

Serengeti 2020(4) by Walt Anderson

Tanzania's Serengeti National Park is a naturalist's paradise, a vast and beautiful landscape with wildlife pretty much everywhere. On a single day in the central Serengeti a few years ago, we encountered 38 lions (some mating), 10 Cheetahs (with cubs), 3 Servals (one of my favorite cats that many tourists miss seeing), and thousands of other large mammals, including the vast herds of the Great Migration. Did I mention that the birding was also amazing?

This is Serengeti Part 4 of 6 from our early 2020 safari, a nice mixture of mammals, birds, and a very colorful reptile. We still have room on the 2nd safari we are hosting this August, so let me know if you'd like to join us. Karibu—welcome! http://www.geolobo.com/?page_id=522



Predators thrive in this highly productive ecosystem. Lions are disappearing from many parts of Africa, including some "protected" areas where poaching and poorly regulated big game hunting continue.



Seeing a Gray Kestrel this close was a special experience. These small falcons nest in the enormous globular nests constructed by the Hamerkop, one of the strangest members of all the stork order.



In case you are unfamiliar with the Hamerkop (which means “hammer head”), here you go. It is so unusual that it is the only member of its family, the Scopidae. The breeding pair takes up to six months to build its incredible nest, often six feet or more across, with a side entrance. Once abandoned, the nests may be occupied by falcons, snakes, or other squatters.



The Dark Chanting Goshawk, named for its vocal courtship displays, is one of the more common raptors of the Serengeti.



I can't resist taking portraits of the gorgeous Gray-breasted Spurfowl. The spur, used in combat by males, is obvious here. This species is endemic (found nowhere else) in northern Tanzania, especially the Serengeti.



Rock agama males are much easier to spot than their cryptic females, and that must make them more vulnerable to the many predators around, but if you don't stand out in the crowd, you lose in the dating game. Its coloration has given it the nickname Spider-Man Agama, which has exposed it to the pet trade. Agamas are one of the hundreds of exotic species now slithering, creeping, leaping, and flying around Florida.



Secretary Birds are the largest of the Serengeti raptors. They stride through the grasslands and capture insects and snakes, even venomous ones, with those long legs. Despite their size, they fly well and nest in the tops of spiny acacias.



White Storks winter in the Serengeti before flying back to their nests atop village houses in Europe. It's a mystery where they pick up the human babies on the way back north.



Closely resembling our Green Heron, the Striated Heron of Africa is obviously a near relative, and at one time, they were lumped as one species. These crow-sized herons tend to stay close to cover. They often hunt by standing motionless close to the water, where a quick stab can yield a meal of fish, frog, or insect.



Bizarre fleshy growths adorn breeding male Wattled Starlings, which are more closely related to the mynahs of Asia and the European Starling of (where else?) Europe than to the two major African clades (close relatives) of the red-winged and African glossy starlings. The “glossy starlings” are the gorgeous ones, as their common names imply: Superb, Splendid, Blue-eared, Golden-breasted, etc. European Starlings were intentionally introduced to North America and have become urban pests, sometimes referred to flying rats or sky carp. It’s too bad we didn’t get the Superb or Splendid types instead.



Wattled Starlings have locally been called “locust birds” because of their tendency to move to locust concentrations and feast on the irruptive insects, often timing their nesting efforts with such high availability of food. Locust eruptions often coincide with exceptionally rainy periods, and that’s when the fancy wattles and pattern baldness develop in the males. We were lucky to see males in full breeding regalia and to see chicks like the fledgling on the right. Wattled Starlings often associate with cattle and grazing mammals, and we saw wildebeest with both oxpeckers and Wattled Starlings riding their backs.



The southern shortgrass plains of the Serengeti were exceptionally lush in early 2020, but this is the area where the great herds annually come to have their young, as the grasses and forbs are especially nutritious thanks to volcanic ash from Ol Doinyo Lengai, the Mountain of God, to the east. The open terrain also gives them better visibility to detect predators, and the short growing season here also limits the number of predators that can make it year-round. Cattle Egrets by the hundreds follow the herds at this time, eating insects stirred up by the thousands of hooves.



Wildebeest are the ultimate commuters, moving hundreds of miles per year, often following the rains and the lush grasses that result (gnu growth?). Water was not a limiting factor in January 2020!



Zebras are also part of the Great Migration, tending to eat coarser grasses than do the wildebeest. Highly social, they engage in mutual grooming: you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours.



This trio of male giraffes appears to be posing for a photo, but they were actually engaged in dominance interactions, where they swing their long necks and whack each other with solid heads. These innocuous mammals, now split into several species, are endangered by habitat loss and illegal killing. It saddens me that domestic livestock now far outnumber all wild hoofed animals.