

Birds of the Masai Mara

By Adam Kennedy. 2012. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-5237 USA. 176 pages. 27.95 USD. Paper.

Animals of the Masai Mara

By Adam and Vicki Kennedy. 2012. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-5237 USA. 152 pages. 27.95 USD. Paper.

The Masai Mara is a legendary place with an abundance of remarkable wildlife. It is home to the ferocious Masai tribe, who, fortunately, are charming hosts to visiting naturalists. The Masai Mara National Reserve covers 1,510 sq km – reduced from its maximum size when land was returned to the Masai and is a part of the Greater Mara Ecosystem. This game reserve in south-western Kenya borders the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. Something under 300,000 tourists enjoy the park's grassland and riverine forest with its signature acacia trees every year. The park is renowned for its more than one million Blue Wildebeest that move north each year from the Serengeti plains. They are joined in this migration by half a million Thomson's gazelles, a quarter of a million Burchell's Zebras and tens of thousands of Topi and Elands.

The Kennedys have produced two volumes aimed at visitors. The first covers 65 species of mammals and also includes 17 reptile species (six snakes). This is about 70 percent of the total list of species of mammals (missing primarily bats and rodents). Each species has a page or two of photographs and a summary of the biology. The book is 15 cm by 20 cm by 1 cm, so is small and light. If it were much larger it would be a coffee-table book, because the photographs are excellent. I really liked the Cape Buffalo (page 81), covered in mud and looking so delightfully grumpy. The text discusses the life of each species, taking the reader through something of their daily lives. These are written with wit and understanding, showing the author's comfortable understanding of the animals he loves. I was gratified by his write-up of the Spotted Hyena that began with "...that suffers from seriously bad public relations.... (his) obligation to put the record straight." This correction the author does in fine fashion. Hyenas are competent, capable opportunists and why we judge them so harshly is beyond me.

The book also covers a few reptiles which, apart from the Nile crocodile, can be very hard to find. I have actively searched likely places for reptiles, even after

dark, and I have yet to see a snake and only saw four other reptile species (one not in this book).

The second book covers 200 species representing 35 to 40 per cent listed for the park (the species listed depends on which authority you choose). It is easy to see 50 species in a day even if you spend your time looking at mammals. What is missing are species like weavers (6 of 19), sandpipers (3 of 17) and cisticolas (2 of 9). These are the less colourful birds that take a lot more effort to find and identify. What are left are the big, bright and obvious birds that are most likely to be seen. Foremost is the stunning Lilac-breasted Roller, Kenya's national bird.

The book is arranged, not in taxonomic order, but by habitat; plains, marsh, woodland, acacia scrub, villages and nighttime. So plovers are in the plains and marsh sections. Eagles are in the plains, marsh and woodland sections.

Neither book typically gives more than a scant idea of how likely you are to see an animal. In all of the Masai Mara and Serengeti combined I could only find one Side-striped Jackal (described as scarce) but saw 11 of its cousin, the Black-backed Jackal. Similarly the bird book does not prime you for the frequently seen Pied Crow compared to the harder to find Village Indigobird.

The authors use some lesser-known names for some species. A good example is Egyptian mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*) is called Ichneumon Mongoose. Similarly, Blue Wildebeest are White-bearded Wildebeest and Burchell's Zebras are Plains Zebra. This is not a big issue and the author does give the Swahili and Masai names. (The one word of Swahili most of us know is Simba, the Lion). The bird book does not give scientific names in the main text, but has an extra index by scientific name. Unfortunately this index is in alphabetical order by scientific name so you cannot look a species up by the common name.

These books will appeal to the naturalist and non-naturalist alike because of their delightful style and

inspiring photos. If you read these books you will surely want to visit this park. The text and photos give you a good feel for the wildlife and their lives, but there is no substitute for being there. We had some of our most memorable experiences in the Masai Mara; being charged by a male Elephant, seeing a young Lion trying to attack a baby Elephant and being instantly stopped by an irate mother and watching several Lioness stalk and kill a Wildebeest.

After decades of using classical field guides I am more comfortable using books that follow taxonomic

order. However, I can see the value to new visitors to sequence the bird book by habitat. Both books are more of an introduction to the wildlife rather than an identification guide, but both books do give some identification help. My recommendation is for new visitors to read these books at home and then take classic field guides to the mammals and birds on safari. You can take these books too as they are small and lightweight and will add to your experience.

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