

# Kenya Wildlife Safari | Trip Report

Jan. 28 – Feb. 3, 2020 | Written by Peg Abbott



With Guides Preston Mutinda and Peg Abbott, with participants Pat, Jean, Trina, Kathy, Mike, Jack, and Nancy.





## Tues., Jan. 28 Arrivals in Nairobi

We arrived in Nairobi, tired from the long flight but still so excited, we enjoyed some birding at the airport and tallied up over a dozen species in our first moments off the plane. Superb Starling, Little Swift, African Pied Crow, and Red-winged Starling were among our first finds, as well as Olive Thrush, now called Abyssinian Thrush, after that historic geographic kingdom that covered much of East Africa including Ethiopia.

We drove a short way through bustling Nairobi to our quiet and safe oasis at the lovely Ole Sereni hotel. Art, sculpture, and textiles are beautiful in their inside spaces, but we were drawn immediately to the long porch where diners can sit outside with a view of Nairobi National Park. A lone African Buffalo was grazing, and not far from him, two Bohor Reedbuck. Recent out of season rains had turned the whole park green, lush grasses produced seeds and bird life was very active!

Arriving mid-morning, we had a couple of hours to wait for our rooms, so we had either coffee (mochas, yum!) or cold drinks, lunch and right in front of us a great bird show. Thick-billed, Yellow-rumped and Streaky Seedeaters were numerous, as were Speke's Weavers, which has an active nesting colony going, already fledglings were begging here. There were several Black-headed Heron, Hadada Ibis and a Hamerkop. The day previous Jack and Nancy has the treat of a pair of Gray-crowned Cranes flying in. We found our first Fork-tailed Drongo, African Paradise Flycatcher, and at a distance, a displaying male Yellow-crowned Bishop.

We rested in the afternoon, with day and night still turned around for us it was the middle of night at home, so sleep came readily. We reconvened on the porch about 4 PM, and enjoyed the birds for a couple of hours, choosing to dine right from there, simple foods after our long travels seemed just fine! We closed the day out with almost 50 species on Day 1 of our checklist—not bad! Preston Mutinda was also very happy to receive the gifts of a camera, and school supplies for the wildlife education center he has established in his village.



## Wed., Jan. 29 Nairobi to Mountain Lodge | Mount Kenya National Park

What a lovely place to wake up to, new bird sounds and a soft mist over the greenery of the national park. From the breakfast table, the Ole Sereni bird show continued, this time a nesting pair of Nubian Woodpeckers and a calling Scarlet-chested Sunbird stole the show. The breakfast buffet here is memorable, both Indian food and more British and American options. Luscious cheeses, omelets, baked goods, yogurts, and more. The coffee was strong, and tea plentiful.

We were on our way by 9 a.m., taking the new highway north, the A2, that is a superhighway now all the way to Ethiopia. Street life provided entertainment, with many vendors, long strips of verdant floral markets; within an hour we were at Thika.

We made a stop at a local fruit stand to see Village Weavers and slurped up samples of juicy ripe, locally grown mangoes. We then stopped at the Tana River bridge and had a heyday, finding our first Gray Hornbill, Gray-headed Kingfisher, a Singing Cisticola, and numerous songbirds—fun!

This bridge over the Tana River was located near a power plant entrance. There was a very small pond, with lush vegetation, and we had an excellent array of birds. D’Arnaud’s Barbet came into good view, and a stunning Gray-headed Kingfisher showed off its brilliant blue back—looking like a bright butterfly in the canopy. There were Bronze Manakins, Red-cheeked Cordonbleu, and Red-billed Firefinch. We kept finding more and more new species, all the while watching local life. A man across the street was selling a huge catfish, still alive, standing up each time a car came by to show it off. Two men walked by with a tethered donkey.



We made a quick stop at a local curio store for rest rooms, and Preston found roosting bats for us to admire, as well as an Indigobird up on the phone wires.

On to Mountain Lodge, passing Olive Baboons, Cape Buffaloes and two Scaly Francolins on the road. We got there on the late side of lunch so went right in. A delightful waitress greeted us and took our order, pumpkin or leek soup, trout or beef, and a nice salad and dessert bar.

We got into our rooms, where we all had patios looking over the waterhole. After settling in a bit, several of us met atop the observation deck, watching Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, Hunter's Cisticola, both African Pied and Gray Wagtails, and a noisy pair of Egyptian Goose. It was cloudy and then rain came in. Taking a peek off the deck behind the bar as we went to do our checklist, Jean spotted two huge Verreaux's Eagle Owl perched together on one of the prominent trees on the far side of the water hole. Bird of the day for many, Pat quickly got them in the scope for all to see, while Peg went to get those still in their rooms to come to see it. Always something to see!

Dinner was nicely done, Lamb, vegetarian dishes, or chicken in a peanut sauce. Flan was a big hit for dessert. We put in our order for wake-up calls for night animals, but for the first time ever, there were no knocks! We heard Spotted Hyena but saw only Bushbucks and, close to the lodge, a big White-tailed Mongoose. Early morning two Forest Hogs made a dash across the grass area. Lack of Cape Buffalo was likely due to so much water being available, but their absence seemed odd compared to large numbers in previous years.

## **Thurs., Jan. 30 Mount Kenya's Mountain Lodge | Thompson's Falls | Nakuru National Park**

Many of us had not quite turned day and night around, so were awake early enough to watch the first light on the peaks of Mount Kenya—yeah—we got a view! There was a lot of fresh snow on top from all the recent moisture, in binoculars the view was dramatic. We did a short morning walk with hopes of seeing Suni, a very small antelope often found here, no luck this year. We did find some new birds, Chestnut-throated Apalis, Kikuyu White-eye, Chinspot Batis, Eastern Double-collared Sunbird and Eastern Mountain Bulbul. Calling Hartlaub's Turaco taunted us but did not come out for a show.



Breakfast was pleasant, coffee and tea, a nice start to the day. Soon we were donning rubber boots for a muddy 1.5-mile walk through the forested wonderland—led by Benson, the local naturalist that has worked here for at least ten years. He knows trees, plants and birds, and we had a wonderful time—about 35 species observed or heard. Mt. Kenya is one of Africa’s “sky islands” where elevation produces conditions for lush vegetation now held in isolation. Few of these species would be seen again on our tour so we were really grateful that the sun shone and let us explore in comfort. African Hill Babbler came out into the open, singing and almost posing for us. We found two species of tinkerbird, Moustached and Yellow-rumped, a pair of Black-backed Puffbird, and Brown-capped Weavers, a specialty. Perhaps bird of the day today would be a Harlaub’s Turaco we finally got wonderful views of. Peg was able to photograph a troop of Mt. Kenya Guereza, including one female with a baby. Also known as Black-and-white Colobus Monkeys, we admired their thick white tails and pensive facial expressions. They relished fruits high in the canopy and were in no hurry to go out of view.

Time passed quickly, by 10:45 AM we were packed up to head to our next exciting location—Nakuru National Park. Our plan was to stop for lunch and bird at Thompson’s Falls on the way.

We all loved the atmosphere of Thompson’s Falls, and in true British fashion the sandwiches were mainly bread with little fixings—by next time we’ll have the choices honed better! But it was a nice place to sit, take a break, and happily Kathy caught sight of a kettle of birds above our view of the falls—White Storks, coming from Europe for the winter, a great find! We walked around the garden in search of sunbirds, finding Collared, Tacazze, and Northern Double-collared with ease.

On to Nakuru! The town grows every year, now a major stop on the road from Mombasa to Lake Victoria in neighboring Uganda. Some lively street life was going on, our turn into the park brought us back to quiet and wildlife.

All of the rift valley lakes in Kenya are on the rise, and Nakuru is no exception. The original main gate is completely underwater. Skeletons of drowned trees are now perfect for Great Cormorant and Yellow-billed Stork. Maribou stood like statues and herons fed around the old parking lot. The gate we later stopped at was birdy, we had fun sorting out weavers and photographing a tolerant European (African) Hoopoe.

We popped the tops of our vehicles so we could stand to view—we were officially now on safari! Nancy was so excited, the popped top confirming that the long-awaited adventure had finally come! We had about an hour before sunset to stop for wildlife as we made our way to the park, finding huge troops of Baboon, herds of Impala, Cape Buffalo, and Zebra quite plentiful, so we quickly used up all our time. Greater Flamingos caught the sun over the town’s wastewater ponds passed as we drove, distant but still in view from the park. Swirls of shorebirds, likely Ruffs, but we did not stop as light was fading and it was time to call it a day.

Flamingo Tented Camp was most welcoming, particularly the dining room with its great traditional architecture ceiling and open-air seating under it. We got settled into our most comfortable tents, 24-hour power for charging and lights, nice spacious bathrooms and hot water showers, comfortable beds and African textile



furnishings. Dinner was from the menu, choices of local tilapia or beef, soups, salads and luscious desserts. Checklist time followed, then off to bed!

## **Fri., Jan. 31 Nakuru National Park**

We grumbled a bit at the early start time announced, but many were so excited to see what was waiting for us they were awake anyway. Breakfast was a buffet, with omelets and crepes and various dishes. Once fortified, we were out the door into our two 4-WD mini-buses, tops open and off we went.

We stopped first at the flooded main entrance where three species of kingfisher, Giant, Pied and Malachite were found in quick order. We had lovely views of a Three-banded Plover, a Hottentot Teal, and African Fish Eagle overhead.

Then passing through grasslands dotted with shrubs we found both Stout and Rattling Cisticolas perched up and singing, seeming joyful and energized by the recent rains. Several pair of Gray-backed Fiscal cocked their tails up and twirled upside down in courtship, one scored a mating which drew applause. Northern Anteater Chats were everywhere, their flight songs such a cheerful sound. Herds of Impala were mainly females with their lone master male, or bachelor herds, often sparring. We followed the lakeshore on a road perched above it, the original road at lake level long covered up by the rising waters. So many trees at the edge were now dead, but in many ways, they appeared graceful as if well-planned sculptures. There were scores of Great Cormorants, Great White Pelicans, Gray-hooded Gulls, and in-between lesser numbers of Gray and Snowy Egret, pairs of African Fish Eagles and groups of Zebra and Cape Buffalo.

We watched diligently for White Rhino but to no avail, until we got to the southern end of the lake. Whether the grass is sweeter, or more abundant here, we found TEN in total, what a thrill! The first two were loners, grazing so much we were begging them to just lift up their heads just a little. This kind of grass would fatten their great



bodies quickly to several tons... Close to one, a pair of Grey-crowned Cranes fed and interacted with each other. A Warthog followed the second as if a small calf.

At the end of the lake there is a freshwater pond with an outlet of rushing water going through a culvert back to the lake. A group of thirty or more White-winged Tern were feeding, a dozen Kittlitz Plovers joined them, and amongst them we found African Black Duck, Red-billed Teal, African Jacana, a Greenshank, a Ruff, Pied Avocet and Black-winged Stilt. Warthogs were down on their knees feeding with gusto.

Francis had a hunch that there were still more White Rhino to be found, and he was right. In the shade of spreading acacia trees we found a group bedded down. These massive animals once down seem to really enjoy it, one was flat out, sacked out like sometimes a horse will do in pasture. To our surprise, four Warthogs slept alongside them, right up against the body of one giant. A teenager was obvious to spot by comparative size. One female stood off from the rest, and we suspected she might have a baby. We finally left them but stopped farther off to see two had gotten up, one now followed by a fairly small one – our hunch had proved correct. Not a one of us will ever forget that bucolic, beautiful moment under massive trees.

We did not bring lunch and had about an hour home, navigating the dirt roads of the park. We were happy to land, celebrated our morning by feasting on foods cooked in a tandoori oven. We could choose the ingredients for our Naan, chiles, coriander, garlic and more. The staff here were so friendly, it makes for a relaxing and special time.

At 4 p.m. we headed to the other side of the lake, our destination cliffs that provide a marvelous view of the lake and surrounding rift valley. We stopped on the lakeshore to admire Wood Sandpiper, a herd of Grant's Gazelle, cavorting Impala, and a group of waders that included African Spoonbill.

Atop the cliffs we found Rock Hyrax and some very big male Baboons that seemed to like the view from trees hanging branches over the precipice. Nyanza Swifts circled near, and Pat spied a long Pink-backed Pelican swimming below, our only one of the day.

Dinner was vegetable cannelloni, beef or pork, again luscious desserts or a cheese plate. We'd had a day of 111 birds and many new mammals. Lala salama (good night).



## Sat., Feb.1 Travel Day | Amboseli National Park

We woke to songs of White-browed Robin Chat, then enjoyed our breakfast under the grand high ceiling. Packed up and gone by 7 a.m., as we had a long travel day, on which we took breaks at curio shops (clean bathrooms) and had lunch at a restaurant in a hotel along the way. We had some grand scenery as we climbed up out of the rift, topping out at 8900 feet. We skirted Nairobi on the southern bypass, saving considerable time. After the airport we got into traffic held up due to an accident, but Nancy's traffic app worked here just fine and gave us the view ahead!



The landscape was green, so different than our trip two years ago which had Kenya held tight in a drought. The rains that painted this landscape green also made it impossible for us to route across the park from the East, so we had to drive quite a long way around, making for a very long day. Giraffe's feeding on flowering acacias were a boost to our spirits as we neared the park.

But oh no! The entry road to our lodge was completely under water. Routing around proved to be quite adventurous as our light faded, but a Masai Warrior showed up to lead the way, walking the correct path through flood waters. Our-4-wheel drive mini-vans driven by Frances and Jonas were put to the test and did well. Dinner and off to bed!



## Sun., & Mon., Feb. 2 & 3 Amboseli National Park

The next two full and wonderous days made up for the journey to get to this gem of a park in East Africa, small compared to others but a haven for Elephants with sweet grass marshes and abundant water from Mt. Kilimanjaro. For photography it is hard to beat, with the iconic snow-capped peak framing many a shot.



We had early breakfasts, a buffet so fairly quick, and were out to find what we could. The tops popped, we could hear and see all around. With so many eyes looking we did not get very far, each day had close to 120 bird species and a





spreading acacias, savanna, woodland, and lush marshes with open water and reedy vegetation.

The first morning we woke to some hard rains, so uncommon for January! We decided to walk and bird on the grounds, waiting to see what the other guides would say about road conditions. As it lightened up a host of species came out and we got super views of Red-chested Cuckoo, White-bellied Go-away-bird, Hunter's Sunbird, Grosbeak Weaver male and female, Rufous Chatterer and more.

At 10 AM we set out—again led by our Masai friends there to push if we got stuck and to make sure we could find our way using this rocky and wet detour. Once in the park, we found three of Africa's most prized bird species in short order. First, a Martial Eagle, perched and preening, surveying the landscape which was full of Thompson's Gazelle, Baboon, and Grant's Gazelle, one magnificent herd of males sparring was fun to observe. You could see the dotting on its chest, massive feet and legs, and bright eyes gleaming. Not far, Jean spied a Secretarybird. It walked slowly along, stopping to preen, look around, test a few patches of potential food with its feet, then amble more. With luck it stayed parallel to the road and we had super views. A Kori Bustard was the next showstopper, distant, but regal, feeding under a broad-arching acacia that held a nest of massive Lappet-faced Vultures. We had two sometimes difficult smaller species in this stretch too—Quailfinch, and Cardinal Quelea, fun! We compared the songs of cisticolas, Rattling, Winding, Zitting, and Desert.

We then made our way to one of the two big marshes, parking for lunch by an action-filled stretch. Numerous herons including Gray, Black-necked, and Squacco fed alongside Hottentot Teal, Fulvous and White-faced Whistling Ducks, and we got good looks at African Spoonbill. There were some close to the car shorebirds, out of which we identified Little Stint, Ruff, Marsh Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, and a couple of familiar Sanderlings. Huge Hippos chortled and cavorted, opening their big mouths wide, lifting a bit out of the water, finally a group of six were feeding totally out of the water. We stayed quite some time and eventually had to pull ourselves away.

That first afternoon we also watched Elephants, several herds with calves, African Buffalos, and both species of gazelles. Kilimanjaro poked its head out, so we had several scenic stops for those postcard views of a shining snow-capped peak near the Equator. Back at camp, Peg and Pat walked out to the Kilimanjaro viewpoint not wanting to waste a daylight moment. You know its good birding when two guides look to add time to their day!

We did our bird and mammal list in the bar, quickly passing the 200 mark for birds for our short trip extension in Kenya. Dinner was a buffet and each night they had a special, Roast Lamb and Beef, or vegetable stir fry. Kathy quickly located the flan for dessert, her favorite.



The second morning we left early and in early light Peg got a quick view of our first cat, the small Wild Cat that looks like a more ample housecat. Sadly, it darted into cover, but hopefully more of them ahead. We waved at the Marabou Stork and Yellow-necked Francolin that greeted us each day and were off to explore. The first day we had to wait on paperwork, but a tolerant Peregrine Falcon kept us busy watching. Once in the park, Pangani's Longclaw posed with its bright orange neck aglow while Red-capped and Rufous-naped Lark made music from the grasses. A regal Saddle-billed Stork got the big lens folks going; we spied it's mate on a nest not far away. We stayed some time with a herd of Elephants, picking out the matriarch and her daughters. We went by another marsh, getting even better views of some species of yesterday. A new bird species was a big hit – nine Black Herons were spied, following a group of African Spoonbills in a small stream, throwing their wings out in quick darting motions to form small tents. It is thought that this shading helps them see fish and cause fish to move, fascinating to watch!

We went to the shore of Amboli Lake, pink with thousands of flamingoes, both Greater and Lesser. In flight, all their colors shone. They fed voraciously, alongside African Spoonbill and other waders. It was time to scope some peeps–the prettiest perhaps the Three-banded Plover with its red iris coloration, and the most local the Chestnut-banded Plover, six of them!

We headed to the Observation Hill where 360-degree views including Kilimanjaro are impressive. But first, over to the right, we spied a curiously tight cluster of Elephants out on open savanna. One van steered off to inspect. Peg urged us to go look, as they were fairly close, and something was obviously going on. A car was off-road, but binoculars revealed it to be a research car, Amboseli Trust. Indeed, it was Cynthia Moss herself, following herd behavior now for her 47<sup>th</sup> season. There was an unmoving bundle on the ground beneath the behemoth's feet, and it stayed motionless long enough for us to worry. Was it a newborn having trouble? Fortunately, the story played out with a happy ending. One elephant got restless and broke from the group, moving towards the sweet marsh grasses all were heading form. Another broke, then three of the largest of the herd put three trunks on

our “bundle”, lifting up Junior to say, ‘back on your feet, time to go”. They had stopped to patiently allow the newest family member to nap. A precious little vignette of behavior.

Time for lunch, then we drove and scanned in search of wildlife. We found a group of at least six Spotted Hyena at the edge of a pond, they crossed in and out of the water, two wrestled with a bone. There was significant color variation but like the ungulates, they looked fat and happy in this abundant year.

Coming back, we passed through a huge group of Baboon, watched Ostrich preen and feed, and were thrilled when Jonas spotted three Bat-eared Fox in an open area. They were aware of our presence and stayed on the move, but all of us got good looks before they disappeared into tall grass. Wow!

Back to drinks and bird and mammal list, dinner, and details for tomorrow, then bed!

### **Photo Credits:**

Peg & Pat–Equator, Peg Abbott (PEAB); Group photo, PEAB; Elephant, (Jack Jordan) JJ; Guides! PEAB; Kori Bustard, JJ; Cape Teal, PEAB; Giraffe, JJ; Zebra, JJ; Cheetah, JJ; Helmeted Guineafowl, PEAB; African Cape Buffalo, JJ; First day beer!, PEAB; Art at Ole Sereni Hotel, PEAB; Preston, PEAB; Nairobi Kenya, PEAB; Jack day 1, PEAB; Market Fun, PEAB; Mountain Lodge, PEAB; Roadside stop, PEAB; Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, JJ; Olive Baboons, JJ; African Pied Wagtail, JJ; Egyptian Goose, JJ; Birding-Mtn Lodge, PEAB; Thompson’s Falls, PEAB; Birding, PEAB; Birding, PEAB; Pied Kingfisher, JJ; Hottentot Teal, JJ; Flooded Lake Nakuru, PEAB; African Fish Eagle, JJ; White Rhinoceros, JJ; Flooded entrance, PEAB; Mt. Kilimanjaro shots, PEAB; Birding out the truck, PEAB; Martial Eagle, PEAB; Secretary Bird, PEAB; Cardinal Quelea, JJ; White-bellied Go-away-bird, JJ; Grant Gazelle, PEAB; Greater Flamingo, JJ; Saddle-billed Stork, JJ; Rufous-naped Lark, JJ; Red-capped Lark, PEAB; Hippopotamus, JJ; Spotted Hyena, JJ; Bat-eared Fox, JJ; Elephant spotting, PEAB.