

11. Big Cats in the Serengeti

We saw a lot of Lions in the Serengeti and never tired of seeing any of Africa's big cats, especially the Lions and Leopards and Cheetahs. On the next morning's game drive there was a very strong wind on the savannah in the eastern Serengeti and our guide said he had got a report from another tour company about a pride of Lions near one of the roads. "We will go to check it out," he said. "This is a hard time for non-nomadic Lions in the Serengeti. Food is scarce until the rains come and the migration comes back." We saw a female Lion walking in tall grass and followed her slowly.

Then we saw a male Lion with a pride of about 6 females with two babies. "I think the earlier female probably belongs to this pride," said our guide, "and another female has got up now and started walking in the same direction the earlier female took, probably toward a watering hole where they might make a kill for the pride." Our jeeps parked on the side of the road and we sat quietly, watching and listening for a little over a half hour, feeling guiltily cowardly that our jeeps had strong metal bars. "I do sometimes feel like such a wimp," I said to Myrtle. "One day we watch the baby Lions and say 'Oh how cute! I want to hug him!' and the next day we cower in our jeeps terrified by the fierce predator look in the female's eyes and the powerful muscles and jaws that make her such an efficient killing machine." "Hey," Myrtle responded with a shrug. "We are alive, right?"





Our guides decided to slowly follow in the direction the two female Lions were going, and as I watched behind us, I noticed that the male Lion got up and was following us. For all the deadly power in those fierce Lion paws, I never tired of watching the graceful way the Lions picked up their paws to move forward. It all seemed so incongruously delicate. The wind kept blowing hard in the direction the females were walking. I wondered briefly if the wind would carry the scent of the Lions to their prey, but the guide said sometimes a strong wind carries the scent away too quickly.



The second female soon caught up to the first, and they walked determinedly on. A third female had stopped and was intently staring at something. The male came up behind her and took up a similar pose and stared as well. I love this shot of the two of them scoping out their hunting territory. “The very first female we saw this morning had a cub with her,” said our guide. “She may have been returning to the pride to introduce her baby to the other Lions, especially to the dominant female. After the baby is born the female stays away from the pride until the baby reaches a certain age.”



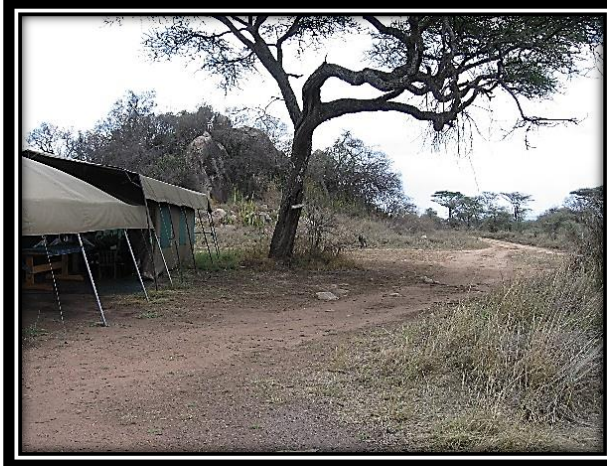
About 10:00 we drove on and were rewarded with these perfect views of a gorgeous teenaged solitary male Leopard in a tree by a kopje. The Leopard kept moving around and changing positions until at last it seemed to find a position it liked, firmly in the crotch of a tree with one paw hanging down. I was reminded of the female Lion our guide had spotted back in the Ngorongoro Crater that was completely hidden among the foliage except for one paw hanging down. This Leopard was not completely hidden, but it was camouflaged quite well. Except for that tail and paw hanging down!



As we drove on, we saw three Cape Buffalo grazing not too far from this lone male Giraffe. Then we saw this magnificent large male Waterbuck reclining under a tree, with his head up alertly, his body tensed and ready to leap and flee. At one point he seemed to look directly at my camera as though to say, "I know. I am a handsome devil. What can I say?"



We were back to our camp by 11:15 and ready for another wonderful lunch. On the way to our tent, Myrtle and I watched a family of Banded Mongooses for a while. “They are cute little critters, aren’t they?” she said finally. “Should we go get them some leftover pizza from lunch?” I turned on her in alarm, only to see her smirking. She would be the first one screaming if a Mongoose invaded our tent looking for a repeat snack. Our lunch had been some kind of pizza-like dish that was so addictive Myrtle and I definitely ate more than we should have. We needed a nap.



After we woke from our nap, again from the cacophony of all the birdsong, which we both adored, we saw a large Baboon running through the camp. Then the Mongoose family up on the rocks all chirped like mad and the Baboon bounded up there and the family of Mongooses disappeared. At 3:30 we left for our afternoon game drive. We came immediately upon a Pancake Turtle crossing the road and our jeeps stopped to let him cross. We saw Zebras close by, “probably the ones that visited our camp,” said the guide. We saw four beautiful Hartebeests. We saw Giraffes and Zebras, Cape Buffalos, Impalas and Thomson’s Gazelles, some Vultures circling, two Bat-eared Foxes in the distance, a Kori Bustard, some Hippo prints with four toes, a large bull Elephant walking, a tree full of Wattled Starlings, a Fisher’s Lovebird, a Yellow-billed Stork, a Black-headed Heron, a tree of Marabou Storks, a herd of 12 elephants plus more back in the bush. “The thrashing and grunting and trumpeting you hear back in the bush is from the young males fighting over dominance,” said our guide. “Glad I’m not there!” was the consensus among us.





To be continued . . .