

# Witt's Wanderings

by John W. Witt

The Serengeti is most aptly and poetically described in the pages of my favorite guidebook on Tanzania:

The Serengeti is where Africa's mystery, rawness and power surround you, and where the beauty and synchrony of nature can be experienced as in few other places. On its vast treeless plains, one of earth's most impressive natural cycles plays itself out again and again, as tens of thousands of hoofed animals, driven by primeval rhythms of survival, move constantly in search of fresh grasslands. — Lonely Planet *Tanzania*, 4th ed. (2008), p. 216.

I can't really recreate the route we took that first day in the Serengeti. The Park roads are unmarked and, for the most part, unpaved. We just drove to areas where the experience of our driver/guide, Ami, told him animals were likely to be.

There was plenty of wildlife activity. We saw our first large cats that morning. We were introduced to kopjes (a Dutch word, pronounced "copy"), huge granite rocks, technically called inselbergs, which provide shelter and collect water for wildlife and plants. In fact, it was below a looming kopje that we saw our first cheetahs. Two young adults were lounging at the top of the large rock formation from which they could spot likely candidates for their dinner's main course.

The afternoon highlight happened near a body of water. A large herd of zebras, obviously wanting a drink, had entered the water to satisfy the urge. As we watched, the routine was that they'd get into the water, stay there for a while and then suddenly turn and gallop back up the bank to high ground. They'd stand there looking longingly at the water until one or two brave individuals would venture a return to the water. All the rest would quickly follow. This process was repeated several times while we were there.

We saw a couple of solitary female lions (Ami told us they're the real hunters in any pride of lions) loitering around the periphery of the scene, but they didn't seem particularly aggressive. Then we spotted a pair of eyes and a snout barely breaking the surface on the other side. It was a crocodile, silently (without the ticks and tocks of the clock in the croc in *Peter Pan*—apologies to J. M. Barrie) edging closer.

We'll never know whether the lions or the crocodile caused the zebras' nervousness but, after three or four soirees into the water, they hurried out and hustled away. As far as we could tell, the lions and the croc, if they were hoping to get their next meals, were frustrated, at least for a time.

Ami told us it's rare for an individual lion to attack a zebra, however. They're too big, too fast and too powerful for a lion to take down. In fact, a zebra's kick can do serious damage to a lion. We later learned, however, teamwork by a group of lions can do the job effectively.

We stopped at the first of several hippopotami pools. The huge beasts apparently spend most of their time immersing themselves in the still water of pools made murky by their own excrement. It hardly seems an idyllic life, but I guess they're happy with it.

Riding along the dusty, unimproved roads that afternoon, we spotted the head of a young male lion, visible just above the long grass, perhaps 25 or 30 yards away, on the right side of the Cruiser. It's a remarkable feeling to see a large wild animal like this fellow, without the customary protection of the moat or steel bars that keep animals and humans safely apart in zoos.

At one point, Ami noted large white birds standing majestically at the edge of a murky pond. He identified them as Yellowbilled Storks (*mycteria ibis*), an example of the waterfowl resident in the Serengeti, wherever water is found. I got several pictures of majestic giraffes quietly grazing as we passed by. A small herd of elephants was close to the road, too. The experience was truly unforgettable.

Next day, passing the spot where we'd watched the zebras, the lions and the croc the day before, we found young male lions finishing off the carcass of a wildebeest. Who made the kill and when it was made was anybody's guess. As I mentioned earlier, the kill is often made by a lioness,

with the males merely enjoying the result of the hunt. But lots of times, the lions merely wait around for hyenas to make a kill. The victim is then shared by both lions and hyenas. It became apparent that when each young lion had eaten his fill, he found a nice shady spot to relax, napping perhaps, but otherwise allowing digestion to take its course.

Nothing stopped the huge northward migration of the zebras and wildebeests, however. In some places, you could see queues of animals extending from one horizon to the opposite. Often there were several queues, but all headed in the same general direction. Near a large pond lay the carcass of an unfortunate gazelle. The predators and their scavenger assistants had pretty well consumed everything down to the bones. That's the law of nature in action, I guess.

Early on, we passed a group of warthogs—ugly beasts—not too different in size from large domestic pigs. I wouldn't want to tangle with an angry one, though come to think of it, I wouldn't want to tangle with an angry *domestic* pig, either.

We passed the corpse of a wildebeest, which apparently had yet to suffer the indignity of its transformation into a meal for the lions. The diners were lurking around, however, and you wouldn't want to mess around with the body, at peril of ticking the lions off. We spotted at least four of them lounging in the nearby weeds.

Speaking of lions, we were moving along beside the migrating zebras and wildebeests, a good 50 to 100 yards away, when Ami looking through his binoculars, suddenly shouted a shocked, "My God! My God!" adding that he'd just seen the take-down of a zebra by lions. It happened right in the middle of a column of zebras moving north. It was so fast that, by the time Ami had finished his shout, it was over. All we could see was the dust caused by some sort of a commotion. Ami excitedly said it was the first time in years he'd seen such an attack.

What Ami had seen was one lion jumping on the back of a zebra, with the zebra falling, apparently mortally injured. Ami said there must have been four or five lions collaborating in the attack. As one leaped on the zebra's back, one or two went for the throat and others went for the belly. The remainder of the zebra herd reacted by swiftly moving away from the scene.

It was in the afternoon of the second full Serengeti day that we enjoyed one of our best experiences. I think Lenora saw the lion first. It was lounging in the shade of a large tree about 15 yards away on our left. We started by, but then I saw one even closer, though on the right side of the Cruiser. The second lion was a young male, judging by its incomplete mane. He was just lying there under the shade of a tree not more than 10 yards from the side of the road. He stayed there acting oblivious to all the human activity near him, while we marveled at how close we had come, with impunity, to the "King of Beasts" in his natural habitat.

The next morning, we reluctantly left the Serengeti on our way to Lake Manyara. There was one memorable stop, however, at a Maasai village. I'll tell you about the Maasai next time.