

Kenya: Laikipia & The Aberdares

Mammal Watching

A Greentours Itinerary

Kenya has perhaps the richest mammal fauna on the whole continent. The extensive system of long-protected areas means that nature is both pretty much as it should be within the national parks but also well-habituated to viewers. The now long-established conservancy system has added another layer to the protection of wildlife in Kenya and now some of the very best places to watch mammals in Kenya are inside the conservancies.

Two of Kenya's rarest and most wonderful mammals head a treasure-trove of amazing wildlife. The magnificent Bongo, and the black form of Leopard.

Day 1

Arrive Nairobi

Days 2 – 4(am)

Elmenteita & the Soysambu Conservancy

After a night in Nairobi we head up across the flank of the Aberdares before descending into the Rift Valley by Naivasha and thence to Elmenteita and the Soysambu Conservancy which protects the northern fringes of the lake. Waterbuck and Cape Buffalo, Warthogs and Impala are along the lakeshore, alongside great flocks of Flamingos and White Pelicans. At night we'll visit extensive areas of grassy bushland which are full of activity. Spotted Hyenas are abundant and there are plenty of Black-backed Jackals too. This is probably the northern limit of Spring Hare distribution in Kenya and we'll see a goodly number jumping through the night. White-tailed Mongooses are quite common. Other species that will require a modicum of luck include Aardworf, Aardvark, Honey Badger, Bush Pig, Bush Duiker and Porcupine.

Days 4(pm – 6(am)

The Ol Pejeta Conservancy & Sweetwaters

The Ol Pejeta Conservancy has been around for a while. The protection it affords the wildlife of the plains west of Mount Kenya has resulted in a massive increase in the numbers of many species in the past twenty years, especially the last ten years. Sweetwaters is a great base to explore it from. A waterhole provides the focus and the lovely tented rooms are spread amongst wildlife-filled grounds, all with views out to the waterhole. Instead of the usual obvious fence they've dug a ha-ha all the way along the waterhole-facing side with a fence in its ditch so that standing back from the edge you are hardly aware of the protection. And protection is

needed for the herds of Cape Buffalo are huge! Not to say that some animals haven't figured it out. At night Waterbuck are everywhere around the lawns, and they are literally jumping the fence. Other wildlife we'll see around the grounds include Senegal Bushbabies which around some of the rooms come out even before its dark. And there's Tree Hyraxes – their diabolical calls provide a fantastical soundscape after dark mixed with the lowing of the Buffalo. Out an about round the conservancy the landscapes are rolling downs with thorn scrub dominating the valleys and slopes. Dams provide water points for the multitudes where frogs sing hilariously. There are large aggregations of mammals on the downs. Herds of Impala, Plain's Zebra, Thompson's Gazelle and Grant's Gazelle. Here the Giraffes are of the reticulated form. There are lots of Woodland Warthogs and we've a good chance of seeing the often elusive Steenbock. Night drives are very good. Lions are plentiful, so too Spotted Hyenas and Black-backed Jackals, and we've a good chance of seeing Striped Hyenas and Caracal too.

Days 6(pm) – 9(am)

Laikipia

Laikipia is a really special place. It is one of a string of conservancies forming a near continuous protected area all the way from Ol Pejeta right up to Samburu – a vast tract of African bush that has not only protected status but which is connected enough to allow for the movement of animals from one end to the other. Laikipia has also benefitted from an enlightened team who have worked very hard to get to know the ever-increasing richness of animal-life in their domain. In particular their knowledge of the movements and ecology of Leopards and their 'black pearl' are exemplary. The property has just the one small lodge and it is small, so there's no more than 5-6 vehicles out on any one day (or night) and as its privately owned they can go anywhere. And you can get out too! Dinner in the bush, or being on foot with the Wild Dogs, it all happens here.

Leopards are everywhere, you'll see three or four on most outings. But it's the way you see them – they are very much active day and night and are completely unconcerned by the vehicles. There are some truly impressive males and you get so close you can almost touch them. Laikipia's black Leopard is known as Giza and she's being wowing visitors to the lodge for four years now. She has a territory around the River Camp – that's where we'll be staying. She's a lithe animal, totally black, but with the red-lamps from the guides you can see there's still those characteristic leopard prints all over her. Amazingly no less than five black Leopards are known within a few kilometres of the camp! Three are youngsters. Not Giza's - she's got normal coloured ones! They are not seen often yet, but one of the other black ones is starting to become used to the vehicles too...

Laikipia's terrain is beautiful with long valleys with equally long ridges aligned rather east to west with the Ewaso Nyiro (or an upper tributary of it) forming the western

boundary of the property. This is the same river that descends through Samburu and Buffalo Springs some hours to the north. The country is well-bushed, with the bush relatively open in places, quite thick in others but in almost all areas the Laikipia guides are able to drive through it if something is seen!

African Wild Dogs have been more or less resident in Laikipia for a long time. The current pack of six adults spend about half their time in Laikipia, so are sometimes absent for a couple of days at a time. Given three days we've a strong chance of meeting up with them. And when we do there's no doubt we'll have a lot of fun. Mornings and evenings Wild Dogs are always on the move and doing something, so as we follow them we'll learn about their life in the bush and they'll reveal many of the bushes secrets to us too. Striped Hyenas and Black-backed Jackals often follow them. Apparently the hyenas like the dog faecies! We will be encouraged to get out of the vehicle and photograph the Wild Dogs on foot. Sometimes they may be only three or four metres away! Though the dogs may look directly at us they take no interest and carry on as normal. Extraordinary.

The abundance of Gunther's Dik-diks with their inflated gingery noses, has to be seen to be believed. They are super-common, with pairs every hundred metres or so. And this is one of the reasons for the high densities of predators, Leopards as well as mid-sized predators. Other antelope are also common such as Impala and Grant's Gazelle. Rarer are the elegant Greater Kudu. There are also a lot of Warthog and both Plain's Zebra and Grevy's Zebra.

The general pattern of activity for us in Laikipia is to go out in the morning and then again in the afternoon, and as dusk falls stop for a sundowner (or a bush dinner one night) and then after dark make our way back. These night trips in Laikipia are supremely active. Leopards are on the prowl every evening. And Lions too. But it's the smaller predators that are so abundant. As well as the ubiquitous Black-backed Jackals and Spotted Hyenas, Bat-eared Foxes and especially Striped Hyenas are rather common. Common Genets insinuate themselves through the thorny scrub while Zorillas are busy in tussocky clearing. African Wild Cats and Serval are easy to see on the grassy ridgetops.

Though we'll concentrate very much on the mammals the birdlife is excellent too.

Days 9(pm) & 10(am)

The Ark

The Ark is a unique place. The building itself sails like some ancient galleon into a marshy hollow that draws all manner of great wildlife to it. Elephants are of course the main actors in the waterhole drama acted out every night here. It's a continuous melodrama of too-ing and froing, tusk-clanking sparing and overheated males chasing females back and forth. Spotted Hyenas come and go, Bushbuck too. Blotched Genets frequent the lodge itself and we'll also find

them around the bird feeder at dusk and dawn, often with the local form of Slender Mongoose and Small-eared Galagos. The diminutive Suni is easy to see under the short walkway, evening and morning. Giant Forest Hogs, a truly sizeable pig, are plentiful night and day, Woodland Warthogs only in the daytime.

Days 10(pm) – 13(am)

The Rhino Retreat and the Aberdares National Park

Not long ago the thought of seeing the elusive and totally magnificent Bongo was just a pipedream in the Aberdares. The *isaaci* subspecies of Bongo, often known as the Mountain Bongo, is so rare it is amazing it still exists. Extinct on the Ugandan side, this subspecies is now confined to four isolated populations in Kenya, with the largest one, of around fifty animals, here in the Aberdares. The males are truly spectacular antelopes – brilliant orange decked out with sharp white stripes and neat black and white markings – like a bushbuck on steroids. At the Rhino Retreat a male visits often. Not every night, but usually every other night, and with a three night stay our chances are strong. Sammy, the caretaker and cook, has watched this animal coming and going for years now and knows its habits well. We'll ensure someone's up to alert everyone!

Probably the welcoming committee of Elephants will already be at the salt lick when we arrive. The salt lick is just metres from the cottage! We will walk out onto the verandah and find ourselves outside and just metres from these giants with nothing between us. That's quite a feeling! Though they are aware of our presence they pay us little attention. At times they walk right up to the verandah. There is a narrow band of rugged rocks just in front of the verandah to avoid being totally overwhelmed by elephant but sometimes one of them will walk up to us along the narrow path between the rocks! This is a remarkable spot for close-up mammal observation. During daylight the lick is visited mostly by Elephants, Buffalo and Bushbuck, whilst at night the action is almost continuous, again largely from Elephant and Buffalo, however there was a wider range of visitors at this time too. A family of Giant Forest Hogs visits regularly. Spotted Hyenas shuffle past, sometimes a Leopard too. Tree Hyrax's extraordinary repertoire of weird sounds punctuate the night along with all sorts of other noises. White-tailed Mongoose wander by.

Birds are superb too with highlights being White-headed Wood-Hoopoe, Red-throated Wryneck, Golden-winged Sunbird, Northern and Eastern Double-collared Sunbirds, Sharpe's Starling, Tambourine Dove, and Crowned Eagle.

We'll spend some of the day recovering from the night-watching but we'll also have at least one drive through the Aberdares National Park each day. This beautiful place is covered in lush mountain woodlands, the large trees separated by extensive shrubby areas and rarely forming thick woodlands. Occasional open areas become extensive as we reach the moorlands above 3000m. Here the flora

includes many familiar temperate genera as well as the weird and wonderfuls such as the Giant Lobelias. Cape Buffalo, Warthog and Giant Forest Hog appear from time to time. A bamboo zone produces plenty of action with Harvey's Duiker and troupes of Mantled Guereza, a the beautiful Colobus with flouncy black and white capes. Here Olive Baboons are also abundant and we'll also seek the pretty Mount Kenya Sykes Monkeys. Birdwatching is exceptional with Harrier Hawk, Mountain Buzzard, Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters and Hartlaub's Turaco amongst many others. A colony of Four-lined Grass Mice will join us for our picnic by a mountain stream at around 3000m.

Day 13(pm)

Depart Nairobi

After lunch on Day 13 we'll head for Nairobi. After dinner and brush-up close to the airport we'll check-in and begin the journey home.

Day 14

Arrive UK/Europe

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