

## Maasai Mara – The Great Crossing

### Introduction

I am an addicted photographer of nature, especially of live scenes . I am also an addicted lover of the African nature reserves, specifically those in Tanzania and in Kenya. And when I am there, inside a safari jeep, with all my photographic gear, and a professional driver behind the wheel, it is then that I grasp the full insight of the concept of synergy.

It is a very well-known fact that the richness and diversity of natural life in those African reserves is without competition worldwide. If you are ready to invest the time and the patience, a complete cycle of life will be exposed before your eyes, with all its beauty and colors, with its wilderness and cruelty, with its power, intensity and speed.

Photographers, be them even still-life photographers, are constantly on the look for action, their camera is in the fast "continuous high speed" mode, ready to freeze any pop-up event. True, birds and animals portraits are great, however, after you have already taken the Chita with its cubs at a one meter distance, and you also caught the eagles and some other birds on the most beautiful branches in an optimal pose, you, me in this case, want something more. I need an action. If it is the Chita, I want it at the moment of a "kill". If it is the eagle, I want it diving toward the carcass. Even a starling is much more stunning with its colorful wings widespread against the sun at sunset...

I have been in the Tanzanian and Kenyan reserves before. I did it with all kinds of groups. Came back with lots of pictures, some are pretty good. But, I wanted more.

I have been watching several TV series on the Great Migrations both on the National Geographic channel and on BBC. I myself have been doing some study on the physical aspects of the migration, and was fascinated by it. It became obvious then, that Africa is where I will be going again, specifically to look for the great migration as it crosses the Mara River in Kenya. I have got to see it through the lenses of my own camera!

Two immediate questions had to be considered. The first one deals with the best time of the year, the second is about the best logistic arrangements. I spent some time studying, and came up with the following:

The herds of the great migration (wildebeests, zebras, gazelles...), on their way from the Serengeti in Tanzania towards the Maasai Mara in Kenya, are actually crossing the Mara river twice. The first time, north bound, in the month of June (plus-minus) where the river flows in the Serengeti. The second time, they cross the Mara river inside the Maasai Mara reserve from the west river side and over to its east river bank. This crossing takes place around the months of August/September. The crossing is a must for the herds, as they have consumed all the grass on the west side, while the one on the east side is very tall and inviting.

I have also learned that the crossing in the Maasai Mara is much more impressive than that of the Serengeti, and it also lasts longer. That decided where I will be heading. I bought the tickets after I have made sure that there are already herds on both sides of the river, meaning that the crossing has already began.

Also, this time I was going to treat myself with a private tour – a single car!. Two good friends with their photographic gear joined me. The car, a long jeep, was spacious enough for the three of us. All the necessary arrangements (jeep, driver/guide, lodges, flights) were made by "Another World" - an excellent Israeli travel agency.

Robinson, Our Kenyan driver, met us in Nairobi airport at midnight. From there, four hours later, we arrived, in the early morning, at the "Mara Simba" lodge on the eastern gate of the Maasai Mara reserve. From there, right after breakfast, our adventure was on it way.

"What would you wish to see?" Robinson asked –

"The Crossing and the birds" we replied,

"That's fine" he said, nodding his head, and off we went.

For eight days we drove around the Maasai reserve. Robinson turned out to be also a real knowledgeable ornithologist. We did take lots of the pictures we came over to take, and then some! [what do you mean by that?] We took pictures of birds, we took pictures of the crossing, and we also took pictures of something we did not think of before, and those were pictures of the crossing by-products.

### The Crossing

The Mara River starts its life within the mountains in the north of Kenya, goes south for some 400 kms, and disappears into Lake Victoria in Tanzania. Some 60 winding kms of its middle length flow in the Maasai Mara reserve. This is the part that interested us the most, as this is where the crossing was to take place. There are several distinct, recognized locations on the banks where this would eventually happen. It was even marked

on our map. The usually steep banks there are worn down probably from many years of repeated crossings at the same place. The drivers know all these places and they also know all the dirt roads that lead to the best viewing spots. All you need to know in real time is, where to go at any given moment.

For exactly this purpose, all the cars that run around in the reserve are equipped with a common communication network and the drivers are very busy updating it constantly. It works like a social network and a very effective one! "Are there any herds?" "What's their direction?" Never was there any question as to where to go "now". It is very important to arrive early, and be among the first and get a seat in the front row... Once Robinson has arrived at the spot, there was no stopping on the way, not even for taking a picture of a bird...

And we have arrived. We are in the best viewing location. We are looking at a huge herd, thousands of wildebeests and zebras, one big mass moving toward the crossing point on the bank of the river. And not only herds are rushing there. Loaded jeeps as well! They are on both banks of the river, on the west side where the herds are gathering, and on the left side where we are waiting to welcome them. The jeeps, as I have said, are loaded with people, all eager to immortalize the moment. To see is to believe! From those who are using their phones and tablets all the way up to those (like us) who are sporting half a meter long lenses...

After some time it started to dawn on me that the name of the game is patience. And then some more and further more, patience. I have been told so before but did not want to believe it... We waited an hour, and then another hour and another one, and nothing! And the herds, what were they doing, you may ask. Well, I will tell you. A few wildebeests walked down to the water edge, looked right and left, sniffed the water, dipped

their hoof in the current, drank some water, and then, for some inexplicable reason, decided not to cross and turned back. Another group came in their place and the same ritual repeated itself. Again and again, until suddenly, the whole mass of animals made a U turn, away from the river and away from us... This was really an unbelievable and puzzling scene. It did look as if the pressure of the thousands behind will force the crossing, but NO, it did not. For some reason, perhaps a crock was sneaking, or some other movement in the water, or maybe recollections from the previous year... In any case, against all our understanding , the huge mass turned back and went away. Robinson said that without zebras at the front, no crossing will get started ,He probably knows...

That's how the first day has passed. The second day was exactly the same... In the afternoon of the third day my friends thought that they had had enough and remained at the lodge – at least there were lots of birds there... I went by myself to the river with Robinson. He was very experienced and very patient . Towards the end of the day, the light was already poor, we were moving from one first row to another, and then, all of a sudden, a huge cloud of dust popped up in front of our eyes! We could see a big number of zebras and gnus crossing the river and rushing right towards us. Robinson was very quick. In no time he found a spot where I could have a perfect line of view . Nobody else was around, only the two of us and the charging herd! I was pushing my camera to its limits. Nikon D800 with the 400 mm of its 200-400mm zoom. I was shooting as fast as the camera can, about 3 frames per second. The whole episode lasted no more than one minute. You can see the pictures and judge for yourselves! No picture of a crock with a young gnu between his jaws, God forbid, but the atmosphere of the crossing is all there alright!

On the next days we did not spend too much time on the crossing, but rather on picturing birds, especially eagles – the crossing's by-products . But that's for the next article.