



Governors' Camp Game Report, Masai Mara, December 2011

Weather and grasslands

We have had lots of rain over the last month which has left a stunning landscape with varying shades of green. The grass has grown all over the Mara. The common grass here is Red Oat Grass (*Themeda Triandra*) and in some low lying areas it is almost four feet in height, there are also small pockets of Elephant grass which is a good thatching grass and can reach heights of over 7 feet. On the 20th we received 57 mm of rain. Total rainfall for December was 151.5 mm. It has generally been quite wet with afternoon and evening showers. Mid day temperatures were 28°C and early mornings around 23°C.

Early on in December the Mara River rose to quite a high level, receding again by late month.



Photo courtesy of Katie McLellan

General game

Game viewing has been excellent despite the long grass and wet and slippery conditions. There has been good lion activity with some different males arriving on the scene in Bila Shaka and Musiara.

'Christmas day' was a bonus day of game sightings, in the afternoon of this day the 'Big five' were seen before 6.00pm.

Good numbers of **elephant** remain on the Musiara and Bila Shaka grassland plains. As grass levels have improved this has brought many elephant back, within these family units there quite a few young calves. An average of over 100 Elephant can be seen at any one time. Large bulls that are in *Musth* have been moving back and forth sourcing females in oestrus and some of the bulls have been seen sparring, it is awesome to see two large bulls squaring off, their tremendous strength and weight mean that sometimes they inflict bad injuries on the other. *Musth* is a periodic condition in bull elephants, characterized occasionally by highly aggressive behavior, accompanied by a large rise in reproductive

hormones, noticeably on these large bulls there is a discharge called temporin which oozes out from their temporal glands, during *Musth* this temporin contains high levels of testosterone plasma and this can literally run down the cheeks. African Elephant can stay in *Musth* for up to nearly three weeks to a month or so.



Photo courtesy of Sharon Roles

The large herd of **buffalo** has been seen on Rhino Ridge and also Bila Shaka. Buffalo like to move about and reside in areas where there are coarse grasses. There are many calves in this herd, some of which have fallen prey to Spotted Hyena and lion.

Topi with a few one month old calves can be found on Topi plains, Paradise and Rhino ridge. Topi have a narrow muzzle so are bite selectors and when they have access to enough green fodder, topi usually don't have to drink. They drink every day or two when subsisting on dry grass. With the good grass levels at present Topi can be seen in large numbers in certain areas. Cokes **Hartebeest** with young that are six weeks old can be seen on Rhino Ridge and Topi plains and good numbers of them at Bila Shaka.

The Warburgia trees are fruiting now and this has brought the Olive Baboons and some Blue Monkeys, Schalow's Turacos and many green pigeons. Elephant also love these fruit and while good grazing is available this will hold them back out, although a few individual elephant have been foraging through the camps at night.

We have enjoyed good viewing of **giraffe** all over the riverine woodlands and close to the camps. There are many calves amongst these loose associated herds and these calves remain in crèches. There are also male herds and these number up to 16 of varying ages. The larger breeding males will travel great distances looking for oestrus females.



Photo courtesy of Patrick Reynolds

On Rhino ridge and topi plains many **Bat Eared Foxes** are seen close to their dens or out foraging, these little foxes also have young pups. In these wet conditions many species of termites are continually expanding their colonies and so this is a good time for these insectivorous foxes to feed well. Termites with wings (also called swarmers or alates) are reproductive's that leave the nest to start new colonies. Alates lose or shed their wings soon after they swarm. Termites form a major role in the diet of Bat Eared Foxes.

Crested **cranes** have been seen courting near the Marsh, this is quite an elaborate affair. One female near the causeway is sitting on eggs.

There are a few common **zebra** in pockets near topi plains and also Rhino Ridge; with more of them in the conservation areas. **Warthog** and piglets that are 3 months old now will still be seen in all areas where there are open grassland plains, many of these piglets were heavily preyed on in October and November when grass levels were low and lion, leopard and hyena could see them from afar. Many sows that have piglets only have two or three left. Lion will also readily dig out warthog from their bolt holes. Impala and Olive Baboons can be seen within the camp woodlands and also Bush Buck. Male **Bushbucks** are quite habitual and will secretly emerge out into the open glades with the soft morning and evening light. Many Lilac Breasted **rollers** can be seen on the roadsides and also in the grassland verges, they seem to be feeding off the brown grasshoppers, these are a truly striking bird and in good light make great photographic subjects.

Reedbuck are also seen within the Musiara Marsh, reedbuck like coarse grasses and will be found in low lying flood plains; during the dry months from August through to October the reedbuck had to compromise their habitat, many succumbed to predation from cheetah and leopard.

There have been many **crocodiles** on the banks of the Mara River basking and regulating their body temperature. They are ectothermic, (or "cold-blooded") this refers to creatures that control body temperature through external means. As a result, they are dependent on environmental heat sources and have relatively low metabolic rates, all reptiles have to regulate their body temperature from an outside source, some of these crocodile on the Mara river will reach 16 feet and weigh in excess of a 1,000 kgs, which is huge!



Photo courtesy of Katie McLellan

We have had lovely sightings of **Black Rhino** particularly on Paradise Plains and Rhino Ridge.

There are some lovely *butterflies* within the camp grounds particularly the swallow-tails; Mocker swallow tail (*Papilio Dardanus*), Green banded swallow-tail (*Papilio phorcas*) Noble swallow tail) *Papilio Nobilis*) and Narrow green-banded swallowtail (*P.Nireus*)

Lion

Bila Shaka/ marsh pride

The Marsh pride can be seen anywhere from the Musiara Marsh, Bila Shaka and as far as Rhino ridge. On Christmas eve the four new Marsh males killed a large male Buffalo at Bila Shaka and were still feasting on the remains on Christmas day.



Photo courtesy of Peggy Chodorow

One of the males was seen mating with Bibi and the one with the damaged eye is slowly recovering and it is perhaps his luck that he did not lose the sight of that eye.

The 5 cubs of the Marsh pride of which one of the cubs is much younger (seven months old and the other four cubs are 10 months old) are doing well and are being seen mostly on Rhino ridge.

The 4 large males related to 'Notch' are being seen near the Talek river and the double crossing area, 'Notch' himself has been seen, he is looking his age though, they have been seen feeding off warthog and topi. One of these males was seen on the 26th at Bila Shaka. On the 20th December on the plains to the east of Rhino Ridge in area called Naibor soit

meaning white stones in Maa there was another male lion, who in 2009 met up with 3 Marsh Females that took flight in the takeover when Notch and his brother moved in 2004 and they since have resided in the Naibor soit area. This male lion looked very worse for wear and seemed to be suffering from many injuries perhaps as a result of a scuffle with other lions.

On Christmas day at 7.30am near the Toyota site close to paradise plains two young male lion from the Marsh Pride that were looking for warthog jumped a hippo that was returning back to water and did not bring it down but made a determined effort.



Photo courtesy of Nick Kourides

On the west side of Rhino Ridge the 9 females of the **Paradise** Pride had killed a topi early that morning and were being badgered by 30 + spotted hyena. The Hyena then dispersed quickly when an old male lion suddenly arrived on the scene and chased the hyena off. This was Clawed the old Marsh pride male but as he is still limping heavily and not very agile the Hyena then re-grouped, turned the tables again, and chased him off, he and the females dispersed and the hyenas finished off what was left of the topi.

On boxing day four females of the Marsh pride had killed a female defassa waterbuck near Lake Nakuru within the Musiara Marsh. The Marsh pride also has been feeding off the many warthog that are in the Bila Shaka and Rhino Ridge grassland plains. On the 28th two lionesses from the Marsh pride caught and killed a warthog and piglet near Bila Shaka. There is also some new exciting news to report that one of the females from the Marsh pride has 4 new cubs that are around 5 weeks old.

Cheetah

A female Cheetah that is assumed pregnant has been seen near the Double Crossing and also near Olkiombo and she has been sitting on cars recently so she has been well photographed, she was last seen on the 26th near Rhino Ridge.

The two males have been seen once only on the other side of the Talek River and that was early on in the month. Another female with an eight month old cub has been seen near Olkiombo and she has been feeding of Thompson Gazelles.

Leopard

Olive and her 12 month old cub have been seen quite recently but her older male cub has not been seen often.

The large male Leopard has been seen in the river bed south of Bila Shaka looking towards Rhino ridge and also at the Bila Shaka riverbed crossing.



Photo courtesy of Sharon Roles

A female that is often seen near the croton thickets on the rocky hill south of Paradise Plains near the Serena pump house has been seen more frequently with some good scenes of her crossing the salt lick flats near the Mara River. She has two young cubs and they are difficult to see, although a glimpse of them was seen in the early evening of the 19th. Back in camp Christmas eve celebrations kicked off at Little Governors' Camp with the visit of a rhino to the marsh right in front of camp.



Photo courtesy of George Murray

We hope to share the magic of our corner of the Mara with you sometime soon.

Governors' Camp Collection