



The Half-Year Safari Report *October, 2006*

From Jim Heck

Our summer season ended in East Africa on two very traditional notes: big game and the migration, giving us some possible insights into global warming's effect in East Africa.

GLOBAL WARMING

For the last 4 years, about a third of the wildebeest herds have entered Kenya's Maasai Mara in August. Although statistics for earlier years are often anecdotal, it's generally believed that the migration reaches the Mara in July. Moreover for the last two years, after sticking its toes in the Mara at the beginning of the second week of August, the great herd returned to the Serengeti for several weeks before truly flooding into the Mara well towards the end of August, basically a month late.

The herd moves on no tourist timetable, despite the need for family safaris to be back for the increasingly early start of the American school year! The herds move to places where there is grass to eat. The grass is grown by rain. The Mara is the rainiest place in East Africa: there is only one month of the year that the Mara is dry, October. But despite the visual appearance of the Mara's wide ranging rolling grassland plains, at 5,000' high its nutrient plains are far inferior to those of the lower Serengeti. Mara plains are interrupted by many rivers and woodlands, and even rocky hills. The grass that grows here is fine, but nowhere near as nutritious or fulsome as the grass that grows on the Serengeti's flat and endless landscape.

So if the rains continue to grow grasses further south, that's where the herds will stay. And for the last several years, the rains lingered. The great droughts that appeared like clockwork every ten years in anyone's living memory, ended in the 1990s. We had a six-week minidrought this year but by the standards of years past, it was nothing. The rains are coming earlier, falling harder and lasting longer. This is particularly difficult to get across this year since the media reported the February mini-droughts with wanton negligence, creating headlines where truly none existed. (There were areas with very severe drought, but they were either very small areas or areas that have had chronic drought for a century. The overall rainfall pattern for all of East Africa shows the increasing wetness of this part of our planet.)

Birds are often used as an indication of the health of any biomass, and in East Africa we now routinely experience many species nesting three times in a year, when in years past nesting

twice a year was considered unusual. Twenty years ago the yellow-billed stork (wood ibis) was strictly a migrant; today it is a solid resident. The white stork is beginning to remain, as well. These large distinctly migratory European birds are telling us clearly that the world's climate is changing.

For those of you traveling with us next year, note that the early weather indications are for an El Nino year. The last El Nino to effect East Africa was in 1998, and it was quite disruptive. But our roads were much poorer then, and there is some analysis to suggest that in an environment of global warming, the El Nino has less noticeable effect.



Yellow-billed stork
By Bill Banzhaf

None of us would argue that global warming is more acceptable because the rain patterns on the equatorial regions are heavier. In fact scattered among western news reports of the "drought" were terrible floods in parts of East Africa that wiped out many farms. But it goes without saying that the nonmechanized farmer considers the current environment an improvement over the last century, and for the occasional tourist the impression couldn't be better. But many of us now see the tripling of the wildebeest herds in the 1980s – beyond the wildest predictions of scientists of the time – as a clarion call from the wild regarding climate change.

LIONS

So it was well understood by the Hartman family of Boulder, CO, that there was no guarantee we would find the migration. Amy and Andy are both lawyers, and we all know what enormous freedom lawyers have to skip work! It was the kids who had to be back by mid-August for school, so as we ended the safari in the Mara as late as possible. It was still only August 10.

We were lucky. On our very first game drive from Governor's -- hardly an hour after our arrival -- we saw in the distance a migratory file coming towards us. That was actually the bonus, as we were following the dysfunctional if comic Bila Shaka lion pride which has lived around Governor's for years. Last year the current grand master displaced the former pride leaders and killed all their cubs. He then sired more than a dozen cubs from three lionesses, and as we arrived eight of them were between 8-9 months old. To the right is a great picture that Micah took of the grand master.



The lions, of course, had expected the wildebeest long before we noticed them. What struck me immediately was how Big Daddy seemed to want nothing to do with the planned hunt. Most males wait in the sidelines for their family to bring down the kill, but this guy was waiting in the next county. You can see from Micah's picture that he still had interest in what was going on, but he obviously knew better than anyone how 8 teenagers were likely to perform an important task. Even the three mothers seemed to realize that normal strategies for putting dinner on the table weren't going to work with this crew, and they let the kids go first.

Two of the mothers and all of the kids were crouched low in the high grass as the file raced towards them. Then, well before they should have, the young males ran towards the file. Wildebeest are not smart animals, but they were smart enough to know they were smarter than the Bila Shaka guys, and without losing their fast-paced gate they raced right towards the young lions with their heads down challenging the confused predators with their whipping horns. The kids scattered helter-skelter.

The wildebeest didn't lose a strut. The lions appeared out of the dust racing away from the charging file. Perhaps seeing our small convoy of vehicles as shelter, they all gathered around us. The grass was high (it had been raining heavily in the Mara) and as they regrouped among our Landrovers one of them saw a mongoose. The next five minutes were spent as eight young lions failed to catch one mongoose. One young lion got the animal in its mouth, but it must have bit his tongue, because he dropped it. The mongoose ran under our Landrover. This was probably the most exciting thing to have happened, because we then had eight young lions circling our landrover, occasionally eyeing us as the culprits in stealing their meal.

Meanwhile, the three moms dutifully brought down dinner. Micah, by the way, got a good video of the feast being devoured.

We are noticing more and more young males in the prides. Traditionally, there were twice as many females as males. Males aren't taught to hunt, and they are kicked out of the pride by their mothers before they get bigger than the mothers (about 9-10 months). Half teach themselves to hunt and ultimately become the masters of the veld, but half starve. Perhaps because of the abundant prey available in today's wetter environment, many more are surviving, and many are successfully not being kicked out of the pride. This causes a whole range of new problems. The Univ. on Minnesota researcher, Craig Packer, has been reporting on this since the late 1970s.

There had been some popular reports in the last few years of a "mysterious" decline in lion populations. The continent-wide population stands just above 20,000, about half its number of a half century ago. But I have yet to see more than popular reports, the first of which was in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2003. The many scientific studies coming out of East Africa on lion

populations suggest declines due to three main factors: (1) habitat encroachment, (2) inbreeding (Packer et al) and (3) accelerated increase in trophy hunting. There's not too much mystery to this.

MIGRATION

The next morning we lucked out, again. Following the growing files of wildebeest heading for the Mara river, we timed it just right, and got some terrific views as we sat motionless for more than an hour while thousands of wilde raced past us into the river. As usual it had taken the file about a half hour to decide to make the swim, increasingly pressured by the growing congestion on the river bank as the file piled into itself. Meanwhile the bumpy silver noses and puckered eyes of crocs appeared breaking tiny wakes in the fast flowing river. Once they took the plunge it took about an hour for around 2500 wildebeest to cross, but it was hardly uniform. Young got separated from their mothers, and so some mothers would turn around and start back across. Soon whole portions of the file were swimming back onto itself. Many clambered up the opposite bank only to get caught under huge overhangs. The now dirty and white water river became bloated with dead wildebeest. The crocs were cruising around like little putt-boats at a carnival, as likely running into each other as bringing down a wildebeest, there were so many. It made the lion hunt of the evening before look like a U.S. strategic invasion.



It's so ironic to see this in the Mara, because once across the Mara river in this upper salient, the wilde are confined by the huge Oloololo Siria escarpment into a narrow area of hardly more than 5-7 miles. They can turn south – and many do – and then return to the Serengeti, but it's basically the northern end to their habitat. The condition of the grass on the west side of the river is rarely different from the east side. A month or two earlier, when they did this over the Grumeti, Seronera and Balaganjwa rivers in the Serengeti, there was meaning to this inevitable sacrifice: the grass was better on the other side. But not now at the end of the migratory cycle. Yet the behavior continues. As an instinctive response we see in the Mara at this time of the year the imperfectness of evolution. I find it irritating to listen to the purified naturalist who speaks of our finely balanced world as an ultimate creation. There are a lot of rough edges.



CROWDS? WHAT CROWDS?

It's official, or rather as official as poor statistics will ever make it: 2006 will be the year of the largest number of visitors to East Africa, ever. It's been a long time coming. The last biggest year was 1986. The picture I snapped to the right on the Hartman safari shows a ranger on a track in Ngorongoro Crater, directing cars around a tree with a leopard. There were 42 vehicles in line. I don't see this improving, soon, for the high summer and holiday seasons. We were all very disappointed that the Tanzanian government rescinded its directive limiting visits to the crater to a maximum of six hours. Six months before that the government rescinded an earlier order to limit the number of vehicles in the crater at any one time to 240. Clearly, we are all struggling with what to do with a valuable resource that brings in so much foreign currency. The composite fees for each visitor entering the crater is between \$70-\$100. This year we expect the number of visitors in the crater to exceed a quarter million. And I'm sure the Hartmans would be the first to tell you that the whole day wasn't like this picture, and that the unique beauty of the crater itself is worth the trip.



But there are still many remote and little visited treasure spots throughout Africa. Following the Hartman safari I went to the Zambezi River, into the remote Royal Zambezi National Park. The place hasn't changed in the last 25 years, the first time I visited it, then on a 42-mile canoe trip from Kariba to Mana Pools. That trip, by the way, continues to operate, but we have other problems with that: the crocs seem to be getting aggressive. A young teenage girl from Spokane was pulled from her canoe and killed last year. This extremely unlikely behavior is widely attributed to the political tensions in neighboring Zimbabwe. Many refugees are crossing the river into Zambia, and the unusual activity has probably triggered some innate reflex in the crocs.

And following Zambia I guided my good friend and his wonderful group of people from the Cleveland Zoo. Director Steve Taylor enjoys truly outstanding support from his community. They are bucking the political climate and with much careful research and aggressive science opening a new elephant exhibit at the Cleveland Zoo. This was their "Safari Ndovu" (Ndovu is Swahili for "elephant".) We went to the crater, because some of the largest tuskers left on earth are found there, but most of this safari was us and... well, elephants. From the vacant woodlands of southern Tarangire to the tens of thousands of square miles of central Tanzania wilderness, rarely did we encounter other vehicles.



ELEPHANT

We began the Cleveland Zoo safari with a fascinating lecture in Arusha by elephant researcher, Anna Estes. Anna is the daughter of the well-known researcher and popular author, Richard Estes (*Safari Companion, etc.*) It was astonishing to learn, for example, that there is no baseline research for elephants in the Serengeti. For such a celebrity animal, it's remarkable how little we know. Moreover, where there had been baseline research (Manyara & Amboseli), it was composed of very myopic studies conducted by the early research celebrities like Ian Douglas-Hamilton and Cynthia Moss. These early researchers contributed enormously to our sensitivity to ecological needs in Africa, but it's a pretty bad indication of our collective interest or intellect that poor science and interesting personal stories trumped solid research.

We've only recently learned, for instance, that elephants reintroduced to the wild fail miserably unless they are mentored by older elephants; and that popular notions that bull elephants don't hang out together is pure bunk. The pictures on this page taken of the water hole at Swala Camp in Tarangire are of dozens of elephants – all male. They have adopted the Swala water hole, presumably as they adopt other similar areas, the same way old retired guys have their morning coffee together at McDonald's.

Anna's creative approach is similar and equally wonderful to many of the young researchers, today, who are displacing the celebrity scientists of my generation with legitimate research. Of all the many fascinating things Anna told us in her short presentation which struck me as specially interesting was her consideration of an unpopular idea that there really were no more forests than we see today in East Africa in an earlier, more "natural" time. Anna argues that the first serious elephant research and counts occurred as much as a half century after the enormous elephant outtake of the 19th century, and that as a result they encountered an unusual Africa with more forests than would have existed had the elephant populations not been so culled out. Implicit in her notion is that an unthreatened elephant population limits African forests, possibly to the level we encounter, now.



The Selous, Mikumi and Ruaha national parks in central Tanzania are massive wildernesses that less than a half century ago were reserved exclusively for hunting. Hunters are increasing at an alarming rate in Tanzania. Each hunter renders the Tanzanian government about ten times the revenue from a tourist armed only with a camera. But to the credit of the Tanzanians government, they have increased the size of protected, nonhunting areas in significant ways over the last ten years, and much of this vast space is now being slowly and very modestly developed for tourists. We were privileged to see these on the zoo safari and I think it fair to say that everyone was duly impressed. Areas relatively new to nonhunting have animal populations which are somewhat more skittish, but even so our elephant, buffalo and other big game count was actually better than in the more mature parks to the north. And we

saw rare game that for some reason doesn't do well in heavily managed parks, like the roan antelope. Only predators were noticeably fewer. On a two-week safari in the north, we average 50-70 lions, 1-2 leopard and assorted other smaller cats. The zoo safari only



Roan antelope photographed by Liz Fowler in Ruaha N.P.

encountered about 30 lions and no leopard. It isn't the past legacy of hunting that depresses predator numbers in these areas, but rather the wildness of the environment. The popular parks to the north are mostly grassland plains and rangers do everything possible including aggressive controlled burning to keep it that way. Antelope flourish and predation becomes easier, so the predator populations increase. In Ruaha where our zoo safari ended, for instance, the formidable bush and enormous areas beyond management restrict antelope populations. Zebra and wildebeest are relatively easy kills for lion, but in these wilder places, there are fewer of them. On our very last game drive, we watched a pride of lion devouring a giraffe.

There is an analogy between the war that successfully ended elephant poaching and the war in Iraq. Both were successful in their original objectives, but neither considered the aftermath well enough. Today, elephant populations are exploding throughout the continent, and while their numbers remain at only about 2/3 the level of the 1960s, the human populations have increased more than twice that inverse, so the problem is quite serious. Elephants are killing people, including tourists. They are destroying farmlands and fragile protected areas. The beautiful and rare *acacia lahai* forests of the rim of Ngorongoro are in distinct danger. It has raised again the argument never abandoned by southern African environmentalists that elephants must be culled. This leads logically to a debate of commercial hunting, and the fireworks begin. Personally, I feel the emotive objections of many nonhunters distracts us from any reasonable discourse. I don't believe the final decision to cull or not cull is one that should be made by any except those who live day-by-day with the big jumbo in their shambas, anyway. And if anyone suggests that we consider the "morality" of hunting, they better first address the immorality of rolling over Third World debt.

WANANCHI

As I approach my 34th year of guiding in Africa, I find it more difficult than ever to address adequately the most important issue, the Africans themselves and our orientation to them as both outsiders and richer members of the world community. As many of you know, I don't like taking you to villages, because short visits distill the realities of contemporary African life – both positive and negative – into either parlor room talking points, or into coopting what is truly needed with truly



meaningless bic pens or chip change. Besides, there aren't villages in any folkloric way, anymore, and few of you want to spend your vacation in a slum. Nevertheless, from time to time, some of you prevail.

Jesse Hartman is coming of age, and as I understand it, part of his overall barmitzvah is to nurture personal giving. He arrived with 24 soccer balls, assorted pumps, whistles and other soccer paraphernalia. In the course of the safari, we went to four schools together. I think he learned a lot; I certainly did. The thirst for education has never diminished in Kenya. The Kenyan President has declared primary school education will be free. So we went to a Kikuyu primary school with 1200 students and 8 teachers plus the headmaster, yet they unhesitatingly interrupted what must be a very difficult daily schedule to welcome us, unannounced as we were. Jesse gave out soccer balls, played soccer, disappeared in mobs of purple sweaters while I watched from the sidelines. I watched the Loldia Boy Scouts somberly lower the Kenyan colors in front of 400 students, as Jesse was made to stand at the pole as the honored guest. I watched an assistant headmaster anxious to show Jesse his six new computers, open a door to a room that had no electricity. They couldn't afford it yet, the assistant head said, smiling proudly at the six silent, black faced monitors. I've rarely had a client who didn't want to sincerely do something to help Africans, but there never seems to be sufficient substance in any effort to make it happen. Well, this time it worked. Let's just say this time, the clients guided the guide. *Asante sana, Jesse.*



And in closing, I have to admit that we did see that incredibly warped lioness in Samburu who for the past year has adopted five different baby oryx, presumably after eating their mothers. Many times this rather idiosyncratic predator has been documented walking alone through the veld with a 2-3 month old baby oryx closely at its hind. Once the young oryx was rescued, but the other times it eventually got eaten by the others in the lioness' pride, although she often tries to stay away from the pride. Explanations have ranged from a barren animal with a personality disorder and elevated levels of estrogen to one of the most successful hoaxes of the American Republic party. This time we saw them tucked deeply under an acacia thorn tree, mostly hidden by the shade. There were no other predators around. There was the lion and there was a lifeless and emaciated baby oryx, probably dead of dehydration. The lioness was sleeping contentedly beside it, undisturbed by us or the meaning of life in Africa.