



Photo workshop

The best of the beasts

Here: when light levels are low, conditions are ideal for using slow shutter speeds to create motion blur. This shot was taken just after sun-up and I shot into the light so that the back-lit beards of the wildebeest would stand out

Right: the short grass plains of the Southern Serengeti are one of the best cheetah areas in Africa, and with patience it's possible to see numerous individuals and regular hunting attempts



Most encounters with lions offer dull photo opportunities as they spend so much time resting and sleeping. It pays to be patient, though. After watching the pride do very little for three hours, I was rewarded with a brief flurry of late afternoon activity including this cub interacting with its dad



Wild April

Tanzania's northern safari circuit encompasses a number of other parks and locations

NGORONGORO CRATER

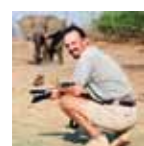
East Africa in 'microcosm', this giant grass and forest covered bowl (it's a caldera 18 miles across) offers endless opportunities at any time of the year. All the classic mammal species (except giraffes) live within the impressive 800m high walls and most are extremely tolerant and easy to approach. The Crater is one of the few places to get really good sightings of black rhinos and it's the best place I know to see huge, tusked bull elephants.

TARANGIRE NATIONAL PARK

One of Tanzania's most picturesque parks, Tarangire offers something different from the other locations in the northern circuit. The park is centered on its eponymous river, which acts like a magnet, drawing in wildlife from the Masai Steppe to the east. The river valley landscape is dominated by impressive baobabs, which often have groups of statuesque elephants under them. Leopards are also frequently seen and bird life is abundant.

LAKE MANYARA

While April may not be the absolute best time here, it's still worthwhile. The ground water forest near the entrance is a habitat not encountered elsewhere, and which harbours an array of different species. The lakeshore also offers excellent bird photo opportunities and the adjacent bushland is good for elephants, giraffes and zebra. Just don't always expect to see the famous 'tree climbing' lions.



The Mara-Serengeti wildebeest migration presents a photographer with unusual challenges, says **Nick Garbutt**. Capturing the vast scale, avoiding crowds, and taking pictures from a moving vehicle

It's often been called the 'greatest wildlife show on earth' and while such accolades are a matter of opinion, there is no denying that the annual migration of 1.5 million wildebeest and 750,000 zebra in the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem is one of those 'must see' events for any wildlife enthusiast or photographer.

So often TV documentaries annoy me, as they erroneously imply that the migration only happens at a specific time of year. This is not so, it is an ongoing event with the herds constantly on the move in search of the best pasture and grazing. Their movements are governed by the annual cycle of rains, which

dictates that the animals follow a predictable yearly circuit around the vast ecosystem. So it is possible to witness the spectacle at any time, providing you go to the right place.

However, there is considerable variation in what might be seen and, more specifically, photographed in different localities. In May and June the herds are primarily in the western Serengeti (often called the 'western corridor'), where water is restricted to pools in the Grumeti River. Thirsty animals are forced to the water's edge to drink. They are always nervous and tentative when quenching their thirsts, and for good reason. Lurking beneath the

calm surface are some of the largest crocodiles in Africa. Giants over 5m long frequently ambush wildebeest by launching from under the water to grab an animal and drag it back to the depths. But this feast is short lived, as the herds move on by July and the crocodiles are forced to fast for the rest of the year until the wildebeest return.

Between late July and the end of September the herds are in the far north of the ecosystem, primarily in Kenya's Masai Mara Game Reserve. Here they frequently cross the Mara River back and forth, and again run the gauntlet of hungry crocodiles. These river crossings are perhaps the most famous spectacle

associated with the migration and late August through to the end of September is a particularly busy time for tourists and photographers in the Masai Mara. Because it is difficult to get away from the crowds, those treasured exclusive animal encounters that yield the best images are harder to come by.

By late October most animals have left the Masai Mara and can be found heading south down the eastern regions of the Serengeti and adjacent Loliondo Game Controlled Area. These are more remote locations with fewer safari camp options and the migration has no real 'focus', other than the animals monotonously moving south, so this is perhaps the least rewarding period for a photographer.

The herds' goal is to reach the short grass plains of the southern Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA). Front runners arrive by mid December, and more and more animals stream into

this huge area well into January. The grasses on the plains are extremely rich and fertile, so this is where the wildebeest choose to give birth. Most calves are born during February, with a glut of half a million arriving in a two to three week period. Not surprisingly, this attracts large numbers of carnivores, with lions, cheetah, hyenas and leopards readily seen. I know of no finer place to photograph cheetahs - the open habitat is perfect for their sight-chase hunting technique - and the glut of baby wildebeest and gazelles serves up a constant conveyor belt of food.

The herds remain on the short grass plains until mid-late April and the month or so prior to this is my favourite time for photography, not only because the action can be endless, fast and furious, but also because there is so much space that it is possible to get away from it all and be on your own. This is further

The Long Gully and Big Marsh areas near Ndutu often attract huge numbers of wildebeest that pass through between February and April, following the region's rainstorms



helped in that much of the prime areas are actually outside the official bounds of the Serengeti National Park and inside the NCA, where rules are more relaxed and it is possible to drive off-road.

The early morning light is often glorious, which makes for very evocative photo opportunities. In the afternoon huge rainstorms regularly build, creating dark, brooding skies that provide spectacularly moody backdrops.

These wide open spaces serve up an overwhelming feeling of freedom and the chance to gaze across vast unimpeded vistas. These can also be intimidating photographically, though, as it's difficult to depict the horizon-to-horizon grandeur adequately, and translate the vast numbers of animals into images that convey concentrations of wildlife. My solution has been to employ image-stitching techniques to create panoramas. The premise is simple - take two or more images that overlap and combine them into one picture, such that the final image covers a greater field of view and is more detailed.

While this technique can be used with any lens, in the Serengeti it is especially powerful when used with a telephoto lenses. I can hone in on a more distant subject like a lion or bird, then broaden the field of view to include elements each side and so place the subject more in the context of its environment. It is also equally effective when focusing on the herds and is a powerful way of translating the vast numbers of animals

into a single picture. Telephoto lenses help here, too. When focusing on more distant animals the foreshortening effect of the telephoto helps 'compress' the herds and convey how densely packed they can be.

Virtually all safari photography is from a vehicle, which means the choice of type is important. I prefer safari vehicles with separate roof hatches, which have been appropriately modified to allow maximum visibility while sitting as well as standing. Of even greater importance is the competence and quality of the driver-guide who not only fully understands wildlife, but also light and positioning a vehicle to best effect. I've done trips over the years where the drivers have fallen short and my photo opportunities have been compromised. Thankfully now I work with guides who are extremely good and this has certainly been reflected in my results.

The descent from the Ngorongoro Highlands onto the Serengeti Plains is spectacular. Here, two Masai giraffe feed on whistling thorn bushes with the plains stretching out behind them



What's in my kit bag?

Nick reveals the essential equipment he takes on a photo trip to Africa



NIKON D3S X2, NIKON D300S

Digital SLRs with fast firing rates really come into their own. When the action is fast and furious (as it often is), it is not practical to repeatedly change lenses, hence three bodies, each with a different lens attached.

NIKKOR 500MM F4, NIKKOR 200-400MM F4 NIKKOR 70-200MM F2.8

These are my three principle 'on safari' lenses, with the 70-200mm attached to the D300s. The fast apertures mean I can shoot when light levels are low, early and late in the day, plus I have the option to throw the background out of focus to increase emphasis on the subject.

A BEANBAG

Vehicle based safaris are about the only time I don't use a tripod, but prefer the flexibility of large beanbags. I can use one on a window or roof hatch edge and even resting on the ground. I travel with them empty (to save weight), then fill them up locally with rice or beans.

DUST COVERS

Safaris are always dusty and a fine deposit can be ruinous, especially if it gets inside the camera body. So I have home-made tubular bags that I slot each camera/lens combination into to keep the dust at bay. Pillow cases are a workable and easy alternative. Minimising the chance of dust getting into the camera is another good reason not to keep changing lenses.

LAPTOP AND EXTERNAL HDS

I prefer to carry a laptop with me and download images each day onto an external hard drive, which I duplicate onto a second hard drive to back up. This saves carrying a lot of memory cards and also means I can do some basic editing in the field, rather than facing a mountain of images to trawl through when I get home.