

The Great Wildebeest Migration One of New Seven Wonders of the World



Between Kenya and Tanzania, you have Africa's most diverse and abundant wildlife. Animals within protected areas of game reserves and national parks have largely remained on a free ranging basis in their natural habitat. It is principally for this reason, that East Africa is one of the worlds' most outstanding safari destinations.

Fittingly, it is here that one of most spectacular phenomenon of the natural world takes place- the Great Annual Wildebeest Migration. This cross border event, is one of the last great migrations, and is increasingly celebrated as a unique world heritage. In November 2006, a jury of experts polled by ABC Television - a leading American broadcaster, affirmed the annual migration as one of the "New Seven Wonders of the World".

The migration event, the Maasai Mara Game Reserve (Kenya) and the Serengeti National Park (Tanzania) – where the phenomena occurs, were collectively selected to share in the honors.

The Great Wildebeest Migration is a yearly mass movement of millions of ungulates (hoofed animals) allured first to the north, and then back to the south by the promise of rains. Tirelessly following almost the same pattern each year, and at around the same time of the calendar, the animals take an amazing yearlong 2,900 km clockwise trek. The great migration involves an estimated 1.3 million wildebeest, 200,000 zebra, and a multitude of gazelles, among a few other hoofed species.

The Mara-Serengeti ecosystem supports the most varied collection of terrestrial wildlife in the world. The principal groups are carnivores, primates, reptiles and ungulates. The carnivores have among them the usual suspects: leopard, lion, cheetah, hyena and jackal, and others such as genet, mongoose, serval and wild dog. Primates are less common but include baboon, bush baby and monkey. But the hoofed ones -without whose presence, the carnivores cannot thrive -are in plenty. The ungulates include: rhino, giraffe, zebra, buffalo, warthog, hippo, and antelopes such as reedbuck, impala, gazelle, duiker, bushbuck, dik-dik, eland, hartebeest, klipspringer, kudu, oribi, roan antelope, topi, waterbuck, and of course the wildebeest.

The Maasai Mara Game Reserve is by common consent, Africa's greatest wildlife destination. The Mara -as it is popularly known, covers 1,510 sq km and is located along the Great Rift Valley, approximately 300 km southwest of Nairobi. "Mara" in the language of the Maasai people, who are native to the region, means mottled- an allusion to the patchy landscape. Rolling hills, open savannah grass plains and woodlands define the area.

The Maasai are a pastoral tribes-people who live in southern Kenya and north-central Tanzania, along the Great Rift Valley plains. They are a fearless, proud, and freedom loving people, who live in the open wild, sharing their habitat with wildlife. The tall, dark and slender Maasai have for long remained contemptuous of modern lifestyles. They have always infatuated romantic westerners, since

the appearance of explorer Joseph Thomson's book "Through Maasailand" in 1885.

The Maasai are not hunters, an aspect that greatly contributes to their harmonious co-existence with wildlife. The only conflict arises when wild game attacks their beloved livestock.

Wildlife in the Mara is plentiful and the big five – elephant, lion, buffalo, leopard and rhino- are easy to spot. The predator population here is abundant and witnessing a lion or cheetah on the hunt is not just an idle dream. The reserve is also an excellent birding destination, being host to over 450 species of birdlife, including the vulture, marabou stork, secretary bird, hornbill, crowned crane, ostrich, long-crested eagle, and pygmy falcon.

The Mara being a game reserve, the Maasai peoples are allowed to co-exist with the wildlife, unlike in national parks, where no human residents are allowed. The Mara is a northern extension of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park.

The Mara's savannah provides a magnificent backdrop for wildlife photography and movies. It is in fact the location of numerous wildlife documentaries and movies, among the most celebrated being the popular BBC documentary series "Big Cat Diary" and Sydney Pollack's Academy Award winning movie "Out of Africa".

Visitors are drawn to the Mara by its plentiful resident wildlife, and by the prospects of witnessing the annual wildebeest migration. Those coming between July and October are likely to witness part of the action. Besides its pomp and glamour, the Mara has some outstanding research facilities; among them Africa's leading spotted hyena research centre.

The Serengeti National Park, which was established in 1951, is found to the north of Tanzania. It is the country's oldest and most famous wildlife sanctuary, and has been selected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Serengeti occupies a massive 14,763 sq km, and lies 335 km from Arusha. Extending southwards from the Kenyan border at the Mara, it is made up of grassy plains, open savannah, acacia woodlands and scattered riverine forests.

Serengeti is derived from a Maasai word for "endless plains". To the south of the park, the endless savannah is punctuated by a series of granite Kopjes -rocky outcrops, some of which feature ancient African rock paintings. The Seronera region in central Serengeti is the most accessible, and predictably the most popular. The Grumeti River to the west is one of the migration river crossings, and is an excellent location to witness the wildebeest hordes in motion. Lobo near the Kenyan border has plenty of wildlife during the dry season.

With great effort, Serengeti has been well preserved, and human interruption kept at bay. In a move that stirred great controversy, the Maasai were relocated to the nearby Ngorongoro highlands. Relative to Serengeti, and taking into account size difference the Mara is more developed and has far more by way of accommodation and other facilities.

The Great Migration principally involves the wildebeest, a larger member of the antelope family, also known as the gnu. The wildebeest is Dutch for "wild beast", and was so named by South African Dutch settlers, who were inspired by the beasts bewildering appearance and behaviour. The gnu comes fitted with the crest like a buffalo's, skinny antelope-like legs, a horse-like tail, and a hind slant posture like a hyena's.

Though humourless by nature, wildebeests have managed to earn themselves the name "Clowns of

the Savannah". But when it comes to survival, nobody laughs at the wildebeests, for they thrive in huge numbers and are a very successful species.

The average gnu will stand at 1.27 m at shoulder height, and weigh about 250 kg. Its diet is primarily grass, and prefers to live in the open grasslands and savannah woodlands of East, Central and Southern Africa. Like many bovines, the bulls are larger than cows in build. The cows experience a gestation period of 8 to 8 ½ months and parenting is solely their responsibility.

The gnu are free spirited, and form no social structures. Though of necessity they travel together, they are a collection of loners; with no hierarchy, no team leaders, and only mother-calf relationships are substantial.

The animals spend most of the year grazing in the expansive Serengeti plains. The migration year begins on a quiet note, with the migration squad spread over Tanzania's Ngorongoro area and parts of southern Serengeti around Lake Ndutu. The animals usually move to this region in December after the short rains subside. At that time, the grass throughout the plains has had months to regenerate. Most of the cows are then noticeably expectant. The wildebeest happily settle here, until the onset of the long rains around March.

January slips by almost unnoticed, but February brings forth a new burst of life. The Serengeti becomes an extensive maternity unit for 3 weeks or so, with over 400,000 calves being born every year at this time. With the cows' continued good diet and state of rest, the calves usually arrive strong and lively. Within a short 3 hours of birth, they are up and running, wasting no time to practice for the long and hard journeys ahead.

By around mid March, hordes of gazelles begin to stream into the area. The grass begins to dwindle, putting pressure on lactating mothers to seek better and more nutritious grass elsewhere. They slowly begin to herd together and move northwest in columns towards the Serengeti plains, past the Naabi Hills. They trek steadily at a slow pace; by now only a few hundred thousands are on the move. The little ones are a few weeks old, and some even only a few days into the world. But they are strong enough; they tag along their mothers into the new, mineral-rich territory.

The animals munch on the wholesome grass as they move along towards the west. They head on past Moru and Simba Kopjes, Seronera, Ndoha and Dutwa plains. By May, when the long rains are waning, the now surging herds check into the Ndabaka and Ruana plains, to join the western migratory corridor along the Grumeti River. They unite with other smaller herds that reside along the route taken, and continue the trot in columns.

As the numbers rise, the march raises a majestic din of thundering hooves and low grunts. The swelling hordes attract all sorts of predators- big cats, hyenas, jackals, and the vultures too. Christmas has indeed come early for the predators of the Serengeti, and the fattening ungulates are a welcome gift. This is also happens to be the migrants' mating season. The air is filled with noisy grunts, and a cloud of excitement envelopes the plains.

The Grumeti River is infested with huge Nile crocodiles that have patiently waited for the time the troops must cross the river. This is the migration's first crocodile challenge; crossing the river is a do-or-die survival game. After the crossing, the pace goes a notch higher as the trekkers take on the western corridor through the Musabi Plains.

The 50 km corridor leads them north towards Lake Victoria, and to the northeast. It is now June and

the dry season sets in. Water in the plains is not plentiful, and most of the green is dried up. Many animals die during this time, some out of sheer exhaustion. The lake region, with its unique rainfall pattern, brings a little relief. The animals soon head for the eastern banks of the Mara River, towards the Kenya-Tanzania border.

Around July-August, the troopers arrive at the Kenyan border, ready to cross the steep banks of the broad and fast Mara River. This crossing is truly the greatest episode of the entire migration. The banks of the Mara River provide one of the best vantage points to witness the drama, and great crowds of visitors are drawn here. The crossing is a magnificent and unbelievable spectacle; in September 2006, an estimated 500,000 animals are reported to have crossed the Mara River in a single session over a period of 7 hours!

About 1.5 million animals attempt to cheat death at various points along the Mara River. At first, the animals halt at the banks and wait for the first few brave machos to make the initial leap. The wildebeest betrays a lack of intelligence and judgment, for the animals leap into the river with little calculation or method. Observers who had judged the beast stupid by appearance are bound to feel justified.

In these waters float some very cunning and ruthless crocodiles, on the ready to nab any crosser that may stumble. Having waited a whole year for this day, they show little compassion and make no exceptions- even ignoring a mother's kicks to save her calf. The animals are however single minded about the crossing, and the heaving procession leaps into the river, stampeding over one another. In this primal zero sum game- crocodiles make a hefty meal of many, while other equally agile predators such as lion, hyena and jackals, await their turn along the river's banks.

About 1/8 of the horde do not survive the crossing; some are carried away by the hard river torrents, others simply drown, and others are victim to predators. The young ones suffer the most; not more than one third of calves born in the Serengeti survive the challenge of their maiden migration. Those that make it safely to the other side have now set hoof into Kenya's Maasai Mara Game Reserve, where the grass is truly greener.

While in the Mara Triangle, they are joined by a new group of migrants from the Loita Hills, slightly to the northeast of the reserve. Between August and October, the Mara is full of life with ungulates and predators traversing the horizons. They spread throughout the park, concentrating in the western, more watered parts of the reserve. There is enough food for all, and the wildebeest will reside here for a while. Others wander slightly beyond the Mara.

In October, after munching most of the grass in the Mara, the mass columns begin to form again. This time they head south where the promise of the short rains in November and renewed grass draws them back to the Serengeti plains. They move eastward towards Keekorok area, and then head southwards, crossing the Sand River on their way out.

By November, they are crossing into the Serengeti, headed for the Lobo Hills, negotiating many rivers on their way farther south as far as Ndutu and Ngorongoro. It is here that they will rest for a while; the pregnant ones will calve and prepare to begin the same migration journey over again.

Archaeological findings at Olduvai Gorge have revealed that the migration may have been going on for millions of years. It is difficult to speculate how much greater the migration may have been before the onset of the 20th century that brought an ill-fated sweep of rinderpest. The disease wiped out massive herds of plains animals, leaving less than 1/10 of today's wildebeest population.

It was not until the 1950's that the first official count was run, revealing a 99,500 wildebeest population in the Serengeti. This was the great contribution of Bernhard Grzimek and his son Michael; makers of the film "Serengeti Shall Not Die". Their 1959 Oscar Award winner was the first of its kind, and it put Serengeti squarely on the international map.

Until very recently, scientists had not been able to fully track this frantic journey. Veterinarian Patrick Garcia has now led a group of scientists sponsored by Animal Planet that included Sophie Grange, Anja Brinch Jensen, and Sébastien Lafont. They employed modern equipment and technology, including a VHF radio system, minuscule Global Positioning System (GPS) monitors, and satellite transmitters. They tracked 10 migration participants- 7 wildebeest and 3 zebra.

The scientists were able to track the animals 24 hours a day, revealing their exact position via satellite. After months on the edge, they showcased their findings in a 3 part televised program –"The Great Savannah Race", which was aired on Animal Planet in July 2006. The documentary takes viewers through the everyday lives of the ten co-stars, with glimpses of their chums and foes alike. This reality show treats you to drama, paradox, intrigue, suspense, tragedy, and light moments.

AfricaPoint.com