



Southern Tanzania A True Photographers Paradise

Trip Report – October 2011

This year's trip to Southern Tanzania certainly lived up to its deserved reputation of a true photographer's paradise.

Selous

Southern Tanzania never disappoints and this trip was no exception. This year more rain than usual in late September ensured that the great Rufiji River was flowing well and the undergrowth and trees unusually green. Selous Impala, our first camp, is one of the smallest in the Selous area, with only 8 tents, discreetly spaced apart. These are very well camouflaged and all overlook the river or a lagoon ensuring you can see but not be seen. This fabulous camp is under the expert management of Barbara, the only woman with a staff of 60. She ensures that everything runs incredibly smoothly resulting in

a top class experience for all the guests on this trip and a superb introduction to Africa. We were there to experience and photograph Africa and its wildlife but an extremely comfortable and welcoming camp really helps. The staff at Impala are always excellent class and for this trip we were to have the services of the top boatman Abdullah, the top driver and guide Mpogo and for the walking safari, the head guide Musa Makomba. We could not have had better! To this add Evans and the team of waiters and bar staff who worked so hard to please and this was bound to be an unforgettable experience.



With his superb boat handling skills Abdullah provided us with extremely close encounters with hippos and



crocodiles both on the main river and one of the major lakes. Only someone with his experience could approach such dangerous animals as closely as we did and provide such excellent opportunities for stunning photographs of hippo heads filling the frame and without resorting to a particularly long lens. Having the opportunity to observe these magnificent animals relaxing, fighting and vocalising all in their natural habitat and at our level was a truly memorable experience.

It was not just the large animals that presented themselves to our lenses. Abdullah's skills also enabled us to photograph the brilliant Malachite Kingfisher from less than 10 feet producing some superb images. Pied kingfishers perching and hovering were a test of our photographic skills but also produced memorable photos as did the young Giant Kingfisher spotted on our last day. Further along the river the colourful Little and White Fronted Bee Eaters provided excellent subjects for our cameras and just watching as well as photographing a large colony nesting in a sand bank was a true privilege.

The list of birds seen on both water and land grew daily with really special species such as the giant Goliath Heron at 5 foot tall and the magnificent African Fish Eagle with its haunting and distinct call which is synonymous with the sound of Africa. Others included the Black Egret or "umbrella bird" with its specialised approach to catching fish and the Jacarna with its huge feet that seems to simply walk on the water surface.



Abdullah's skills with the boat were matched by Mpogo's skill as a driver. We covered large areas and his excellent driving, superb eyesight and fantastic local knowledge coupled with an enthusiasm to show us Africa made for really memorable game drives. We found all the usual suspects including lions, hyena, plenty of baboons, even more impala, tall giraffes, zebra, kudu, wildebeest and warthogs as well as elephants and some of these right inside the camp!



For each animal encounter Mpogo positioned the vehicle expertly which made great photos just that much easier. We didn't manage to see the local speciality wild dogs but that didn't stop Mpogo trying, it takes a very special skill to track such elusive animals from a land rover but Mpogo was a master and it was just sheer bad luck that we didn't manage to find them. We did however manage to find a vast number of vultures gorging on a dead hippo. They just stood around crops clearly bulging and too heavy and lethargic to take off. We mused on the various collective nouns for vultures, I knew of three a committee or, as with crows, a parliament or a murder as in crows. We all felt that given scene what we were watching, a murder was probably the more appropriate collective noun for vultures.



Our third escort was the camp's head guide Makomba who took us on a walking safari and explained all the signs and animal tracks as we walked straight out into the bush getting close to giraffe and baboons. He saw this area as his home and like the other guides took it as a true privilege to share with us his fantastic knowledge of the wildlife and countryside. The game walk ended with a real treat, breakfast beside a wonderful lake and a journey back to camp by boat.

Ruaha

Four days was not enough but we had to leave to travel to our next destination, the pretty and even smaller Kwihala camp in the Ruaha, only 6 tents this time. The two camps are about 250 miles and a 1½ hour flight apart and in what is very different countryside. Ruaha at this time of year is very dry with even the major rivers reduced to mere trickles. Kwihala means "bush" - and this is some of the most beautiful African bush you can find. The camp is set in a high area with views over the surrounding countryside; it is near the Mwangusi Sand River and in one of the best game areas in the National Park. Kwihala is quite different to Impala being built more on the traditional safari camp style. It offered us a really refreshing combination of adventure and style, and took us even closer to the wildlife and the excitement of Africa. It still however provided for those who crave their creature comforts with huge tents, each 40 square metres and situated in their own plot with proper beds and a comfortable mattress, freshly pressed linen and a well-equipped bathroom with hot shower and flush loo. They were little havens in the bush and for those brave enough to leave the curtain open the sounds of the night often were accompanied by eerie shadows in the moonlight as lions padded past the tent crunching the dry leaves as they went.



All the tents and particularly the "mess tent" were designed by well-known contemporary African designer – Jacquie Resley. The mess tent at 150 square metres was spacious and the social centre of the camp, it has separate dining and relaxing areas to create a homely feel, although canvas walls and open sides leave one with no illusions that one is definitely in the African bush.

Our driver and guide for all our trips around Kwihala was Marius Swart a South African who had a superb knowledge and understanding of the game and wildlife of the area. Couple this with a keen interest in photography and we had the best guide we could for this section of our trip. This was really important as in Ruaha we would be spending our days travelling the bush in custom built land cruisers. These were specially designed to provide us with a superb vantage point to see and photograph the wildlife, and what wildlife we saw! Never on any trips I have ever run to Africa have we seen leopards on each and every day! To see these superb animals in their natural habitat is a privilege and watching a young and beautiful female leopard walking along the track right beside us or a half grown cub hunting down a mongoose in a log pile is an experience beyond words. On one occasion we even saw two different individual animals in the same morning.



One afternoon as we approached a big kigelia or sausage tree, Marius started explaining how a week before we had spotted a male leopard laying on the horizontal branch and when we rounded the corner there he was again! The next morning we drove down to an area where the lions had been roaring all night. As we stopped to photograph a Lilac Breasted Roller, we heard baboons barking abuse at something on the opposite side of the creek. Quickly we made our way there and on checking to see which direction the baboons were looking found the beautiful 2 year-old leopardess walking along the track.

Ruaha is well known for its lions and we had some superb sightings including a magnificent male who had been nicknamed Grumpy. He lay on the ground feet away from our vehicle and in the failing evening light roared out his challenge to others in the area. There is nothing more primeval than the roar of a lion, it typifies the wild side of Africa and when heard at a distance goes straight through your body and triggers a



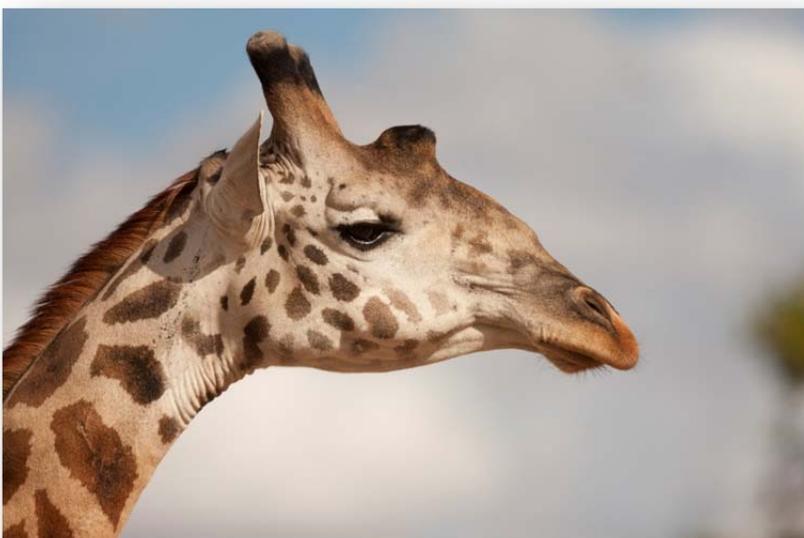
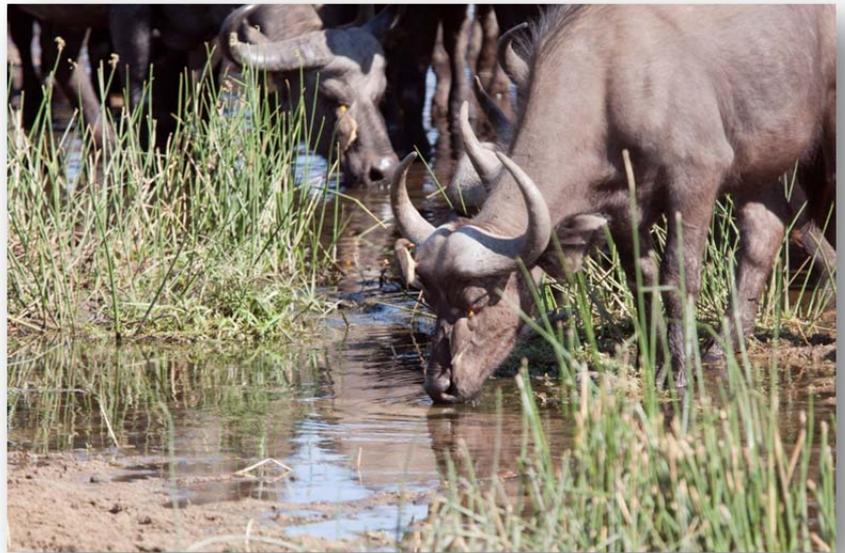
primitive fear which is at the same time fantastically exhilarating. Place that same lion only a few feet away and the effect is truly awesome even if the light was so poor that it made photography difficult. He might be as grumpy as his name suggest but what was absolutely certain was that this was one male lion not to be argued with and he was letting everyone know that.

The other real spectacle at Kwihala this year were the buffalo. We stopped one day and watched a herd of over 700 of these huge and magnificent animals approaching what was left of the river for a drink. Marius positioned the vehicle expertly and we simply sat stunned as the herd moved towards us through a dust cloud and approached the water where they stopped for a drink right in front of the mound on which we were parked. Little can improve on this.

The hot dry dusty conditions meant water was in short supply and thus the elephants and zebra have to dig in the dried up river beds to find precious supplies. This did however allow us to get much closer than would normally have been possible.

As with Impala the real beauty of Southern Tanzania is the lack of other people and vehicles, Ruaha is another perfect example. The Ngorongoro Crater in the north is a beautiful area but now more resembles Woburn Safari Park in the UK.

One morning we watched two bull giraffe fighting. When bull giraffes fight they stand side by side and swing their heads using their long necks to deliver a serious blow to their opponent. Battles can be fatal, but are more often less severe, generally ending when one giraffe surrenders to the other. The longer the neck, and the heavier the head at the end of the neck, the greater the force a giraffe is able to deliver in a blow. As we watched they seemed quite graceful but communicating with Marius after we returned to the



UK I learnt of the true seriousness and risk in this form of combat. The day after we left Africa these two continued their battle and with one tremendous and well-aimed swing one bull connected the other a dealt a very rare fatal blow felling his opponent to the ground never to rise again. Instantly there was a 3 day feast ready and waiting for the lions.

Another pride of lions we were watching needed this sort of luck as their hunting skills were really not that well honed. It was quite a large pride with a magnificent

light coloured male who posed for our cameras on some rocks beside the dried up river bed. One lone lioness however spotting a few zebra in the dried up river bed decided to stalk them. She managed to use the limited cover to get right to the edge of the sand river and after a brief moment studying her potential

quarry burst from cover in full pursuit. It was a spectacular experience to watch as was the sound of the zebras hooves as they fled. Unfortunately as she didn't have any back up from the rest of her pride the

zebra escaped. It would have been very different if the other pride members had joined in and especially as they had such a great vantage point on the edge of what was a vast expanse of dried up river bed. Maybe if the lioness we had photographed posing at the feet of the magnificent male lion had thought more about her next meal rather than the handsome hunk beside her things would have been different!



We felt for a couple of chaps who were trying to film a lion kill for National Geographic and

had now spent 90 days in the field but had still failed. Ruaha is such a great area for lions they surely had to succeed eventually. They did on our last day when they managed to film two lionesses killing a warthog. We arrived sometime afterwards to watch a few hooded vultures and two black backed jackals squabbling over the warthogs head.

The last but one day provided another surprise, a report of a rare, for Ruaha, sighting of a lone male cheetah resting under a tree. It was a long drive to get there but well worth it when we arrived even though we were only able to spend a few minutes with the cheetah.

Ruaha provided us with bird species that we didn't see at Impala like the comical hornbills, Chanting Goshawks, Bateleur Eagles, Saddle Billed Storks and the Buff crested Bustard that called throughout the night.

Kwihala was altogether a different but equally memorable experience ensuring this trip lived up to the aim of experiencing two very different aspects of Africa in the one visit, all in an area without that many visitors and with superb local guides and facilities. In the words of one of the trip members she simply "ran out of superlatives".



Bob Brind-Surch

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