

## SAFARI REPORT-Tanzania and Gorillas by Garth Irvine, Calgary Zoo Keeper/ NETT Tour Leader

### This was a spectacular trip to East Africa!



I was beyond delighted when our first close up elephant encounter happened in the tiny Lake Manyara National Park. We had just come down a small hill and a cow/calf herd of elephants were slowly moving towards us from about 15 meters. We just sat and waited, watching for signs of displeasure at our close proximity. There were no signs of concern. Ever so slowly the whole herd split and moved around our Land Rover on both sides. The excitement level was as high as an elephant's eye as these pachyderms moved within inches of our vehicles! My greatest worry at this point should have been for the low oxygen levels in my safari companions as most of them were holding their breath, but I too was lost in the moment. As the herd moved away our breathing returned to normal and we were able to get photos from yet another angle—the ever elusive elephant butt shot. Not many animals can eat up as much film as an elephant—especially close up.

Truly the Ngorongoro crater is the Disneyland for naturalists and nature lovers. I never dreamed we could see so much in one day. Hundreds of hoof stock including; wildebeest, zebra, cape buffalo and more. I experienced a real feeling of accomplishment when our guides found us two black rhino! The highlight of the day however was arriving at a recent lion kill. At this point mostly it was a seething, rolling pile of scavengers. We could see dozens of hyena, several vulture and a few jackals. All of a sudden a large male lion came charging from quite a distance to reclaim his kill. Scavengers scattered in all directions. The lion stood over the kill for a moment. Then off to his right he saw a male mating with the female he had been guarding for the past few days. Instantly abandoning the kill again he charged the offending male and a loud, dusty spectacular fight ensued. I don't think any blood was shed and later in the day we saw this male with his female again—but at this moment we just weren't sure where her alliances laid. It just doesn't get any better than this!



I have always had something of a fascination with zebras. They are even more beautiful in large groups. We were lucky enough to see how the bold pattern works to



blur the individual to a predator. Fairly early in the day we parked beside a watering hole as a herd of elephants and zebra came to drink. The matriarch of the herd of elephants tasted the water and then took the group elsewhere. The long line of zebra—probably more than 300, stretching about a kilometer, took turns drinking. Something was making them nervous. About 20 animals would enter the water to their knees and nervously begin to drink. All the while their ears were straight up and eyes wide with fear. They would just drink for a few seconds and all would race out of the pond. About half of these animals would return and some parched ones would join them. I think they all made about three attempts before they had quenched their thirst. As we left this incredible sight we found a pride of lions resting in the shade of some

shrubs not far from the edge of the pond. It felt good to be certain that it was not us making the zebra nervous.

I don't know how many times we were parked watching some incredible wildlife event and something else was going on behind us. About midday we found a cheetah resting in the shade of a tree. After awhile we realized that a herd of elephant and a herd of zebra were approaching us from behind. To our left very quietly a lioness was half-heartedly stalking some reedbuck. Where to look? Where to look? We were spinning trying to take it all in. Suddenly the cheetah got up and crossed the road to where the lioness was stalking the reedbuck. Our cheetah appeared oblivious to the presence of the lion. The cheetah looked like she was playing as she chased the reedbuck away. Instantly the lion chased after the cheetah. Very quickly the cheetah put great distance between her and the lioness. It was very exciting for all of us to see these two predators interact & many of us got photos of both in the same frame. All the while elephants & zebra were approaching from behind.



In my other life I work with captive gorillas. I have always dreamed of seeing gorillas in the wild. We are among a handful of people alive who have sat with a group of wild mountain gorillas. The Bwindi Impenetrable Forest is called that with good reason -it was work to get to where the gorillas live. The forest was so thick we could only see a few meters ahead when all of a sudden we could hear the sound of breaking branches and then we could smell gorilla! Gorillas have a very distinct odor and I knew we were very close. At first we caught the odd glimpse here and there and as time went on, it was apparent that this troop of 18 was all around us. We saw the silverback and an adult female laying down watching without any concern. We were slightly more interesting than the ants in the leaf litter in front of them! Just a few feet away an upside down juvenile played with a branch and appeared to be posing for our cameras. We could hear the sound of leaves and branches being shoveled into mouths and the gentle rumblings of the content giant apes. All too soon our hour was up but it made it so much easier to leave knowing we would be visiting another group tomorrow. East Africa is a dream come true for this nature lover.