

MAKE TRACKS

May 2004
Safari Report

KENYA, TANZANIA & RWANDA

By Mona Keith, Zoo Keeper/Tour Leader

Two of the most spectacular animals to see in Africa are elephants, the largest, and giraffes, the tallest! We saw both up close and hadn't even yet recovered from jet lag! The Rothschild's giraffes at the Giraffe Center in Nairobi have been conditioned to be hand-fed. What an amazing experience to be so close to see and feel their long mobile tongues. Well adapted for stripping off the leaves from the thorny acacia branches, they are also purple to reflect the ultraviolet light to prevent sunburn! The next day we were treated to spending time at Daphne Sheldrick's Elephant Orphanage where we watched young elephants as they drank their bottled milk offered by their keepers, rolled in the mud and rough-housed with each other. These little guys are all products of poaching – rescued from sad situations, hand raised and then oh so carefully returned to the wild under the care of elephant matriarch, Eleanor in Tsavo National Park in southern Kenya. One little guy took particular interest in a member of our group sitting in her wheelchair. As he charged, the quick reflexes of our leader Carol Petersen quickly pulled back the chair while the keeper hurriedly got control of his "little" charge. Sheila enjoyed every second, blissfully unconcerned of the power behind these tiny tanks!

Amboseli National Park never disappoints. Its large elephant population is a memorable way to start a safari. With the snow-capped peak of Mount Kilimanjaro visible as the background to the world's largest land animal, the photographers were in their element. From the big to the small, the nature walk, complete with naturalist and Maasai warrior, was highlighted with a dung beetle rolling its precious ball of elephant dung into which it will lay its eggs. We were in luck and reception was good at the Amboseli Lodge. The



Calgary Flames fans in our group were delighted to be able to watch one of the playoff games. The Flames

won this game and the group celebrated with some of the local Maasai warriors in their own red apparel. Hard to say who was jumping the highest!

Lake Manyara welcomed us with its sea of pink flamingos. The morning was spent watching 85 hippos lazing about in and out of a shallow pool. This water source also attracted large groups of over 10 different bird species including, Yellow-billed storks, White-faced Whistling ducks, Pied avocets and Black-winged stilts.... a birding paradise! One of our group spotted an African civet, a small cat like creature part of the mongoose family, hiding amongst the rocks of a small stream while the rest of us were trying to ID the swallows darting above. This unusual daytime sighting created quite a stir with our driver/guides!

As we descended into the Ngorongoro Crater we dipped under the hanging cloud cover. The area was filled with the activity of the numerous zebra and wildebeest as well as their predators. The lions and hyenas were clearly visible this day. We watched as an irate wildebeest turn the tables and put the run on a hyena that got too close! The sun soon burned off the clouds and we came across a pool of hippos trying to keep their massive bulks cool. The water was not deep enough to cover them fully. A few of them had discovered the benefits of rolling completely over coating themselves with the muddy water. Quite the sight to see a 2000 kg animal roll right over with its short thick legs sticking up in the air! Hippo Feet!

As we entered the "endless plains" of the Serengeti we were privy to some "intimate" time with the King & Queen of the Beasts! The mating ritual of lions involves, soliciting, biting, growling and LOTS of repetition. This pair was going for the record, copulating every 6 minutes. Another interesting lion sighting included two lionesses resting high in the branches of a tree, trying to escape the heat and throngs of wildebeest. Our group had the great treat of watching 3 cheetah brothers slowly approach and drink from a small pool of water. They were ever vigilant; looking over their shoulders every few minutes and we knew why. . . very close by, we had been watching two male lions resting in the tall grass. These handsome boys were not fully mature with only a hint of the magnificent manes they will sport when adults. The annual migration was in full force with wildebeest and zebra thick in numbers.

Several of our group took advantage of the spectacular view of the Serengeti from the vantage of the sky in a hot-air balloon. Driving before



dawn to the launch site brought silhouettes of hippos out grazing, the reflective eyes of hyenas as they skulked off the road, the tail end of an African Wild Cat as it darted into the tall grass. Once air-born the expanse of the great Serengeti unfolded below us. Looking down on hippos in the river, a giraffe walking gracefully over the plain, peering into vulture's nests perched high on top of the acacia trees & the masses of wildebeest was a sight to experience!

While some carried on to Zanzibar or to the roof of Africa – Mt. Kilimanjaro, some of us were treated to a visit with the endangered Mountain Gorilla. Crouching quietly and gazing upon a troop of 14 Mountain Gorillas in the Volcanoes National Park, in Rwanda, was simply an incredible experience! After plodding for 1.5 hours uphill through the thick undergrowth we crested onto a small grassy ridge where the Amahoro troop were enjoying their morning rest. Our small group of 8 and two guides watched as a female, complete with her 1 month old infant clinging under her, gnawed away at an old tree trunk seeking out grub. A curious 3 month old approached us several times, causing us to shuffle awkwardly back to keep the minimum 7 metre distance required. Each time he approached his older brother would wrestle with him pulling him back toward the main troop. The silverback of the troop was on the slope below us detectable only by the loud crunching of the thick vegetation that made up his breakfast. As we were silently watching the rest of the troop he suddenly appeared behind us. We all pressed together careful not to look directly into his eyes or move suddenly. He moved past us through the bush to join his family. While we enjoyed this close up experience, the other group was treated to yet more procreation with a male/female team increasing the Mountain Gorilla population – a rare sighting! One word describes it all - WOW! Africa holds many wonders for us all to respect and enjoy – join us for your trip of a lifetime!

