

Tour Report

Kenya – Masai Mara Photo Safari

13-23 February 2020

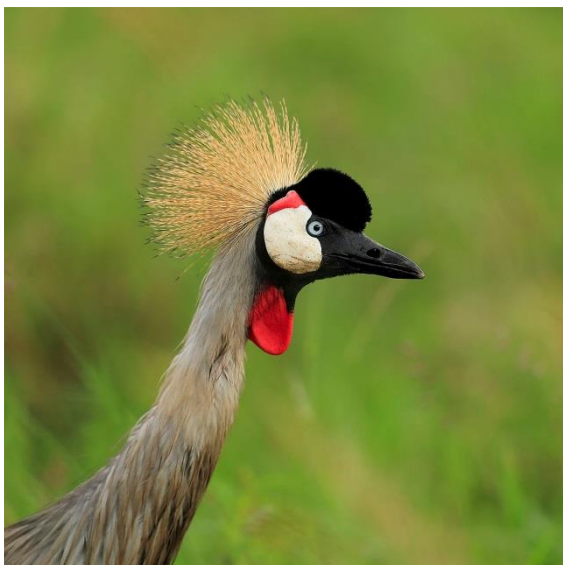
Young lion



Black rhinoceros



Grey-crowned crane



Leopard



Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1: Overnight flight to Nairobi**Friday 28 February 2020**

The group was all on the evening Kenya Airways flight from London to Nairobi, which was sadly delayed by a couple of hours. We eventually took off and enjoyed a smooth overnight flight to Nairobi.

Day 2: Arrive Nairobi; fly to Mara & enjoy first safari**Saturday 29 February 2020**

We arrived in Nairobi later than we had planned, but with plenty of time before our onward flight to the Masai Mara. We were met at Nairobi airport by Jairo who helped us board our transfer vehicles to Wilson airport for our flight to Kichwa Tembo. On arrival at the airport, Jairo helped us check in and get our luggage weighed before hopping on the flight ahead of schedule and making the 45-minute journey to the Mara.

We landed very smoothly at the airstrip and were met by our guides, Jeremy and Dennis, who provided the group with a refreshing array of drinks and snacks. It wasn't long before we were at the lodge, after a game drive on the way with Thomson's gazelle and topi found nearby and some zebra, impala and even giraffe seen on the escarpment. On our way into the lodge we also saw a number of birds which included common fiscal, common bulbul and red-necked spurfowl. There was also a tree hyrax to welcome us as we entered the lodge's grounds.

We were shown to our rooms after a very warm welcome and we reconvened for lunch after a shower and some time to freshen up. We then had a bit more time to unpack our things and rest before our first game drive into the Mara Triangle. As we departed the lodge we saw a troop of red-tailed and blue monkeys. We headed out into the park and saw our first little bee-eater posing on a branch, before moving on to see a pair of black-chested snake eagles perched in a couple of different trees. It wasn't long before we could see elephants (at a distance) and our first lions too – there were four resting in a tree. Although the sighting was quite distant, the opportunity to photograph them in the open landscape was really wonderful. After spending some time watching the lions, one climbed down the tree and disappeared and we took this as a sign to move on. We turned along a road, back towards the lodge, only to come across a lone lioness walking along the road in front of us. We proceeded to follow her for quite some time, probably 45 minutes, as we made our way back to the lodge, and were able to get a number of images.



We returned for our first dinner at Kichwa Tembo, and what a fabulous dinner it was too.

Today was our first full day out exploring the stunning landscapes of the Mara ecosystem. Overnight the heavens had opened, with torrential downpours. Although the worst of the rain had since moved on, there was to be a number of showers as the morning progressed. We headed out of the lodge while it was still dark, but arrived at the entrance to the Mara Conservancy just as daylight started to take hold. We entered the park and quickly came across a black-headed heron, searching the waterlogged ground for frogs. There was also a particularly obliging grey crowned crane, which posed for photos alongside the vehicle. We continued towards an impressive male impala, standing alert in the long grass, before then continuing past a herd of buffalo (in the distance) and large male elephant which made a brief appearance before quickly melting away into the thick bush along the river.

As we rounded a bend our guide, Dennis, saw a lioness walking along the road ahead of us; it was at quite a distance and a remarkable bit of spotting. We caught up with her and proceeded to spend some time following her, before managing to get ahead. She then made her way back into the long grass, where she had spied a lone topi, before scaring it off and climbing a tree to look for another potential meal. We moved off when numerous other vehicles arrived. We headed back towards the lodge, with a wonderful group of banded mongooses. As we reached the airstrip, we found our first male lion, resting in a thick patch of grass. As we had a limited view we decided to move on, only to then see another male get up and lie back down again. This second male had a much darker mane, but we would have to try our luck in the afternoon. As we moved on we came across more topi, this time with young, zebra, and in the long grass ahead of us was a pair of black rhino – an amazing sighting right out in the open. We headed back for breakfast, a little later than we had intended.



Most of the group had a brunch, instead of breakfast and lunch, with us all meeting up as scheduled for our afternoon drive. This time we headed back out towards where we had seen the lions in the morning. As we were leaving the lodge we came across a lone hammerkop resting on the roadway across the river, when suddenly it was joined by two more. We witnessed and photographed some remarkable behaviour as one of the new arrivals ended up mounting one of the other two birds and making quite a show of it. In the background a troop of baboons was feeding and we continued out down towards the plains to see if we could find the two male lions. Sadly, they had moved off into the thick vegetation and we were unable to find them. Instead, we found came across an impressive male impala with his harem, one of which escaped

and he chased it off into the distance before returning. We ended up stopping for sundowners along the Mara River and photographed some hippos and buffalo which were close by as we arrived. There was also a lone giraffe out in the open grassland, which provided the first clear view of giraffe of the trip.

As the light started to fade, which happens rather quickly when you are this close to the equator, we headed back to the comfort of the lodge for dinner and a well-deserved beer or glass of wine.

Day 4: All-day game drive to south of Mara Triangle

Monday 2 March 2020

Today was our first all-day game drive and we set off early once more, excited as to what might be in store for us all. Within minutes of passing through the park gates, we came across two large bull elephants which were dozing by the side of the road. They were a delight to watch and photograph, and it was the perfect way to start the day (despite the drizzle and gloom). We moved on and found our first waterbuck of the trip, grazing in the flooded grasslands and posing for a number of photographs. Only moments later a gorgeous malachite kingfisher landed by the side of the road, before diving into the water to catch a fish. As we moved on we came across a pair of jackals; sadly, they didn't really want to be photographed, but a lone hyena walked straight towards us, providing some excellent photography opportunities. As we made our way further south, towards the border with Tanzania, we noticed a large male lion standing in the long grass. He was watching a clan of hyenas, between 10 and 15-strong, before slowly approaching a tree to scent-mark. It was then the hyenas moved in, probably to a kill, and the male lion went charging after them, protecting whatever meal he had hidden away. He disappeared into the long grass and we moved onwards to search for a leopard which had made a kill a couple of days earlier. We worked our way across the rolling plains before eventually coming to the spot where the leopard had been seen. She was hiding away in a thicket and, as we strained to see her, she suddenly decided to break cover. We positioned the vehicle to ensure she would walk towards us and we were blessed with some excellent photography opportunities. We then headed to a nearby acacia tree, overlooking the spectacular landscape of the greater Mara ecosystem and were treated to a bush breakfast. We were cooked Ugandan 'Rolexes', a combination of a chapati and an omelette, with fresh yoghurts, fruit and a cooked breakfast on offer too. We also had a visit from a superb starling, after any scraps we might leave behind for it.



We then headed off, slowly making our way back towards the lodge with a lone hyena spotted just off the road, and we also came across our first secretary bird; however it wasn't particularly cooperative as it walked in the other direction. We came across a particularly impressive male warthog, which posed for photos, before we continued down towards the swamp. We saw our first large troop of baboons on the ground and a number of giraffe out in the open savannah. As we reached the lower elevations of the Mara Triangle we came across an incredible number of birds feeding in the flooded grassland. There were also some waterbuck and impala; the impala even put on a show by jumping over the water right in front of us – perfect for photography. It was amazing to see and photograph so many different birds including great

egret, grey heron, rufous-bellied heron, yellow-billed stork, white stork, maribou stork, openbill stork and Abdim's stork too. There was also a couple of monitor lizards and plenty of African jacana – it was an amazing place and we spent a fair bit of time photographing a great egret fishing in the shallow water. We moved on to find a grey crowned crane close to the road, before passing a number of elephant and a long-crested eagle in an acacia. We stopped before we left the park to photograph a blue-eared starling and a flock of common waxbill too.



We arrived back at the lodge after 10 hours out in the park and the group was treated to yet another fabulous meal in the lodge before retiring to their rooms.

Day 5: Morning & afternoon safaris in Mara Triangle

Tuesday 3 March 2020

This morning we headed out at first light as we had on the previous mornings and, having heard about a dead giraffe which had drawn in the local pride of lion, we went to investigate. Sadly, the giraffe (which had died of natural causes) was hidden away in the riverine forest of the Mara River and it wasn't possible to see the lions. We worked our way southwards along the river and stopped to photograph a lilac-breasted roller, before seeing a young bateleur eagle preen in a tree. There were plenty of impala and buffalo about as well as a couple of waterbuck, and a lovely family of elephant appeared out of the woodland to feed across a dry river gully. We spent almost an hour watching the elephants feed and interact (they had a very young baby with them, which had still not mastered the use of its trunk), before heading of back to the lodge for breakfast. There was the usual array of birds on our way back, including grey crowned crane, yellow-mantled widow, pin-tailed whydah and yellow-throated longclaw. We tried to get photos of the birds closer to us, but with only limited success.

We had another late breakfast and afterwards tried photographing the red-tailed monkeys around camp, as well as the seemingly growing community of warthogs grazing on the lodge's lawn.

In the afternoon we headed out into the park, hoping to find the lion that had evaded our attention this morning. Instead we found a couple of Grant's gazelle and some giraffe walking across the open plains.

Then, as we headed into the main part of the Mara Triangle we came across two bull elephants throwing their weight around, tussling and locking tusks in a battle that lasted for over 10 minutes. It was an almighty display and provided some wonderful photography opportunities for all the group. We then heard of a lioness up a tree nearby, so we headed off to see what we could find. As we arrived we saw a lioness asleep in the tree, but noticed some movement underneath. Sure enough there was another lioness under the tree and we were able to spend the next hour or so enjoying watching the lions climbing up and down the tree, before finally being joined by a cub as the light was fading. It was a fantastic way to spend the evening with sundowners and snacks in the vehicles as the sun disappeared behind the escarpment. We headed back to the lodge, content with our evening's sightings and photography.



Day 6: Morning & afternoon safaris in Mara Triangle

Wednesday 3 March 2020

We were determined to see the male lions so once again headed down towards the area where the giraffe carcass was thought to be. Again there was no luck, but we did get to photograph a very cooperative northern anteater chat before hearing over the radio that the lions had at last appeared out in the open. We headed straight there, with elephants dotted all over the landscape, and saw the tails of the lions in the long grass, close to another family group of elephants. The lions disappeared, seemingly going to ground. Despite our best efforts we could not get any closer to the lions, or get any photographs. Our guide Jeremy then spotted a black rhino on the plains closer to the Mara River so we rushed over to get a better view. As we arrived we realised that a male lion was asleep in the grass less than 50 metres from where the rhino was standing and so we focused on the lion. He eventually woke from his slumber and started to yawn and stretch, before getting up and heading to the shade of a nearby tree. We then headed back to photograph the black rhino, but sadly a light aircraft took off on the nearby airstrip and spooked it. We left the rhino, stopping to photograph a large herd of buffalo and continued to the lodge for breakfast.



We went out for another afternoon drive and we were determined to see the big male lion. As we drove down into the park, I noticed a slight lump in the long grass close to the lodge's airstrip. The furry lump disappeared into the long grass, but I was sure it was a lion. After a little deliberation, Jeremy and Dennis decided it was worth taking a track that would get us closer. We finally came to the lion-coloured lump, and indeed it was a lion: one of the two large males that are lords over this domain. The weather was not particularly cooperative tonight, with persistent heavy rain and so we decided to stay put, hoping the rain would drive the lion towards some cover. He gave us false hope on numerous occasions, looking like he was going to stand up before returning to his slumber. So the rest of the evening passed with us waiting for the lone male lion to make some sign of movement. Alas, the lion never moved and so we returned to the lodge for another fabulous meal.

Day 7: All day game drive in Mara National Reserve

Thursday 4 March 2020

Today was our earliest start, as we were heading out on another all-day game drive, this time to the Masai Mara National Reserve. We set off towards the Mara River, using the low bridge to cross into the Mara North Conservancy, but as we reached the bridge there was a problem. The unseasonal heavy rains had led to a dramatic rise in the river levels and the water had, seemingly, been flowing over the bridge in the night, depositing a large tree trunk on the roadway. A number of us alighted the vehicles and went to move the tree out of the way so we could pass in our Landcruisers. It was remarkably heavy, but with a team effort we were able to move the tree to the edge and continue on our way. We drove through a local village and on towards the Musiara Gate. Along the way we saw plenty of game as well as Masai cattle, including our first eland, numerous Thomson's gazelle, topi, impala, zebra and warthog. There were also numerous hyenas patrolling the area and we managed to capture some images of an individual as it walked along, backlit in the morning sunlight.

The weather today was much more typical of this time of the year in the Masai Mara – large blue skies and warm sunlight. We passed through the gate and headed towards a number of vehicles which had gathered in an area of long grass. There was a huge herd of topi wandering across the open plains and then we could easily see numerous shapes moving through the grass. It was a pride of lions, hoping to hunt the topi. However, it wasn't long before they seemed to give up on their morning hunt and they dropped into the grass to do what lions do best, sleep. We moved onwards, up towards a hill with a large Masai cattle boma and discovered the road had been washed away by the previous night's heavy rains. Together with the local herdsmen, we managed to move some boulders into place and help make the road a little more navigable.

Our first vehicle, with Dennis at the helm, managed to navigate its way across the improvised roadway before the second vehicle made it through. On the other side, there was another vehicle stuck and we quickly freed its occupants from their sticky situation. Unfortunately, Jeremy managed to get stuck slightly further down the road, but we were eventually freed and able to move in search of a photography subject. There were a number of pallid harriers and kestrels coursing across the open grasslands in search of food, while whydahs and widow birds seemed to dance above the grass.

We hit the jackpot as we arrived at a site to find two male lions in a stand-off. One was a male from the local pride, while the other was an outsider. They never moved far from one another and it was then we heard that there was a mother with cubs just up the hill, resting under the shade of a tree. It seemed as if the male from the pride was always putting himself between the family and the intruder, ensuring their safety. We headed off to a nearby tree (via the mother and cubs) for a wonderful bush breakfast with more Ugandan Rolexes, a cooked breakfast and many other edible delights.



We returned to the nearby tree to spend some time with the mother and cubs. They continuously moved around to find the best of the shrinking shade. The shade continued to shrink and one brazen cub decided to use our vehicle as a nice spot to escape the heat of the sun – he sat right next to one of the vehicles and left the vehicle stranded in a sea of grass. Our other vehicle moved back towards the large males. The vehicle with the cub enjoying the shade was then joined by another and eventually Jeremy started the engine and moved backwards ever so slightly to free the vehicle from the lion captors. The two vehicles were now reunited, but there was only one lion out in the open now – the interloper had taken refuge in the shade of a nearby bush. The lion from the local pride was still positioning himself between the intruder and his family, but took the time to feed on a topi carcass that had likely been killed during the night.

One of the vehicles decided to return to the lodge after being out during the heat of the day, while the other stayed put with the lions, hoping for some action as the heat of the sun faded away. There was no battle between the two, but as the light started to drop there was some movement from the outsider. We were able to build up a wide array of imagery as the day progressed, before it was time to move back towards the gate and home to our lodge for the evening. The other highlight of the day was watching a wealth of butterflies, dragonflies and widow birds displaying in the long grass.



The remaining vehicle was on its way back to the lodge, driving through herds of topi, impala, Thomson's and Grant's gazelles, when we saw some lion across the stream outside the gate. After a quick pit-stop we headed over to get a better view of the lions – the pride we saw first thing in the morning. They were looking to hunt again and, after a bit of time with them all, the members of the pride we could see suddenly stood up and looked in unison behind us. There was a lioness that nobody had spotted with a warthog kill and she was coming back to feed the pride. This small meal didn't last long and, with the light fading, photography opportunities were limited. However, it was a wonderful way to end the drive and we started to make our way again, before darkness fell. We saw our first Kirk's dik-dik on our way back down towards the river before we ended up back in the comfort of the lodge, after a long day out in the Mara with lions galore.

Day 8: All-day game drive in Mara National Reserve & typical safari

Friday 5 March 2020

This was our last full day in the Mara ecosystem and the two halves of the group wanted to go off in different directions. One vehicle, with Jeremy leading the way, headed off into the Greater Mara once again, on a second all-day game drive, while the second vehicle, with Dennis and myself, went out in the morning and in the afternoon.

The all-day drive came across hyenas with a kill before sighting a black rhino in the distance. Sadly, the roads had not improved much more than the day before, and in trying to reach the rhino they got stuck in the mud. Unfortunately, they were stuck for some time without anybody nearby to rescue them. They were eventually rescued, after having a bush breakfast and numerous attempts to free themselves, before heading back to the Mara Triangle to find some lions and join the second vehicle for sundowners.

The second vehicle went out at the same time, but instead stayed closer to camp, working its way along the river. A lioness and two large cubs were seen briefly on the edge of the road, before disappearing into the thick riverside vegetation and we continued on this glorious morning. We had great views of a topi, backlit in the warm sun, numerous buffalo and then a lone hyena with two jackals close by. It turned out that the hyena was guarding a kill (most likely made by a leopard), while the jackals were desperate to get a piece of the prize, which they eventually did. The hyena wasn't particularly keen to be photographed and dragged its morning meal off into the marshland, away from prying eyes.



As we headed back towards the lodge we found the resident pride of lions just off of the main track, we had probably driven right past them at first light. We saw the whole pride as they slowly made their way towards the shade of the tree, while a large male refused to move from his grassy resting place. There was a black rhino nearby and we stopped briefly for a quick look before calling time, as the sun was starting to heat up. It was time to head back for a wonderful brunch, before reconvening in the afternoon for our last evening drive.

As we set out, it was another stunning evening, with the warm sun lighting up the beautiful open plains and acacia trees. We headed down towards the spot where the pride of lions was last seen, but instead we found a few buffalo bulls close to the road. We moved onwards, skirting around the marshland to find a huge bull elephant in the road. In the distance, we could see a large gathering of elephant consisting of multiple family groups, undoubtedly the large bull's intended destination, but we were unable proceed past this almighty obstacle. We did spend a little time photographing the resident birdlife perched up on mounds along the roadside, whilst waiting for the natural road block to move off the road. Eventually we decided it was best to bypass our new foe, and head back the way we came. We were hoping to get to a spot from the 'Out of Africa' movie for sundowners, but along the way we were a little side-tracked. Firstly we came across the famed pride of tree-climbing lions, which were now busy sleeping in an acacia tree. We quickly realised they wouldn't be moving any time soon and continued onwards towards the sundowner spot, only to be distracted once more by two male giraffe in the middle of a fight. We spent some time capturing images of this spectacular scene before heading off up the escarpment for our final sundowner in the bush. The herd of giraffe decided to join us and made for a wonderful sight as they walked across the landscape – what a stunning view and what a wonderful time we'd had.

We arrived back at the lodge just in time – the rain started after a little while and tonight it really meant business. However, the rain was not a problem as we were treated to an exceptional private dinner upstairs, with Masai songs and dancing for good measure. It was the perfect way to enjoy our final evening together in the stunning surrounds of Kichwa Tembo.



Day 9: Game drive in the Mara Triangle & flight to Nairobi

Saturday 6 March 2020

It was our final early morning in the Mara and what a beautiful morning it was too. We headed out into the park for one last, short game drive, hoping to get a glimpse of some wildlife before heading back for breakfast and our light aircraft flight to Nairobi. It turned out to be a quiet morning overall, primarily with numerous birds and elephants providing the photographic highlights. We did find fresh tracks of the tree-climbing pride, but sadly we didn't have the time or the road conditions to allow us to follow them. Other than the numerous elephants the highlight was probably a spotted hyena which walked straight past our vehicles at first light.

We returned to the lodge for our final breakfast before packing up all our things and meeting at reception for the short journey to the Kilwa Tembo airstrip for our light aircraft flight back to Nairobi. We had to wait a little while, with drinks in and before we boarded the Cessna Caravan, and bid goodbye to Jeremy and Dennis. Saying goodbye to the guides is always a time filled with great sadness, but the appreciation we all had for their excellent services was obvious. We had a very straightforward flight back to Nairobi, passed swiftly through Nairobi Wilson Airport and were soon on our way to the airport hotel.

We reconvened for one final meal as a group before heading back to the UK, and what a fantastic meal it was. It was a delight to have spent the last week in the company of such an enthusiastic group and I can't wait to return in 2020.

Day 10: Flight back to the UK

Sunday 7 March 2020

We had a relatively early start for our morning flight back to the UK with Kenya Airways. We said our goodbyes, after picking up our luggage in the baggage hall once back in the UK.