



The Half-Year Safari Report *May, 2008*

From Jim Heck

Our winter/spring season ended in East Africa with some of the most surprising game viewing I've had in years, in part probably because of the troubles in Kenya. And the season ended with very good news in Kenya.

KENYA

Although I was in Kenya four times since the troubles the end of December, for a total of about a week, we canceled all our programs there through June and rearranged them into Tanzania. We made the decision in early March and had we been able to wait just a week or two longer, we would probably not have extended the change that far. But the vagaries of travel contracts and obligations were such that had we waited and conditions had not improved, then we might have been unable to make the changes at all.

I've compiled enough material to write a book about what happened in Kenya vis-a-vis you safari goers, and much of it was discussed in the daily briefings many of you received. Suffice it to say that Americans got screwed, and that no other nationals did. This was because of the unfair bias that individual traveler insurance gives to our insurance companies. So while nationals from the U.K., Argentina, Hong Kong and Fiji could all get their money back from insurance, Americans couldn't.

But racing to the present, the situation in Kenya is nothing short of remarkable. Most if not all of the government's power is actually being shared by two diametrically opposed camps: the camp that represents the rich and powerful, and the camp that represents everyone else, which are the downtrodden and abject poor. The two sides couldn't have more different goals or political philosophies, yet the saint in the cauldron, Kofi Annan, brought them together. Street wisdom suggests this can't last, but I disagree. Africa has a history of diametrically opposed factions running the show, together. It doesn't last for years – one of the factions ultimately prevails – but it works long enough to replace violence with constitutional process.

In a few years I fully expect that this Kenyan history will transform into a model for resolving the rich/poor crises which is now bound to afflict so many places in the world, such as China, and conceivably in much more serious ways. And I wouldn't be surprised if some day even America uses the model. The differences between our rich and poor are becoming *greater* than in the Third World.

SO WHY WAS GAME VIEWING SO GOOD?

Only about a fifth of the tourists to East Africa are Americans. And about a third of them visit both Kenya and Tanzania. So while we had a terribly difficult time confirming alternate space in Tanzania for our Kenyan programs, when we finally arrived, no one was there! Foreign nationals simply didn't show up. They didn't have to formally tell the folks in East Africa that they weren't coming (they should have) to get their money back from insurance. So perhaps it was because there were so few people that we had such phenomenal game viewing.

WILD DOGS

Wild dogs a few minutes outside the doorstep of Sopa Lodge in Tarangire! This was the best find of the season, and they continue to be seen up to this writing. Two pairs, only four animals, but in great condition. Tarangire is a good place for dog; it's just that we've never seen them before. But the southern end of the park borders a wild, massive and uninhabited area we call the Maasai Steppe, giving access to the wildest creatures on the veld. I also wonder if some of the work many NGOs are doing – including Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo – to stave the decline of the dog in East Africa may be coming to some fruition.



Four wild dog have been spotted repeatedly about 3km from the Tarangire Sopa Lodge since mid-January. This is the first regular sighting of wild dog in this heavily used tourist area in memory.

Domonic Travis, one of the LPZ researchers, conducted a fairly simple field project throughout February, 2007. He went around Maasai villages inoculating the local animals against distemper and rabies, two of the viruses that decimate wild dog populations. This is a win-win situation at the first instance, because both the Maasai and the wild dog benefit. The main reason dog have suffered so seriously in recent years has been these two viruses. But the second most important reason that dog are threatened is that Maasai don't like their goats eaten by wild animals, and so the inoculation

program is a double-edged sword that really begs for more work. Now that it appears the Maasai animals are healthier, and that the dog population is increasing (as is the area's pastoral Maasai population), the traditional competition between them will get more intense.

RHINO

The second great find was rhino... in the Moru Kopjes of the Serengeti! Also a good place to find this unusual beast, because for years authorities have kept off-limits a large section of the Serengeti that borders this area... precisely for rhino reintroduction. I guess it worked! It was two young adults that seemed quite feisty and healthy. We were on the road to the cave paintings, an area where we rarely see much of anything, and the two rhinos were wallowing in the road in the mud. We spooked them and off they went. I have rarely seen my drivers so excited!



As far as we know the beautiful Moru Kopjes of the Serengeti has not had rhino spotted since the early 1980s. Now, once again, they have been seen, here.

Black rhino in the wild remains the last catastrophic story of big animals in East Africa. No matter what we do, we seem unable to grow the population. Within private and usually heavily fenced and even moated reserves, they are doing fabulously. Lewa Downs has bred more than 70 rhinos in the last decade. But once in the wild, they just don't last. A rhino is relatively easy to kill. Cutting off the horn is easy. Sticking it in your sack is easy. The trek to Yemen is hard but worth it when a horn now fetches \$7,000 in the Aden market. (See earlier remarks I've made about the racist myth that the horn is used as an aphrodisiac. Its greatest value is as a dagger handle.)

Frankfurt Zoological Society researchers first tried to reintroduce rhino in 1997. A mother and a calf were brought up from South Africa and plumped down on the crater floor. Shortly thereafter they disrupted one of my safaris. For three days straight they hid in the brush alongside the Sopa rim road, popping out to knock down Landrovers as they drove by. Then, they disappeared. Shortly thereafter a male was reintroduced to the Serengeti, and then he disappeared, but his progeny have appeared. It was such an exciting find in 2000 that a huge area of the Serengeti was declared off-limits to tourists. (A triangle from Ndutu to Hidden Valley to just east of the Kusini road.) That triangle cut off the beautiful Hidden Valley, which I really regret, since it is one of the most beautiful parts of the Serengeti and an important part of the migration (see below). It's possible that this closing resulted in the success that allowed us to see the two rhino last month in Moru.

I doubt that this benefit is greater than the added tourism that would accrue to a Hidden Valley opening. It reeks of the same Frankfurt Zoological Society efforts about a decade ago to close the crater altogether to tourism in return for an annual grant equal to its tourist receipts. I am a champion of science and conservation, but these types of narrow-minded efforts totally ignore two very important issues: (a) the benefit to the local population, and (b) the need to expand worldwide exposure to the wilds.

MIGRATION

The migration this year was fabulous. Undoubtedly as a result of the better and better rains we seem to be getting, the herds are healthier and larger. I have seen a wide range of numbers, from as low as 1.2 million to 1.7 million. One of the unfortunate aspects to Serengeti research is that the various scientific organizations tend not to share research until its published, and then it's too late to corroborate. The Tanzanian government, including the different committees

associated with the Serengeti, are often working at cross purposes. The main NGO, the Frankfurt Zoological Society, tends to not publish its research for several years. The bottom line is that we rarely know how many wildebeest there are until several years after the fact, and then, it's something of a guessing game: choosing the right NGO.



So all I can add is that there seemed to be a lot more wildebeest this year than last. There were also young scattered about of all sorts of ages. We saw young in April that still carried umbilical chords, an indication they were less than two weeks old. Yet we saw birthing in mid-January in the crater. This is an enormous span of a birthing season, which normally was always the last half of February. Young born late, of course, are less likely to prevail in the migration... unless they know something we don't, such as a lengthening of the rainy season that will keep the grasses growing on the southern grassland plains.

One fascinating aspect to the migration this year and last, was that in February a good portion of the southern grassland herds moved way north – as far as Seronera. They then turned around and came back by mid-March. This little manoeuver made sense during the mini-drought of February, 2006, where poorer grasses last longer in the woodlands and riverbanks of the north. It makes absolutely no sense without a mini-drought, since the grasses further north aren't as abundant or nutritious as the southern grassland plains. Is it just possible that the migratory route is at least partially a learned experience? And that this little two-step in February was led by yearlings and two-year olds that *had* to do in February, 2006?

BIG TUSKERS

One of the great treats in going down to the crater, especially early in the morning, is to see the "Big Tuskers". These old men came into the crater during the years of poaching and found safe haven. The crater isn't a very good place for elephant, but they adapted, and now that poaching has been controlled, they won't leave. Worse, they won't breed. I don't know if they



forgot how, but they seem to have little interest in the opposite sex and never seem to go into musth. But they are living trophies. We don't see elephants with tusks these big anywhere else on the continent. And, naturally, they're dying out. But for the time being, it's one of the real treats of a well-planned crater game drive.

FIRST DRAFT OF "CHASM GORGE"

I am trying to add to my published guide books a first attempt at a novel. The story is set in East Africa and a political tale about a safari guide involved in ransoming a Presidential candidate's son from a terrorist in The Sudan. I would love the feedback of former clients. If you're willing to read a digital copy, please email me at jimh@ewtravel.com with the SUBJECT LINE : Chasm Gorge.

2009 GREAT MIGRATION SAFARIS

The dates have been set for my 2009 migration safaris:

January 12-29

March 11-27

(Both departures include optional Kenyan sections before the Tanzania core.)

For further information, please email me at jimh@ewtravel.com

