

LEAP OF FAITH



The annual migration of almost 2.5 million wildebeests, zebras, gazelles and antelopes is probably the most impressive natural spectacle in the world. **Mark Eveleigh** and his daughter **Lucía** visit Kenya's Maasai Mara to catch the world's greatest show at its most dramatic.

The actors have taken centre stage for what is often described as the greatest wildlife show on earth. But the great migration is much more than just a show: it's a brutal life-and-death drama, with a cast of millions. And it's set against one of the most spectacular landscapes on our planet.

The air is thick with tension in our Land Rover on the southern bank of the Mara River but among the rising dust, jostling horns and stumbling hooves on the opposite side of the steep canyon, the pressure must surely be rising to panic point. There are about 30,000 wildebeests crowded along the riverbank and back in the acacia scrub. I'm doubtful that the herd will cross here, however. Surely the ten-metre vertical drop down to the river is unmakeable. It would be suicide.

I keep my camera lens pointed at the opposite bank nevertheless, as I look back over my shoulder. The sky is dark on the horizon and it looks like rain might already be spattering the savannah along the southern boundary of the Maasai Mara National Reserve.

I turn back just in time to see a puff of dust halfway down the sandy cliff opposite us. A single wildebeest bull has slipped. Shoved by the pressure from those behind, he plummets ten metres to the foot of the precipice and stumbles, apparently miraculously unhurt, onto his legs. Then, with nowhere else to go, he throws himself into the swirling current of the Mara River.

Through my telephoto lens, I can discern V-shaped ripples on the surface where huge Mara crocodiles are zeroing in on the solitary swimmer like torpedoes. But he's not solitary for long. The great migration is founded on two inviolable principles of natural survival. The first is 'safety in numbers'. The stumbling fall of that single bull, almost inevitable under the increasing pressure from the herd behind, is a signal. Almost before that first wildebeest enters the water, three others have leapt to what I imagine must be their deaths. By the time they too are swimming, the crocs have been side-tracked by the general confusion as all along the bank a hundred wildebeests are sliding, dropping, flailing and kicking over the edge of the cliff and into the water below.

Within a few seconds the entire bank opposite us is a cascade of sliding dust and tumbling bodies. By the time that first swimmer scrambles, unhurt, onto the bank below our car, the surface of the river is being churned to froth by the horns and hooves of a hundred wildebeests. The sheer brutal desperation of the scene is overwhelming and my heart is in my mouth. This is primarily because my ten-year-old daughter Lucía, sitting next to me, is gasping in horror. Surely the body count is going to be nothing short of heartbreaking and suddenly I wish that she wasn't here to see this.

Within a few minutes, the first thousand front-runners of the herd have scrambled up the bank and galloped onto the plains behind our vehicle. Then I realise that, so far at least, there are very few injuries. The entire crossing takes about forty minutes and by the time it's all over, I have counted just six dead or

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mortally injured wildebeests. There can be few clearer examples of that second famous principle of survival, Darwin's law of 'survival of the fittest', than in the great migration. I suddenly realise just how incredibly resilient these animals are. I can't imagine a single horse surviving a leap like these thousands of wildebeests just made.

A lot has been written about the great migration, but nobody has ever really been able to do it justice in words. Even today, it is hard to find accurate estimates of the scale of the migration. 'The annual migration of two million wildebeests,' says UNESCO, 'is one of the most impressive nature spectacles in the world,' (yet on the same page UNESCO estimates the total number of wildebeests at just one million).

The great migration is often described as nature at its most perfectly synchronised and flawlessly orchestrated. Anyone who's witnessed it over an extended period, however, will tell you that it's actually incredibly chaotic with small offshoot herds appearing to mill in contradictory directions. They gallop decisively towards the east, only to meet up with equally determined groups coming from the west. They seem to mill about for a while, like boy scouts on an orienteering exercise, before they race off in another apparently random direction.

"The really unbelievable thing is that this huge herd is going the wrong way," I point out to Lucía, after reassuring her that almost every one of the wildebeests made it safely across. (It seemed that most of the crocodiles were so stuffed with meat that they didn't even bother to hunt).



PHOTO BY MARK EVELEIGH

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"This is the northbound migration, yet all these animals have been lured temporarily southwards by that rainshower," I jerk a thumb over my shoulder. "They'll almost certainly all have to come back again!" Ultimately these same wildebeests would have to recross the Mara River again - presumably at an easier crossing point - before they finally regroup to head south again, towards the Southern Serengeti calving grounds 500km away.

I had witnessed the migration before in Tanzania but had never seen a crossing quite as dramatic as that morning's on the Kenyan section of the Mara River. I had seen the great herds heading northwards with their numbers augmented by almost a quarter of a million babies. When I saw them crossing southwards six months later over the Tanzanian section of the Mara, I was shocked to realise that on this southbound journey, very few young were left alive. Only the very strongest survive and some experts estimate that as many as one in four wildebeests die, victims of injuries or predators (often both). By the time they head south again, even the yearlings are veterans of the great trek. Only a population from which the weakest 25% is effectively culled every year, over the course of thousands of years, could evolve into such deceptively tough animals.

Wildebeests are sometimes called the 'clowns of the savannah', for the way they kick their heels up and jump and frolic at even the hint of oncoming rain. Take time to witness the migration firsthand and you'll come to appreciate that for a wildebeest, there is something very definite to celebrate in merely being alive. ☺

➤ Uganda Airlines flies to Nairobi daily.

Gamewatchers Safaris (www.gamewatchers.com) offers a 5-day fully-inclusive safari package - from US\$2,335 per person - staying at two wonderfully-located camps in exclusive wildlife conservancies in the Maasai Mara ecosystem and game-driving with expert Maasai driver-guides and spotters.

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