

# Book Reviews

**Book Review Editor's Note:** We are continuing to use the current currency codes. Thus Canadian dollars are CAD, U.S. dollars are USD, Euros are EUR, China Yuan Remimbi are CNY, Australian dollars are AUD and so on.

## ZOOLOGY

### **Animals of the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area**

By Adam S. Kennedy, and Vicki Kennedy. 2014. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, NJ, USA, 08540-5237. 152 pages, 18.50 USD, Paper.

### **Birds of the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area**

By Adam S. Kennedy. 2014. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey, USA, 08540-5237. 224 pages, 18.50 USD, Paper.

The Serengeti-Mara ecosystem is world-renowned for its massive herds of migratory wildebeest, zebra, and other grazers, encompassing approximately 25,000 km<sup>2</sup> of northern Tanzania and adjacent Kenya. The bulk of the ecosystem lies within Serengeti National Park and the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and adjacent game reserves, with the remainder in the Maasai Mara of Kenya. Immediately to the south of the Serengeti ecosystem are the Ngorongoro Highlands including the famous Ngorongoro Crater. Following up on the 2012 success of their guides on the animals and birds of the Maasai Mara, the Kennedy's have recently released *Wildlife of the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area* and *Birds of the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area*. Former safari camp managers and now professional guides, Adam Scott Kennedy and his wife Vicky bring their photographic talents, experience, and first-hand knowledge of the Serengeti, Ngorongoro, and surrounding areas together in this new pair of field guides. Although these two new field guides enter a relatively crowded market, there is a niche for them, particularly for visitors on their first East African safari.

*Animals of the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area* is a bit of a misnomer since it only treats mammals and a few reptiles, with birds in a separate volume and nothing at all on amphibians, fish, or invertebrates. It does cover 70 mammal species, including most of the species likely to be encountered on safari in Serengeti and Ngorongoro, or for that matter elsewhere on Tanzania's "Northern Circuit". A notable exception is the Oryx, which has been observed just east of Serengeti National Park in the Loliondo area near Lake Natron. The guide also excludes bats, shrews, and most of the 40 or so species of rodents known from the Serengeti. No great loss, for although important components of the ecosystem, these small mammal groups are difficult to see and even harder to identify when not in the hand. The *Animals* field guide

also covers 18 of the reptiles most likely to be observed on safari or near Serengeti area lodges. It includes such obvious choices as Nile Crocodiles and Black Mambas, but also brightly-coloured agamas and nocturnal geckos. Surprisingly, neither the Pancake Tortoise nor the Egyptian Cobra were included, both striking species that I have seen by day in the Serengeti.

The guide is focussed on the Greater Serengeti area and has a brief introductory section with maps and text on the general geography and ecology of the area, including the great migration, as well as suggested locales for great wildlife viewing. While I might quibble with some of the details, the authors have done an admirable job distilling this information into a concise introduction that I think it will help visitors place what they see into a larger ecosystem context and ultimately deepen their appreciation.

The guide is packed with 146 colour photos, showing both males and females for sexually dimorphic species, and even young where space permits. In addition to great photographs, what sets this guide apart from many traditional field guides is the light and accessible tone of the text. Each species has a half-page to 4-page treatment, with information on identification, preferred habitat, diet, and habits. Although total length and shoulder height are provided, I do wish that average weight (or a range) was also provided for each mammal species. For better-known species, there are interesting notes on their distribution in the Serengeti and Ngorongoro, as well juicy tidbits on their ecology or behaviour. For example, the reader is warned of the honey badger's tendency to go for the genitals when confronting humans. Perhaps apocryphal, it makes for good reading nonetheless and is a part of safari lore. The guide also has informative sidebars with insight and observations provided by local Tanzanian guides, the "Super Six". It is a bit like having an experienced flesh-and-blood guide along with you.

Common and scientific names used in the guide generally follow those used by IUCN, and alternative names typically provided where necessary to avoid confusion. Welcome additions included for each species are the Kiswahili and Maasai names (good luck with the pronunciation!), and the etymology for some of the more interesting names is also provided. The species are presented in a “simple order” whose underlying rationale escapes me, and I think standard taxonomic order would have been preferable. Fortunately, there is a detailed Table of Contents listing all species, as well as both a detailed and a short index at the back, so it isn’t difficult to find a particular species.

Although some may prefer to read it back home, this field guide is compact and light enough (14 × 21 cm and only 320 g) to bring on safari. Wildlife sightings are often fleeting, in poor light, or obscured by vegetation, so having a field guide handy to confirm identification is helpful, particularly for lesser-known species. Even if you don’t pull out it out while on game drives, having the guide handy to refer to in the evening or other down time will help reinforce the names of unfamiliar species observed during the day. If you are particularly keen about herps, I would also recommend getting a copy of Spawls *et al.*’s 2006 *Reptiles and Amphibians of East Africa* (240 pages) that covers 230 of the more commonly encountered species reptile and amphibian species.

With over 500 documented species, Serengeti National Park and the Ngorongoro Conservation Area are recognized as Important Bird Areas by Birdlife International, and the Serengeti Plains are also an Endemic Bird Area. Novice birders may find this diversity daunting, and traditional field guides covering all of East Africa, with 600 pages and 1400+ species, can be overwhelming. Adam Scott Kennedy’s *Birds of the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area* is intended to make this area’s birdlife more accessible by using photographs and limiting the guide to 264 of the more commonly observed species. I was surprised by several omissions such as the spectacular Southern Red Bishop and the endemic Grey-crested Helmet-shrike, and was puzzled by the inclusion of a sidebar on the Dodo. Fortunately, it makes note of the endemic Fischer’s Lovebird, Usambara Barbet, Grey-breasted Spurfowl, and Rufous-tailed Weaver, which are relatively easy to find in the Serengeti.

The book is arranged by nine “habitats”, with birds typically found in a particular habitat grouped together, rather than by standard taxonomic order as in most field guides. The habitats are described in the introduction and include: plains; marsh & water; woodland

scrub & garden; acacia scrub; village birds; forest & crater highland; air; night; and Lake Victoria specials. The intent is to help novices more rapidly locate the likely bird species in the guide based on where it is observed. This approach has its limitations due to poorly defined or overlapping habitats, especially for widely distributed species such as the Grosbeak (Thick-billed) Weaver, which was included as a “Lake Victoria Special” but is also found in the Ngorongoro highlands and beyond. I also found it frustrating, for example, to have the hombills spread out on pages 37, 119, 169, and 183. Fortunately, the habitats are colour-coded in the guide, and there are numerous cross-references to similar-looking species that may occur in other habitats.

The quality of the photographs is truly impressive, as is the artistic and technical skill evident in the layout. There are typically 2-3 species per page (with full page accounts for some of the more charismatic or spectacular species), and the backgrounds of the numerous images are seamlessly blended, so that it often appears as if birds were actually side by side in their natural habitat. Both sexes are often shown, and even some immatures. The informative and accessible species’ accounts have tips on identification and similar species, and touch upon distinctive songs or calls, behaviour, ecology, and other points of interest. Scientific names are not provided in the main text (they are in an index at the back), but most novice birders often have a hard enough time remembering the common name, let alone the Latin one. Kiswahili names are sadly not provided (Helmeted Guineafowl the lone exception), but perhaps should have been, at least for the more distinctive species such as the Ostrich and vultures. Although it is not a bird-*finding* guide, a bit more information on local distribution/abundance or particular birding “hot-spots” would also have been appreciated. For example, the cliffs of Olkarien Gorge at the eastern edge of the ecosystem are well-known (at least in some circles) as a critical nesting site for Rüppell’s Vultures.

This field guide is “aimed at all levels of birding ability” and it is definitely suitable for novice birders and for those on a safari primarily for mammals and larger wildlife. The guide only covers about half of the species known from the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area, so keen birders will likely want to bring a more comprehensive field guide on their trip. Nonetheless, the quality of the photographs and text would make it a fine addition to field naturalist’s library with an interest in East Africa.

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