

Ngorongoro 2020 Birds by Walt Anderson

There is no place on earth like Ngorongoro Crater—a natural Pleistocene park with abundant large mammals, hundreds of species of birds, and jaw-dropping scenery. Its productivity reflects a “Goldilocks geography,” where everything is just right. However, we fear that climate change could disrupt this mosaic of ecosystems. Human-caused climate change is no hoax and not something we can ignore any longer. There have been five major mass extinctions, and climate-change experts have found strong signatures of CO₂ imbalance for each one.

I fear that unless we have the political will in the US and across the planet, we are setting the stage for a world we would not care to (or perhaps be able to) live in.

I feel fortunate to have experienced so much of nature’s beauty, which is why I feel I must be a champion of conservation. Ecotourism has been a force for good in many places, though mass tourism has at times been very harmful. Responsible ecotourists need to “pay it back” by any means possible.

Here are a few bird photos from one day in January 2020. They are just a hint of the beauty we must work to protect.



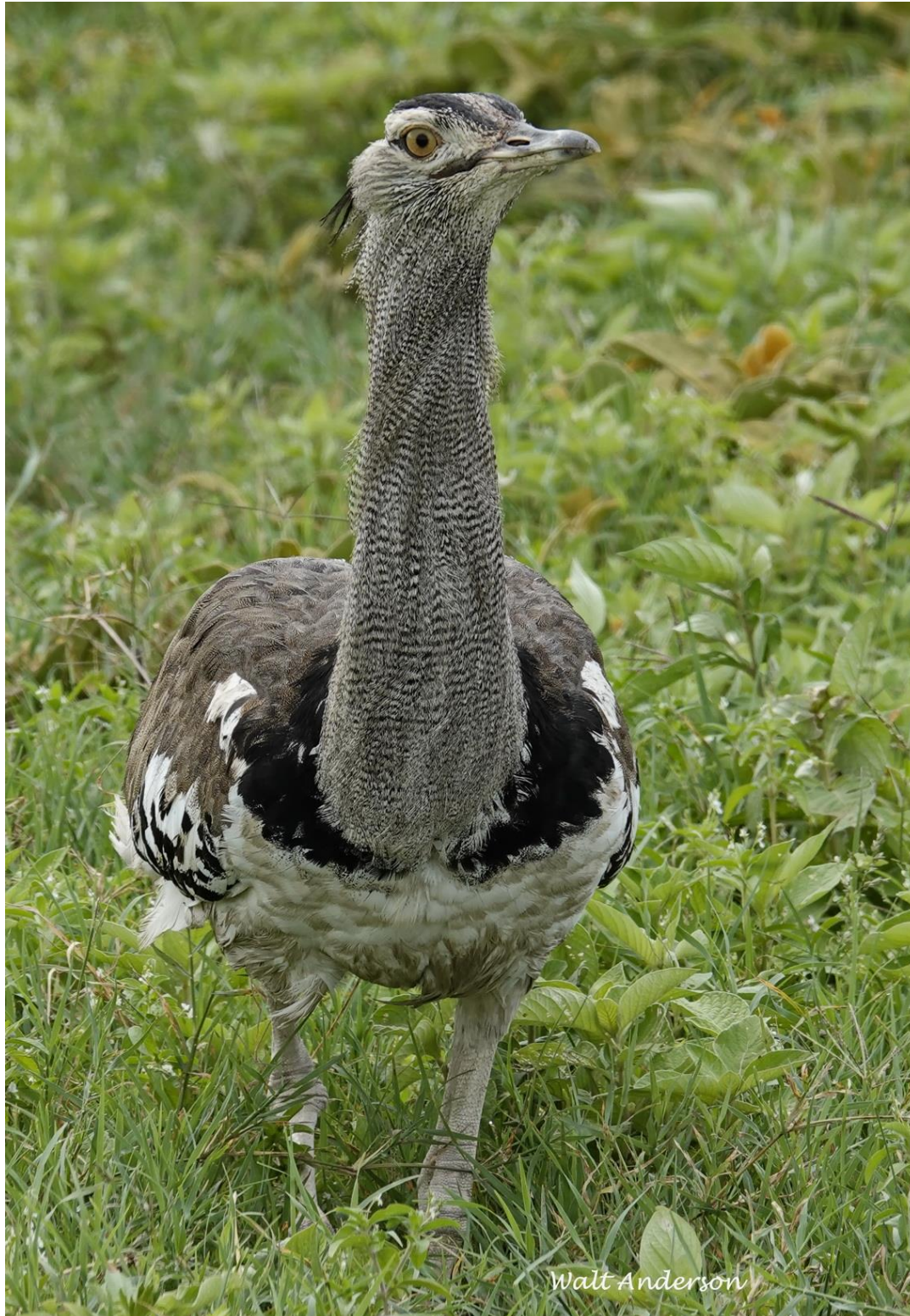
View from the rim of the massive caldera that is “Ngorongoro Crater.” Typically, the short rains are over by late January, but this was an unusual year, and you can see water throughout the landscape, sometimes flooding out normal tracks used by tourist vehicles. With binocs, we could see elephants, rhinos, buffaloes, zebras, and other larger animals from this viewpoint. Colorful birds and raptors flew right across in front of us at eyelevel. No wonder this evokes thought of Eden in many people.



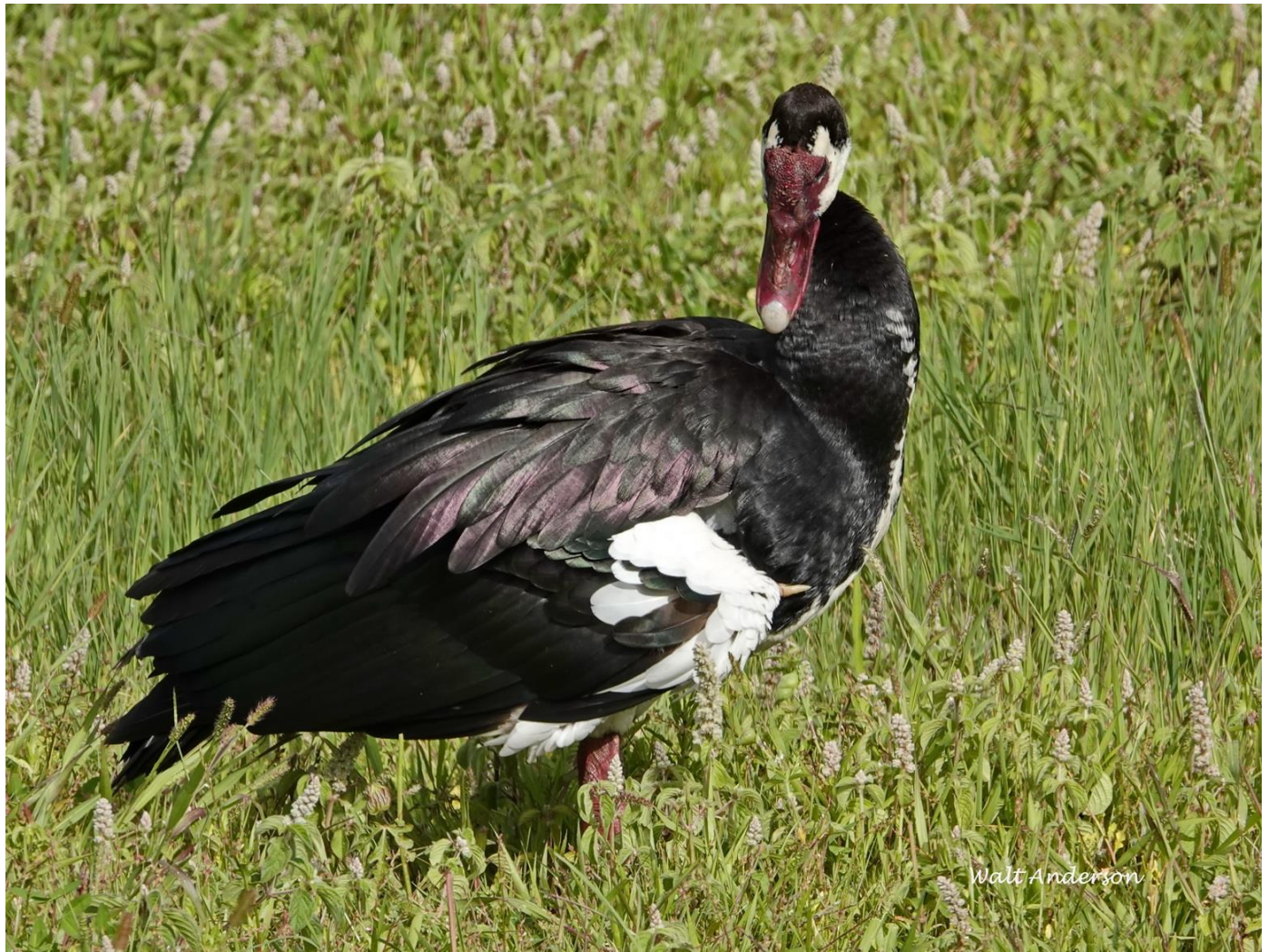
Gorgeous Gray Crowned Cranes, chosen as the National Bird of Uganda.



Poetry in flight.



The mighty Kori Bustard. Even non-birders are stunned by the impressiveness of so many large and/or colorful birds in Tanzania. It's not difficult to see 100 or more species of birds during a day in the Crater even while watching big mammals most of the time.



The Spur-winged Goose is one of the largest of the waterfowl. If you look at the bend of the wing (the white crescent here), you can see the spur that gives this bird its name. Don't mess with it. Notice the dazzling iridescence on the back feathers.



Another common waterfowl species we always see is the Egyptian Goose. These cute little goslings were separated from their parents (nothing to do with us), and we hope that they got reunited before being noticed by someone looking for lunch.



There are so many beautiful birds of prey, and one of the most elegant is the Pallid Harrier, a migrant from Eurasia. This is a male; the female is pretty in her own way, but mostly brown and stripy, easy to confuse with the female Montague's Harrier unless you look closely.



Speaking of brown and stripy, this is an African Pipit. Pipits are among the more challenging bird groups to ID, but we work on every one! Their family, the Motacillidae, includes pipits, wagtails, and longclaws.



The Rosy-throated Longclaw is a colorful member of that family. Longclaws are only found in the Afrotropics, and one species is a dead-ringer for our meadowlarks, a case of evolutionary convergence.



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The Capped Wheatear is a conspicuous grassland resident, one of two non-migratory wheatears in the crater that are joined by other species from Eurasia in the northern winter.



Africa has incredible diversity of birds of prey, including a half-dozen species of vultures that are actually eagles modified for a diet of carrion. The abundance of large herbivores and big carnivores makes this a paradise for the White-backed Vulture. Vultures are important ecosystem elements, but they have been persecuted by humans and actually may be in danger of extinction as human populations continue to rise. As my friends Dusti and Tony bravely advocate, we need to SCALE DOWN!