

## 5. Into the Crater

The next day all went as planned and everyone was assembled by the jeeps at 7:00 am.



The weather was foggy and wet, and the road was so muddy from work being done on it that I marveled we did not get stuck in the mud. There was a 20-minute wait at the entrance to the Crater, and I was surprised how expensive the entrance fees were: \$50 per person plus \$200 per vehicle.



As we went down into the crater we saw large holes along the sides of the road. Our guide told us the elephants dig those holes to get the salt from the volcanic soil. The first thing we saw as we entered the crater was cows. “The Maasai are allowed to live in the conservation area,” said the guide. “Sometimes there are problems with the cows being attacked by the wild animals for food, but it is the responsibility of the Maasai to protect their cows. You see the flat-topped acacia tree here. It only grows at 4000 feet.”



He continued, “Ngorongoro is a Maasai word meaning ‘the tribe that pushed the original tribes out.’ It also can mean the bell around the cow’s neck. We will see in the crater all the animals we saw in Tarangire Park. The total number of mammals in the crater is estimated at 20-25,000.”



“The eastern side of the crater is the wet side, and we find Elephants on the east side. Elephants have 6 sets of molar teeth. When they wear out the last set, they die of starvation. There are about 20 Black Rhinos in the crater, but they are hard to see. There are about 50 Lions in the crater. In 1994



many Lions died of canine distemper. They got it from the Maasai dogs. Two of the large birds you see here are the Secretary Bird and the Kori Bustard, the largest bird that can fly in Africa.”



“We will see Hippos and Hartebeests,” he continued. “We will not see Giraffes, and we will not see Impalas in the crater because there is not enough cover for them. The drop from the top of the crater to the bottom is 2000 feet. The crater formed from a volcano. The mountain was 4500 meters



(14,800 feet) above sea level, and the whole top blew off about 2 ½ million years ago. Later the sides caved in. It's really a caldera, not a crater, the largest unbroken and unflooded caldera in the world, but in size alone it is the sixth largest. There is a Buzzard on that tree in the controlled burn over there, and Cape Buffaloes in the distance. When the male Cape Buffaloes get to a certain age they are chased out of the herd and form a small group of their own or are solitary. The matriarch runs the herd, just like with Elephants. The Cape Buffaloes live up to 25 years and the gestation period for babies is nine months.



There is a Black Rhino in the distance lying down. They stay near the rim of the crater and come down into the crater bottom to sun themselves when they are cold. It is cold on the rim of the crater. They mark their pathways with urine and feces so they can find their way back home. In the 1960s and 70s there were many Black Rhinos, but poachers decimated them. At one time there were only four left. Now there are 21, but they have a gestation period of 16 months, and their population increases slowly.” Myrtle still pinched me every time she saw some Thomson’s Gazelles, and I told her to be careful because there were more Wildebeests than Thomson’s Gazelles. Ha!



Suddenly we noticed that the Wildebeests were running away. Our guide stopped talking and began to look intently to our right, at a low hill in the distance. I could not see anything of interest, but as we kept watching, we could see slight movements in the tall grasses far away. Our guide whispered,



“There is a pride of Lions following the Wildebeests. There are six females.” Our jeeps had pulled up one behind the other and we all sat waiting silently and tensely, watching. As the Lions came closer, we saw that they were heading straight for our jeeps. There were a few muffled gasps among our group, and Myrtle grabbed my hand, with her other hand over her mouth.



The Lions came closer and closer and continued to head straight toward our jeeps. Then they walked right BETWEEN our jeeps, and I sensed the exhilaration and tension in our group. There was not a sound except the slight swish of dried grasses under the Lions’ feet. I think we were all holding our breath, fearful to make a single movement. One by one the Lions passed between our jeeps, so close we could have reached down and petted them. It was quite incredible. Even our guide seemed moved and excited.



After the Lions had all passed between us and were walking away to our left, our guide said, “Those Lions had fed recently and were no danger to us, but they are following the Wildebeests, probably to a watering hole, where they will rest in the shade and wait for the Wildebeests to come to the watering hole or river to drink. Then they will pounce. After the females kill the Wildebeest, they call the male Lion to come and open the body for the choicest parts. Then the females eat the rest.” Myrtle started frowning, but I squeezed her hand because I wanted to hear the rest of our guide’s lecture. “When a female Lion goes into estrus, she and the dominant male go out of the pride and do not have food or water for seven days, they only mate. The male mounts every 15-19 minutes and he can mate 80 times in 24 hours.” There were audible gasps among our group, especially among the men. “Then the male and female return to the pride after their seven-day ordeal; and now the dominant male is much weaker, so a new dominant male takes over by fighting him.” “That’s pretty brutal,” said one of the men in our group. I think Myrtle was sufficiently surprised to learn about the male Lion’s ordeal that she forgot to get mad about the female Lion giving him all the choice parts of the kill. Also, she learned about the female Hyena. We saw this Spotted Hyena at a watering hole and a pack of 16 Hyenas running away when the rain started. “Hyenas and Warthogs have dens,” said our guide. “So they are all running to their homes, away from the rain. The female Hyena is dominant. Both males and females have balls. Females are black and big, to intimidate the males. During estrus the balls go away.” “That’s my kind of girl, even if she is a little ugly,” whispered Myrtle.





“Zebras love the rain,” said our guide. “That’s why they always lead the annual migration.” We saw lots of Wildebeests and Zebras. “May to June is rutting season for the Wildebeests,” said our guide, “and all the babies are born in February and March or a bit later. That sound you hear, like Ho Ho Ho, is the Zebra calling.” We saw Black Rhinos, Grant’s Gazelles, and Helmeted Guinea Fowl.





We saw two Ostriches mating. It was most interesting. The male was maybe 20 feet from the female when he suddenly flapped his huge wings, made a mad dash toward the female all the while flapping those wings, and the female sat down. The male mounted her and kept flapping his wings furiously as he mated, throwing his head back. The mating was a process of several minutes where it looked like the male was literally beating the female into submission, the way his huge wings flapped around. "He's just keeping his balance," said the guide. "More like trying to keep his thing in where it needs to be," said Myrtle with a quiet snicker. "Hey, give him a break," said a man nearby, "He takes care of the chicks after the eggs hatch." "That is true," said the guide. "Ostriches lay their eggs in a communal nest. Sometimes a female Ostrich has 100 chicks by collecting 'orphans.' The dominant female will incubate the communal nest of eggs during the day, then the male sits on them during the night because it is dark and hard to see. Their main predator is the Hyena, and Hyenas sleep during the day. Ostrich eggs are huge. One Ostrich egg equals 20 chicken eggs." That statement, of course, elicited some "Wows!" "The male is black with some white, and the female is brown." The male we were watching was eventually successful, and he stood up proudly, preened a bit, and then walked away with his head high. An animal I loved to watch was the funny Warthog, how it would kneel and put its snout to the ground and proceed to dig furiously, raising a cloud of dust. They are herbivores, and one of their food sources is roots under the soil. The Warthog male has big tusks to help him dig for roots, and he goes down on his knees because his neck is short. Males have manes and Warthogs are usually brown in color because they roll in the dust.





We saw Hippos walking in a lake with Flamingos, the first time I had seen Hippos not submerged.



To be continued . . .