



# THE SPECTACLE AT THE RIVER

*The Great Wildebeest Migration in Focus*

The annual migration of giant herds of grazers across northern Tanzania and Kenya is a truly spectacular event. Over two million wildebeest, zebras and gazelles traverse the Serengeti and Masai Mara ecosystems in search of green pasture, in a regular pattern that has become one of the greatest wonders of the natural world.



For decades, zoologists, animal behaviourists and other scientists have pondered how *Connochaetes taurinus* (the common Blue Wildebeest) has developed such a finely-honed instinct for survival when food and water become scarce.

Although broad-shouldered and muscular, the Wildebeest is, however, not renowned as the animal kingdom's intellectual giant – an accolade that surely must go to the African Elephant.

### **FOOD IS EVERYTHING**

Driven by the relentless search for food, the annual migration of thousands – some observers even mention millions – of Wildebeest reaches a peak between July and August each year when the animals, accompanied by herds of Zebra and often also Thompson's Gazelle and the occasional eland, enter the 1,510-km<sup>2</sup> Masai Mara in search of lush grasslands.

Focussing on *The Crossing* – when the Mara River will be traversed –

the group, seemingly, switches to autopilot for a journey that will end in disaster for some, at the hands of predators, crocodiles, and the fast-flowing waters of the Mara.

Remaining, to the delight of scores of predators, until October or November when the return journey will be undertaken, when lions, leopards, cheetahs and hyenas all grasp this festive opportunity to prey predominantly on the elderly, the frail, and wobbly-legged offspring born during the migration.

The Great Migration, as it is popularly known, is not an isolated once-a-year event, but rather a constant migration of animals which begins in the 65,000-km<sup>2</sup> Serengeti ecosystem and during which, over 1.5-million animals slowly make their way.

Owing to the massive size of the herds, food and water reach depletion levels within six to eight weeks – with a subsequent sense of panic in the ranks – which will ultimately launch their departure.

But what triggers this mass migration to the Tanzanian south?

How do the animals know where to find food and water? Evidence would suggest that weather patterns play a significant role, and that the animals instinctively respond to these phenomena.

Finally, the day arrives, as the Wildebeest gather on the banks of the Mara River. Eyes wide in fear and with labouring breath, they scout for the safest and surest path through the water, and onto the safety of the opposite bank. The juveniles and slower animals, especially, are noticeably fearful, fully aware of their potential to become crocodile dinner, and of the likelihood of drowning.

Meanwhile, Marabou storks and other carrion dispensers stand ready to perform their tasks as clean-up agents.

This is nature's way and, although seemingly cruel to human observers, it is an efficient control mechanism to keep the environment clean and disease-free.





*...as the khaki-clad tourists sip their G&Ts at dusk, the animals who survived the crossing will sleep with one eye open, always perfectly aware that predators prefer the darkness.*



#### HUMAN SPECTATORS

*Homo Sapiens* thrives on drama, a fact that goes some way to explain why visitors from all parts of the world flock to Kenya and Tanzania for the annual migratory spectacle. They arrive in game viewing vehicles, with telephoto lenses at the ready; reliant on their knowledgeable guides to find them that elusive perfect photographic or viewing spot.

The popularity spell that the Great Migration casts over tourists also requires five-star infrastructure that ranges from fly-in safaris to exquisite accommodation, and ultimately also



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*Indulge in a hot air balloon ride over the Masai Mara Reserve*

to the quality of the guides. Fine cuisine that would not be out of place in the capitals of the world is taken for granted – and there is a deliberate (and successful) attempt to create an authentic “Out of Africa” experience.

And as the khaki-clad tourists sip their G&Ts at dusk, the animals who survived the crossing will sleep with one eye open, always perfectly aware that predators prefer the darkness.

#### **ACCOMMODATION**

Whether staying at the conservancy or in the main reserve, one is virtually guaranteed the discerning experience you seek. The Masai Mara Reserve offers superb plains scenery, yet it is recommended that visitors focus on the five main migration zones – northern, eastern, southern, western and central – when planning their trip. Considered Kenya’s best park and one of Africa’s highest wildlife density regions for predators, the reserve provides unmatched safari activities including hot air ballooning, as well as possible bush walks with armed rangers in attendance.

Only the fortunate few will enjoy



*Wildebeest crossing the Mara in search of greener pastures*



*African Marabou patiently waiting to feed*

emotional impact on the viewers. Emotions will range from anticipation to excitement and also sadness at the inevitable demise of so many beautiful animals.

But this is nature’s way, and it will not change – unless humankind, in our perversity, cannot resist the urge to intervene. 11

*by bernard hellberg /  
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