

# eastern PROMISE

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.

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TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM RILEY



Masses of lesser flamingos paint Lake Nakuru an incredible pink.

## LAKE NAKURU NATIONAL PARK

Situated in the Great Rift Valley north-west of Nairobi, Lake Nakuru National Park conserves its namesake soda lake as well as woodland, wetland and cliff habitats within its 188-square-kilometre extent. The lake supports arguably the greatest avian spectacle on the planet: up to two million flamingos - both greater and lesser - that form a pink corridor around the shore. The number varies, depending on the water level and the stage in the breeding cycle, but usually at least a million of these elegant birds are present, voraciously filtering an estimated 250 000 kilograms of algae per hectare of lake each year.

Other waterbirds abound too, including pelicans, egrets, storks, ibises, spoonbills, ducks, terns and waders.

The woodlands also harbour excellent birds. Ones to look out for include the rare grey-crested helmet-shrike (sometimes in mixed flocks with white-crested helmet-shrikes), red-throated and white-bellied tits, banded parsonia, Hildebrandt's spurfowl and little rock-thrush.

The game viewing in this park is not to be scoffed at either. Leopard and lion numbers are healthy, but the real specialities are Kenya's largest populations of both black and white rhinos and the localised Rothschild's giraffe.



## SAMBURU NATIONAL RESERVE

At the northern limit of our circuit, this sanctuary, along with neighbouring Buffalo Springs and Shaba national reserves, provides prime Somali-Masai arid-zone birding and access to many species that are not easily found elsewhere in Kenya. Highlights of a few days' birding here are likely to include Somali ostrich, the rather aberrant vulturine guineafowl, Somali courser, the diminutive Somali bee-eater, white-headed mousebird, Donaldson-Smith's sparrow-weaver, the localised Williams's, masked and Friedmann's larks, the stunning golden-breasted and massive bristle-crowned starlings, and the golden pipit with its beautiful, buttercup-yellow plumage. These species are just a small selection of many tantalising possibilities in a region that offers truly spectacular birding.

The rugged landscape, verdant Ewaso Ng'iro River, desolate lava fields and fantastic wildlife are additional attractions. Besides big cats, look out for the remarkably attractive Grevy's zebra, the reticulated giraffe (most beautiful of all the giraffe subspecies), lesser kudu, Beisa oryx and the strange, long-necked gerenuk. ▶



The arid, acacia-studded savanna of Samburu, Shaba and Buffalo Springs national reserves are interspersed with rugged hill ranges.

LEFT Donaldson-Smith's sparrow-weaver is one of the attractions of a visit to Samburu and fortunately it is commonly encountered.



TOP The rich afro-montane forests cloaking Mount Kenya offer superb birding.

Despite its vibrant coloration, Doherty's bush-shrike is not easily seen in Mount Kenya's forest vegetation.



DAVID SHACKELFORD

### MOUNT KENYA NATIONAL PARK

This UNESCO World Heritage Site protects Africa's second-highest mountain (5199 metres) and the afro-alpine, bamboo and forest zones that clad this snow-capped peak. At 715 square kilometres it's a large park, and you can get a substantial bird list by visiting as many elevation zones as possible. At the base of Mount Kenya, riverine thickets harbour the remarkably scalloped Hinde's pied babbler, an extraordinary (and, according to the IUCN Red Data List, Vulnerable) species in that each individual sports a unique plumage pattern.

The forested zone provides the richest birding, with chances to see the likes of the sought-after olive ibis, red-fronted parrot, Hartlaub's turaco, montane nightjar, bar-tailed trogon, Tullberg's woodpecker, Kenrick's and Sharpe's starlings, the vibrant Doherty's bush-shrike and the lovely Abyssinian crimsonwing, not to mention noisy families of white-headed wood-hoopoes.

A rugged road leading to a meteorological station takes you through bamboo habitat into the afro-alpine heaths, and in these zones it pays to look out for the attractive Jackson's spurfowl, Abyssinian ground-thrush, moorland chat and cinnamon bracken and mountain yellow warblers, as well as the high-elevation scarlet-tufted sunbird.

Although less often encountered than their savanna counterparts, the Mount Kenya sanctuary's mammal species include suni, giant forest hog, tree hyrax, guereza colobus and the thickly insulated Sykes' monkey. For safety rather than checklist purposes, also watch out for African buffalo and elephants!



### SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK

True to its name – from the Maasai word *serengeti*, 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 ancient 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 hyenas, 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.

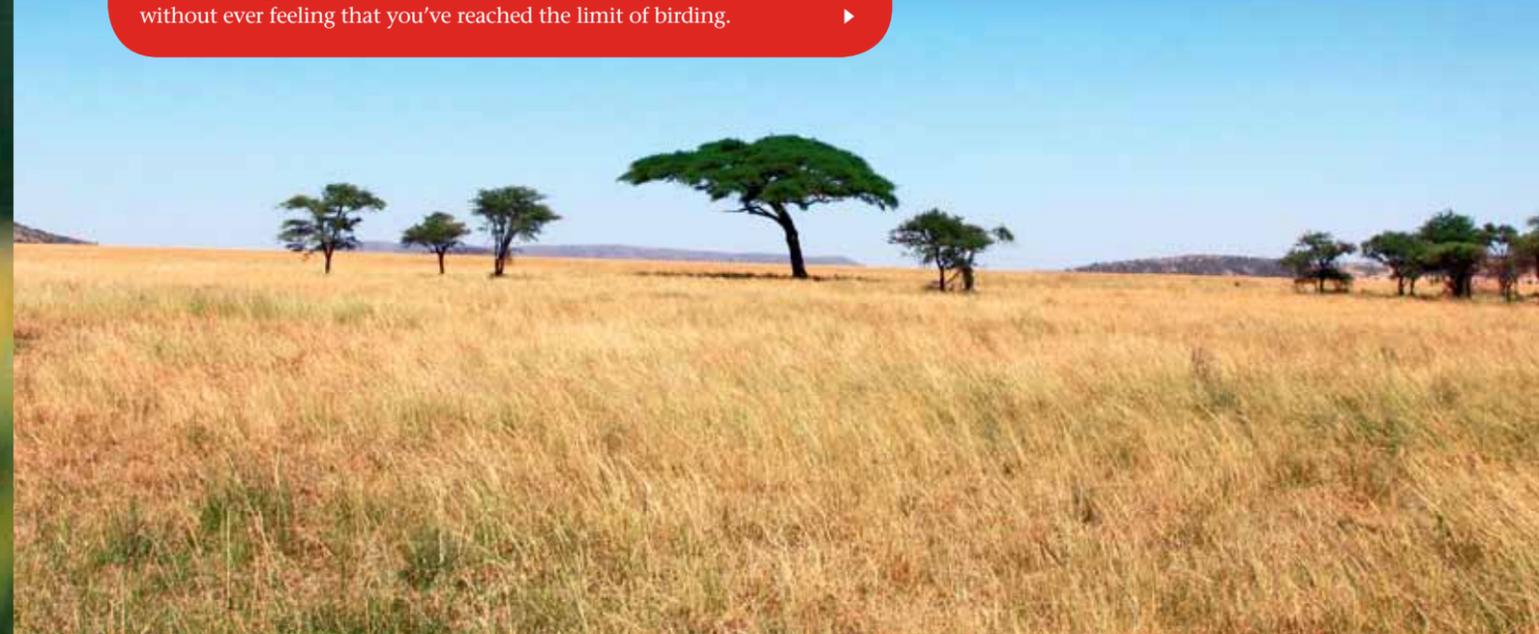
No fewer than 550 bird species have been recorded in the park, a staggering tally that is due to the diversity of habitats: open grassland, riverine forest, acacia thicket, broad-leaved woodland, rocky outcrop, swamp and lake. Typical species include Von der Decken's hornbill, northern white-bellied bustard and the shimmering Hildebrandt's and ubiquitous superb starlings, as well as vultures, snake-eagles and numerous seed-eaters. 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 rufous-tailed weaver (an ancient relict species that forms a link between sparrows and weavers), the beautiful Fischer's lovebird, Usambiro barbet, 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. ▶



The Serengeti's habitats are far more varied than this 'typical' view of its acacia-dotted grassland suggests, and together they support a wide range of birds.

ABOVE, LEFT Fischer's lovebird is one of the Serengeti's localised specialities.

ABOVE, RIGHT A common - and attractive - endemic in the Serengeti, the grey-breasted spurfowl can be seen in riverine thickets and acacia scrub and woodland.





LEFT Red-and-yellow barbets are usually seen near the termite mounds in which they nest.

BELOW Typically of flycatchers, the silverbird perches prominently as it watches for its insect prey.

BOTTOM Tarangire National Park's open woodland is rich in birds and wildlife, especially along its centrepiece river.

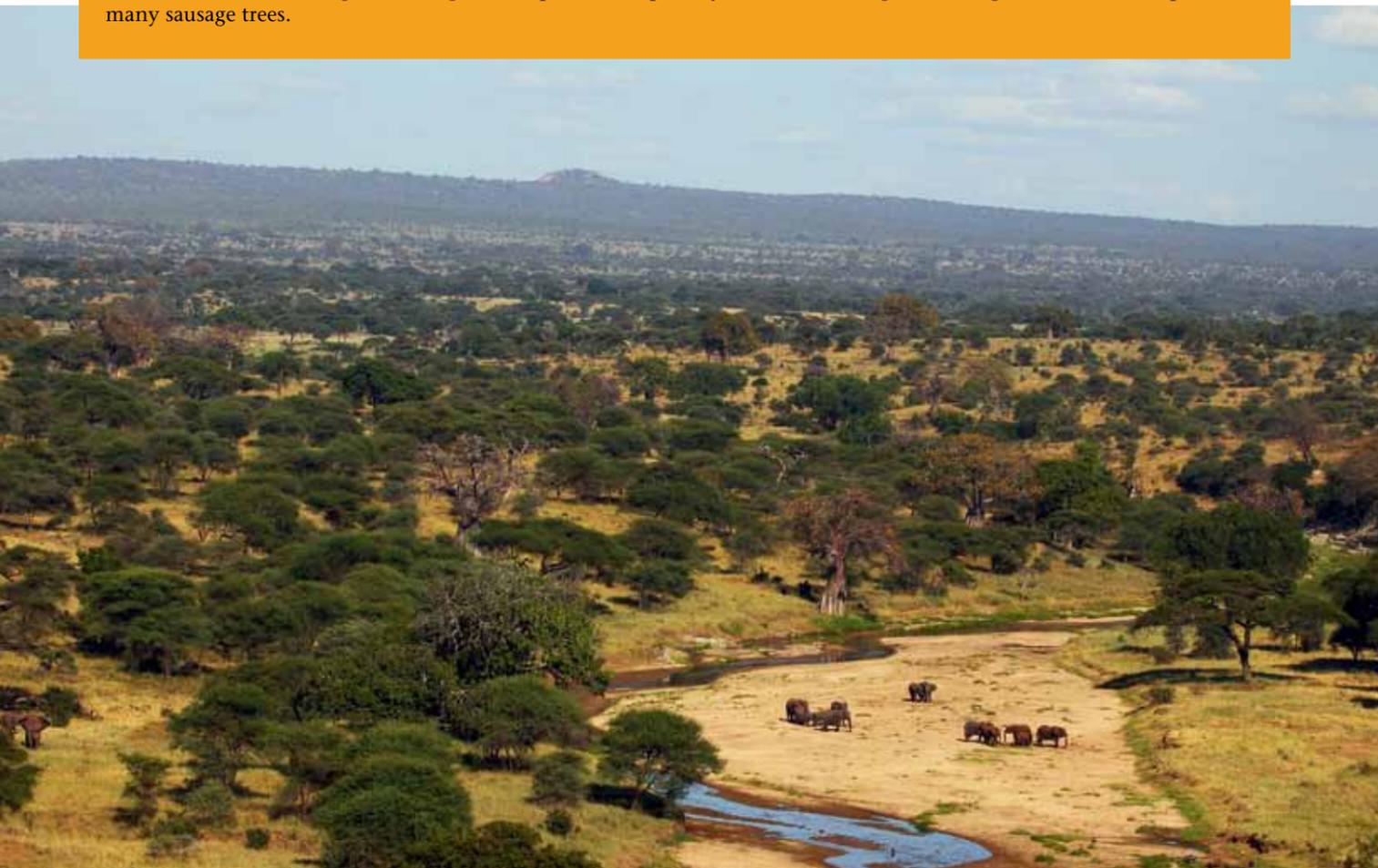


## TARANGIRE NATIONAL PARK

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.



## NGORONGORO CRATER

At 610 metres deep and with a valley floor covering 260 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 elephant bulls (interestingly, the steep crater walls discourage family herds of elephants, as well as giraffes), thousands of blue wildebeest, plains zebras, buffaloes and gazelles, East Africa's most easily seen black rhinos, more spotted hyenas 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 jump 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 oliveaceous 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 warbler, Lynes's cisticola and oriole finch.

The forested slopes of Ngorongoro Crater drop down into the world's largest intact caldera, which is covered with grassland, woodland and lakes.

BELOW, LEFT The crater's moist grassland is home to the rosy-throated longclaw and is one of the best places in Africa to see this lovely species.



ALBIE VENTER



Bronzy sunbirds haunt the forested rim of Ngorongoro Crater, their presence betrayed by piercing, rapidly repeated calls.