

# Running with the herd: The great migration

THEY CALL IT 'THE GREATEST WILD SHOW ON EARTH' FOR A REASON:

A CONTINUOUS AND COMPLEX ODYSSEY OF 2 MILLION HERBIVORES

ACROSS THE EAST AFRICAN INTERIOR ON A RAIN QUEST.

Words by Caroline Lindström

→ Wildebeest mothers time their births so that they happen between 9am and 11am, which is when hyenas are resting.



Serengeti Safari Camp game drive - Nomad Tanzania

My first immersion into the drama of the Serengeti migration was vicarious. I was working for the wildlife film-maker Hugo van Lawick, but viewing his extraordinary footage as it was couriered to the London office only hastened my return to Africa.

Punctuated here and there by the tan flank of a Thomson's gazelle, the columns of wildebeest are moving steadily over the rolling grassland, coalescing into groups at times, then separating again into grey skeins which stretch to the treeless horizon. Sphinx-like on a high granite outcrop, a lioness watches the herds pass, and blue in the distance is the extinct volcano **Lemagrut**. This is a primeval scene – one which never fails to stir something in us, perhaps the echo of something our ancestors routinely witnessed. It is one of the last intact migrations on earth, covering an area of some 16,000km<sup>2</sup> of high plateau in **East Africa**, many political administrations, and a mosaic of habitats. Every year over 2 million wildebeest,

zebra, and gazelle move in sequence around the system, following the rain and the best grazing. Nowhere else on the planet can one experience such a spectacular congregation and diversity of large mammals. So when delegates met in Stockholm in 1972 to discuss areas deemed the most precious natural assets in the world, it was the **Serengeti** that came top of the list. It was there that the concept of **World Heritage Sites** was born.

When is the best time to experience it? There is no simple answer: the migration is an ongoing, dynamic process, and the herds tend to move in a vaguely clockwise direction in search of localised rain, so the trick is to intercept them. Common sense might dictate it would be preferable, therefore,

to choose a mobile safari operator, but these days a number of camps and lodges in the Serengeti and **Kenya's Maasai Mara** can virtually guarantee access to the spectacle, challenging though it may be at times.

A general pattern has emerged, nonetheless. By late November and December the wildebeest are arriving on the short-grass southern plains south and east of **Seronera**, near **Ndutu** (Tanzania) and north of the **Ngorongoro Conservation Area**, urged on by the scent of sprouting grass. This is particularly nutritious thanks to deposits of calcium and phosphorus-rich volcanic ash which have accumulated over millennia. A bonus for photographers are the numerous lion prides which



#### SPECTACULAR SAFARIS

Planning of any safari is best left to the specialists to avoid disappointment, given migration variables. **Journeys by Design** [www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com) offer an impressive portfolio of luxury camps in the region and they are sincere in their commitment to conservation and communities. For the sense of freedom that one enjoys with a mobile safari consider **&Beyond's Serengeti Under Canvas** [www.andbeyondafrica.com](http://www.andbeyondafrica.com) or the perennially outstanding **Nomad** [www.nomad-tanzania.com](http://www.nomad-tanzania.com) for their **Serengeti Safari Camp**. For me one camp literally stands above all others: **Nomad's Lamai Serengeti**, which, built into a remote **kopje**, provides a stunning view of all the action.

→ The migration was virtually unknown until Bernard and Michael Grzimek flew over the area in the 1950s.


**BY THE NUMBERS**
**420**

Estimated tonnes of dung deposited daily.

**24**

Hours taken for a calf to run as fast as its mother.

**3,000**

Number of lions in the Serengeti.

**3.6 million**

The age in years of the hominid footprints at Laetoli, near Olduvai.

hunt in the marsh and woodland here, while the open plains are perfect terrain for cheetah.

From January to March the herds are moving with the local rain showers, which are refreshing the grassland. Zebra stay with the wildebeest because they feel safe, but move in front in a fringe to eat the greater bulk of the grass – and in their wake are scattered the gazelle. Up to half a million wildebeest calves are born during a short window of three to four weeks around February (predators can only eat so much), and the gangly offspring can run with the herd within minutes to evade the predator outriders. If the **Southern Plains** become particularly denuded, the herds may wander as far west as **Maswa Game Reserve**, or east and south into the Ngorongoro Conservation Area.

April sees the herds dispersing west before starting their great exodus north through the scattered woodland and long grass plains before streaming past the **Moru Kopje**, following the **Mbalageti River**. Game drives are a challenge at this time, but there are few other visitors to blot the Pleistocene panorama. As the thunderheads disperse, columns of wildebeest continue to enter the **Western Corridor** of the Serengeti, and towards the end of the month there is a sense of expectation as the herd rumbles into the narrow wedge of land between the forest-lined **Mbalageti** and

**Grumeti Rivers**. It is worth tolerating the often sticky driving conditions for the sight of grasslands in flower and the tumult and testosterone of the wildebeest rut. In years when the rains persist throughout May, the wildebeest may be scattered over a wide area of the central Serengeti, so do obtain a local report. Camps in the Seronera region are still a good option.

From June to July some of the migration then heads due north of Seronera, but most herds are usually farther west; the wildebeest are often milling on the south side of the Grumeti River. Here they congregate, often building up to a significant density before forging the river – which is only a series of pools. While they always represent an annual feast for the Grumeti's leviathan crocs, these crossings are not considered to be as spectacular as the dramas on the Mara.

August sees the wildebeest continuing to move northwards, often fanning out across a broad front, some heading through Ikorongo, others through the heart of the Serengeti National Park. The animals are seeking the relatively untouched rolling grasslands of the **Maasai Mara**, where the migration faces its most serious hurdle: here the river rushes through the northern Serengeti from Kenya's adjacent **Maasai Mara Game Reserve**, the country's finest wildlife sanctuary. Watching the frantic herds massing to cross the **Mara**

**River** then plunging into the torrent in frenzied, terrified waves can be both mesmerising and macabre – and now oddly familiar to us. This **Top End** of the Serengeti is a place of space and solitude, a favourite of 'old Africa hands', and the resident game is prolific. By October the wildebeest herds have exhausted the grazing and pools of the Mara, and are heading back with renewed purpose, the cows heavy with calf, through western **Loliendo** and **Lobo**, back to the green flush of the southern plains from whence they came. 🌍


**SERENGETI STORY: LIFE AND SCIENCE IN THE WORLD'S GREATEST WILDLIFE REGION.**

By **Anthony R.E. Sinclair**. Oxford University Press. This highly readable account published in 2012 documents Sinclair's lifetime's work as scientist in the Serengeti, often facing extraordinary challenges during times of economic, social and political change. It is an entertaining companion to the ecology and history of the region and a useful introduction to the issues threatening it today – but certainly no dry textbook. Though optimistic in tone, his lesson is nonetheless that 'nothing is ever secure against human greed'.



Lamai Serengeti bedroom



Nduara Loliondo 2 – Nomad Tanzania



Chada Katavi cheetah – Nomad Tanzania

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