

# Nairobi National Park News

September 2020

Cover Photo by Davina Dobie

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## Chairman's Monthly Updates | September 2020



**Gareth Jones**  
**Board Chairman**  
**FoNNaP**

Greetings to all of you,

The current global reality is still very sobering and of great concern to many nations including Kenya. We do, however, continue to pray that increased forms of normal life will return. As the year 2020 moves into the 4th quarter, the recent reduction of curfew hours and the partial normalization of international flights will allow improved functionality and therefore increased economic activity, including visitors to the park.

The new range of FoNNaP merchandise with the FoNNaP logo in combination with an "OUR PARK – OUR HERITAGE" logo is now available. A full range of the available priced items will be advertised on the FoNNaP website, social media and also circulated to the members via email. Members qualify for a 10% discount on all purchases. It is hoped that this range of items will communicate a clear message regarding the NNP and at the same time raise funds.

The bird walk at Silole Sanctuary was very well attended, and judging by the many positive comments I was sorry that prior commitments did not allow me to attend. (Please read the detailed article in this edition of the FoNNaP newsletter). During the month of September, the FoNNaP board also had a good constructive meeting with the Senior Warden. The meeting included subjects such as vehicle patrols, park clean-ups and a program to upgrade all the signage within the park. 1000 indigenous trees were also planted near the Cheetah gate in a combined activity with the Tour Operators (Read the detailed article in this edition of the FoNNaP newsletter).

FoNNaP was invited by the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife to attend a special conservancy ceremony at Swara Plains on Thursday 24th August 2020 with Cabinet Secretary – Ministry of Tourism & Wildlife – Hon Najib Balala as the guest of honour. (Read the detailed article in this edition of the FoNNaP newsletter).

It is hoped that the FoNNaP 2021 wildlife calendars (Animals & Birds) will be available by the middle of October 2020. Please continue to take care out there and stay well! Pray God help us in our actions!!!

Kind regards

Gareth Jones  
Chairman

## Nairobi National Park Lions in September 2020

By Trish Heather-Hayes

Its been an active month with lions moving around in unusual areas, being chased by buffalo and males meeting up with each other.

On the 2nd September, Sirikoi was seen by a tour guide and clients in the evening, staggering along the road like his legs weren't quite functioning and looking somewhat dazed. He disappeared into a large bush close to the road. The following morning, those in the park kept an eye out for him but he wasn't seen. Olga and I went separately into the park after lunch to help search. I found the spot where he had gone off the road and into hiding close to No 5, then Olga spotted a scat on the road with large pug marks all around it. We followed these pug marks down the road from 5 towards 4a when once again they veered off into the grass and towards the riverine. We went home feeling that at least he was up and moving. Bright and early the next morning there he was, walking with a very slight limp, on the road from 4a heading to No 5. He seemed none the worse for wear! It was reported that he had been hunting zebra but had missed a kill and so maybe he had received a hefty kick from one of the zebra and was numb and dazed at the time. He has been seen around frequently in different areas of the park, especially the forest and Kingfisher area and on one evening joining the KF4 mothers and subs on a buffalo kill near Impala Point.



Photo credit Olga Levani Ercolano – Sirikoi

An interesting occurrence on Sunday the 6th. Mpakasi and Kitili have been making frequent trips up from Athi to the SGR between No 7 and the murrum pits before No 8. On this day they came up together to the SGR, but then Mpakasi wandered off towards No 6 and met up with Sirikoi, leaving Kitili on his own, still beside the SGR. Mpakasi and Sirikoi had met several times in earlier years when Sirikoi was still with Athi and her daughters, then after their deaths, Mpakasi and he were seen together in the Basin when Sirikoi turned up in his old haunts and

met up with Mpakasi, chasing away Kitili away each time he ventured close. After about 5 days, Sirikoi left the basin and headed back to the Langata Forest and Kitili and Mpakasi reunited. There is obviously tension still between the two as Kitili kept his distance when Mpakasi walked off and met up with Sirikoi near No 6. Mpakasi spent a couple of hours with him then moved back to Kitili and they walked together to the Karen C Dam, leaving Sirikoi alone to move off from No 6 to 17. Strange the animosity between them, as they are both Mohawk's sons. Mpakasi is not related to either of the two but friendly with both.



Photo by TH Hayes - Mpakasi followed by Kitili

Solo and Nala also seem to have taken a liking to visiting the areas around 9, 8 and the SGR, appearing with their 5 cubs but keeping to themselves, staying a day or so and then moving back to 10a waterhole and Sosian Valley. This last Sunday they appeared in the valley between Mbuni and the Murrum pits of 7-8, at the same time as Kitili and Mpakasi. Kitili moved off with a female (which wasn't seen well enough to identify) leaving Mpakasi waiting for him in the valley, while Solo and family moved into some bushes not far from Mpakasi for the day.



Photo by T H Hayes Solo and Nala

Morana and two of her daughters Zahara and Johari, of the KF4 group, were just past Kingfisher towards 28a, when they spotted three of the KF7 girls, Isinya, Naserian and Naisenya with a zebra kill they had made near the Rangers camp before 28a. They bravely chased off the three younger females and took over the kill. The remainder of the KF4 group, Leboia and Alamaya and the 5 subs were further afield doing their own hunting near 27a. It had been noticed a few days prior that Zahara has a large wound on the inside of her back left leg. Whatever she had been involved in had ripped the skin in quite a large area, but as it was clean and she was keeping it that way it was felt that she could take good care of it herself. It is healing well. Alamaya had also been in a squabble with something and had a long cut on her back and a slight limp.



Photo by TH Hayes - Morana and Johari with their stolen kill

Safi and Serena of the MF group have both been mating on and off with Mpakasi and mostly Kitili. Seeing Serena at No 9 two weeks ago I felt she might be pregnant, but we will have to wait and see.



Photo by T H Hayes - Serena

Safi was down at the Athi dam, looking well but not pregnant at all. Sadly Sidai, Safi's sister, has not been seen for a while now and not sure what has happened to her.



Photo By TH Hayes - Safi

Kemboi is also still missing. It was thought he was around No 16 last week but it turned out to be Kitili, who was being a bit aggressive towards Quntai and Leshan. They decided it was best not to get involved with the large male that Kitili has become and moved off fairly quickly.



Photo by TH Hayes Leshan and Quntai

The KF7's, Quntai, Leshan and 5 sisters, on the plains above No 6 dam, were edging around a herd of buffalo who turned round and chased them instead, sending them all running in different directions, with two climbing into a nearby shrub, not quite a tree, where they hung on for dear life until the buffalo got bored and moved off, then it was a scramble to extract themselves from the "tree" and run off to join the rest of the family who had moved a safe distance away.

Since the death of Sam, Sirikoi has been enjoying the freedom of his areas and the friendship of the KF4's. With Mpakasi and Kitili being more frequent around the SGR and as far as the No 6 dam, it will be interesting to see how things pan out and who will be dominant in which areas, and where the two younger males Quntai and Leshan will fit in. Hopefully it will all be fairly peaceful.

## COMMUNITY NEWS

### Naretunoi Lease Money Paid Amid Lack of Funds Occasioned by Covid 19

Vincent Ole Simel



After skipping the April payments, The Wildlife Foundation paid the Naretunoi Community Conservancy lessees their September cheques. The previous event did not take place due to the harshness caused by the Covid 19 pandemic.

Ever since the first Covid 19 case was reported in the country, The Wildlife Foundation Centre (TWFC) where the money for the conservancy is raised did not have activities, thus making it hard to raise funds to pay land owners.

This situation forced TWF to come up with the “adopt an acre” strategy to raise funds for the lease programme. The organization had to do robust marketing to ensure they raised the lease money. The strategies included organizing trips to the conservancy, game count and adopt an acre. The lessees were invited to the function on 29th August at the Empakasi Primary school. In his welcoming address, the assistant chairman of the school’s Board of Directors Mr. Thomas Lekwik encouraged conservation as a means of ensuring the existence of biodiversity in the Nairobi National Park ecosystem. “KWS, this school is your offspring. We wonder why you seem to have neglected it. Take care of us we need you”, said Lekwik.

“I am glad that we have gathered here again for the lease programme”, remarked Mzee Parmisa Semei. “We say thank you to TWF for working hard in the midst of the pandemic to ensure the leases are paid”, he continued. While introducing the community rangers, Daniel Kimiti asked the lessees to take note of the ranger in charge of the block where they come from. “There is a ranger for every block in triangle one, where you reside. In case you need TWF assistance, they are the people you will talk to”, said Kimiti.

While speaking in his capacity as the area chief, Nickson Parmisa noted suspected cases of poaching.

Raise an alarm in case you see any poaching activity. Call the rangers who are trained to deal with such issues”, said Parmisa. “It is those poachers that are stealing our livestock and they should be stopped”, he concluded.

Benson Mutunkei, one of the directors at TWF started by introducing Nkamunu Patita the Programmes Coordinator at The Wildlife Foundation and a member (appointed by FoNNaP) of the Task Force created by the Ministry of Tourism & Wildlife on the Nairobi National Park and Athi-Kapiti plains corridor.

He apologized for the lease payment that was not done in the month of April. He also thanked the land owners for being patient in the midst of the pandemic. “While doing the mapping of the conservancy, we noticed a number of fences have come up. This will lead to wildlife movement blockage which will translate to less money to the land owner”, said Mr. Mutunkei.

He thanked the Kenya Wildlife Service and USAID for their partnership which has led to the creation of the community ranger’s programme saying it has created employment opportunities for the youth in the conservancy.

Speaking at the event, Mrs. Twalib, took the opportunity to formally introduce herself to the community since she became the Community Warden a few months ago. She called on the community to work closely with her office. “I am also a pastoralist like you”, she said. “I understand how it feels to lose livestock which is your source of livelihood”, she continued.

“As KWS we have opened a unit known as Capture Base Outpost headed by Moses Kereto. This unit has a vehicle and officers ready to respond at any given time they are required to”, said the Community Warden.

“In case you lose your livestock, make sure you report to the police, get an OB number from Mr. Kereto and then let it be signed by your chief”, she said. She also revealed that her office has been working on compensation forms from 2014 to date. “Compensation is done on both livestock lost and farm lands destroyed”, she further said.

She announced that The Kenya Wildlife Service and the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology want to introduce bee keeping to land owners living next to the park to supplement their pastoralism. “This initiative is for groups and not individuals” she retaliated.

“The groups will be trained on how to handle the bees, harvest the honey and will be helped on marketing the end products”, she said.



### Greening The Park: Tree Planting Activity At Nairobi National Park

By Janet Kavutha

Nairobi National Park is an important carbon sink for the Nairobi city. Given the pollution from the industrialisation and infrastructure developments, the park needs more trees to increase the carbon sink. Keeping the park alive is a FoNNaP mandate that we take very seriously, through ecosystem restoration of various areas in the park. The Cheetah gate area was disrupted during the SGR construction and KWS have been doing a restoration programme for the area.

On 26th September FoNNaP in partnership with KATO (Kenya Association of Tour Operators), Apolo Tours, WCK (Wildlife Clubs of Kenya) and the Millennial Environmentalists (TME), worked together to organise a tree planting activity around the Cheetah gate area. 1000 trees were planted.

The participants assembled at the KWS main gate at 8.30am, a short briefing was done by the NNP Senior Warden, Mr Joseph Dadacha and Mwanahamisi Twalib, the Community Warden. The group used the Mombasa highway, branching off at Athi river to the Cheetah gate area. The Community Warden and Jacky from KWS research wing divided the groups to 4. These were to undertake the red soil application in the holes, tree planting, watering and the other group was in charge of collecting the plastic bags used in wrapping the seedlings. The species were mostly indigenous Acacia species that exist and do well in the park, given the savannah nature of the park

The exercise ended at 1pm, after an inspection of the area by FoNNaP and TME officials to ensure that each seedling was planted, well covered and watered. They also ensured no tools used were left behind. Later the cars drove through the park for a game drive where they sighted rhinos, wildebeest, zebras, impalas, Grants gazelles, giraffes and many other animals. The Apolo group and volunteers from TME and FoNNaP went for lunch at the KWS Club House. Later, a vote of thanks was given and the group dispersed.

The post planting activities will include watering when the rains are not consistent and monitoring to replace seedlings that dry out. Fortunately, during this weekend, it had rained.

The post planting activities will include watering when the rains are not consistent and monitoring to replace seedlings that dry out. Fortunately, during this weekend, it had rained.

We are grateful to the members who took the initiative to donate seedlings for this activity.

Asanteni sana and let NNP remain green forever.



# An African Crowned Eagle Rescue In The Park

By Olga Levari Ercolano



On Saturday afternoon, 25th September 2020, whilst on Park Patrol duty in Nairobi National Park, I came across an impala carcass along 27A on the way to Kingfisher, with one vulture keeping its distance and gingerly trying to approach it. I wondered whether there may be some other predator around to cause the vulture to be so careful and keep looking around all the time. I believe, as I found out later, that Sirikoi (adult male lion) was in the neighbourhood, had sniffed at the carcass, rejected it and gone for a nap under a nearby bush. I did not see him till several hours later, after the Crowned Eagle rescue, when he popped his head up from a bush across the road and moved deeper into the bush as it started raining and a huge herd of buffalo crossed the road moving towards him. All the time he had been near me and I had not realized.

Back to the carcass - once the vulture plucked up courage to approach the carcass and dig in, another appeared, then more and more flew in till there was a huge flutter of wings and chatter and the carcass was devoured in no time, leaving just bones and some red meat stuck to the bones. I proceeded with my patrol to Kingfisher.



On my return to the carcass, the vultures had gone and there was a large bird of prey “collapsed” on the remaining carcass, with its head into the ground, one wing half raised in an odd position and it kept shaking its head. It appeared to be in distress. There was another vehicle nearby, whose occupants had seen the bird approach in a strange hopping manner. We discussed the situation, saw that it was a young African Crowned Eagle and I immediately reported it to the rest of the Patrol team and KWS to arrange for rescue. Trish called Zoe Gibbs of the Raptor Rehabilitation Trust, but we had to get permission from Millicent of KWS to supply a ranger and allow the raptor to be taken out of the Park to Raptor Rehab. I stayed with the eagle for several hours, watching and reporting its behaviour, until Zoe arrived with a ranger to capture it. Passersby were curious as to what I was doing, asked so many questions and were happy to know that FoNNaP cares for all manner of fauna and will seek help when needed. At a certain point, I was somewhat pleased to see the eagle manage to turn its body around, and even stand up and start pecking at the carcass, although struggling, but getting some nourishment. However, it soon collapsed to the ground again. When he looked towards me, his eyes were pleading for help. I did not leave him, until help came.

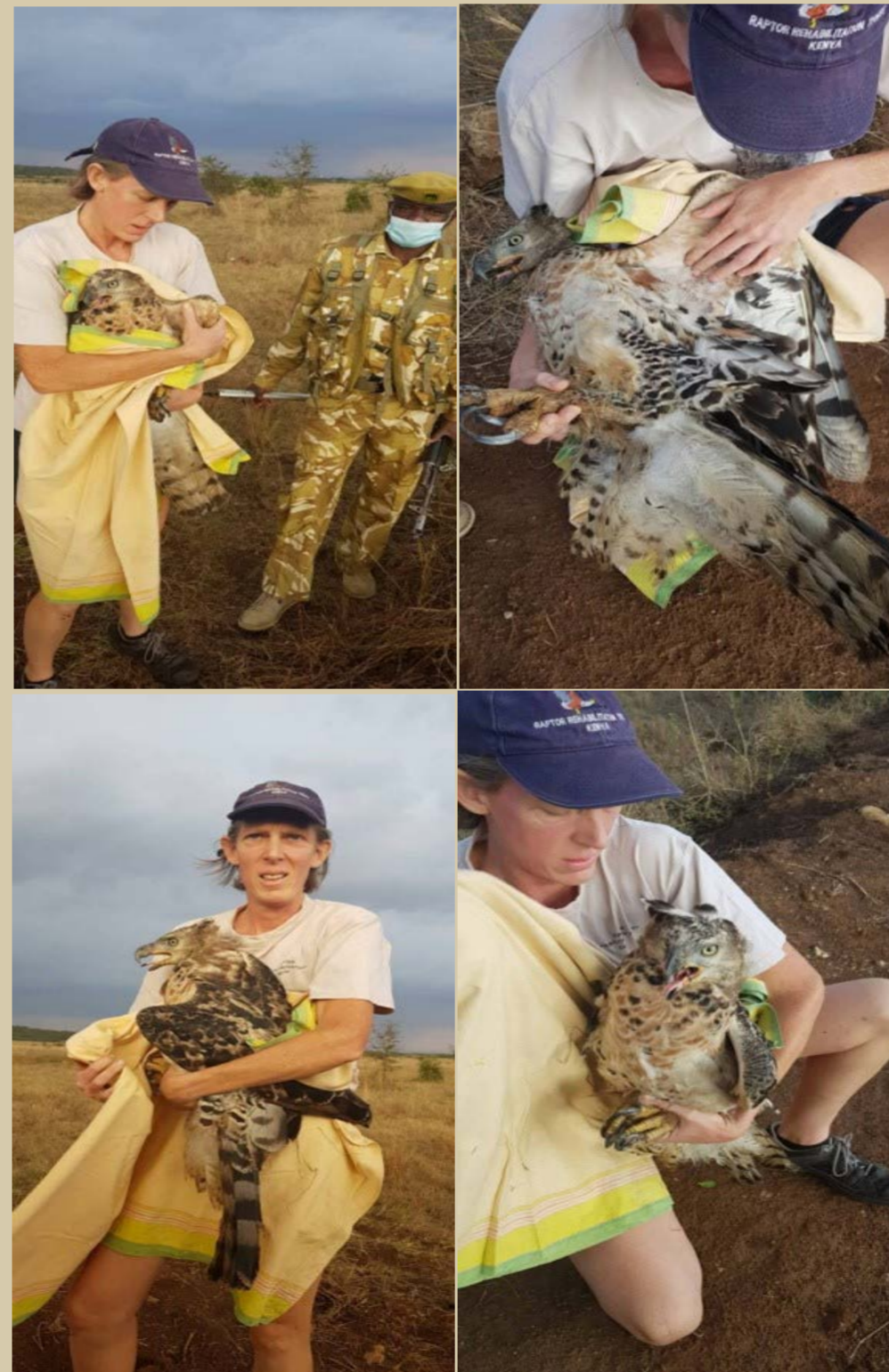


When Zoe arrived with the ranger, she went straight towards the eagle to capture it. He struggled as he hopped away to the nearest bush, unable to spread his wings and fly. She went back to her vehicle to collect a bird net on a pole, caught him, covered him with the kikoy and brought him to show me. She inspected the bird and saw that it had a damaged joint in one of its wings and moreover needed nourishment and was full of lice!



The Xray of the Crowned Eagle’s wing indicates that “It has been struggling for 3-4 weeks and all that, is bone between the fracture. Sadly, the wing is not the priority. He is so emaciated, weak and in bad shape. He also has a broken toe and is covered in lice (indicative of a weakened system). He is on ”death’s door”. All possible will be done to help him.”

He has been placed into ICU, on fluids. By day 3, he was a little brighter and eating.



The eagle is now in the Raptor Rehabilitation Centre in Zoe’s good hands.



Day 4, he is more lively, standing & eating more (photo from Zoe on 30th September, 2020). This eagle has a strong will to live. Zoe wants to name him “Gollum”. I think that’s great. He will have an identity.

In view of the dedication and care provided to these exquisite birds in distress, by the Raptor Rehabilitation Trust,

and for taking care of Gollum, I feel it would be a nice gesture to help Zoe, by donating to the Trust via **Mpesa Paybill Business No.870930, Account “Crowned Eagle”**. If you wish to assist, please donate to this number. We shall keep regular check and updates on Gollum in following his progress.

## An Historic Conservation Event

By Gareth Jones



FoNNaP was invited by the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife to attend a special conservancy ceremony at Swara Plains on Thursday 24th September 2020, with Cabinet Secretary – Ministry of Tourism & Wildlife – Hon Najib Balala as the guest of honour. I personally attended the event with our Vice Chairman Jacob Tukai, and Caroline Patita.

It was indeed a rare and historic occasion with VIP guests and media present, as 2 special conservancy certificates were awarded. Firstly to the Hopcraft family and then to the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI). The combined area of the two conservancies is about 47000 acres. During his speech, Hon Najib Balala repeatedly mentioned the possibility of linking the Nairobi National Park to the conservancies. The next challenge is to find a way to “bridge the wildlife corridor”. The gazetted Task Force to investigate wildlife movement possibilities was officially launched and given a period of maximum 3 months to present their findings in the form of a written report. (Caroline Patita is the FoNNaP representative on the Task Force).

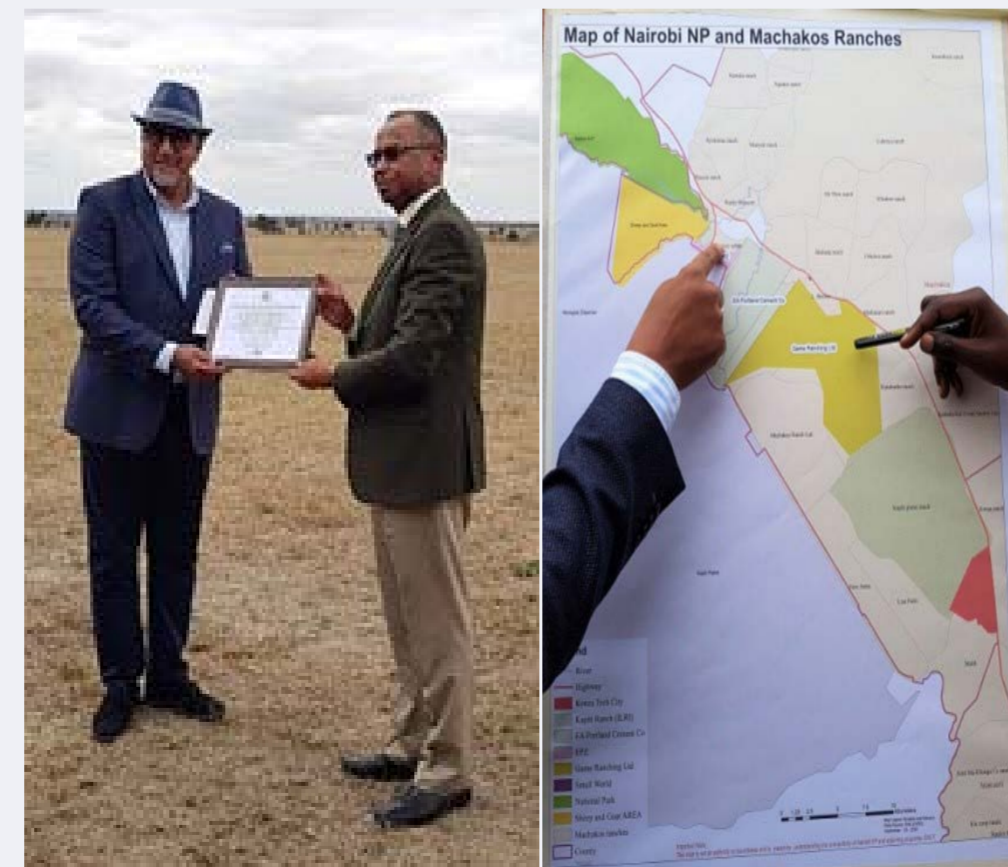
In the current reality, it will be a challenge to achieve 2 major breakthroughs. Firstly, to find a fair way to work with the Maasai community regarding the “sheep & goat” land, and secondly to be able to find a viable way through the Athi River EPZ zone, such that it is wide enough and secure enough for wildlife to move through without being restricted. An overpass or underpass bridge will also need to be built to ensure safe wildlife movements over the Athi River – Namanga highway.

Just so that there is no confusion or misunderstanding, various media reports are stating that the park has increased by 49000 acres from the current 29000 acres (117 square kilometers). In reality, this statement represents the future hope of making provision and achieving a wildlife corridor including a bridge (overpass or underpass) to cross the Athi-Namanga highway. The conservancy land is still privately owned, and the 2000 acres of sheep and goat land south of the park still needs to be officially included.

It will be fantastic if the wildlife zone could be expanded past 78000 acres to also include land along the western boundary of the park. There is still much work to be done to achieve this.

Let us all hope and pray that God will help us all to work together to find a way where there seemed no way, such that the efforts of every person who tried in the past will not be in vain. We hope that the year 2021 will be the year of the “bridge”, such that the Nairobi National Park will be connected to the conservancies to open a wildlife corridor, and in doing so, all those who made the effort, will be more than just a voice for the creatures who cannot speak, in that words became meaningful action. Imagine for a moment that this was the year 2046 and the park is now 100 years old, will it be a time of lamenting the losses, or a wonderful time of celebrating the actions of those who acted when they could? The year 2021 is also the 75th Anniversary of the Nairobi National Park, let us pray it is an historic year, the year of the “bridge”.

Gareth Jones, Chairman



Hon Najib Balala & ILRI CEO

Connectivity from Conservancies to NNP

## A Jackal Amongst The Vultures

By Gabriel Grimsditch



In the city of Nairobi, action and drama are never far around the corner. The same applies to the city’s jewel, Nairobi National Park. One fine Saturday, action in the wild was signaled by vultures circling and spiraling in the skies above. At first, we thought that the vultures might, as they often do, just be riding the thermal wind currents that the heavy birds need to keep them airborne, but as we continued driving, an exciting scene unfolded.

Two black-backed jackals had found a carcass, and were happily tucking in. But they were not alone. A committee of African white-backed vultures had formed on the ground and was watching the jackals intently, just a few metres away from the kill. More vultures dropped in from the skies and joined the clawed committee. A critical mass formed and suddenly, without warning, the vultures swarmed the carcass. The jackals beat a hasty retreat, and a cacophony of beaks and feathers ensued as the vultures fought over the kill. A Ruppell’s vulture joined the fray, pecking at the African white-backed vultures to gain prime position, and was quickly dislodged by an even larger lappet-faced vulture.

The jackals were now watching the scene from a safe distance, tails between their legs. But all was not lost. Mustering up remarkable courage, the jackals regrouped and charged the vultures! They ran straight at the carcass, teeth bared, eyes wide, backs arched, and scattering the birds. Success! He who dares, wins. The jackals once again regained control of the prize, even if just for a few seconds. Tails wagging, they took bites of meat as they fended off the vultures. As the vultures closed back in menacingly, the two canine brave-hearts managed to run off to safety to tuck into their hard-fought meat. Every dog has his day!



Two jackals eating



Vultures swoop in



Lappet faced vulture swoops in



Jackal face off with vultures

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Olga Levari Ercolano

**Photo of the Month**

By Olga Levari Ercolano

*“Zebras and the City”*

## The Vipers Of Nairobi National Park

By Stephen Spawls (stevespawls@hotmail.com)

In terms of human suffering, vipers are arguably the most dangerous family of snakes; all are venomous. They are characterised by long fangs, placed at the front of the mouth; so long, in fact, that they must fold flat when the snake closes its mouth, otherwise the fangs would stick out below the jaw line. These fangs have a single purpose. When the snake bites, the venom injected through the fangs is driven so deep into the body of its prey that the animal dies, literally, within seconds, before it can attack its assailant, or escape. The only family of snakes that are equally dangerous are the elapids; the cobras, mambas and allies, but elapids are faster moving and more alert than vipers, so probably cause fewer bites to humanity.

There are about 360 species of viper, split into three subfamilies. Some 260 species are pit vipers, of the Americas and eastern Asia. This group (which includes rattlesnakes and the Asian tree vipers) have heat-sensitive pits on their heads that enable them to detect warm prey in total darkness. Another subfamily contains only two small, slim, Asian vipers. The remaining subfamily, the true vipers, contains about 100 species, found in Africa, Europe and eastern Asia.

Kenya has thirteen species of viper; including three beautiful endemics; the Kenya Montane Viper, *Montatheris hindii*, from the moorlands of Mt Kenya and the Aberdares, the Kenya Horned Viper, *Bitis worthingtoni*, of the high central rift valley, and the Mt Kenya Bush Viper, *Atheris desaixi*, of the southeastern Mt Kenya forest and the Nyambene Hills. Two species of viper are found in Nairobi National Park. They are the Puff Adder, *Bitis arietans*, and the Rhombic Night Adder, *Causus rhombeatus*. Both are widely distributed in Africa. The Rhombic Night Adder occurs sporadically from South Africa north to Ethiopia and west to Nigeria. The Puff Adder has probably the widest distribution of any African snake, throughout the savannas, light woodland and semi-desert of sub-Saharan Africa; it extends north of the desert to Morocco, and is found in the southwestern Arabian Peninsula.

Rhombic Night Adders are not particularly dangerous. Six species of night adder occur in Africa (four of which are found in Kenya), they have a painful bite which causes swelling, but no-one has ever been killed by one. They feed largely on frogs. Rhombic Night Adders occur throughout the park; they have also been recorded in Lang'ata and Embakasi, thence northeast towards Ruiru and Thika. They are not common in the park but may be seen crossing roads by day, for despite their names, they are active by day and by night, an unusual habit for a snake. They hiss angrily if approached, several times I have become aware of a night adder on account of its noisy hissing before I saw it. Night Adders are unviperalike in several ways; they have quite

short fangs, round eye pupils (vipers usually have vertical pupils), nine large scales on top of the head (most vipers have many small scales), and they lay eggs. This caused them to be classified as primitive vipers, offshoots from the ancestral stock, until molecular analysis of their DNA proved that they lie squarely within the clade, or ancestral tree, of true vipers.



Rhombic Night Adder



Nairobi National Park, Puff Adder country

Unlike night adders, the Puff Adder is very dangerous; probably the most dangerous snake in Africa. It has a powerful venom, it is common, widespread, well-camouflaged and when approached remains quiet and still, hoping to remain unseen. And it may bite you if you step on, or very near it (although there is some evidence that they actually only bite as a last resort, preferring to remain motionless even if trodden on!). The venom is a potent cytotoxin, causing massive local tissue destruction. A number of people in Kenya are bitten every year by this snake, especially in Ukambani. A Puff Adder bite is a medical emergency and needs treatment at an advanced hospital.



Female puff adder with short tail



Hidden danger, camouflaged Puff Adder



Male Nairobi Puff Adder

The Puff Adders of highland Kenya, including the Nairobi ones, are vividly marked; males are bright black and yellow, although females are duller. Although it is hard to tell the sex of most snakes, Puff Adders can be sexed; the males have a longer tail and are brighter in colour. Like most large vipers, Puff Adders give live birth; the picture (for which I thank the team at Bio-Ken at Watamu) shows a clutch of over 60 babies born to a Tsavo female. One Kenyan female had 156 babies, a record for any vertebrate, although 10-25 babies is more usual for the Nairobi area. Puff Adders occur throughout the savanna areas of the park, but are rarely in the forest. In Nairobi, they occur to the south and east of the city. You are only likely to see one at dusk, when they emerge and are sometimes seen on the roads. They tend to remain in one area; my old friend Glenn Mathews once found a distinctively-marked Puff Adder, with a tick on its head, in his garden at Kitengela, he took it across to the Park and released it several hundred metres away, but it returned a few days later. Interestingly, the biggest Puff Adders in Africa occur in lowland Kenya; in most parts of Africa, Puff Adders rarely grow to more than 1.2m, but some Kenya snakes measured more than 1.8 m. A snake to be admired from a distance.



A clutch of baby Puff Adders



Puff Adder fangs



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# The Forgotten 'Great Migration' Of The Athi-Kapiti Plains

By Sidney Shema



Wilbeest migration in Nairobi National Park, photographed in 1994 from the African Heritage House.  
Photo credit: African Heritage House

Nairobi National Park (NNP) is famous for being the only national park in the world that is situated within a capital city. Not only that, but it still supports wild mega-fauna including lion, buffalo, two rhino species, leopard, giraffe, eland, and a whole host of other impressive creatures. It's also clear that the park is now under serious pressure from human infrastructure and developments. What you might not know, however, is that NNP is only a small part of a much larger ecosystem (called the Athi-Kapiti, or Athi-Kaputiei) that once supported a wildebeest migration as spectacular as that of the famous Mara-Serengeti ecosystem.

In fact, according to the Nairobi National Park guide book produced by FoNNaP, "the Athi-Kapiti ecosystem was, in the 19th century, said to boast the most spectacular concentration of wild animals in East Africa." Immense herds of wildebeest and zebra, hundreds of thousands strong, along with all manner of other ungulates, would migrate south onto the Athi Plains during the rains and back to the park during the dry season when water and grass became scarce on the plains. My friend Simon Thomsett, who was based in the Athi-Kapiti area from the 80s to the early 2000s, has told me about how he used to watch wildebeest crossing the Athi River (where the town now is) getting captured by crocodiles just like what you see in the Masai Mara today. He has also, using a light aircraft, watched long columns of wildebeest marching from the Chyulu Hills up towards Nairobi.

In fact, the original migration used to extend as far north as Thika and OI Donyo Sabuk, west to the Ngong Hills,

and south to Amboseli and the Chyulu Hills. Gradually through the 20th century, this range became smaller and smaller as migration routes got cut off one by one by growing towns and settlements. By the 1990s the migration had been greatly reduced in size but there were still a few tens of thousands of wildebeest migrating unhindered between NNP and the vast plains to the south. The building of the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) and subsequent growth of Athi River, Kitengela, and Isinya towns in the 2000s put a final impenetrable barrier in the main migration corridor between NNP and the Athi Plains, which were important for wildebeest not only as wet season pastures but also as calving grounds.



Wilbeest and other plains game in Nairobi National Park. Lukenya Hill is visible on the horizon

Today, the Athi-Kapiti Ecosystem wildebeest population is now split into two separate sub-populations. One in NNP with only a few hundred individuals, who disperse only a short distance outside the park to the open rangeland immediately south, where the Naretunoi Conservancy and Sheep and Goat Land now are. This is where they give birth to their calves and spend the wet months before returning to the park in the dry seasons. The second population is on the other side of the EPZ-Kitengela-Isinya blockage; on private land, ranches, and conservancies. These include those in Machakos County such as Kapiti Plains Estate (ILRI Research Station), Game Ranching (Swara Plains), Lukenya, Maanzoni, Lisa Ranch, etc, as well as adjoining private lands to the west in Kajiado County, almost all the way to Isinya town. This is mainly a pastoralist area and still has plenty of wildlife. This population, in my opinion, is bigger than the NNP population. The combined area of all those ranches and private lands is in fact much bigger than the park. The fate of these remnant wildlife populations mainly lies in the hands of the land owners in these areas.



Wilbeest and Zebra at Ilpolosat (west of Konza), Kajiado County. These are part of the population that is now separated from the NNP population

It is encouraging to note that a task force has been set up by the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife to try and link these two areas back together, and hence restore the migration. One of the biggest challenges will be how to overcome the huge barrier that is the EPZ, Athi River, and Kitengela towns. Is the government willing to relocate the EPZ and open that area up as a migration corridor? An overpass has also been proposed but this would have to be very immense (remember, it is not just a road that it will have to cross but an extensive built-up area). The recent declaration of Swara Plains and Kapiti Plains (ILRI) ranches as conservancies was a good first step, but it will not be enough if a way to actually re-connect the park to the plains is not figured out. I must admit that I'm a bit skeptical about the likelihood of this restoration being achieved, given the circumstances, but all hope is not lost.

For more from Sidney Shema, visit his website (shotsbyshema.com) and/or follow him on Instagram (@ShotsByShema) and Facebook (Shots By Shema – Through A Birder's Lens).



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## Secretarybird (*Sagittarius Serpentarius*)

By Rupert Watson



The bird was originally christened *Falco serpentarius* in 1779, the author of which, in taxonomic terms, is still cited as John Frederick Miller, an illustrator. He is fortunate to have his name attached to such a magnificent species, merely as a consequence of having painted a specimen from the Cape of Good Hope. Even before Miller's work was out, the bird had been moved to its own genus, *Sagittarius* ('archer') before, in 1935, finally being accorded its own single-species family, *Sagittariidae*. Recent DNA studies support the idea of diurnal birds of prey being the Secretarybird's closest relatives, and any likeness to cranes or bustards are seen merely as the consequence of similar adaptations to a terrestrial, grassland lifestyle.

Such uncertainty was not confined to the make-up of the Secretarybird's family tree. There was also the whole question of why it was called what it was. Did the 'secretarial' epithet derive from the dress of black breeches and tailcoat, supposedly worn by Victorian secretaries, or because the crest feathers may resemble the quill pens that secretaries would tuck behind their ears or under their wigs? Some suspect the word of being a corruption of the Arabic *saqr-et-tair*, translating literally as 'hunter bird'. Or is 'secretary' a corruption of the generic name *Sagittarius*, referring to early descriptions of the bird wandering around, somewhat haphazardly, like an advancing bowman?

Thanks to its being such a high-profile, widely distributed and generally protected bird, there is little uncertainty over its behaviour. It is most often encountered striding purposefully across open grasslands where, unlike any other raptor in Africa, it is actually hunting on foot. The birds usually live and hunt in loose pairs, sometimes so loose as to appear to comprise singletons – which they may indeed be, in the case of young birds that have yet to pair up, or males out searching for food while their mate incubates the eggs.

One September afternoon I watched two Secretarybirds in Nairobi National Park, surely a pair as their plumage differed slightly: one, presumably the male, with a shaggier neck and much larger and more pronounced crest that it held erect; the other with a smaller, sleeker crest, flattened against the back of its head. I first saw only one, and then picked up the other in my binoculars, far away both from me and from its mate. Gradually they closed in on each other, until they could almost have touched wingtips, walked together for a minute or two, but without seeming to be hunting co-operatively in any way, and then gradually separated again, back into their own worlds. I wondered how they would communicate if one of these mostly silent birds found prey when they were far apart. Then it occurred to me that, as the birds usually swallow whole anything they catch, there may be little need to communicate hunting success, except perhaps when there is a swarm of locusts or grasshoppers, which can be shared.

Seeking food on the ground has turned Secretarybirds into opportunistic feeders, so much so that just about any creatures they come across are acceptable fare. If the birds sense a disturbance that could signal the presence of prey nearby they break into a fast trot in search of what might be their next meal. Despite their Latin species tag of *serpentarius*, the importance of snakes in their diet is probably exaggerated, and smaller, more easy-to-swallow items are preferred, such as grasshoppers, lizards, eggs, nestlings, mice, young rabbits, even tortoises, crabs and mongooses. These may be flushed from the grass cover by the birds' stamping their feet, or otherwise intercepted as they scurry away from the advancing footfalls. Secretarybirds are not partial to carrion, except charred prey on the edge of burnt or burning grasslands, where individuals sometimes congregate. The charismatic naturalist, Francois Levallant, is quoted by several authors as having bagged a specimen on one of his South African journeys that contained 'eleven rather large lizards, eleven small tortoises, a great number of insects nearly entire, and five snakes as thick as a man's arm'.

Much interest has been aroused by the Secretarybird's mode of killing its prey before swallowing. It usually kills larger rodents, lizards and snakes by stomping on them with its well-equipped feet, which have three thick, blunt toes in front and one behind, each ending in a short, curved talon. The force of the blow they inflict is prodigious, and the bird may deliver the final coup de grâce with a peck at the back of the neck. Thick scales on the front of its legs – and sometimes its outstretched wings – give protection from retaliation.

In 2016 a paper entitled *The Fast and Forceful Kicking Strike of the Secretary Bird*, scientists Portugal, Mum, Sparkes and Daley teamed up with Madeleine, a Secretarybird at the Hawk Conservancy Trust in Hampshire, England. Madeleine had been trained to stomp on rubber snakes for the benefit of spectators, so a pressure plate was buried under the ground in her aviary, and a rubber snake pulled slowly across it while high-speed cameras recorded the action. The force of the stomp was equivalent to the weight of a 20-kilogram hammer, or almost four times the bird's weight, and, equally remarkably, the kick was timed to take just 0.15 of a second. The consequences for a Secretarybird of a badly aimed strike can be lethal, so there is no room for error – the kick must literally be deadly accurate.

These birds normally eat their prey on the spot as they are incapable of clutching substantial creatures in their talons and flying off with them. Therefore, rumours of Secretarybirds flying up high and dropping large prey on the ground to kill it, as both Lammergeiers and Golden Eagles do with tortoises, are probably unfounded. Secretarybirds carry food in their crop, and it is quite conceivable that either danger or discomfort would force a bird in flight to disgorge half-swallowed prey, such as a snake. Watching from a distance, no observer could distinguish this from prey being dropped deliberately.

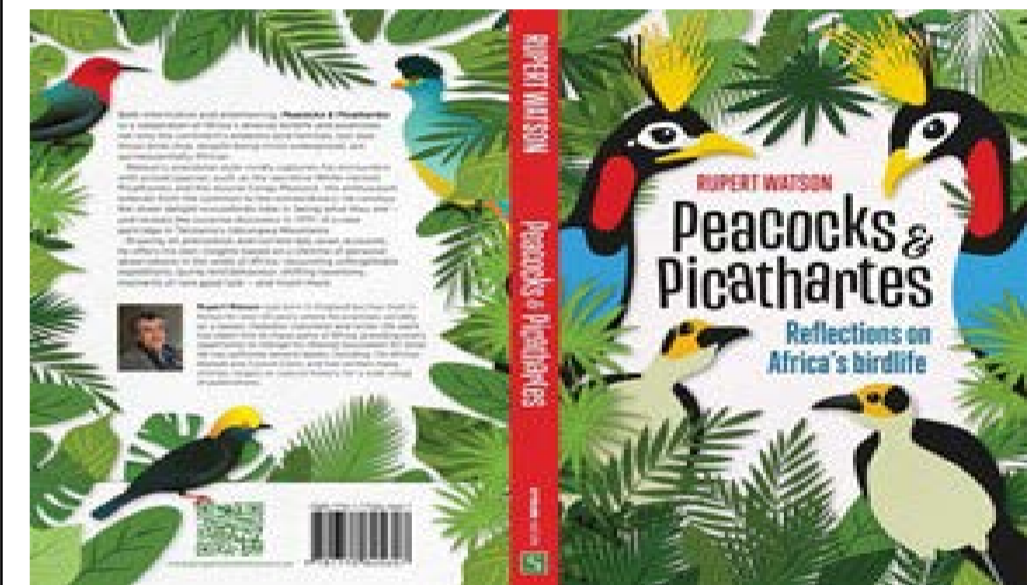
Secretarybirds seldom fly from danger, preferring to run; a bird flying with a loaded crop is most likely bringing back food to its mate or young on the nest. Territories in East Africa are usually centred round flat-topped Acacia or Balanites trees, which often double as roost and nesting sites, with dense thorny branches that prevent predators from reaching the nest from below. On the flat nest platform of sticks and grass, the female usually lays two white or pale blue eggs, which she incubates for up to 45 days, occasionally aided by the male.

Once hatched, the chicks are fed for almost 90 days, both parents bringing back food in their crop, which they then regurgitate. Sometimes the adults tear prey up into smaller morsels and feed these to the chicks, otherwise the female may re-ingest the male's regurgitation, finally feeding the young partly digested and more easily swallowed nourishment. Chicks in the open-platform nests, often left

unattended by either parent, are at the most vulnerable stage of their lives, and may fall prey to avian predators like crows, kites or even ground hornbills. However, leaving the nest too soon also brings its dangers, because the young then risk being unable to fly back up to roost in the evening.

As a species, the Secretarybird is not remotely threatened: the shading on its distribution map stops at the edges of thick forest or true desert, but otherwise covers most of sub-Saharan Africa where the grasslands are suitable for the birds' long daily hunts, and scattered trees offer roosts and nest sites.

However, there is no doubt that local populations are under threat and that the bird's range is shrinking, particularly with the expansion of intensive forestry and agriculture. The subdivision of large plots into smaller subsistence farms, enclosed with wire fences, drives Secretarybirds away, and power lines are a lethal danger for creatures that are so ungainly in the air.



Rupert Watson's book, *Peacocks & Picathartes* is available at the FoNNaP office, Langata Link.



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## Searching for Treasures

An upcoming series on conservation from the perspective of a young upcoming youth conservationist  
By Ryan Napo Nduma



Today was a special day in my life. It was my second time at the Nairobi National Park. I first went to the park earlier this year on my birthday and I just couldn't get the dazzling plains out of my head. I kept reliving the moments I first saw lions, rhinos and the springing impalas and gazelles live - through the photos I mainly captured through my phone.

*It was more than an attraction, it was the validation of a calling.*

### Early Rise

I got out of the house at 5:56am super eager for the day ahead. It was a much awaited day.

On the way I couldn't thank God enough for the wonderful opportunity that was before me. I wrote about lions three weeks ago for the first time as a result of being triggered to action and now I had a wonderful opportunity to take action through FoNNaP.

### The Treasure Hunt

It's now 7:50am and we just got into the park ready to begin our adventure. I was in the back of a double cabin Toyota Hilux driven by Jacob, with Reinhard in the front passenger seat. I was in good hands. They both have ventured into the park more times than I have and Reinhard has a special story that I will hold to the end of this post :)

I was handed the camera and took a quick look at the plethora of animals highlighted on the list getting ready to start taking photographs.

To give you a sense of scale, the Nairobi National Park is about 117 square kilometres in size, and is the only National Park in the world within a city. We had till 12:30pm to transverse the entire park, find and photograph all the animals below:

We started off at the Impala view point that allowed us to see much of what the exquisite park had to offer. I could smell the fresh gust of wind that blew over the view point while the glimmering sun slowly began to rise, illuminating the zebra, buffalo and giraffe in the open plains. The birds twittered as they panned across our view. It was a moment worth reliving.

We then ventured into the forest, home to Koko and her family of majestic leopards, it would've been a sight to see but unfortunately we didn't happen to encounter her or the other 15 leopards in the park.

We then ventured into the plains; spotting the Martial eagle, impalas, zebras, buffalo and eland. All in the early hours of the day. We were on a roll.

**I was learning by engaging all my senses to the environment around me. I believe it's the best way to feel connected to something you love.**

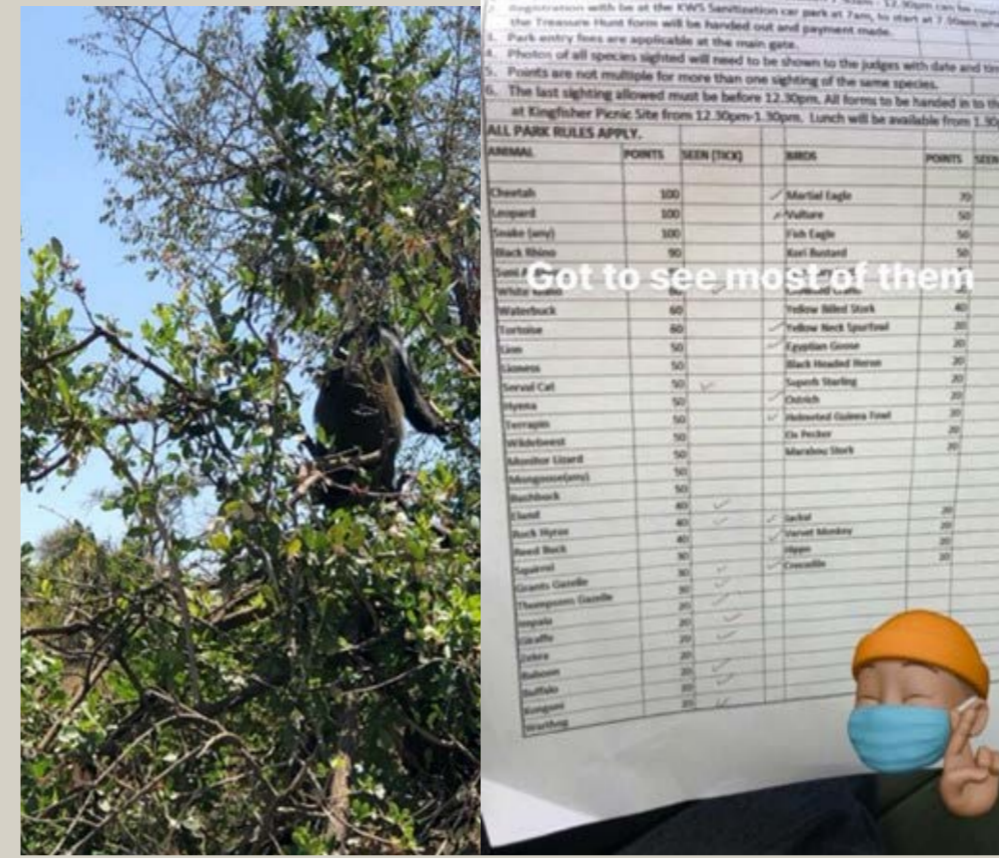
The next animals we saw, as the sun got brighter, took a lot of effort but we still managed to catch some glorious sightings.

As the sun gets hotter; most cats and some wildlife tend to hide in bushes to cool off and as a result we encountered a lioness but could barely see her as she hid deep in a dark lit bush.

Nonetheless, we were blessed to come across jackal, white rhinos and the serval cat- which we are 100% sure that we were the only ones fortunate enough to capture, as he hid in the bushes, too shy to greet us :)



We continued to persist and came across the rock hyrax, vervet monkeys, crocodiles and a wide range of birds as we continued to screen the dams and the vast plains.



When engaged with nature and being right at the heart of it all, it is very easy to lose track of time and as we were trying to find wildebeest and black rhinos, time caught up with us and we had to head back to the main meeting point at Kingfisher picnic site to share our sightings and tally the points. On the way, our car broke down, but that did not stop our adventure or down our spirits. It's the norm with exciting expeditions and thankfully we managed to prevail over the situation and make it back.

Why does this story matter?

Well first of all it goes back to what I talked about in the previous post but more so, I am looking to tell these kind of stories and exploring different places while taking you with me.

This way I can show you the wonderful treasures our country, continent and even our world have to offer. It is a call to action.

I am hoping to spur the greater audience, young and old, to take action. Positive action that will not only allow for us to create safer spaces for these wild animals but that will ensure their homes aren't tampered with in the first place. It is my duty to ensure that my children and their children can search for and find these treasures and so together we must join hands and continue to fight for their lives.

I was more than pleased to see an immense amount of locals, especially young children, who have already begun to devote their young minds to the same and it is so inspiring to know that these lions, gazelle, wildebeest etc., have hope in the upcoming future generations. I could go on for days but this is where I will end for today. Thanks for reading!

<https://ryanssparky.science.blog/2020/08/30/searching-for-treasures/>

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Sightings at Nairobi National Park | September 2020

Junior Photos



Fareed Gulamhusein - 15 yrs



Seyan Hirani - 13 yrs



Olga Levari Ercolano

Please send photos to [newsletter@fonnap.org](mailto:newsletter@fonnap.org) to be featured in the NNP sightings column



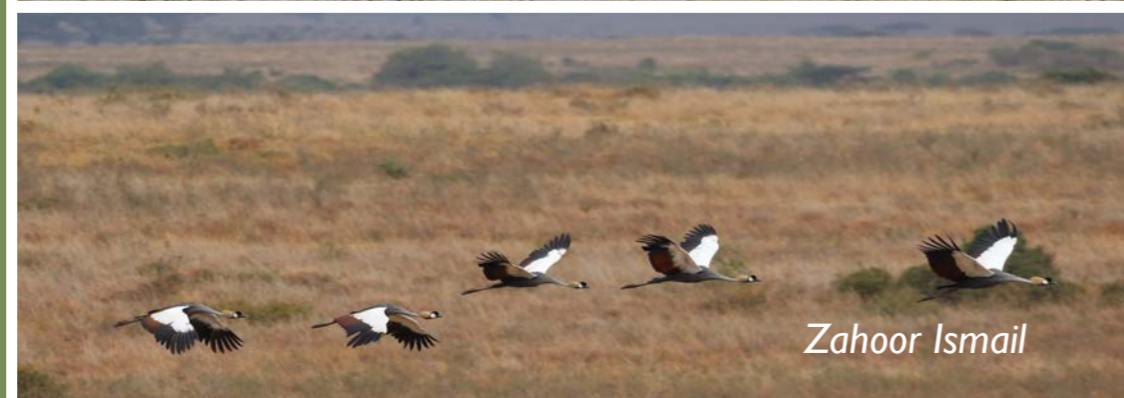
Harsh Gurka



Kitili by Edwin Abade



Hemali Varsani



Zahoor Ismail



Hanain Ayub  
hanain



Adnan Savani



Siddarth Patel



Trish Heather-Hayes



Ebrahim Shabbir



Warthogs by Anil Kerai



Jonathan Pereira



Ryan Napo

## 'THE BLACK'

By Lucas Mboya



Meaning black rhino. Such charismatic creatures. Bags of character. What I love about them is they almost always react to our presence.

For the photographer, that's fantastic. As soon as they sense your presence, they either move away, or close in if they feel threatened, or are not quite sure of what we are. I read up on them and much as my knowledge is from the layman's point of view I think I've learnt quite a bit.

From my observations, both black and white rhino. Their hearing is superb, so is their sense of smell. Their eyesight is terrible. When a rhino turns its head sideways and looks in your direction from one eye, it's already more or less confirmed what you are and just wants to see if it can recognize a shape or aspect that it's familiar with.

For the black rhino, if it senses you're a threat, it will raise its head above shoulder height and look straight at you. This is its best position to see you in binocular view where it can also get an idea of exactly how far you are from it.

You've seen the dung piles that rhinos leave. Not the dung

itself, but the piles, certain places where a host of rhinos defecate turning into a large pile of dung. It's a 'facebook post'! A status update. There's a whole world we humans don't see or understand of the lives of wild animals, especially through their sense of smell.

Because rhinos have large ranges, their sense of smell has evolved to give them so much information from the scent of each other's dung. It's another method of communication. Rhinos can tell the condition and state of the other rhinos that have defecated in the pile. They can also tell how long ago the last rhino was there. They can tell if the rhino that left the last 'post' was male or female, in good or bad health, in or out of season, what they had been eating and most importantly, their emotional state, in particular whether they were stressed or in fear. This information gives the rhino a broad picture of its surroundings, potential threats, grazing or browsing, whether it needs to be alert or can relax and how close other rhinos may be.

If you want to see a rhino charge (mostly mock charges), hang around the dung piles late in the evening, when it's getting dark. That's when they're most likely to visit them

to get an idea of how safe the area they're in is, since by night, they're practically blind.



When it's raining and getting dark, you're most likely to be charged! Especially by black rhino. The rain dampens both sound and smell, making the rhino feel particularly vulnerable. Don't ask me how I found this out!

Three weeks ago, I had a lovely encounter with a black. Two actually, on the back road between 2B and 22, the area that has recently been mown. Initially I tried to get as many photos as I could, assuming that it would quickly disappear, but after a few minutes I realized that he wasn't moving off and quite clearly had other business in the area, by the way he was scent marking so many bushes. A little while later, I noticed a second rhino, a little smaller, doing the same thing a short distance away. I watched them for over an hour before the larger one suddenly became aware of the other's presence and promptly chased him away. Unfortunately I couldn't get any shots since it happened so suddenly.

Their behaviour was probably linked to mating rights. Possibly a female in season was nearby. At one point, I noticed that the larger rhino was getting agitated by having to keep an eye on me as well as the rival rhino at the same time. After a few warning snorts from him, I decided not to tempt fate and moved on leaving them to sort out their business. I got some of the best photos I've taken of this marvellous creature, and left the park, very chuffed with myself.

(I also spend time observing rhinos in Ruma National Park, Homa Bay county, which is also a rhino sanctuary).



## Two Poems By Meshak Ogweno, From Kwale County, Who Uses His Poetry To Help Fight Climate Change.

### DO YOU THINK YOU LOVE THIS PLANET?

Do you think you love this planet?  
Then these simple hacks and tips will help save it,  
Switch off lights immediately your done,  
And no need of laundry driers when outside there's plenty  
of sun,  
Also use reusable bags when shopping,  
Plus at the office try smart printing,  
It will reduce papers wasted so few trees will be falling,  
Never forget turning off the water while brushing teeth or  
shaving,  
And doing the same when hand-washing dishes or when  
bathing,  
Vehicles are the biggest compromise to our air,  
So walking or biking to work when you can will be fair,  
Mind what you throw as trash,  
Most of them can be recycled and bring back cash,  
Last but not least energy efficient bulbs are the best,  
You will be saving both your bank balance and the  
environment.

### THE FUTURE AIN'T EXCITING

With these frequent nuisance flooding,  
A sign of sea level rising,  
Toxic gases in the atmosphere,  
Now it's raining acid instead of water,  
So dying plants and animals a common sight everywhere,  
And some will go extinct meaning they will disappear,  
The future ain't exciting.  
More droughts and heat waves,  
Hot weather lasting days to weeks,  
And worse still to come compared to our forests burning,  
Or asthma and other lung complications worsening,  
Since it is no longer clean the air we are breathing,  
The future ain't exciting.  
But there's hope we can still make a change,  
By doing the following to stop it from going further the  
damage,  
Like going solar a simple thing to do,  
And at the same time good for the planet and your  
pocketbook too,  
Or even planting more trees,  
They absorb airborne chemicals and more oxygen they  
release,  
If you want to be a good farmer,  
Start a compost pile to make your own fertilizer,  
Then use your fan instead of air-conditioner,  
I think with those the future maybe exciting.

## FoNNaP Birdwalk At Silole Sanctuary



The gorge – photo credit Marek Ostrowski @mmoostrowski

The FoNNaP Birdwalk is a popular activity that brings bird lovers together.

On this occasion, 42 members and 13 non members, both young and old, that have a common interest in birds, were present, all armed with binoculars and cameras. The turnout was excellent and the weather, favourable for walking. Due to the uneven and steep terrain, not all attempted entering the gorge, but still had a wonderful bird viewing and wildlife experience on flatter ground.

This year, the venue was at Silole Sanctuary, bordering the park, with breathtaking views of the Nairobi National Park. On 20th September members gathered at the Silole cottage parking by 8.30AM and after a short welcome brief by Will Knocker, we commenced the walk towards the Park boundary. Will was kind enough to take us around the sanctuary and tell stories of the area and its connectivity to the park.

Martin Omay was our birder for the day. He has been a member of Nature Kenya for close to 10 years and is a professional birder. He led a curious team in spotting birds, explaining their plumage, their sounds, behavioural mechanisms and nests, making references to his bird book.

Those that were able, went down to the gorge, a spectacular location that normally floods during heavy rains. The little ones enjoyed running up and down the gorge and throwing stones in the water pools. From the gorge, Will then took



us to visit the dam, on the other side of the Sanctuary, towards Kitengela Glass, where they have carried out a restoration programme by planting Acacia trees that are growing well.

After the long interesting, fun and informative walk, members were hungry and regrouped at the cottage, where Gaye (Board member) and Jonathan Pereira had been busy preparing a delicious koroga lunch, whilst the scent of the cooking curry was wafting along the airwaves and enticing people to the food area. The food was delicious and enough for second helpings for all.

FoNNaP merchandise was on sale. The event was an enormous success, enjoyed by all participants and definitely to be repeated.



The group pausing before going towards the dam  
Photo by Olga



Fonnnap merchandise table at the cottage  
photo by P H-Hayes



Boundary between Silole & Maasai Gate, NNP  
Photo by Olga



Martin Omay – photo credit Marek Ostrowski



Koroga lunch – Photo by Olga



# FoNNaP

Kids Column

## WILD ANIMALS!

- 1- Match each animal with its legs
- 2- Write the name of the animal
- 3- Colour



## African Savannah Animal Word Search

H S H L X S Y T N K M N W J D  
 C Y Q P P C O B S O C T E A C  
 I J V P Z C Q B L X D E A C N  
 H I P P O P O T A M U S V K O  
 R Z E D H N T H O W R D E A I  
 Z H P L G F C N I E A E R L L  
 W Y I O L I X L I F F J B H J  
 U B F N R E D O P F K P I T A  
 G Y A T O E Z H V A T R R M J  
 C F S B B C P A E R P H D Z L  
 R O L E O A E O G I A N E Y H  
 T X E U P O R R R G I B M H A  
 U S C F Y Y N B O F P A O E Q  
 T H A T E E H C E S K W V B F  
 T E R M I T E N V Z H E D Z D

- |            |            |              |
|------------|------------|--------------|
| BABOON     | BONGO      | CHEETAH      |
| GAZELLE    | GIRAFFE    | HIPPOPOTAMUS |
| HYENA      | JACKAL     | LION         |
| OSTRICH    | RHINOCEROS | TERMITE      |
| WEAVERBIRD | WILDEBEEST | ZEBRA        |



## OUR CORPORATE MEMBERS



## FoNNaP CALENDAR OF EVENTS - 2020


- 20th September- Members' Bird Walk – Silole Sanctuary
- 26th September - Tree Planting at Cheetah Gate
- 2nd-3rd October - FoNNaP Merchandise Sale at Yaya Centre
- 4th October- NNP Game Count
- Lion naming ceremony for the cubs turning of age (Date to be confirmed)
- End of Year event – November (date to be confirmed)
- Game Count – December (date to be confirmed)



## NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK



Adventure in the wildlife capital

A lioness is shown in profile, sitting on a large, dark rock. The background features a city skyline with several tall buildings, including a prominent one with a spire, under a sky with soft, orange and blue hues, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The lioness is the central focus, and the city skyline is visible in the distance.

## Friends of Nairobi National Park

FoNNaP is a non-profit membership society founded in 1995, dedicated to assisting the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) to nurture and protect biodiversity within Nairobi National Park, and the broader ecosystem to which the park belongs.

Join today and be a Friend of the Park!

### CONTACT US

Office No. 14, Langata Link | Off Langata South Road

Opp. Kenya School of Law

P. O. Box 45124-00100, Nairobi, Kenya

Tel: +254 (0) 723 690 686 | Email: [admin@fonnap.org](mailto:admin@fonnap.org)

Website: <https://fonnap.org>