

Tour Report Kenya – Kenya's Masai Mara 22 – 31 Jan 2022

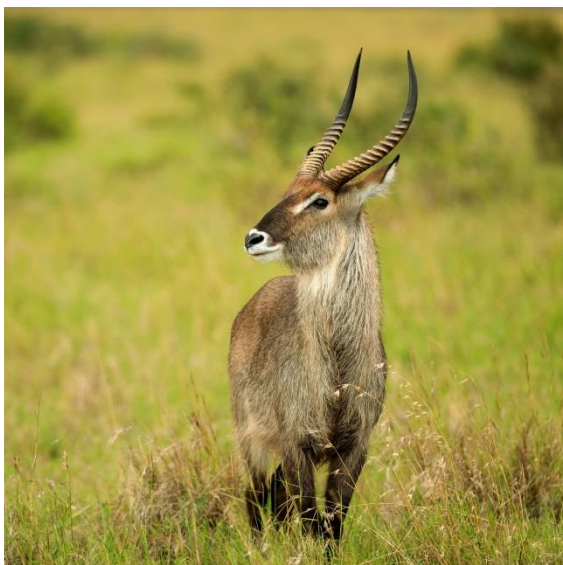
Serval



Superb starling



Waterbuck



Male lion



Compiled by Bret Charman

Tour Leader: Bret Charman

We were blessed with an incredible week in the Greater Mara, enjoying countless sightings of many of the region's most sought-after species. The photography opportunities were equally excellent and for the most part, the weather was extremely cooperative.

Day 1: London Heathrow to Nairobi

Saturday 22 January 2022

Today, most of the group met at Heathrow as we caught our flight to Nairobi with British Airways. We arrived in Nairobi late, due to delayed departure from Heathrow and made our way through the numerous Covid procedures set up for arrivals.

We made it through the airport and picked up our luggage where we were met by our local representatives. We were to spend the night in the very comfortable Crowne Plaza airport hotel, only a 5-minute drive from the terminal. The whole group was checked in efficiently and we all retired to our rooms for a very well-earned rest.

Day 2: Nairobi to the Mara Triangle

Sunday 23 January 2022

We awoke for breakfast before our short transfer to Wilson airport, where we would catch our flight to the Mara Triangle. We arrived and were helped with the check in process before a short wait, and then boarded our Cessna Caravan for our 45-minute flight to the Mara.

We arrived at the Kichwa Tembo airstrip by our guides Dennis and Fred, were relieved of our luggage and swiftly provided with cold drinks and an array of snacks. After enjoying our drinks we climbed aboard our Land Cruisers and began our mini safari up towards the lodge. Right by the airstrip we saw buffalo, topi and impala before rounding a bend to find a secretary bird in the road. As we moved on up to the lodge we came across elephants, zebra and even saw our first tree hyrax.

A warm welcome was awaiting us as we pulled into the lodge, with the team coming out to greet us. We had a briefing with a refreshing drink before being shown to our rooms and then heading back to the main area for a delicious lunch.

We met again at 4pm for our first safari, but we only left after photographing a long-crested eagle, the resident warthog family and group of dwarf mongooses. We headed out hoping to find and photograph a coalition of five male lion which have taken over the local prides, but on the way photographed a posing lilac-breasted roller before coming across a lovely herd of elephant with a young baby as well as a black rhino. With the heavy cloud cover, photography opportunities were limited today, but it was great to get some record images of a black rhino on our first day. As we moved up towards the escarpment, we found the male lions resting in the long grass – doing what lions do best – snoozing.

Before we knew it, the light was fading and it was time to head back to the lodge. Of course, on our way we were distracted by a herd of elephant and giraffe on one of the small bridges crossing the stream that skirts the lodge's grounds.

After a quick shower, it was time to enjoy our first dinner – a lovely way to end our first day in the spectacular scenery of the Mara.

Day 3: The Masai Mara

Monday 24 January 2022

After having a friendly wake up call, accompanied by a warm drink of our choice, it was time to meet for our first morning safari. We headed out before it was light, timing our safari for what we hoped would be the best morning light. As we headed down towards the Mara River, we saw the sun rise over the horizon

and we moved on in search of the lion we left the night before. We couldn't locate them down along the river, but enjoyed views of countless elephant and even a couple of reedbuck. We then saw a large herd of giraffe watching something in the distance, only to realise they were watching a large pride of lion moving across the savannah. We made our way to their position, to find the pride scattered amongst the vegetation. One by one, the lions congregated on a low termite mound and provided a lovely scene where it was possible to photograph them all together. The pride then moved off into an area of scrub and settled out of reach on another low termite mound.



We then moved off to make the most of the facilities the open plains of the Mara can provide and enjoy an excellent bush breakfast – both Dennis and Fred teaming up to provide an excellent meal in a beautiful spot. Before long we were joined by a flock of superb starlings – enjoying the crumbs dropped around our breakfast spot.

We tried in vain searching for a black rhino and her calf before slowly trying to make our way back to Kichwa Tembo. Just off the main road we came across a pair of ground hornbills and despite the harsh light (the sun had finally broken through the clouds), we managed to capture some excellent images as one of the birds caught a toad and proceeded to swallow it whole. Just by the entrance to the conservancy, the group watched and photographed a troop of olive baboons as they played and rested on or underneath an acacia. As we crossed the stream by the lodge, a herd of zebra were drinking and a youngster turned to show a large wound, almost certainly inflicted by a lion attack.

After such a busy morning, lunch was already upon us and the team provided yet another excellent meal. The food and hospitality really are second to none.

It was time for another afternoon out in the park, looking for a baby rhino and its mother. We made every attempt we could to find the black rhino and her calf, passing a group of black-backed jackals on the way. Eventually, we found her and the calf hiding in the bushes, thanks to the expert spotting skills of Don!

Despite our best efforts, and permissions for a slight excursion from the park authorities, photography opportunities were extremely limited. The mother was rightly very wary of us and rarely allowed the calf out into the open. She suckled the calf within the scrub, but she never really ventured out into the open for any quality photography opportunities.

On our way back towards the lodge we went to check on the lions, but they were still keeping themselves away from the track and so we moved on and watched the sunset over the escarpment of the Great Rift Valley. We continued onwards towards camp and came across the hyenas, and their young, all around their

den site. It was too dark for photography, but to see such a clan with so many pups of different ages was an absolute delight.

Day 4: The Masai Mara

Tuesday 25 January 2022

It was an early start today as we convened at the entrance to the lodge for our drive through the Mara North Conservancy to the Masai Mara National Reserve (via the Musiara Gate). We started our journey driving in the dark along the public road, crossing the Mara River and up on to the plateau above. We made good progress and passed numerous hyena outside the villages as well as Thompson's gazelle, topi, a couple of wildebeest and plenty of zebra too.

As we started to climb to the higher plains we saw a pride of lions just below a ridge, bathed in the most glorious morning light. We arrived just in time, when we had the pride to ourselves, walking and posing in the stunning soft golden light. They were just starting to move as we arrived, traversing the ridgeline and working with Dennis and Fred allowed us a wealth of photography opportunities. Slowly, other vehicles appeared and it was then that a large male appeared from over the horizon. It was following the pride across the ridgeline where it eventually caught up with them. As more vehicles started to arrive, we made the call to leave the pride be and found a cheetah hiding in the long grass. It was a young cheetah and she was obviously trying to keep out of sight, keeping a low profile before intermittently checking for danger. She then got up and it was immediately apparent she was looking to hunt. We gave her space, allowing her to stalk her prey and positioned our vehicle parallel to the Thompson's gazelle she was stalking. The slow approach was excellent, with the gazelle facing the other direction, but unfortunately she started her chase too early and despite getting close she was unsuccessful. We then heard that the lions had made a buffalo kill up on top of the ridge, so we went off to see what we could find. The lions had gorged themselves and only a couple of females and cubs were still feeding. We were able to photograph the scene for some time, with lions coming to and fro. Two cubs decided to climb up on a mound right by our vehicles.



After a fantastic morning we decided to find some shade to enjoy our bush breakfast, however as we set about down the slope we came across the same cheetah sat perfectly atop of a mound. We couldn't resist and stopped to add to our cheetah portfolio.

We finally made it to a great spot where we had a fantastic bush breakfast, with a herd of eland walking by just before we had finished. With such an incredible opportunity we decided to return to the cheetah and see whether she would hunt again.

After some time with the cheetah, we should have headed back to the lodge for a late lunch but ended up staying out for the whole day. Half the group wanted to stay with the cheetah (who attempted to hunt again) while the other vehicle went in search of a leopard and her cub, with great success. They were rewarded as the female crossed the open with the cub in tow, capturing some remarkable images.



We slowly made our way back towards the Mara Triangle, heading back through the Mara North Conservancy, before visiting the hyena den and had some fantastic encounters as the young, of different ages, all played around the burrows. Adults were there too and scared off a band of banded mongooses which came too close for their liking. To see and photograph the intimacy between the mothers and their pups was a real treat.

We returned to camp for yet another fantastic meal and retreated to our rooms for a well-earned rest.

Day 5: The Masai Mara

Wednesday 26 January 2022

This morning we decided to head over to the Mara National Reserve once more, in search of the leopard that part of the group saw the day before. After passing through the Maasai lands of the Mara North and then into the community lands, we came across a huge clan of hyena, moving in unison across the plain.

We continued onwards, down to the river where the leopard was seen with her cub, stopping to photograph the misty scene that lay before us. We continued down towards the river as the sun rose higher into the sky and found the leopard deep down a ravine, hiding in amongst some thick scrub. After a bit of patience she emerged with the cub, which was bounding around and loving life. We also photographed a flycatcher and a sunbird and were joined by a common kestrel.



After a little while we moved on, hoping to catch up with a cheetah coalition. As we moved we saw our first Grant's gazelles as well as another large clan of hyena. A martial eagle sat atop of an acacia before we heard that the mother cheetah with three large cubs were nearby. On the opposite side of the river was another lone cheetah. The mother was located up in some bushes and as she was off road we had to limit our time with her.

Then it was time for a fantastic bush breakfast down by the Talek River. We then went to find the mother and cubs, before discovering the lone cheetah had crossed the river and was now working her way across the plains to the hill top scrub.

After a little time we headed back towards the leopard, finding numerous wallowing hyena on the way. The leopard was now fast asleep and the cub carefully hidden away. We continued on back towards camp, finding a group of young giraffes and the usual plains game found in the vast open grasslands.

After lunch we headed out along the escarpment in the Mara Triangle, seeing if we could find the tree-climbing lions. As we entered the conservancy, a beautiful group of banded mongooses strolled by us, one of which was carrying a bird. We continued onwards, only to find a large male lion and a female enjoying one another's company right by the road. We stopped and tried to capture the action before they moved away from an approaching herd of buffalo.

We had then heard on the other side of the buffalo someone had just seen a serval so we tried our luck there. Unfortunately we were unsuccessful – no matter how hard we tried we were unable to spot the elusive feline.

We returned to the lions which were still down by the trees, and seemingly staying put. We went to check on other members of the pride who were nearby, with half the group getting distracted by some blue-headed agama climbing up and down a tree – providing great subjects. We got to the lions to find them doing what they do best – sleeping.

We watched the sunset before photographing a handsome white-browed coucal and black-shouldered kite. As we drove back to the gate the male lion was roaring by the road side and we found the hyenas resting outside the front of their den close to the lodge.



Day 6: The Masai Mara

Thursday 27 January 2022

We left camp bright and early once again and were out well before dawn. We were heading south down along the escarpment, searching for whatever may cross our path. It's a beautiful part of the Mara Triangle.

We stopped at a herd of giraffe feeding on the low scrub to the east, just as the sun started to rise over the horizon. After capturing some shots of the majestic mammals with the plains falling off behind them, we moved onwards. We came across a balloon safari breakfast spot, where they told us that there were some lions close-by. In fact, the lions were right next to the breakfast site, laying in the long grass. The sun was coming out from behind the clouds and the long grass provided a beautiful setting in which to photograph the large male lion and his female companion. After a little while we decided to move onwards.



Following a quiet spell on the plains our guides had heard, from the rangers, that there were more lions across the stream, just below the escarpment. We slowly made our way and found two pairs of mating lion, both making the most of this quiet area, before we so rudely interrupted the intimate scene. We had the sighting to ourselves, watching and photographing as they enjoyed one another's company. In the distance a herd of buffalo were approaching the position of the lion. Within half an hour the buffalo had caught the lions' scent and they started to move away. At that moment we decided it was time to move on ourselves, across the stream to find a spot for breakfast

Breakfast was in a truly beautiful spot, in the shade of a fig tree, away from anyone else in the Mara ecosystem. Nearby were a herd of hartebeest, some topi, impala and once again the cooked breakfast was spectacular. Once again, we had heard that more lion were nearby and so after finishing another lavish feast, we headed up onto the plains to see if we could find them. It wasn't long before we were alongside a pride of sleeping lions – the photography opportunities were limited so we decided to move on.

We were approaching Serena Lodge and as we passed the sign, I turned to see a serval sat in the shade. We stopped suddenly and slowly approached the serval, which turned out to be incredibly relaxed. We spent over half an hour photographing, capturing a range of stunning portraits – it was among the best serval encounters you could ever hope to wish for. The serval decided, once the sun disappeared behind the clouds, that it was time to hunt and we spent another ten minutes or so photographing it as it caught some insects and what looked like a frog.

After such an incredible encounter, it was time to head back along the river and to the lodge for a late lunch. Once again though, we were distracted as a huge herd of elephant, over 150 strong, crossed one of the side channels of the Mara River and we were amazed by the scene before us. After the elephants had all crossed the river and the road beyond we finally made our way back to camp for our increasingly delayed lunch.



We had an hours respite before heading out once again, searching for the lions close to camp. We headed out across the plain in front of Kichwa Tembo and found the coalition of four males that oversee the pride here. Once one of the lions moved, we realised there was a monitor lizard sat only a few feet away. We then watched as the monitor approached one of the other males, unsettling it until it too moved position. It was incredible to see a relatively small lizard drive away a 200 kilogramme lion. Some of the group also went to the river to photograph the hippo before we returned to the lodge for dinner.

Once again we had an excellent dinner at the end of an incredible day in the Mara – with seven different male lions encountered and photographed, plus a serval, you can't really get much better.

Day 7: The Masai Mara

Friday 28 January 2022

This morning was the earliest start of our trip, we left the delightful surrounds of Kichwa Tembo at 5.30 and headed across the Mara River to the Musiara Gate into the Masai Mara National Reserve. We went in search of the leopard and her cub once more. We stopped as the sun began to rise, capturing images of the beautiful vistas that lay before us. We were the only ones looking for the leopard, but no matter how hard we tried, we were unable to locate her. A herd of giraffe walked across the open plain and made for a beautiful scene in the wide open plains and a lone tree.

We had heard that there were a couple of male lions who had killed a baby buffalo, with the mother standing guard of the body. We moved on, working our way across the water-logged ground as we neared their position. On arrival we found two male lions resting in the long grass and a large female buffalo, with a mature calf) standing by the body of the deceased new-born. It actually turned out that buffalo was likely still born and the lions just happened to be in the right place at the right time. We waited for the action to begin, for some time, but the lions were biding their time. The two of them realised the mother would eventually move on and they would have an easy meal. We decided to move on for yet another fabulous bush breakfast.



After breakfast, we spent a fair bit of time to trying to help a vehicle that was stuck in a stream. But with two vehicles towing and an awful lot of wheel spinning it was deemed that there was no chance to tow the vehicle out. It seemed as if the front left wheel had broken and it would have to be towed out by heavy machinery.

With no success, we moved on in search of the cheetah coalition, but they had seemingly split up. Instead we heard that the female with the three mature cubs had been joined by a male. We arrived to find all five laying in the shade of a tree. We decided to stick by them, waiting to see whether any action might start between them or in case they decided to hunt. We were with them for around 45 minutes when a female impala and her young trotted by. Before we could even react, all of the cheetah were sprinting down the hill. The adult impala escaped, but the youngster wasn't so fortunate. As we made our way down the slope we could see the poor impala being squabbled over. Within a couple of minutes the inexperienced cheetah had killed the impala and were quickly feeding. A lone hyena was already on the scene, but with five fully grown cheetahs it kept its distance. As we photographed the lone male tried to mate with the female, but his numerous attempts were rebuffed.



We watched on as they fed, photographing the graphic scene, before all the cheetah slowly retreated to the shade of the same tree as before. We watched as they rested and the male still tried his advances before one vehicle decided to stop for lunch. The other vehicle stayed with them and watched as the female finally accepted the male's advances and moved away from the three youngsters. The youngsters chirped continuously as their mother left them alone, maybe for the very first time. Our second vehicle returned to find the three youngsters still on their own, looking for their mum, while she was with the male only a few hundred yards away.

We decided to leave them, working our way back towards where we had last seen the leopard and her cub. Moving up and down the gulley, skirting the thick vegetation, we were unable to find her despite our best efforts. She had done what leopards do best – disappear. We decided to slowly make our way back to camp, seeing if we could find anything along the way. There was plenty of plains species including topi, zebra, Thompson's gazelle and impala, as well as a pair of black-backed jackals. As we reached the local village, there were lots of people going about their daily business and we arrived back at the lodge in daylight – a first for our trip. Everyone had the chance to freshen up before another wonderful meal and excellent service from all the excellent staff.

Day 8: The Masai Mara

Saturday 29 January 2022

Our last full day in the Mara today and we decided to follow the river south towards the higher elevation plains and the volcanic hills just before the Tanzanian border. We started off by driving along the river, slowly exploring the marshy ground, but all was quiet except for buffalo, impala and a host of birds. As we followed the river around to the east, we turned southwards climbing into the rolling plains beyond. As we climbed the slope, we passed where we bumped into the serval and continued onwards before coming across a couple of handsome reedbuck who posed very nicely, providing the perfect portrait opportunities of this dainty antelope. We continued up into the volcanic landscape, with ancient volcanic plugs rising dramatically out of the plains, with rocky outcrops and vegetated tops providing a very different backdrop. To the south were the wide plains of the Serengeti were filled with topi, wildebeest, zebra and buffalo. This is surely among the most beautiful backdrops anywhere in Africa and we had it all to ourselves.

One vehicle came across a large male lion, walking across the open savannah between the rocky outcrops while the other stopped to photograph the first side-striped jackal of the trip. Eventually we reconvened where a second lion was feasting on the carcass of a young zebra, with four hyena watching on and a couple of black-backed jackals for good measure. We sat and photographed the impressive lion as he made sure he picked off every scrap of meat and chewed on the skin. When he decided he was finished, the hyenas quickly swooped in, grabbing anything they could get their jaws around. One of the vehicles moved on, getting ahead of the large male as he walked across the lush green grasslands while the other stayed with the hyenas as they squabbled and fought over the prize.



What's more, we had the sighting all to ourselves and were blessed with some wonderful photography opportunities. Once everyone had filled their memory cards and drained the batteries, we moved onwards towards the Tanzanian border where we stopped for breakfast. All around were hundreds of zebra, topi and gazelle grazing, with the open Savannah stretching all the way to the horizon. It was an exceptional morning filled with stunning photography and fantastic company. Our guides Fred and Dennis went above and beyond to ensure everyone had an excellent time.

We slowly made our way back towards the Mara River, enabling us to see some of the huge Nile crocodiles that inhabit these treacherous waters, as well as a large pod of hippos. As we headed back to the lodge we came across a pair of ground hornbills, one proudly carrying a beak full of meals, including a snake and frog, while the other seemingly had nesting material. It was then a drive back to the lodge for a break before heading back out again for a shorter evening drive.

As we ventured south into the Triangle, a large storm was brewing to the north with incredibly heavy rain darkening the skies and it seemed to be heading towards us. We skirted along the escarpment trying to keep ahead of the storm when we found a very handsome male waterbuck. Despite the strong winds and threat of a downpour at any moment, he was remarkably cooperative, posing nicely for the group. Incredibly, the deluge and associated soaking passed us by.



We moved on as we searched for the any of the resident black rhino and instead found a wonderful family of elephants. I don't think it matters how many elephants you see, they always draw you in and although they can be hard to photograph the rewards can be exceptional. We sat and watched as a very young calf suckled from its mother, while another slightly older calf played nearby. The two were obviously friends (likely to be cousins) and came together for a bit of rough and tumble. Boys will be boys as they say. We watched on as they practised their sparring skills, pushing and shoving, before the older one decided to assert its dominance. It mounted the younger calf, driving him back to the reassurance of his mother. It was a magical sight and provided some wonderful photography opportunities.



After a prolonged period with the elephants, we made our way along the river when Dennis saw a lion in the distance. It was the same coalition of males that we had spent time with a couple of nights ago. The light was fading now and photography opportunities were limited with the long grass and lions doing what they do best – sleep. So with the light nearly gone it was time to make our way back up towards the escarpment as the sun was setting behind the rocky bluffs. It was time to drive the short distance to Kichwa Tembo for our final dinner and night in this spectacular setting.

Day 9: The Masai Mara to Nairobi

Sunday 30 January 2022

Our final morning in the Mara and it was another early start. Due to the incredibly heavy rains the night before, we were unable to head into the concession as normal across a ford. Instead we headed around the edge of the reserve, and bumped into two lionesses. The sun was still below the horizon and with limited photography opportunities we decided to move on and see what else we could find.

It was a quiet morning for the most except for the usual plain's game and large family groups of elephants dotted across the lush landscape. It was a morning to soak up the ambience, to enjoy the magic of this spectacular part of Africa. Sometimes the best thing to do is to sit back, relax and put the camera to one side. As we were making our way up towards the escarpment, Fred spotted a lion high up the slope just below the treeline. There, walking straight towards it was a large bull eland. It must be said that this was well over 400 metres from where we were sat in our vehicle. It looked as if the eland was going to walk right at the lioness, but it either caught its scent or had a sixth sense and veered away. A second lioness was further up, within the trees and heading towards a herd of zebra. We all watched with bated breath. It was some time before the action commenced and the lioness made her attack. Unfortunately for her, or fortunately for the zebra, she failed. Further down the slope a large herd of elephants had heard the commotion and now formed a protective ring around their young, while a few buffalo looked on rather bewildered by the chaos around them.

With that final piece of drama unfolding right at the end of our short morning drive, it was time to return to the lodge for the final time. We enjoyed an excellent breakfast before heading to our rooms and packing everything away. Two of our group were moving on to the Mara North Conservancy, while the rest of us flew to Nairobi. We had the use of day rooms at the Crowne Plaza, enabling us to freshen up before our overnight flight back to London.

Upon arrival at the airport, our progress through security, check-in and border control was all very smooth, enabling us to be airside with plenty of time. We boarded our flight back to the UK and settled in for the night.

Day 10: Nairobi to London

Monday 31 January 2022

We arrived on time at Heathrow, and waltzed straight through immigration, but unfortunately stumbled at luggage with the slow delivery of our bags. As the bags trickled through we said our goodbyes and made our separate journeys home.