Cape Bushbuck**, **Olive Baboons**, a *Long-crested Eagle* and gorgeous cliffside views of **Mount Kenya Guereza**. Striking across the road was our second **African Leopard** of the trip (my sixth combined with Uganda). Another delicious lunch awaited us at the Country Club where we got one last epic pose from a large-tusked **Eastern Warthog**.



Mount Kenya Guereza



A three hour's drive brought us back to Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. We all hugged and said our goodbyes. Sandra was such a pleasure to share this trip with. I'd definitely like to do it again sometime. The same can be said for Shem, who really shined across quite the packed schedule.

Sandra had two weeks of Uganda awaiting her, while I had a lengthy set of flights ahead of me. Covid canceled the first leg of Nairobi to Istanbul, so I conceived/concocted an alternate route via Entebbe. My homebound flight from Istanbul was then delayed a dreadful six hours. I finally made it through customs to meet my very patient girlfriend Ann, exactly 30 minutes after Valentine's Day had already ended. I was exhausted, but happy to be home. And don't worry, we celebrated Valentine's the following weekend!

### Stuff We Missed:

Fortunately, we saw eight out of my top ten targets, missing out on **Maned Rat** and **Sokoke Dog Mongoose**. The former shouldn't be difficult with more time at Creaky Cottage and the latter is found in a different area of Arabuko- ask for guide David Ngala. Arabuko also occasionally yields **Caracal** and even less frequently **Ader's Duiker**. **Black Rhino** and **Bohor Reedbuck** are present in both Aberdare and Nairobi NP. The Rhinos aren't easy to see, but it was shocking to see zero Reedbuck in Aberdare. **Bongo**, meanwhile, remain very rare in Aberdare, still reeling from the temporary introduction of lions. Had we been permitted to visit Ishaqbini, there's strong potential for **Somali Galago** at night.

### Special Thanks:

To Dr. Paul Webala and Venkat Sankar for their help in expertly identifying many of the rodents and bats from our trip. Also, to Jon Hall for influencing my location choices and connecting me with the aforementioned Dr. Webala (and of course his plentiful bat roosts.) And lastly to the great Kajengo and Wanjiru for a magical afternoon in Arabuko's caves.





# List of Mammal Species Seen

(wild lifers in bold) :

|    | Common Name                         | Scientific name                           | Nairobi NP | Tsavo East NP | Arabuko Sokoke | Tana River /Bura | Nanyuki | Aberdare NP |
|----|-------------------------------------|---|------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|---------|-------------|
| 1  | Four-toed Elephant Shrew            | <i>Petrodromus tetradactylus</i>          |            |               | X              |                  |         |             |
| 2  | <b>Golden-rumped Elephant Shrew</b> | <b><i>Rhynchocyon chrysopygus</i></b>     |            |               | X              |                  |         |             |
| 3  | <b>Southern Tree Hyrax</b>          | <b><i>Dendrohyrax arboreus</i></b>        |            |               |                |                  | X       | X           |
| 4  | <b>Yellow-spotted Rock Hyrax</b>    | <b><i>Heterohyrax brucei</i></b>          |            | X             |                |                  |         |             |
| 5  | African Bush Elephant               | <i>Loxodonta africana</i>                 |            | X             |                |                  |         | X           |
| 6  | Senegal Bushbaby                    | <i>Galago senegalensis braccatus</i>      |            | X             |                |                  |         |             |
| 7  | <b>Kenya Coast Galago</b>           | <b><i>Paragalago cocos</i></b>            |            |               | X              |                  |         |             |
| 8  | <b>Northern Greater Galago</b>      | <b><i>Otolemur garnettii lasiotis</i></b> |            |               | X              |                  |         |             |
| 9  | Vervet Monkey                       | <i>Chlorocebus pygerythrus hilgerti</i>   |            | X             |                |                  |         | X           |
| 10 | <b>Sykes' Monkey</b>                | <b><i>Cercopithecus albogularis</i></b>   |            |               | X              | X                |         |             |
| 11 | <b>Tana River Mangabey</b>          | <b><i>Cercocebus galeritus</i></b>        |            |               |                | X                |         |             |
| 12 | Olive Baboon                        | <i>Papio anubis</i>                       | X          |               |                |                  | X       | X           |
| 13 | <b>Yellow Baboon</b>                | <b><i>Papio cynocephalus ibeanus</i></b>  |            | X             |                |                  |         |             |
| 14 | <b>Mount Kenya Guereza</b>          | <b><i>Colobus guereza kikuyuensis</i></b> |            |               |                |                  | X       | X           |
| 15 | <b>Tana River Red Colobus</b>       | <b><i>Piliocolobus rufomitatus</i></b>    |            |               |                | X                |         |             |
| 16 | Striped Ground Squirrel             | <i>Xerus erythropus</i>                   |            |               |                |                  |         | X           |
| 17 | <b>Unstriped Ground Squirrel</b>    | <b><i>Xerus rutilus</i></b>               |            | X             |                | X                |         |             |
| 18 | <b>Zanj Sun Squirrel</b>            | <b><i>Heliosciurus undulatus</i></b>      |            |               | X              |                  |         |             |
| 19 | <b>Ochre Bush Squirrel</b>          | <b><i>Paraxerus ochraceus</i></b>         |            | X             |                |                  |         | X           |
| 20 | <b>Red Bush Squirrel</b>            | <b><i>Paraxerus palliatus</i></b>         |            | X             |                | X                |         |             |
| 21 | <b>Southern Pouched Rat</b>         | <b><i>Cricetomys ansorgei</i></b>         |            |               |                |                  |         | X           |
| 22 | <b>East African Gerbil</b>          | <b><i>Gerbilliscus vicinus</i></b>        |            | X             |                |                  |         |             |
| 23 | <b>Emin's Tateril</b>               | <b><i>Taterillus emini</i></b>            |            | X             |                |                  |         |             |
| 24 | <b>Nairobi Grass Rat</b>            | <b><i>Arvicanthis nairobae</i></b>        |            | X             |                |                  |         |             |
| 25 | <b>Ruwenzori Thicket Rat</b>        | <b><i>Grammomys ibeanus</i></b>           |            |               |                |                  | X       |             |
| 26 | Cape Hare                           | <i>Lepus capensis</i>                     |            | X             |                |                  |         |             |
| 27 | African Savanna Hare                | <i>Lepus victoriae</i>                    |            |               |                |                  |         | X           |
| 28 | <b>Four-toed Hedgehog</b>           | <b><i>Atelerix albiventris</i></b>        |            |               | X              |                  |         |             |



|    |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |    |
|----|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 29 | <b>Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bat</b>    | <i>Epomophorus wahlbergi</i>                     |   | X |   |   |   | X  |
| 30 | Egyptian Fruit Bat                        | <i>Rousettus aegyptiacus</i>                     |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 31 | <b>Least Long-fingered Bat</b>            | <i>Miniopterus minor</i>                         |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 32 | <b>Little Free-tailed Bat</b>             | <i>Chaerephon pumilus</i>                        |   | X |   |   |   |    |
| 33 | <b>African Sheath-tailed Bat</b>          | <i>Coleura afra</i>                              |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 34 | <b>Hildegard's Tomb Bat</b>               | <i>Taphozous hildegardeae</i>                    |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 35 | Large-eared Slit-Faced Bat                | <i>Nycteris macrotis</i>                         |   |   |   | X |   |    |
| 36 | <b>Heart-nosed Bat</b>                    | <i>Cardioderma cor</i>                           |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 37 | <b>Lander's Horseshoe Bat</b>             | <i>Rhinolophus landeri</i>                       |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 38 | Sundevall's Roundleaf Bat                 | <i>Hipposideros caffer</i>                       |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 39 | <b>Striped Leaf-nosed Bat</b>             | <i>Macronycteris vittatus</i>                    |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 40 | <b>African Trident Bat</b>                | <i>Triaenops afer</i>                            |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 41 | <b>Indian Humpback Dolphin</b> (no photo) | <i>Sousa plumbea</i>                             |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 42 | <b>Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin</b>    | <i>Tursiops aduncus</i>                          |   |   | X |   |   |    |
| 43 | African Wildcat                           | <i>Felis lybica lybica</i>                       |   | X |   |   |   |    |
| 44 | <b>Serval</b>                             | <i>Leptailurus serval</i>                        |   | X |   |   |   |    |
| 45 | Southern Lion                             | <i>Panthera leo melanochaita</i>                 | X | X |   |   |   |    |
| 46 | African Leopard                           | <i>Panthera pardus pardus</i>                    |   | X |   |   |   | X  |
| 47 | African Civet (no photo)                  | <i>Civettictis civetta</i>                       |   | X |   |   |   | SH |
| 48 | Common Genet                              | <i>Genetta genetta</i>                           |   | X |   |   |   |    |
| 49 | Rusty-spotted Genet                       | <i>Genetta maculata</i>                          |   |   | X |   | X | X  |
| 50 | <b>Common Dwarf Mongoose</b>              | <i>Helogale parvula</i>                          |   | X |   |   |   |    |
| 51 | Slender Mongoose (no photo)               | <i>Herpestes sanguineus</i>                      |   |   |   |   |   | X  |
| 52 | White-tailed Mongoose                     | <i>Ichneumia albicauda</i>                       |   |   |   |   |   | X  |
| 53 | Banded Mongoose                           | <i>Mungos mungo</i>                              |   | X |   |   |   |    |
| 54 | Spotted Hyena                             | <i>Crocuta crocuta</i>                           |   | X |   |   |   | X  |
| 55 | Black-backed Jackal                       | <i>Lupulella mesomelas schmidtii</i>             |   | X |   |   |   |    |
| 56 | Bat-eared Fox                             | <i>Otocyon megalotis virgatus</i>                |   | X |   |   |   |    |
| 57 | Grant's Zebra                             | <i>Equus quagga boehmi</i>                       | X | X |   |   |   | X  |
| 58 | <b>Southern White Rhinoceros</b>          | <i>Ceratotherium simum simum</i>                 | X |   |   |   |   |    |
| 59 | <b>Desert Warthog</b>                     | <i>Phacochoerus aethiopicus delamerei</i>        |   | X |   |   |   |    |
| 60 | Eastern Warthog                           | <i>Phacochoerus africanus massaicus</i>          | X |   |   |   |   | X  |
| 61 | Giant Forest Hog                          | <i>Hylochoerus meinertzhageni meinertzhageni</i> |   |   |   |   |   | X  |
| *  | Dromedary Camel                           | <i>Camelus dromedarius</i>                       |   |   |   | X |   |    |
| 62 | <b>Reticulated Giraffe</b>                | <i>Giraffa reticulata</i>                        |   |   |   |   |   | X  |
| 63 | <b>Masai Giraffe</b>                      | <i>Giraffa tippelskirchi</i>                     | X | X |   |   |   |    |



|    |  |  |   |   |   |   |  |   |
|----|--|--|---|---|---|---|--|---|
| 64 | <b>Coke's Hartebeest</b>               | <i>Alcelaphus buselaphus cokii</i>         | X | X |   |   |  |   |
| 65 | <b>Eastern White-beared Wildebeest</b> | <i>Connochaetes taurinus albojubatus</i>   | X |   |   |   |  |   |
| 66 | <b>Hirola</b>                          | <i>Beatragus hunteri</i>                   |   | X |   |   |  |   |
| 67 | <b>Peter's Gazelle</b>                 | <i>Nanger petersi</i>                      |   | X |   |   |  |   |
| 68 | <b>Eastern Thomson's Gazelle</b>       | <i>Eudorcas thomsoni thomsoni</i>          | X |   |   |   |  |   |
| 69 | <b>Southern Gerenuk</b>                | <i>Litocranius walleri walleri</i>         |   | X |   |   |  |   |
| 70 | <b>Hinde's Dik-dik</b>                 | <i>Madoqua hindei</i>                      |   | X |   | X |  |   |
| 71 | <b>Mountain Suni</b>                   | <i>Nesotragus moschatus kirchenpaueri</i>  |   |   |   |   |  | X |
|    | <b>Coastal Suni</b>                    | <i>Nesotragus moschatus moschatus</i>      |   |   | X |   |  |   |
| 72 | Cape Buffalo                           | <i>Syncerus caffer caffer</i>              | X |   |   |   |  | X |
| 73 | <b>Southern Lesser Kudu</b>            | <i>Tragelaphus imberbis australis</i>      |   | X |   |   |  |   |
| 74 | <b>Cape Bushbuck</b>                   | <i>Tragelaphus scriptus sylvaticus</i>     |   |   |   |   |  | X |
| 75 | East African Eland                     | <i>Taurotragus oryx pattersonianus</i>     |   |   |   |   |  | X |
| 76 | <b>Harvey's Red Duiker</b>             | <i>Cephalophus harveyi</i>                 |   |   | X |   |  |   |
| 77 | <b>Fringe-eared Oryx</b>               | <i>Oryx beisa callotis</i>                 |   | X |   |   |  |   |
| 78 | Common Impala                          | <i>Aepyceros melampus melampus</i>         | X | X |   |   |  | X |
| 79 | Defassa Waterbuck                      | <i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus defassa</i>        |   |   |   |   |  | X |
|    | Common Waterbuck                       | <i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus ellipsiprymnus</i> |   | X |   |   |  |   |

SH= Shem Only

\* Domesticated

79 Species, 49 Lifers