Herds of zebras and wildebeest grazing endless grasslands studded with flat-topped acacia trees, dramatic volcanic calderas brimming with big game and predators, red-robed Maasai herding skinny cattle – these are well-known images of quintessential Africa, and they can all be discovered in Kenya and Tanzania. Less well known is that each country hosts more than 1 000 bird species. This diversity, combined with a superb network of protected areas, excellent lodges and friendly people, prompts Adam Riley to recommend them as top birding destinations. Although there are many excellent locations within each nation – think Masai Mara, Amboseli and Kakamega in Kenya and Selous, the Eastern Arc Mountains and Zanzibar in Tanzania – he describes here just six that shouldn’t be missed. They can all be visited in one two-week trip, starting in Nairobi and ending in Arusha. Any time of year is good, even the April–May rainy season when the scenery is lush and there is less dust, and when there are fewer tourists and rates are lower. Expect to net about 450 bird and more than 50 mammal species on an adventure to these parks.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM RILEY
TRUE TO ITS NAME – FROM THE MAASAI WORD SERENGITI, MEANING ‘ENDLESS PLAINS’ – THE 30 000-SQUARE-KILOMETRE SERENGETI ECOSYSTEM STRETCHES ACROSS NORTH-WESTERN TANZANIA INTO THE MASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE IN KENYA. IT IS BEST KNOWN FOR THE ‘GREAT MIGRATION’, A PHENOMENON OF TWO MILLION WILDEBEEST, ZEBRAS, GAZELLES AND ELAND THAT MOVE ACROSS THE REGION’S PLAINS AND WOODLANDS, FOLLOWING AN ANCESTRAL COURSE CHARTED BY SEASONAL RAINFALL. FOR NINE MONTHS OF THE YEAR THIS GREAT BELLOWING HERD CAN BE FOUND IN THE SERENGETI, AND WATCHING THE LONG LINES OF GRUNTING WILDEBEEST TREKKING ACROSS THE PLAINS IS A REMARKABLE EXPERIENCE. THE MIGRATION IS TRACKED NOT ONLY BY HUMANS BUT BY THE PARK’S PREDATORS TOO, AND IMPRESSIVE NUMBERS OF LIONS, CHEETAHS, LEOPARDS, SPOTTED HYAENAS, JACKALS AND CROCODILES TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS MASSIVE GLUT OF PROTEIN, ESPECIALLY DURING THE CALVING SEASON, WHEN UP TO 8 000 WILDEBEEST CALVES ARE DROPPED PER DAY.

NO FEWER THAN 550 BIRD SPECIES HAVE BEEN RECORDED IN THE PARK, A STAGGERING TALLY THAT IS DUE TO THE DIVERSITY OF HABITATS: OPEN GRASSLAND, RIVERINE FOREST, ACACIA THICKET, BROAD-LAIVED WOODLAND, ROCKY OUTCROP, SWAMP AND LAKE. TYPICAL SPECIES INCLUDE VON DER DECKEN’S HORNBILL, NORTHERN WHITE-BELLIED BUSTARD AND THE SHIMMERING HILDEBRANDT’S AND UBQUITOUS SUPERB STARLINGS, AS WELL AS VULTURES, SNAKE-EAGLES AND NUMEROUS SEDEATERS. THE SERENGETI IS ALSO HOME TO SOME SPECIALITIES THAT ARE SOUGHT BY THE MOST HARD-CORE OF BIRDERS: THE LOCALISED GREY-BREASTED SPURFOWL (AN ENDEMIC TO THE GREATER SERENGETI ECOSYSTEM), THE BIZARRE RUFUS-TAILED WEAVER (AN ANCIENT RELICT SPECIES THAT FORMS A LINK BETWEEN SPARROWS AND WEVERS), THE BEAUTIFUL FISCHER’S LOVEBIRD, USAMBIRO BARRBET, GREY-CRESTED HELMET-SHRIKE AND ATHI SHORT-TOED LARK, AS WELL AS THE LITTLE-KNOWN KARAMOJA APALIS, WHICH CAN BE FOUND AMONG WHISTLING-THORN ACACIAS. IT’S POSSIBLE TO SPEND DAY AFTER DAY IN THIS VAST AND PRODUCTIVE WILDERNESS WITHOUT EVER FEELING THAT YOU’VE REACHED THE LIMIT OF BIRDING.
NGORONGORO CRATER
At 610 metres deep and with a valley floor covering 3250 square kilometres, Ngorongoro Crater is the world’s largest unbroken volcanic caldera. It was originally the peak of a giant volcano – one that may even have challenged Kilimanjaro in terms of height – but two to three million years ago it collapsed on itself to form the magnificent feature we know today. Several lodges on the crater’s forested rim provide their guests with unbelievable views (especially at sunset) and access to an incredible wildlife spectacle. About 25 000 head of game, together with the highest density of large predators in the world, make the crater their home. A typical game-viewing day will produce sightings of giant elephants, hundreds of buffaloes, thousands of blue wildebeest, plains zebras, gazelles, East Africa’s most easily seen black rhinos, more spotted hyaenas than you can shake a stick at, and cheetahs, leopards and golden-maned lions.

The birding is no less astounding. In the breeding season, Jackson’s widowbirds jumping out of the tall grass in one of the strangest display flights known to humans. African quailfinches are most easily seen as they come down to drink at waterholes, and the lovely rosy-throated longclaw is nowhere easier to find. The huge, salty Lake Magadi attracts thousands of greater and lesser flamingos, as well as many waterfowl and wader species.

Lerai Forest, dominated by tall acacia trees, teems with birds and is a good place to look for roosting raptors, including bateleurs, martial eagles and various vulture species. Palearctic migrants abound in the northern winter months, among them common whitethroat, common nightingale and eastern olivaceous warbler. Afro-montane forest dominates parts of the crater wall and slopes, and here sunbirds in particular thrive; residents include the golden-winged, with its sickle-shaped bill, as well as Tacazze, bronzy and eastern double-collared. Other species to look out for include Hildebrandt’s spurfowl, the searingly bright Schalow’s turaco, cinnamon-chested bee-eater, grey-capped waxbill, Lynx’s cisticola and ortolan bunting.

TARANGIRE NATIONAL PARK
Lying south-east of the Serengeti, this 2 850-square-kilometre reserve has at its core the Tarangire River, a perennial watercourse that is a haven for wildlife, especially in the dry season when thousands of elephants and other game congregate here. The park’s wetlands and baobab-studded woodlands harbour more than 550 bird species, and they come thick and fast; spend just an hour at the entrance gate and you can tick 100 species!

The local specials are ashy starling (a Tanzanian endemic), yellow-collared lovebird and northern pied babbler. Other species to look out for in the woodlands include bare-faced go-away-bird and the colourful red-and-yellow barbet. Raptors, both diurnal and nocturnal, abound and range from massive Verreaux’s eagle-owls roosting in leafy trees along the river to species of the woodlands such as African hawk-eagle and lizard buzzard.

The big game is, of course, a bonus. In addition to the elephants (they are nowhere more abundant), and finding oneself in the midst of a peacefully feeding family herd is a special experience), there are lions, cheetahs and leopards, and the chances of seeing them are good. Leopards are especially fond of snoozing on the large branches of the park’s many sausage trees.