THE GREAT WILDEBEEST MIGRATION
A NEVER-ENDING STORY
The Serengeti and Maasai Mara ecosystems see huge herds of wildebeest and zebras migrating in a continuous search for the best food and water. Although this journey follows a similar annual route, exact timing varies based on rainfall.

When the rains beckon, the wildebeest go. In spite of the big cats in waiting, or the rivers thick with crocodiles, they diligently follow their inner compass in a never-ending circular journey.
The Great Migration is the largest overland migration in the world, with wildlife travelling a total of 800 km or more during each cycle. The magnificence of the event lies in its magnitude. Between 1.5 to 2 million wildebeest, zebras and other species plod or canter across Tanzania’s Serengeti and Kenya’s Maasai Mara in search of good grazing. And if you are lucky, you get to go along for the adventure.

The herds move in a clockwise direction, up from the south of the Serengeti, through the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, the Loliondo Game Controlled Area, and the Grumeti Reserve. They then leave Tanzania briefly to spend time in the Maasai Mara in Kenya, which borders Serengeti National Park to the north, before heading back south to start the journey again. Most of the migration takes place in the far larger Serengeti than in the Maasai Mara.
During the migration, around 250,000 wildebeest and 30,000 zebra die every year as a result of predation by carnivores, but also from drowning, thirst, hunger, and exhaustion.
And following the herds is another migratory species – human safari die-hards, who revel in the drama and magic of this, the Greatest Show on Earth. This is no cookie cutter safari, as nature does not keep Swiss time, and even the well-documented river crossings are not predictable as to when and where. In fact, it’s the unpredictability that is the drawcard, and experienced travellers and guides know how to enjoy the many layers of bush life while waiting for the dramatic river crossings and predator action.

FOLLOW THE WILDEBEEST

Rainfall drives the event, so tracking the herds is not an exact science, but the same general pattern plays out each year.

JANUARY:
It is the first rains in the southern Serengeti plains that beckon the herds to the Ndutu area. If you want to find the wildebeest in January, Naabi Hill and Lobo are the places to look. Many females in the herd are heavily pregnant at this point and moving towards greener grasses is of top priority.

**FEBRUARY:**

Every year half a million wildebeest are born on the Serengeti plains, and February is the month with the highest birthing rate, sometimes seeing as many as 8,000 born each day.

The abundant new grass makes the area around Lake Maek and Lake Ndutu the ideal place for the wildebeest to give birth. The herd will stay put for a while in the southeast Ndutu area after the calves are born, before heading up north in a clockwise direction.

Calving season means adorable wobbly babies finding their legs – a bonus for predators, who do not play nicely. If you want to see a wildebeest just hours old, your best chance is to go out at midday when they typically give birth, to allow the babies the time to gain strength before nightfall.

The Serengeti also boasts a particularly healthy lion population, with over 3,000 lions in the reserve. This is of great significance when you realise that these big cats face a bleak future across the African continent.
Cheetahs overwhelm a young wildebeest in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya © Paolo Torchio – Photographer of the Year 2018 entrant
MARCH:

The mobile camps in the Serengeti provide an up close and personal experience of the migration. You can find the herds in the Ndutu and Kusini Maswa region, in the south west of the park. Having the babies in tow means they move a bit slower. And be prepared for some afternoon rainfall in March.

APRIL:

If you visit in April you are going to need your rain jacket. The herds amble from the Ndutu region, past the Simba kopje, in the direction of Moru. The herds have now split into large groups, rather than the
massive concentrations that stretch as far as the horizon.

Simba kopje is where the lions are at, and it’s worth spending some time lion hunting – in the strictly photographic sense of the word. The wettest part of the day is the evening. The rainfall makes the plains slippery, and vehicles without 4×4 mode will battle to go anywhere.

**MAY:**

For those wildlife photographers looking for action shots, set your sights on May in the Serengeti. The ‘long rains’ keep on going throughout the month. And as the calves get bigger and stronger, the distances the herd covers get longer. You’ll most likely find them between Moru and Mokoma, moving towards Lake Magadi.

*Left: Wildebeest as far as the eye can see in the Maasai Mara*
National Reserve, Kenya © Subi Sridharan; **Right:** A group of hyenas take down a wildebeest during the migration in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya © Karen Nienaber. Both photos were entrants to Photographer of the Year 2018

**JUNE:**

By June the rains have abated somewhat, and the herds have spread out. The front-runners reach Mbalageti River around this time. While those bringing up the rear could still be as far back as Lake Magadi, or in the south most corner of the Simiti and Nyamuma Hills. The herds are now often in long lines as they head north.
JULY:

July is mating season in the Serengeti. You can find the herds in the Grumeti Reserve, in the west of the Serengeti, and moving past Fort Ikoma. Crossings of the Grumeti River are worth hanging around for, but the Serengeti is vast and relatively under-developed with lodges, and so river crossings are harder to find.

Also, the Grumeti River does not have the volume of water that the Mara River has, and the crossings are not as spectacular. The herds graze their way northward, as they move toward the Maasai Mara in Kenya. This is a transborder event.
AUGUST:

Come August and the herds have made their way up to the northern Serengeti, and face their biggest challenge yet: the Mara River. This fast-moving river flows through the Maasai Mara into the Serengeti. And while the gushing murky waters are captivating, they are also possibly responsible for the largest death toll en route, killing many thousands of wildebeest.

Sometimes the herds plunge en masse off steep banks in their desperate attempts to get across the river, or after being spooked by lions, and the fall alone will kill many individuals. Others drown as they are crushed by the sheer volume of panicking wildebeest trying to scramble up the equally steep banks on the other side. Every death means dinner for crocodiles, birds and fish – such is nature’s bounty.
Clockwise from top left: 1) Dust is kicked up as the wildebeest make their way across the Mara River in Kenya © Paolo Torchio; 2) The first leap! © Subi Sridharan; 3) Moment of chaos just before crossing the Mara River in Kenya © Karen Nienaber; 4) The river crossings are fraught with danger for the wildebeest © Subi Sridharan. All photos were entrants to Photographer of the Year 2018

And amidst the panic, the dust and the noise, the big cats and hyenas pick off the stragglers and the injured. Be warned that aside from the massive herds, the river crossings also attract large volumes of tourists, who congregate at strategic points to witness this spectacle.

There is no class system here, as privately-guided wealthy couples in open Land Rovers jostle for the best views with budget back-packers crammed into mini-vans with pop-up roofs.
SEPTEMBER:

You can catch the tail end of the Mara River crossing or go see the herds out in the great open plains of the Maasai Mara, where they are like flies in places. Pack your hat, because the weather will be hot and dry.

OCTOBER:

October offers a scene of casual grazing in the Maasai Mara. The push is over and the fresh grass is the reward. For the survivors, that
NOVEMBER:

What is known as ‘the short rains’ begin in November, triggering another move, as the herds leave Kenya and south to western Loliondo and the Lobo area in Serengeti National Park. Whether it rains in November or not, is nature’s call. But pack some extra jerseys for the cooler weather. At this point the herds organise themselves into smaller family groups and get on with the serious business of grazing.

DECEMBER:

By December the herds are back in the south of Serengeti, and the first act begins all over again.
RIVER CROSSINGS

When people say they’ve come to see the migration, they really mean they have come to see the river crossings. Watching the wildebeest hurl themselves into the water, one after the other, in a flurry of panic, sends a surge of adrenalin through the most seasoned bush junkie.

The river crossings are the scenes we’ve all watched on *Planet Earth* – the chaotic clamber of wildebeests, zebras and a few antelope species across turbulent crocodile-infested waters. And then, of course, you have the lions and leopards waiting amongst the riverine shrubs to ambush unsuspecting victims. For those of us with limited time and rudimentary camera equipment it can be difficult to capture the full impact of thundering hooves, the frantic urgency to get to the other side and the drama of predations. Sometimes the best strategy is to put the camera down and simply watch and absorb the drama playing out in front of you.
AVOIDING THE TOURISTS

Avoiding tourists is somewhat of a sport in the Serengeti and Maasai Mara, particularly during the peak safari season. If you are the tourist who skips the Eiffel tower, and seeks out that artisan cheese store in the back alleys of Paris, then perhaps give the Mara River crossings a miss.

The rainy season, from late March to late June, offers up a less crowded Serengeti, as the herds move into the western part of the park. The mass of animals moving across the plains is captivating, but what you are really on the lookout for is a hunt. And the open
plains give you prime viewing.

Moving away from the herds and following a pride of lions has its own bittersweet rewards. The predators face struggles of their own out on the plains: defending their territories, protecting their cubs, and nursing the battle wounds from a particularly hard hunt.

Just because it is the rainy season doesn’t mean it will rain. And if it does, it might not be a continual downpour. Again, the whims of the wild.

As an added bonus, catching the lodge off-season means less pricey accommodation.
Avoiding tourists is more of a challenge in the Mara, the reserve is smaller and as soon as the herds arrive, so do the crowds. The trick here is to stay in one of the private conservancies bordering the reserve. They are close enough to make day trips to see the herds doable, and it means fewer crowds back at camp. These private conservancies can offer activities not permitted in the parks, such as night drives and bush walks.

**MAASAI MARA’S SECRET SEASON**

Local safari connoisseurs visit once the busy season is over—for the peace and tranquility that no-one else, except BCS Big 5 tours, country and most of the lions, leopards and cheetahs are resident in the Mara area.

6 days, from $2,370 per person sharing

[ENQUIRE NOW]

**TOP TIPS FOR WITNESSING THE MIGRATION:**

1. Decide what you want to witness the most, because this will impact on the timing and location of your visit. Broadly, the choices are river crossings, massive herds as far as the eye can see or calving. You will enjoy predator action at all times;
2. Choose your lodge carefully because easy access to the herds is vital. You don’t want to spend hours getting to and from the best locations, eating the dust behind a long line of other vehicles;
3. If you seek privacy and exclusive wildlife encounters during the migration, choose a lodge in one of the conservancies neighboring the parks. Alternatively consider visiting during the ‘secret season’;
THE CLOSING CURTAIN

If you think about it, wildebeest are a rather understated animal, zoomed past on most safaris to get to something ‘more exciting’. It’s nice that there is a show that puts them on centre stage. And with a bit of planning ahead, the front row seats are yours.

WHERE TO STAY

IN THE MAASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE

GOVERNORS’ CAMP

Governors’ Camp is situated in a forest which runs along the banks of the Mara River within the Maasai Mara National Reserve. This luxury camp (originally reserved for the exclusive use of the colonial
governors of Kenya over 100 years ago) boasts a plethora of wildlife; it’s also a haven for bird-watching enthusiasts. There are 37 tents that have en-suite bathrooms. There is also a bar tent that offers uninterrupted views of the river.

Clockwise from top left: 1) The luxury tented accommodation lines the banks of the Mara River, offering unrivalled views; 2) Enjoy a drink on the deck that overlooks this wonderful region; 3) Incredible wildlife encounters are abundant – even when you’re enjoying a meal. All photos © Governors’ Camp

OUTSIDE THE MAASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE
COTTAR’S 1920s SAFARI CAMP

Cottar’s 1920s Safari Camp is situated on a 6000 acre private conservancy, located a mere one kilometre from the Maasai Mara National Reserve. The location allows for day and night game drives, walking safaris, as well as a once-in-a-lifetime privilege to interact with the Maasai community and absorb their fascinating culture. There are 10 tents available (one honeymoon, five double and four family tents.)
Clockwise from top left: 1) All of the tents have en-suite bathrooms, offering spectacular views of the private concession; 2) Comfortable rocking chairs give you the opportunity to sit back and take in the breathtaking landscape; 3) For ultimate luxury, indulge in a stay at the beautiful ‘Cottar’s Bush Villa’; 4) Make use of the infinity pool and spa area – the perfect way to unwind after an activity-filled day. All photos © Cottar’s 1920s Safari Camp
TRAVEL TO TANZANIA AND KENYA WITH AFRICA GEOGRAPHIC

Have a look at our bucket-list safaris below:

- **Serengeti great migration safari (4 days)**
- **Maasai Mara Secret Season (6 days)**
- **Maasai Mara Migration Season Safari (7 days)**
- **Art Safari in Maasai Mara (6 days)**

*Travel in Africa is about knowing when and where to go, and with whom. A few weeks too early or late and a few kilometres off course and you could miss the greatest show on Earth. And wouldn’t that be a pity? Contact an Africa Geographic safari consultant to plan your dream vacation.*
Growing up watching Beverly and Derek Joubert’s documentaries and idolising Jane Goodall, Noelle Oosthuizen has always dreamed of living in the bush. For now she writes about her bush adventures from her home in Cape Town, South Africa. She has a special soft spot for chacma baboons, and she advocates for these charming primates every chance she gets. By far her favourite adventure has been being a foster mom to an orphan baby baboon.
Celebrating Africa’s Avian Candy

"Everyone likes birds. What wild creature is more accessible to our eyes and ears, as close to us and everyone in the world, as universal as a bird?" ~ David Attenborough
Birds may be ubiquitous, and are often overshadowed by the celebrity wildlife stars like Africa’s Big 5. But one thing is for sure – no matter their size, shape and colour, they will never cease to amaze and are incredibly beautiful to behold.

Found around the world, birds have adapted to life in the wilderness. From forest, jungles and the open bush, to deserts, high mountains and far out at sea, birds can be found everywhere!

Globally there are approximately 9,500 bird species, and of that almost 2,500 have been seen in Africa and its associated islands. We are now going to take some time out to admire and appreciate some of these African birds in our gallery, Africa’s Avian Candy, which comprises of a selection of stunning photos, along with some interesting facts. And they're not just any photos, they're some of the special photos submitted during our Photographer of the Year 2016, 2017 and 2018 competitions.
Celebrating Africa’s Avian Candy

Pearl-spotted owls are one of southern Africa’s smallest owls. They will breed from August to November and possibly both parents incubate the eggs for up to 31 days. The female lays 2-4 eggs in a tree cavity, often made by woodpeckers or barbets. Incubation lasts 29 days, and the young fledge at 31 days and become independent a few weeks later.

"Peek-a-hoot!" in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, South Africa © Gerrie Rall (Photographer of the Year 2017 Top 101)
Celebrating Africa’s Avian Candy

Bateleur eagles can often be seen spending their time at waterholes during the heat of the day, frequently entering the water for a bath and then opening their wings to sunbathe. By exposing their wing feathers to direct sunlight, the oils in their feathers warm up, which the bird then spreads over the feathers with its beak to improve aerodynamics.
Celebrating Africa’s Avian Candy

The ostrich is the largest bird in the world. It also lays the largest eggs and can run up to 70km/h.
Saddle-billed storks feed on a variety of aquatic species, such as fish, crustaceans (crabs, shrimps), and amphibians (frogs). The storks use their bills to stir up the water to flush out the fish, causing the water (and the fish) to become muddy, so often you will see them washing their fish before consuming them whole.
Cape robin-chats occupy a variety of habitat types, generally preferring areas with quite dense undergrowth and scattered trees, bushes, rocks or other structures to use for perching, along with surface water for drinking and bathing. It is a common bird in gardens across much of its distribution, including in city centres such as in Cape Town.
"Protect my habitat" – a shoebill in Mabamba Swamps, Uganda © Usha Harish (Photographer of the Year 2018 entrant)

Shoebills may be big, but they can fly if they want to. Granted, they don’t fly very far, and long flights are rare, but flying is no mean feat considering they can grow up to 1.5 metres tall and can weigh up to 7kg.
"Perched in the wind" – a southern ground-hornbill's feathers are ruffled by the breeze in Kruger National Park, South Africa © Chantelle Melzer (Photographer of the Year 2018 Top 101)

In Africa, southern ground-hornbills are classified as ‘Vulnerable’ by the IUCN, however, those in South Africa are classified as ‘Endangered’ as only about 1,500 individuals live within the country. Loss of habitat, loss of nesting trees, electrocution from transformer boxers and even, in some cases, killed for use in
traditional medicine, have all contributed to the rapid decline of these majestic birds.
Celebrating Africa’s Avian Candy

A Meyer's parrot parades at a waterhole in Mashatu Game Reserve, Botswana © Johan J. Botha
(Photographer of the Year 2018 entrant)

Meyer's parrots eat mainly seeds and nuts, husking small seeds and chewing on larger food items. It is the only bird in its distribution range capable of cracking pods and seeds of leguminous trees, so it benefits from a monopoly of this food type.
Celebrating Africa’s Avian Candy

Black-cheeked lovebirds inhabit deciduous woodland, where permanent supplies of water exist, as they require daily access to water. In the dry season, these birds may congregate in large flocks of up to 800 or more.
"While waiting for over two hours in the hot equatorial sun for a migration crossing to happen, I decided to change my focus to a group of vultures that were feeding on a drowned wildebeest carcass. Fully fed, this beauty decided to dry off its wings in the sun, which produced this interesting image of a great raptor. These raptors face many problems, from loss of habitat, reduced breeding..."
sites, and reduction in large ungulates (resulting in fewer sources of food), to death from poisoning, the witchcraft trade and collisions with power lines. They play such an important role in making sure that diseases such as rabies and anthrax do not spread, and they also help cycle nutrients back into the ecosystem. We must help conserve these amazing raptors at all costs." ~ Sushil Chauhan
Egrets form symbiotic relationships with many hoofed animals, especially with African buffaloes. While the egrets eat the insects that live on the ungulates and are disturbed as they walk through the grass, the buffaloes on which they forage benefit from the removal of harmful parasites.
"Disappointment in the air" in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, South Africa © Olli Teirilä (Photographer of the Year 2017 Finalist)

"Two lanner falcons, an adult and a juvenile, were on the hunt at the Cubitje Quap waterhole in the Kgalagadi. From the nearby trees, they observed the smaller birds enjoying a drink. Every now and then they would make their swoop, and on one of these swoops the adult caught a Namaqua dove. The juvenile, with nothing to show for its efforts, attacked the adult, trying to steal its
kill. Feathers flying, the adult held on to its prize and flew away while the juvenile was left to contemplate its disappointment in the air."— Olli Teirilä
The white tern is a beautiful bird seen on all the islands in the Seychelles. This species is notable for laying its egg on bare thin branches in a small fork or depression - without a proper nest structure.
Celebrating Africa’s Avian Candy

Red-billed queleas searching for seeds in Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe © Jens Cullmann

(Photographer of the Year 2017 Top 101)

Red-billed queleas form flocks which can contain thousands of birds. They are considered a major problem bird in some areas as they can cause a lot of damage to cereal crops. With the adult breeding population at approximately 1.5 billion pairs, red-billed queleas are the most common wild bird in the world.
Celebrating Africa’s Avian Candy

Up close of a crested guineafowl in Zimanga Private Game Reserve, South Africa © Johan J. Botha (Photographer of the Year 2018 entrant)

Crested guineafowl are named because of the curly tufts on their head. They inhabit central parts of Africa, ranging throughout all the forest territories, as well as a handful of regions in southern Africa.
A crested barbet in flight at Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden, South Africa © Ernest Porter (Photographer of the Year 2016 entrant)

Crested barbets spend most of their time bouncing around on the ground foraging for food. They are not accomplished flyers, and when they do fly it is only for a short period of time.
Celebrating Africa’s Avian Candy

The martial eagle is the largest eagle in Africa, weighing in at almost 6.5kg. This bird is a powerful hunter with extremely keen eyesight, and can spot potential prey up to five kilometres away.
Rosy-faced lovebirds canoodle in the Erongo mountain range, Namibia © John Davies
(Photographer of the Year 2016 entrant)

Rosy-faced lovebirds are very social birds and will often congregate in small groups in the wild. They feed throughout the day and are very dependent on water. Plumage is identical in males and females and their rapid flight shows the blue rump against their green back.