

KENYA'S MASAI MARA RESERVE
**AFRICAN
EDEN**

Nothing can be compared to this legendary, easily visited and truly unique wildlife photography destination

Adult male African lion ■
Panthera leo at sunset. On the
title page, cheetah *Acinonyx*
jubatus surveying its range
from the top of a hillock
as a hot-air balloon
hovers in the distance.



Topi
Damaliscus lunatus jimela.

The

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he Masai Mara (also known as the Maasai Mara, and locally simply as The Mara) is a large game reserve in Narok County, Kenya, contiguous with the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. It is named in honor of the Masai people (the ancestral inhabitants of the area) and their description of the area when looked at from afar: "Mara" means "spotted" in the local language, due to the many trees which dot the landscape. The Masai Mara National Reserve (MMNR) covers some 1,510 km² (580 sq mi) in south-western Kenya. It is the northernmost section of the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem, which covers some 25,000 km² (9,700 sq mi) in Tanzania and Kenya. It is bounded by the Serengeti Park to the south, the Siria escarpment to the west, and Masai pastoral ranches to the north, east and west. The Greater Mara Ecosystem encompasses areas known as the Masai Mara National Reserve, the Mara Triangle, and several Masai Conservancies, including Koiyaki, Lemek, Ol Chorro Oirowua, Olkinyei, Siana, Maji Moto, Naikara, Ol Derkesi, Kerinkani, Oloirien, and Kimintet. Rainfall in the ecosystem increases markedly along a

southeast-northwest gradient, varies in space and time, and is markedly bimodal. The Sand, Talek River and Mara River are the major rivers draining the reserve. Shrubs and trees fringe most drainage lines and cover hill slopes and hilltops. The terrain of the reserve is primarily open grassland with seasonal riverlets. In the south-east region are clumps of the distinctive acacia tree. The western border is the Esoit (Siria) Escarpment of the East African Rift, which is a system of rifts some 5,600 km (3,500 mi) long, from Ethiopia's Red Sea through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and into Mozambique. Wildlife tends to be most concentrated here, as the swampy ground means that access to water is always good, while tourist disruption is minimal. The easternmost border is 224 kilometres (139.2 mi) from Nairobi, and hence it is the eastern regions which are most visited by tourists. There are several bush landing strips which serve the camps and lodges in the Masai Mara, including Mara Serena Airport, Musiara Airport and Keekorok, Kichwa Tembo, Ngerende Airport, Ol Kiombo and Angama Mara.

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■ Nile crocodiles
*Crocodylus
niloticus* feasting
on a wildebeest
carcass.





African elephant
Loxodonta africana
- a relatively
uncommon species
in the Mara plains.

WILDLIFE

The Mara is world-renowned for its exceptional populations of lions, leopards, cheetahs and elephant, and the annual migration of wildebeest, zebra, Thomson's gazelle and other antelope, to and from the Serengeti every year known as the Great Migration. Wildebeest, topi, zebra, and Thomson's gazelle migrate into and occupy the Mara reserve, from the Serengeti plains to the south and Loita Plains in the pastoral ranches to the north-east, from July to October or later. Herds of all three species are also resident in the reserve. All members of the "Big Five" (lion, leopard, elephant, Cape buffalo, and rhinoceros) are found here. The population of black rhinos was fairly numerous until 1960, but it was severely depleted by poaching in the 1970s and early 1980s, dropping to a low of 15 individuals. Numbers have been slowly increasing, but the population was still only up to an estimated 23 in 1999. Hippopotami and crocodiles are found in large groups in the Mara and Talek rivers. Hyenas, cheetahs, jackals, and bat-eared foxes can also be found in the reserve. The plains between the Mara River and the Esoit Siria Escarpment are probably the best area for game viewing, in particular regarding lion and cheetah. As in the Serengeti, the wildebeest are the dominant inhabitants of the Masai Mara, and their numbers are estimated in the millions. Around July of each year,

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Greater Blue-eared Starling
Lamprotornis chalybaeus
expelling the seed of a fruit it has recently eaten.

■ *Mother and cub cheetah Acinonyx jubatus. The Mara is one of the best spots in the world to admire this endangered species.*



these animals migrate north from the Serengeti plains in search of fresh pasture, and return to the south around October. The Great Migration is one of the most impressive natural events worldwide, involving some 1,300,000 wildebeest, 500,000 Thomson's gazelles, 97,000 Topi, 18,000 elands, and 200,000 zebras. Antelopes can be found, including Grant's gazelles, impalas, duikers and Coke's hartebeests. The plains are also home to the distinctive Masai giraffe. The large roan antelope and the nocturnal bat-eared fox, rarely present elsewhere in Kenya, can be seen within the reserve borders. More than 470 species of birds have been identified in the park, many of which are migrants, with almost 60 species being raptors. Birds that call this area home for at least part of the year include vultures, marabou storks, secretary birds, hornbills, crowned cranes, ostriches, long-crested eagles, African pygmy-falcons and the lilac-breasted roller, which is the national bird of Kenya.

HISTORY

The Maasai Mara National Reserve is named specifically after the Masai people. The Masai people make up a community that spans across northern, central and southern Kenya and northern parts of Tanzania. As pastoralists, the community holds the

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Left, Yellow-breasted Longclaw *Macronyx croceus*; top right, Violet-backed starling *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster*; bottom right, Purple Grenadier *Uraeginthus ianthinogaster*.





Adult male African ■
lion *Panthera leo*.

belief that they own all of the cattle in the world. The Masai rely off of their lands to sustain their cattle, as well as themselves and their families. Prior to the establishment of the Mara Triangle and Masai Mara, the Masai lived on the land where the current reservers are located. Once the Masai Mara was declared a national reservation as a conservation area for the protection of wildlife and wilderness, the Masai were forced to move out of their native lands. When it was originally established in 1961 as a wildlife sanctuary the Mara covered only 520 km² (200 sq mi) of the current area, including the Mara Triangle. The area was extended to the east in 1961 to cover 1,821 km² (703 sq mi) and converted to a game reserve. The Narok County Council (NCC) took over management of the reserve at this time. Part of the reserve was given National Reserve status in 1974, and the remaining area of 159 km² (61 sq mi) was returned to local communities. An additional 162 km² (63 sq mi) were removed from the reserve in 1976, and the park was reduced to 1,510 km² (580 sq mi) in 1984. In 1994, the TransMara County Council (TMCC) was formed in the western part of the reserve, and control was divided between the new council and the existing Narok County Council. In May 2001, the not-for-profit Mara Conservancy took over management of the Mara Triangle. Kenya was colonized by British colonial forces up until 1963 when Kenya gained independence. Prior to Kenyan independence, Eastern Africa and much of Africa as a whole, Kenya

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Black-backed Jackal ■
Canis melomelas feeding
on the head of its prey,
an antelope fawn.



■ African leopard
Panthera pardus
at dawn. The Mara
is a great location
to observe these
stunningly beautiful
felines.



■ Left, Grey crowned crane *Balearica regulorum*, a relatively uncommon but truly spectacular bird. Right, Yellow-billed oxpecker *Buphagus africanus* feeding on ticks as it perches on the back of a zebra.



■ A rare sight:
Serval *Leptailurus*
serval with its prey,
a rat it has just
caught in the
tall grass.





Far left, abstract detail of the strongly patterned Masai giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis tippelskirchii*. Left, bull Cape buffalo *Syncerus caffer* resting in a quiet pool.

■ Another rarely observed denizen of the Mara, the severely endangered Black rhino *Diceros bicornis*.





■ Top left, Wood sandpiper *Tringa glareola*; top right, Red-necked spurfowl or Red-necked francolin *Pternistis afer*. Bottom left, Lilac-breasted roller *Coracias caudatus* with prey; bottom right, Common sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*.



An iconic scene from the ■
Mara: African lions *Panthera leo* feeding on a wildebeest kill at dawn, with Spotted hyenas and vultures participating to the banquet.



■ A herd of wildebeest *Connochaetes taurinus* attempts a crossing of the Talek river.





■ Top left, Masai Mara national reserve flower *Amnocharis tinneana*; top right, Little bee-eater *Merops pusillus*. Bottom left, Gray-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala*; bottom right, Fireball Lily *Scadoxus multiflorus*.



■ The feeding of African lions *Panthera leo* is a violent, brutal, bloody affair - punctuated by loud growls, threats and the occasional fight among the participants.



experienced extreme measures of colonization that has left long lasting negative effects on the country. For example, the establishment of the Maasai Mara National Reserve and Mara Triangle was brought forward by British colonists that wanted to preserve the African wildlife and landscape. The British thought that the local people in the area were causing more harm than they were. These establishments completely ignored local communities, which ultimately displaced local peoples from their lands. The Mara displaced thousands of Masai, where the community lost culturally significant areas and has put harsh pressures on cattle grazing. Unlike most other National Parks in Kenya the Masai Mara National Reserve is not administered by the Kenya Wildlife Service, but by Narok County government. The more visited eastern part of the park is managed by Narok County Council and the western part, known as the Mara Triangle, by the Trans-Mara county council, which is contracting management to the Mara Conservancy, a local nonprofit organization formed by the local Masai that contains several anti-poaching units. Although one third of the whole Masai Mara, The Mara Triangle has only two lodges within its boundaries (compared to the numerous camps and lodges on the Narok side) and has well maintained, all weather roads. The rangers patrol regularly which means that there is less poaching and excellent game viewing. There is also strict control over vehicle numbers around animal

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Masai giraffe ■
 Giraffa camelopardalis
 tippelskirchii.

■ Nile crocodiles
Crocodylus niloticus
feeding on a
wildebeest carcass.





■ *Left, African leopard Panthera pardus resting in a tree canopy; right, aerial safari with a hot-air balloon hovering above a wildebeest herd and the endless grassy plains of the Mara.*



■ *Plains zebra*
Equus quagga,
formerly Equus
burchellii. When
feeding as here
they will take turns,
with one always
keeping an eye
out for possible
approaching
predators.





Left, playfully sparring African leopard *Panthera pardus* siblings; right, a rare sight - Yellow-winged bat *Lavia frons*.





Male African lions *Panthera leo* competing for the remains of a wildebeest kill.



Top, Nile crocodiles *Crocodylus niloticus*; Bottom left, Kirk's dikdik *Madoqua kirkii*; bottom right, Bohor reedbuck *Redunca redunca*. The latter two species are rarely observed by most visitors in the Mara.



sightings, allowing for a better experience when out on a game drive. The Mara Triangle is the southwestern part of the Masai Mara National Reserve, Kenya, and is managed by the not-for-profit organisation The Mara Conservancy on behalf of Trans-Mara County Council. Divided from the rest of the Masai Mara National Reserve by the Mara River, the Mara Triangle is less visited and less crowded, often with many more game animals grazing on the plains and between the volcanic hills that distinguish this corner of the Mara. The outer areas known as Masai Mara Conservation area is administered by the Group Ranch Trusts of the Masai community who also have their own rangers for patrolling the park area. The wildlife roam freely across both the Reserve and Conservation areas which are a continuous wildlife ecosystem.

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African leopard
Panthera pardus
at dawn.





Left, Marabou ■
stork *Leptoptilos*
crumenifer; right,
Eland *Taurotragus*
oryx at sunset.



FIELD RESEARCH

The Masai Mara is a major research centre for the Spotted hyena. With two field offices in the Mara, the Michigan State University based Kay E. Holekamp Lab studies the behavior and physiology of this predator, as well as doing comparison studies between large predators in the Mara Triangle and their counterparts in the eastern part of the Mara. The Mara Predator Project also operates in the Masai Mara, cataloguing and monitoring lion populations throughout the region. Concentrating on the northern conservancies where communities coexist with wildlife, the project aims to identify population trends and responses to changes in land management, human settlements, livestock movements and tourism. It works in partnership with a number of lodges in the region by training guides to identify lions and report sightings. Guests are also encouraged to participate in the project by photographing lions seen on game drives. An online database of individual lions is openly accessible, and features information on project participants and focus areas. Since October 2012, the Mara-Meru Cheetah Project is working in the Mara monitoring cheetah population, estimating population status and dynamics, and evaluating the predator impact and human activity on cheetah behavior



■ *Black-chested snake eagle or Black-breasted snake eagle Circaetus pectoralis.*

and survival. Collected over the years, photographic data allows the project team to trace kinship between generations and build Mara cheetah pedigree. The data collected helps to reveal parental relationship between individuals, survival rate of cubs, cheetah lifespan and personal reproductive history. This work has never been done before and the team is sharing results with the Mara stakeholders and respondents. The ongoing research is a follow-up study, which will compare results with the previous one in terms of cheetah population status and effect of human activity on cheetah behavior and surviving. The project is working in affiliation with Kenya Wildlife Service, Narok and Transmara County Councils and with assistance of Coordinator of Maasai-Mara Cultural Village Tour Association (MMCVTA). The team is cooperating with Mara Hyena Project and working with managers and driver-guides from over 30 different Mara camps and lodges. Rangers and driver/guides are trained in cheetah identification techniques and provided with catalogues of the Mara cheetahs. Finally, the Masai Wilderness Conservation Trust is an

organization whose mission statement states the following: *"The Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust (MWCT) works to protect the legendary ecosystems and astounding biodiversity of East Africa through conservation that directly benefits local Maasai communities."* While the MWCT was founded by an American, Edward Norton, the team is comprised largely of Masai peoples. This organization is prized off of their assistance provided in the local communities that have faced severe threats to their land and ultimately their culture as a whole. While research conducted on wildlife within the Mara is an important factor in sustaining ecotourism and a healthy ecosystem, it's equally important that organizations work to ensure a successful future for local communities that have been affected by the park. ●

DON'T MISS THE SECOND INSTALLMENT OF OUR MASAI MARA STORY – COMING IN APRIL 2020 ON ISSUE 38 OF ANIMA MUNDI – ADVENTURES IN WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY!



■ Yellow-billed stork
Mycteria ibis feeding on bullfrog.



Nile crocodile ■
Crocodylus niloticus. The
Mara is home to a large
population of these huge
and dangerous reptiles.



■ A lioness charges - unsuccessfully - a herd of fleeing wildebeest. Safety here lies in numbers - the cat was quite clearly distracted by the confusion of the stampeding herbivores and lost its opportunity.



A successful chase - here a lactating impala mother has fallen victim to a hunting cheetah female, which has to feed her three hungry cubs.





■ The brief and repeated mating sessions of African lions *Panthera leo* are tense affairs, which start sensuously enough but most usually culminate in a violent reaction by the snarling female.



■ A spotted hyena *Crocuta crocuta* snaps angrily at a number of vultures which are trying to snatch a morsel from its prey. Contrary to popular belief, spotted hyenas are not only scavengers but also active and very successful predators.



A lioness reacts angrily to the avances of a young male. Despite the violent scuffle, the two mated repeatedly soon after.



*A lioness charges after
a fleeing wildebeest
Connochaetes taurinus.*




*A gigantic Nile crocodile
Crocodylus niloticus asserts
its dominant position during
a feeding frenzy.*

The hunt is on!
A lioness charges after a herd of stampeding wildebeest. Such scenes can be often observed in the wide open plains of the Masai Mara.





A herd of wildebeest 
Connochaetes taurinus
crosses a dry riverbed.



■ Left, the sleek spotted shape of an African leopard *Panthera pardus* as it slides down a river bank. Right, a basking Mwanza Flat-headed Rock Agama *Agama Agama mwanzae*.





A rather unique sighting as a young lioness attacks unsuccessfully a fleeing hippo Hippopotamus amphibius in a dry riverbed.



Left, Secretary  bird Sagittarius serpentarius; right, Lappet-faced vulture or Nubian vulture Torgos tracheliotos.





A flash of ■
blue and turquoise - a
Lilac-breasted roller
Coracias caudatus
lands on its perch.



■ A pride of African lions *Panthera leo* feeding a Cape buffalo carcass.



■ A study in sleekness and speed - a female cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* in hot pursuit of its antelope prey.



Another rare sighting - ■
a gravely endangered Black
rhino *Diceros bicornis* in the
soft light of the early morning.



■ *Grant's gazelle*
Nanger granti, a
stunningly elegant
grazer and one of
the favourite prey
items of the Mara.



A female cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* surveys its range as a nervous Masai giraffe in the background keeps a wary eye on it.





■ Vultures can be clumsy and noisy on the ground, but once in the air they are incredibly elegant and graceful. This is a massive Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppellii*.