

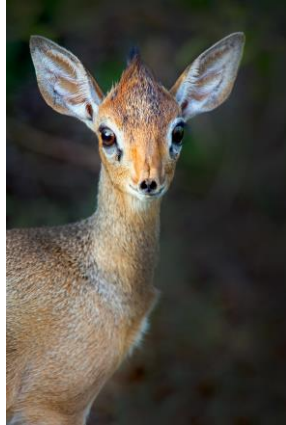
Gustafson Photo Safari's Tanzania 2014 Great Migration Birthing Season

Day 1: I preface this by saying I do this for a living and there are amazing things that happened every day of last month's safari that I have never seen before.

After a relaxing night at the African Tulip Hotel we headed up country to Lake Manyara for our first Afternoon game drive. The groundwater forest is one of my favorite forests in the world. It is home to crowned hornbills, ground hornbills, dik-dik, silver-cheeked horn bills and 3 species of monkeys. We used a lot of flash on vervet, baboons and blue monkeys. I love the fur texture, distinctive faces, and golden eyes of the blue monkeys.



Ground Horn-bill



Dik-dik



Baby baboon



Blue Monkey

Day 2: The next morning's game drive took us to the lake front for the fly-in of pelicans, spoonbills and yellow-billed storks, who haven't been seen in these numbers for the last 6 years. They flew in by the hundreds with the orange sunrise for a backdrop for dramatic group silhouettes. As the light grew brighter the yellow-billed stork's beautiful pink feathers and yellow bills really stood out against the clear sky.



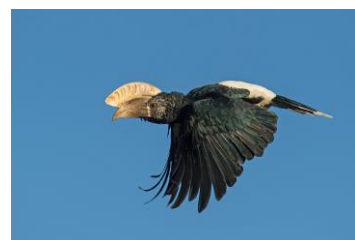
African great white pelicans



Yellow-billed storks



Yellow-billed storks



silver-cheeked horn-bill

From Manyara we traveled to the southern Serengeti, the birthing grounds of the Great Migration. Our first evening game drive found a pride of 15 lions feasting on a fresh wildebeest kill. The adults were active, the cubs fed until they were as round and tubby as beach balls in the golden light! Cubs fought over the best feeding spot, and battled over a leg, while the littlest cub made off with the tail.



Lions on a wildebeest kill

Day 3: Nature can be stunningly beautiful but it can also be shocking. The drama of life moments on the savannah is why we are here. This morning we went to the short grass plains where the Great Migration gives birth. We witnessed a baby wildebeest being born and moments later watched as a hyena ran in to snatch it away. The mother charged the bulky predator time after time but in the end the life moment went to the hyena.

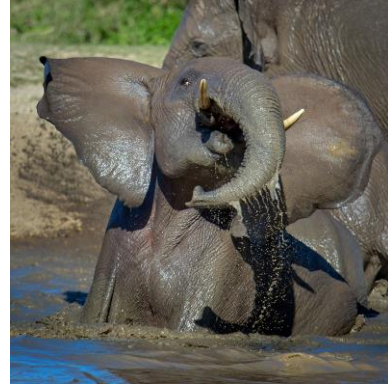


Spotted hyena and baby wildebeest

After that we had a little of this and a little of that ending with a lovely half hour with a hunting serval cat and a pair of leopard tortoise.



The afternoon was dedicated to finding elephants in the valley. Our first family was browsing through the woodlands. Nice to see but not much to shoot. I am glad because when we found the big herd they were heading for a huge pond where we hoped they would drink. We went ahead to get in position and were ready when they came to the water's edge. None of us could have predicted they would all come down the bank, enter the pond and start to splash, drink, and SWIM all over the place. The light was behind us and the elephants were amazing! Water was flying everywhere and a couple of the big ones came up straight out of the water with their trunks and tusks straight up in the air. On the way back to our lodge Julie got one of her safari wishes...to see a lion in a tree. Not just a lion in a tree, but she was a beautiful lioness on a perfect perch!



Day 4: Cheetahs in the morning! We found a mother cheetah that had just come out with her 5 brand new cubs. We got nice chances for photos of the mother...my favorite is the beautiful cat in shade with a sunlit, completely overexposed foreground and back ground that make it feel like she's sitting in a cloud. She was quite nervous with the new cubs so after seeing them in the open for a few shots we left her to care for them in peace.



This afternoon was another elephant experience. Instead of drinking and swimming they were mud bathing. The sound of these giants slapping into the mud and blowing it from their trunks was the soundtrack for this event. There were lots of times where we realized we were not seeing a single elephant...we were seeing elephant shaped mud!!



Day 5: Every morning we had picturesque sunrises with wildebeest herds moving from here to there following the rains. Every day we saw cheetahs. Our first sighting was of 2 big males closing in on a female with a year-old cub. The first thought was that the big males would kill the cub, but it seemed that they were older cubs of this female who she had called in. She wanted them to let her younger cub join them so his hunting and therefore his survival chances would increase. As the males approached the cub was very aggressive while they were gentle. Lots of chirping communication prefaced every move. Ultimately the cub did a casual roll on his back and ended up next to the 2 males.



Cheetah brothers meeting mom and younger brother

The afternoon game drive revolved around a pair of honeymooning lions. They had just begun the mating cycle and went at it every 6 minutes! They gave us plenty of chances and different angles for photos. Some of the events ended lovingly while others ended with violent outburst by the female. Lots of dramatic yawns filled the time between...



Mating lions

Day 6: rained last night so we went out to the big plains to find the herds of wildebeest. Lines of animals went from horizon to horizon in seemingly endless procession. Babies were being born all over the plains!

Wildebeest baby and herd



More cheetahs this afternoon...2 hunting brothers, a single male, 2 more hunters...I'll just tell you up front that we saw 36 individual cheetahs! Beautiful to see. Intriguing to watch as they go about their daily lives.



Day 7: A single cheetah hunted the big plains as 3 jackals followed hoping for a kill and the scraps that followed. The cheetah flushed an African hare 50 feet from our vehicle and chased it right across our line of fire. We got some really nice running shots before she gave up on the rabbit and turned her attention to some gazelles in the distance. We let her go on her hunt, but before we knew it she had started the chase for real...the gazelle turned and put on a sprint directly toward us. The cheetah made the kill within 50 feet of us!!! The shots of the kill were dramatic.



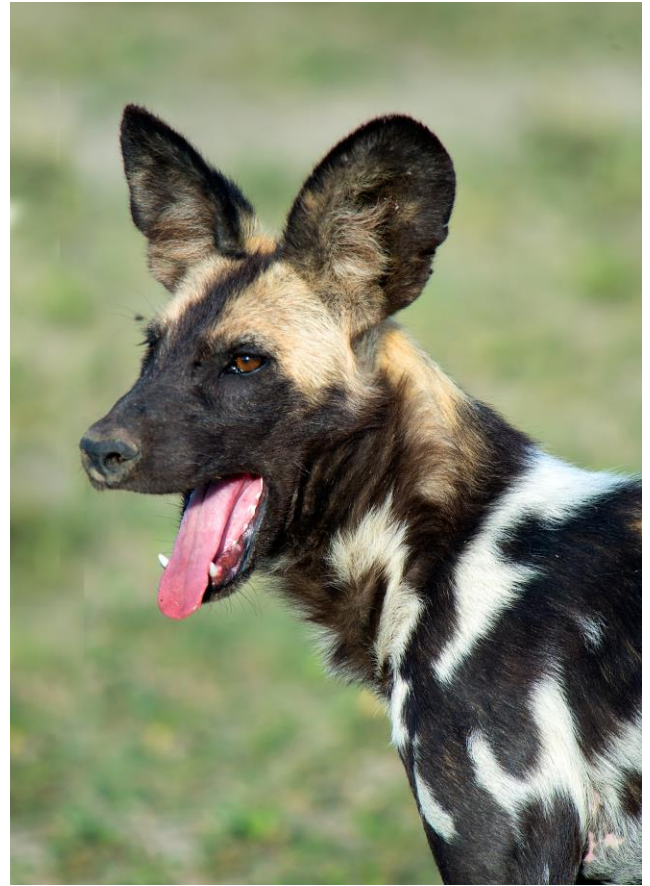
Cheetah and black-backed jackals

Grant's gazelle



Cheetah run (3 photo composite)

We started the afternoon drive right after lunch because we had a radio call from one of our friends who was traveling on one of our shortcut roads to Karatu. He had found a pack of 13 wild dogs that hadn't been seen for about 10 years. The first time we saw them by Lake Masek as a pack of 7 dogs sleeping on dry, gray lake shore. We drove for about an hour and a half over the open savannah and finally found them on the edge of a dry creek. After resting and grooming for about 40 minutes they moved up to the rim of the riverbed and on to a low ridge with the emerald green valley as a background,. At some unheard signal they all stood, yawned and did what Julie calls the "Puppy Dance" where they all ran in circles, jumping over each other as they went. The lead dog headed out and they all followed in an organized line for the hunt. WOW! We headed home in the sunset, happy and amazed at this rare sighting.



African Wild Dogs

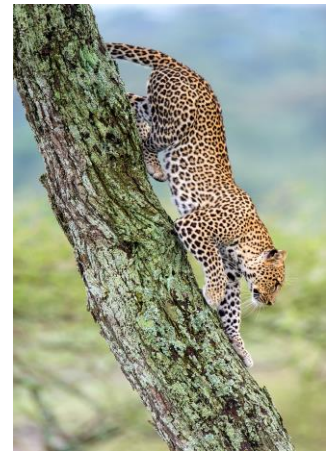
Day 8: This morning we found a new pride of lions...2 big females and 4 cubs. They were in the middle of a green meadow and active!! The cubs were in play mode and we shot all morning as they ambushed first each other and then the mothers. 2 cubs were a month old and the other 2 were several weeks older. The challenge was to make photos that tell a story and not just show a pile of cats. Some favorite moments were cubs hanging from mom and taking her down like a buffalo. She lay on her back as the cubs went for her throat and stomach. When she had enough she shook them off and gave the most persistent a backhanded whack.



The afternoon was dedicated to finding a leopard and cub who had not been seen for the entire week. They had been seen on the valley rim and when we found them they were beautifully set in an open acacia tree. The cub was in a high perch with the mother on a beautiful lower branch with a white sky behind. She kept putting her head up, called to the cub, groomed, and stretched against the trunk before leaping up to the cub's branch. Later they both exited the tree via an angled branch and headed for the bush.



The mother was the first to come down with smooth, lithe strides. The cub, on the other hand, was absolutely hysterical as he scrambled and slide his awkward way down the tree. He stopped right in front of us for this portrait. I love the soft white “kitty fur” showing through the spots. They found a comfortable spot in a glade for nursing and grooming before walking into the underbrush.



Day 9: Our last morning drive in the area was to the 4 lion cubs and 2 mothers. There was no action because the mothers were completely asleep. As we waited to see if anyone would do anything 2 huge male lions came out of the bush and flopped down 50 feet from the mothers and cubs. They were the pride's males and had not been seen for two weeks. As soon as the cubs caught wind of them it was on!



The 4 cubs ran to the males and carefully approached as the males growled and swatted at them. As the cubs warmed up they swarmed the huge males, despite all the teeth! Some of the best shots are of a little cub with his head virtually in the mouth of a roaring lion with its ears pinned back and eyes squinted. While driving to our new destination, the Central Serengeti, Julie spotted a golden jackal den with 3 kits playing on its edge. Home base is now the Seronera Lodge with its easy access to the Seronera River Valley and leopards! Here is where we had the 3 leopards on the fig tree branch last August. Our afternoon drive included topi with babies, giraffe, some birds and... a huge male leopard who hopped onto a massive hammercop nest. The poor bird perched on a stick and looked on as the leopard stretched out on the nest and went to sleep.

Golden jackal cub



Topi calf



Hammer cop nest



Day 10: This morning we went to the big hippo pool for the best action. Hippos were still coming back from the night of foraging, entering the pool and jostled for position. Pairs of hippos squared off for practice jousting as they measured each other's gaping jaws back and forth across the pool. Best of all was the deafening chorus of hippo voices as their voices echoed across the pool.



This afternoon we drove along the river valley in search of our family of three leopards. When we found them they were in a single tree. A storm blew through and the three cats headed for the thickest leaves to stay dry. When the storm blew its self out the leopards came to the open branches, licking rain drops from each other and shaking showers of water from their fur.



Leopard brother and sister

Day 11: We spread out to search for leopards and lions. Some went after the big male from the hammercop nest while our van went for the family of 3 leopards. As we drove along the river I told Julie "Find us some leopards." She said "I never find anything. The only way I could find a leopard is if he was walking down the road toward us!" We turned the next bend in the road and Julie yelled "Leopards!!!" All three of them were walking down the road right at us! We slowly reversed for about a mile and shot the best we could in the predawn light. They turned off the road, took a half hearted run at a reed buck that leaped off into the tall grass.



Leopard mother and cubs



The mother seemed to be looking for exactly the right tree for them to spend time in. When she finally chose one it was a tall, open yellow acacia tree. The rest of our group got there and we soon understood why she chose that particular tree. It had several big nests in the high branches. Her goal seemed to be to teach the cubs to hunt for birds and eggs. They went up to the impossibly thin branches and flushed a couple of raptors and raided the nest. Her next lesson seemed to be to teach the cubs to jump... They jumped from branch to branch, increasing the distance until they were literally flying to branches 30 feet away! Amazing.



Back to the Lodge for breakfast, pack up and a drive to the Ngorongoro Crater. On the road to Nabi Hill there was a black-headed heron in a road side puddle. We stopped and I thought it would be cool if he would catch something and eat it. The next thing we knew he darted his head into the puddle and came out with a HUGE frog, fought with him, tossed him in the air and it was “down the hatch”! We checked in and spent the late afternoon with a cool drink and watching the sun go down across the Crater.



Black-headed heron and frog

Day 12: Our first morning in the Crater had lots of action. There had been a lot of rain so the big tusker elephants were out of the marsh and browsing across the Crater floor. Lots of crowned cranes were flying and dancing. The rains had also triggered the birthing cycle for the Crater wildebeest population. There were babies EVERYWHERE. Lots of Grant's gazelles, cinnamon-colored zebra babies, and hundreds of wildebeest babies were nursing on the lake flats. After a late breakfast the sun came out so we headed for the crater rim for the afternoon.



Baby Grant's gazelle Baby wildebeest Zebra colt



Day 13: Today was another overcast day (my favorite) so we planned a late brunch at the picnic so we could have a full day in the Crater. Everyone had LOTS of energy! Zebras, wildebeest, and Cape buffalo were jousting. A huge lion was walking from here to there and gave us great photo chances. Our goal was to get in front of him at eye level to give him the powerful photo perspective. Usually if I can get into the right position for this shot the lion is walking into the sun and has his eyes closed most of the time. The morning was overcast so his eyes were open and the soft light showed every detail of his massive mane. After brunch we had chances at a big male serval cat, laughing zebras, and a displaying kori bustard. One of the big tuskers was at the hippo pool so we ended our day watching him graze on the reeds at the edge of the pool. Our continual hope was for him to put his head up and show all of his huge ivory.



Cape buffalo



fighting zebras



Jousting wildebeest



Big Tusker



African gray crowned cranes



Kori bustard

Day 14

Last AM drive in the Crater...Please let the rhinos come out...There were 11 rhinos on the meadows and every one of them was a million miles away. Bummer. While we waited for the rhinos several big elephants were making their way toward us. We hoped they would do a trunk entwining greeting.



Gray crowned crane gathering

As they approached we heard lots of crowned cranes flying over. This kept happening till we turned around and saw 100 crowned cranes in a tight formation. The elephants and rhinos were forgotten as the fantastical birds danced and bowed in mating ritual. The whole thing broke up when a jackal ran into the middle of the flock and caught one for breakfast. The blast off was deafening!



We ended our safari with a stop at the hippo pool where not one, not two, but three big tusked elephants were in the reeds feeding and drinking.



We drove out of the Crater and enjoyed a goodbye view of distant elephants with the misty hills of the Crater wall as a backdrop. We all knew we had experience and safari like no other.

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