



Field Guide Level 1 Course September & October 2009 - Rukinga, Kenya

Tsavo country is vast, spectacular and ochre-red. The fine red dust is its trademark - and too the red elephants and buffalo that result from it.

Rukinga Ranch is 30000ha of cattle ranch turned conservation thanks to efforts of Wildlife Works, a company that recognised that the region in which Tsavo lies isn't going to get any wealthier from doing nothing for the land. The cows get denser each year as does the population and so the only real solution is to put the land to good use. When the majority of the space in the region is already taken up by the East and West Tsavo Parks that are already a tourist attraction thanks to history and movies like 'Ghosts in the Darkness', it makes sense to ensure the wildlife perpetuates. To do this takes cooperation from the community and a channel that links them together. Rukinga is such a place...a refuge for migratory animals passing through the desolate dry landscape and a paradise to the observer.



The elephants jostle and vocalise through the night to stake a claim to the small waterhole they have created from lifting the water pipe outside camp. The park staff are exasperated at having to fix the pipe for the umpteenth time but I love the fact that all through the night I can hear the ellies from my bed and every morning first thing, there they are right on the doorstep vying with buffalo bulls for access to the muddy bath. Hundreds of ring-necked doves alight around the great grumpy pachyderms like grey snow falling on the red earth, the sunlight glinting off their white retrices. One needn't venture far at all for a wildlife spectacle so incredible, it's hard to believe it happens again and again each morning.

But after some elephant indulgence, the great expanses beyond the camp vicinity beckon and inevitably the temptation grips to look for some of the other remarkable species that inhabit these parts. There are gerenuks that never cease to elicit giggles as they stand up primate-like on their hind legs to access leaves generally out of reach of such small antelope. Their front hooves dangle out gracefully in front of their sleek bodies as they nibble and chew for seemingly ages on two pins. Fringe-eared oryx are rarer but a glimpse of their impressive stature with lance-like horns is always a treat. As is an encounter with the endangered Grevy's zebra. The population was introduced to the area in an effort to bolster the numbers. While the oryx's ears appear frayed and unkempt, the Grevy's has ears that look like they used

to belong to Mickey Mouse! Oversized and comical these perfectly compliment a unique stripe pattern amongst zebra that resembles a pin-stripe suit left open over the belly to reveal a white undershirt.



Aardwolf and striped hyena, caracal, serval and bat-eared fox are some of the other treats and not always that rare a sight either. But my best are the Kirk's dikdik. These miniature antelopes are the fame of the area. Paired off in their small but exclusive territories, it's a few hundred meters only between sightings. Their large eyes are even more emphasized by the dark preorbital glands that they use to paint tarry secretions onto beacons as boundary markers. The little ungulates also make remarkably large middens to identify their ranges but as a species, being so successful warrants a little showing off I suppose. Their slender noses are apparently a clever trick they have to survive in such harsh climates, wriggling these to cause evaporate cooling.

I've heard a story or two of late about how the dikdik got its name but as convincing as these were, the fiction was derived from a very capable story-telling Irishman with a vivid imagination and an illuminating smile. Jimmy was one member of the first group of students to participate in EcoTraining's pilot Kenyan 28-day field guide training course on Rukinga and was matched in his charismatic-ness by each of the others participating. Anton, the Russian-Australian, had a ceaseless stream of naturalist questions that couldn't be quenched (even between Ashleigh's random hic-ups) – even at 2am on a nocturnal drive, they just kept coming! But that kind of interest is exactly what is required in an environment where there are so many new things to learn and areas to explore...not least of which was Mount Kasigau, the towering



landmark that presides over the Rukinga landscape. So up we went...

The Austrian-Spanish cousins, Sophie and Cecile, and I had decided we would just accompany the over-energetic Jimmy, Anton and Wil part of the way up the 1640m peak. Climbing a mountain is about enjoying the scenery on the way up and not just anticipating the view from the top. Dry, rocky *Commiphora* bush changed into tall, shaded dry forest which metamorphosed into a fantasy-land of looming trees, dancing leaves, giant-sized buttrices and moss-covered logs. Trenches from the First World War distracted us from the hike at one point and then the appeal of an even lovelier wet-forest further up where purple orchids dotted the tree trunks, Taita white-eyes flitted and one had to be careful to step steadily on the slippery mud. The temperate was cool and lovely, a remarkable micro-climate compared to the heat below. Then the final climb was in sight and the girls were still on board and more



determined than ever to reach the top having come so far inadvertently! The boys must've been as impressed with us as we were with ourselves as they quite willingly shared their sandwiches with us! We had abandoned ours in the vehicle below not thinking we'd need them! Getting down proved a comedy of slippery errors but 7 hours after it all began and we were back on level ground marvelling at the feat!

October has seen the start of the very welcome rains. '*Karibu sana*' as they say in Kiswahili... 'most welcome'! The entire landscape has been transformed into an emerald wonderland and although the elephants have dispersed and are no longer lingering on the camp doorstep, it's a relief to know there's plenty of water for them to drink. The buffalo can relax a bit too.

Or maybe not since the lion activity on Rukinga has been on the rise. Two very good-looking young males (albeit maneless) made their appearance the other morning roaring proudly to announce their arrival. After feasting on a lesser kudu, the companions settled under a leafy *Commiphora* to while away the hours providing super viewing for the second intake of EcoTrainers this year.

The maneless lions of Tsavo are renowned although scientists still seem to be a little confused as to why they don't grow manes. The probability is that the heat typical of the area would sap them of vital energy if they had impressive furry manes but interestingly, increased testosterone

that causes baldness in human males, could be another reason. Since Tsavo lions tend to hold tenure over a territory on their own unlike the coalitions of other savanna areas, they'd need a whole lot of hormone driving them to be aggressive enough to chase off contenders and hair-loss may result! The ladies don't seem to mind...



The rain has brought the migrants and Indi or 'Indiana Jones' as we affectionately call her – a local Kenyan already in the safari industry but here to learn more - is thrilled! Every referee-whistle of a Eurasian bee-eater or 'coo-coo' of the African cuckoo elicits gasps of delight from her. Through the many enjoyable hours of birding that we've done on both Rukinga and in Tsavo East (clocking up 123 species in 3 and a half weeks), she has also elicited gasps of delight from the rest of us with her ceaseless supply of snacks! In her words: 'yum'!

Johnson is the laugh-a-minute Kenyan chap who always has a bright smile and a witty comment. He keeps Caroline on her toes questioning her about everything he spots. Caroline is our Dutch 'singing' friend – she has a tune for every occasion! She's on an adventure away from rainy Holland to indulge in glorious Africa – lucky for us but maybe not for her, we've had a fair bit of rain during her stay! Steve and Petra complete the dynamic little group and although Steve is of Taita origin, he happily chats away to Petra in her mother tongue German providing great amusement to the rest of us.



Such is the case in any EcoTraining Kenyan field guide experience...a mix of diverse culture, personality, landscapes and wildlife. Wouldn't miss it for the world!

Thanks for a great course!

Megan Emmet

Kenyan Instructor

