



wild ride



Atlasing in the Mara region

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It's 05h30 and my heart is racing, my ears alert. I've just tried to escape a charging elephant bull on foot. While I hunker down in the bushes, listening for cracking branches or a low rumble emanating from the dense shrubs around me, I hear a Rufous-naped Lark, Tropical Boubou and a distant Schalow's Turaco. A cacophony of 60 low-flying Grey Crowned Cranes distracts me momentarily from my potentially precarious situation. If it's the last photograph I take, it might be worth it. When the cranes have passed I hear the roar of lions, but they are a way off. The stomach rumbling of the elephant sounds a safe distance away, so I return through the undergrowth to my companions, who are hidden at a water-hole observation point. Having witnessed the chase, it won't be Green Sandpiper and the domestic squabbles of Egyptian Geese that they remember from this day.

This is a tale of an atlasing adventure to the Narok County district of Kenya, adjacent to the world-famous Maasai Mara National Reserve. I'd been invited to direct a Biosphere Expeditions group to conduct wildlife surveys in Enonkishu, the northernmost of the Mara conservancies. People come from all over the world – Finland, France, Australia and Germany, for example – to help with these expeditions. We would observe not only buffalo,

cheetah, lion and leopard, but also the Maasai roaming with their large herds of cattle. The western boundary of the conservancy is the Mara River, beyond which lies a patchwork of small agricultural plots, intensively farmed and heavily populated.

The survey meant a chance to extend my BirdLasser life-list and to contribute to the Kenya BirdMap project. Since the project's integration with the SABAP platform, birdwatchers in

Kenya have been making great strides in creating good coverage of the country. However, there are still very large gaps, including the south-western section of the country in the direction of Lake Victoria.

The pre-elephant adventure had started 10 days earlier. The region had experienced heavy rains for several months and the notion of what constitutes a 'road' needed to be redefined as the route from A to B that would do the

least damage to the vehicle and present the least chance of getting stuck in deep mud. The night we arrived at the Mara Training Centre, which was to be our base for the rest of February, we'd been driving in a river, navigating past stuck trucks and even a trapped tractor. Once I'd had to climb out of the window as water gushed through the door after our vehicle slid off the submerged track into a deep gully in the river. It took 10 men, luck and perseverance to get out of that one. There were many more stuck-in-the-mud adventures during the next few weeks, so if my atlasing efforts seem somewhat paltry in comparison to other such expeditions, I trust you'll understand why.

My previous trip to Kenya was 25 years ago, so in between resolving organisational and logistical matters, I spent the first few days familiarising myself with the local birds. While many of the calls were familiar (for instance, those of several of the doves and the Black-backed Puffback), a lot were not. Weavers and cisticolas required particular attention and many silent Chiffchaff-like warblers

above *There were Grey Crowned Cranes on this plain before these cheetahs came along.*

right *A Golden tick: Speke's Weaver.*

above, left *Toothless but jaw-dropping, a Double-toothed Barbet at the Mara Training Centre.*

opposite, left *There is plenty of space to park. It's getting out that's the problem.*

had to be left out. As did my first turaco sighting – a red and green flash won't get you very far here. Neither will a glimpse of a trogon let you confidently tick Narina, as it could equally be the Bartailed. Eventually both Schalow's and Hartlaub's turacos were decisively added to the trip list. Certainly, without a local bird guide to help me, patience and time would be required to get a handle on the incredible tropical diversity the site offers.

As someone who has never been sufficiently organised to keep a life-list, using BirdLasser to track my efforts is great. The birds are listed by geographic



region which is very helpful, so Africa's birds can be filtered to bring up those that have been recorded in East Africa. It was extremely satisfying to watch the appearance of another Golden marker (the indication of a BirdLasser lifer) >



mediocre lists – a sighting of a young boy throwing stones into a hedge where a Purple Grenadier had flown for cover might explain some of that. One of our expedition activities was to host a school group from the adjacent village. Despite their homes being less than a kilometre from the conservancy, most of the children had never seen a lion before and that was undoubtedly the highlight of the game drive they were taken on by expedition members. A stand-out sighting of that day for me was a colony of Speke's Weavers in the school grounds; Village and Baglafecht's weavers were commonly seen.

There were many birding highlights, among them Secretarybird, Southern Ground-Hornbill and Montagu's Harrier. However, the lack of vultures was particularly noticeable away from the core wildlife areas. In the first two weeks the only sighting was of a White-backed Vulture at a nest, far south of the conservancy. A poisoning event was reported by the rangers while we were out with the schoolchildren and apparently these incidents are depressingly frequent. Towards the end of the

trip, while on a drive south towards the Maasai Mara National Reserve, a welcome sight was a multi-species group of vultures spiralling over the plains above many wildebeest and zebra.

On the upside, one of the most rewarding places to bird was on the top of Kileleoni Hill, just over 2000 metres above sea-level. A hike up to this point delivered the best raptor sightings: Martial, Crowned, Tawny and Verreaux's eagles, together with Bateleurs and Augur and Common buzzards (as well as a leopard driven from some long grass). Raptorphiles are certain to get their daily dose of fang and claw here. The rangers who accompanied us, armed only with field experience and an acute connection with the signs of the wild around them, would occasionally throw a stone into the thickets ahead as we walked, but to flush buffalo, not birds.

It is a lot more affordable to visit the conservancy areas of the Mara than the Maasai Mara itself. There, a day entrance alone is US\$80, compared to US\$20 for Enonkishu. While the sight of a Maasai on a motorbike passing a family of cheetahs may be off-putting to purists, it is quite remarkable to observe how wildlife and people coexist on this land. Despite human-wildlife conflict (such as elephants raiding crops and breaking fences), there is no shortage of game literally at arm's length in this very densely populated part of the continent.

After dealing with scores of out-of-range forms during two years of surveying in the Karoo, it was refreshing that in Kenya there were none. SABAPI did not extend to Kenya, so there are no previous records against which submissions can be vetted, which is great for atlasers but of concern to data scientists.

My month-long sojourn rewarded me with 236 species, covering 12 pentads, over half of which were virgin. The highest pentad tally was 82. And what was the highlight? Maybe making it back to South Africa just in time before the coronavirus induced



on the list and map. When someone else was assigned to do my listing while I drove, it was also a useful way of picking out errors in the list!

Photographing birds was a challenge. Unlike the SANParks camps where birds are habituated to people, this was not the case in the northern Mara. It was in stark contrast to the mammal wildlife, which clearly is very accustomed to seeing a wealth of people and vehicles; a pack of six young cheetah cubs playing around the safari vehicles was something to remember. Excursions into the agricultural lands beyond the Mara also produced very



above *Usambiro Barbet* (a subspecies of *D'Arnaud's Barbet*) is common in the Mara region.

right *Modern-day Maasai* on their way to market.

global lockdown. I'm certainly hoping the world will be back on track in 2021 for a second round of atlas-ing in one of Africa's most rewarding birding destinations. And that next time the elephants will be friendlier.

above Although common, the *Purple Grenadier* is a visual treat and mostly confiding.

top While waiting for a flood to subside, I had a chance to share my binoculars with interested observers.