

MARA MONTHLY

AUGUST 2011

Thousands of wildebeest drowned during the crossing since the beginning of the migration.



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MARA CONSERVANCY CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT FOR AUGUST 2011

By Brian Heath

GENERAL

We had several days of heavy and widespread rain, starting around the full moon in mid-August and continuing until the end of the month. Some of the storms were the heaviest this year and caused considerable damage to the roads. However, they did replenish water supplies and turn the grass green in most areas.

Deloitte started their annual audit on the 16th and completed their fieldwork by the end of the month.

We held a meeting between ourselves, Deloitte and KAPS to review progress against targets for KAPS' first year of operations. The meeting was extremely useful in highlighting some of the slight weaknesses in the revenue collection system and in agreeing on ways to close the loopholes. We decided that current technology used to count people in vehicles was prohibitively expensive and not worth the cost but agreed that KAPS should develop a RFID system that enables us to read cards up to 15 metres away. These cards are expensive but can be recycled – they would enable us to check on tickets from a distance.

WILDLIFE

Dr Mijele treated a big bull elephant on the 7th and a young calf on the 22nd. The first had two arrow wounds and the calf a wire snare. We had a spate of elephant injuries and deaths over the month – one big bull was shot dead between Mpata Club and Kirindon on about the 14th (it was found after three or four days but one could clearly see where it had been shot and had rushed off before it died), the tusks had not been collected. On the same day, the 17th, Dr Mijele treated a young elephant for a gunshot wound on the leg and we found another young elephant dead. In the interim three other elephants had been found dead, two in the Triangle from natural causes and another one in the community area outside the Reserve – the cause of death inconclusive. Between May and August elephants tend to move up the escarpment, often to raid maturing crops. This places them in direct conflict with the farmers and local community and we believe that many of the injuries and deaths have been in retaliation. However, the big bull killed on, or around, the 14th seems to have been shot by someone who knew what he was doing – it was a single shot to the heart. The Mara Elephant Project is about to start. Ten – 15 radio collars will be placed on elephants in different areas of the Mara ecosystem. This will enable us to get a better understanding

of elephant movements. There will be a concurrent, specialist, anti-poaching unit established and we hope to have the unit operational at the beginning of September.

The wildebeest started pouring into the Triangle on the 8th, with massive crossings between Isieya and Purungat. A few days, later large numbers started crossing higher upstream – resulting in the death of a few hundred animals. For a while there were tens of thousands of wildebeest in the Triangle but by the end of the month most had moved South into the Lemai Wedge; with a few thousand returning to Narok. The crossings back into Narok resulted in hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths. We have noticed a number of crossings this year at non-traditional crossing points – one wonders how much the pressure from tourists and vehicles push wildebeest into searching for different crossing points – often in relatively thick bush. This has to have been one of the worst years in the recent past – for the low numbers of animals that came into the Triangle, more importantly for the huge number of deaths. The result of crossing in unsuitable places and an exceptionally high river for this time of year.

A lioness gave birth to cubs in the Serena compound, we presume that it is the same lioness who had cubs there two years ago. Sadly, last time she lost her cubs when they were a few months old.

RESEARCH

Dr Eberhard Zeyhle of AMREF in Kenya returned to continue on his research on Cystic *Echinococcosis* in Sub Saharan Africa and was assisted by Dr Dominic Mijele from the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). They took samples from at least 100 dead wildebeest, all from animals that had drowned in crossings on the 26 and 27th. They found *Echinococcosis* (Hydatid disease) in a couple of animals, and *Cysticerci*, possibly *C. Bovis* (Tape worm cysts) in almost all adult animals. Other parasites found included: *Taenia hydatigena*, *Fasciola gigantica* and heavy nematode infestations - *Haemonchus* and *Strongyloides*.

All the above have an economic impact in domestic livestock and *Echinococcus* can potentially be fatal in humans.

Amanda Subalusky and Chris Dutton left at the end of the month, after completing their fieldwork for this year. They noted that the very high ammonium levels seen in the water after the large wildebeest die-off in July took about two weeks to peak and then returned to normal within another week or so – coinciding with the decomposition of the carcasses. They were also looking at turbidity caused by hippo pods and wildebeest crossings and found that turbidity was more pronounced when river flows were low. However, rainstorms cause flushes of water in the river and these cause a huge decline in dissolved oxygen and large increases in turbidity – possibly caused by flushing out hippo faeces. The drastic drop in dissolved oxygen after a rainstorm may account for the periodic die-off of fish that we witness after rainstorms.

STAFF

Eleven of our staff started their paramilitary courses with the Kenya Forestry Service in Londiani. We had five members of staff undertaking the Junior Commanders Course and the remainder are undergoing basic training.

Frankie Mwagonah left on the 19th. We are very sad to see her go, she has been a key pillar to the efficient running of our Nairobi office and her ability to get things done has been amazing. She has been replaced by Margaret Mumbi. Margaret has been working for Seiya on a part-time basis and knows some of our systems.

TOURISM

The Mara has experienced the best season for years, with most of the camps and lodges full to capacity throughout July and August. Chinese and Indian nationals were very much in evidence this year and undoubtedly were a major factor in the excellent season. Many of the clients were obviously very keen photographers, as witnessed by their cameras and huge lenses.

The more deaths we see from wildebeest crossing in unsuitable places, the more convinced I become that they are being pushed into these places by the pressure of tourists and their vehicles. This year has to rank as one of the worst in recent memory for drowning wildebeest. Is the death of 10,000 wildebeest worth it?

There are numerous occasions when a whole river bank is blocked with vehicles; 90 to 100 vehicles on one side of the river at a crossing is not uncommon. To compound the situation: people then get out of their vehicles and start running up and down the river bank in their frantic efforts to get the best views and photographs. It is also distressing to see the rush as vehicles race to a crossing – once word is out that a crossing is either happening or imminent. In their haste to watch a spectacle people seem to forget that they are witnessing live, wild, animals and that these animals can be seriously stressed into changing their behaviour – sometimes with disastrous effect. How many people stop think of the tragic waste of life – albeit wildebeest life - when they see the river full of bobbing carcasses, when they see thousands of dead animals snagged up on rapids or in eddies? We need to educate our tourists and their guides. However, if we are



The crossing wildebeest struggles to breath

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not careful, and the Reserve management does not create awareness and institute more control, we will kill the goose that lays the golden egg. Tourism is not some short-term phenomenon. It, and the resource on which it is based, is here to stay. It is our duty as custodians to ensure that the Mara/Serengeti ecosystem thrives.

SECURITY

We arrested 23 poachers in August, bringing the total to 1,664. The patrol teams also recovered 782 wire snares, rescued 48 wildebeest, one zebra and one impala. They also found 23 wildebeest, nine zebra and one impala dead in snares.

One poacher was arrested near the Lemai swamp on the 1st by the Ngiro-are team – four wire snares were recovered. The following day the team went into the Northern Serengeti on a two-day patrol and managed to arrest seven people. In the first incident they arrested four people at Ngira at night, as they came in to hunt. 27 wire snares were recovered. The following day they arrested one person with seven snares at Jiko Nane and that night they arrested two more people at Kokamange – they recovered one snare.

The Ngiro-are team collected 56 wire snares on the 6th and 7th – 7 wildebeest were rescued.

The Iseiya team collected 215 snares in the week ending the 9th – most of the snares were recovered in the Lemai Wedge; Lemana, Maji ya Bett and Miungu. In all 14 wildebeest were rescued but at least three wildebeest and two zebra were found dead in the snares.

The Iseiya team arrested one, of five poachers, on the night of the 10th. The poachers were on their way to set snares near Maji ya Bett when confronted by the rangers. Seven snares were recovered at the time and another 36 were recovered the following day. Three wildebeest were rescued.

Rangers from Mara North and Ol Choro joined forces for two days from the 11th. That night the combined force set up ambushes in the Lemai Wedge; between Maji ya Bett and Kichwa ya Tembo, and arrested one, of three,

poachers as they came into the Park. The following morning, at 9.30, two more people were arrested in the same area.

One more person was arrested by the combined team the following night; as he and two others entered the Serengeti near the Lemai Swamp. The Iseiya team ambushed 20 poachers on the same night but unfortunately all of them managed to escape. In all 54 wire snares were recovered during the operation. Four wildebeest were rescued, whilst one zebra and one impala were found dead in snares.

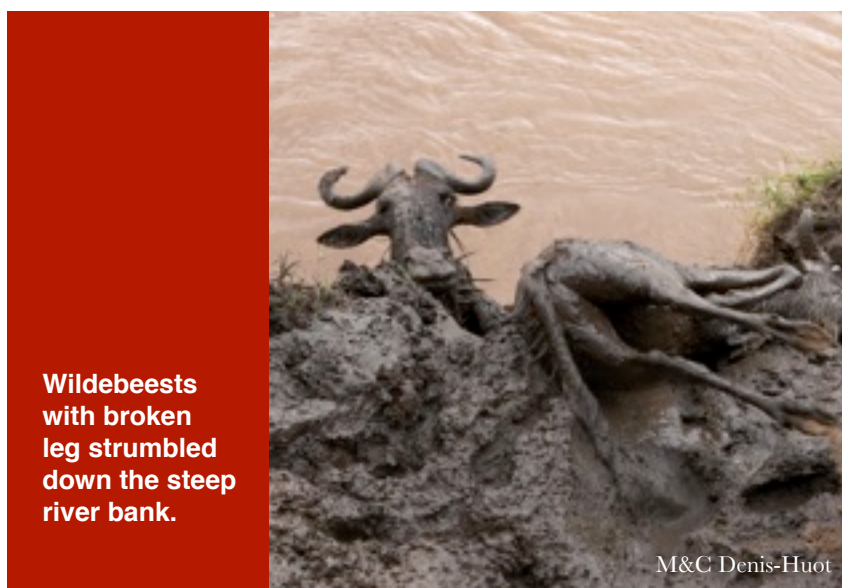
The Mara North rangers joined forces again on the 19th and managed to arrest one person as he entered the Lemai Wedge near Kasarani. Six wire snares were recovered and two wildebeest rescued. The patrol came across 16 dead vultures (six lappet-faced, two Rupell's griffon and eight white-backed). They had been dead for some time and it would appear that they had been poisoned for their wing primary feathers – used in fletching arrows.

A patrol in the Lemai Wedge the following day recovered 25 wire snares – some near Kasarani and the remainder near Maji ya Bett. Three wildebeest were found dead and one rescued; one zebra had been butchered.

Two people were arrested near the Kinyangaga Ranger Post at 7.30 on the night of the 22nd. They were carrying eight wire snares.

The following day our rangers collected 118 wire snares near Maji ya Bett. In all, 318 snares were recovered in the week ending the 27th, the increase in snares reflecting the movement of animals into the Lemai Wedge. 15 wildebeest were rescued, as was one zebra; nine wildebeest and five zebra were found dead in the snares. During this period two people were arrested; at 1.00 am on the night of the 26th, as they came into the Lemai Wedge on a commonly used path we call the Masanga route.

One night operation, using four vehicles, managed to arrest five poachers as they entered the Serengeti, between Kichwa Tembo and Kinyangaga. The first two were arrested at 7.30 pm and the next group were arrested at 8.30 pm. One of the vehicles we were using was the one that has been purchased for the Mara Elephant Project – we were testing its spotlights, with a view to buying them for our own anti-poaching vehicles. Although expensive, US\$ 1,900 each, they would greatly benefit our work. 18 snares were recovered that night and the following day. We rescued two wildebeest and an impala female; two other wildebeest were dead and we found where six had been butchered several days earlier.



Wildebeests with broken leg strumbled down the steep river bank.

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REVENUE AND ACCOUNTS

Revenue in July was the highest single month's revenue recorded in the Mara Triangle and we can expect it to be similar or slightly lower in August.

We completed the annual audit and will report on the 2010/11 financial statement next month, once the audit report is completed.

REVENUE COLLECTED & DISTRIBUTED FOR THE MONTH OF JULY 2011

Collected	Gate Revenue		Balloon Revenue	
	US\$	Ksh	US\$	KSH
Ticket sales	548,500.00	5,215,970.00	-	-
Non-ticket sales	27,230.00	902,350.00		
Balance for Distribution	575,730.00	6,118,320.00	-	-
Distributed				
Trans Mara County Council	212,436.50	2,374,041.70	-	-
Group Ranches	104,215.00	991,034.30		
Sub-total	316,651.50	3,365,076.00	-	-
Mara Conservancy	259,078.50	2,753,244.00	-	-

DEVELOPMENT

- We completed resurfacing the whole road between Sankuria and Little Governor's. This is now an all weather road.
- The road team then started on placing an extra layer of murram between the Four Kilometre sign and Egyptian Goose – primarily to cover the rocks that have broken through.
- We completed the workshop extension.
- We ordered a new tractor and trailer to replace our larger unit. A new Land Rover will not be available until early 2012.
- We touched up damaged sections of the main roads, using the grader.
- We purchased a Autel diagnostic computer for our new Land Rovers – they are computerised and it has been difficult to diagnose small problems without our own diagnostic equipment.

REPORT ON FOCUS ON AUGUST

Complete workshop	Done
Find replacement for F Mwagonah	Done
Resurface sections of the roads to Little Governors	Done
Order new Land Rover and tractor	Done
Send rangers and officers on training course	Done
Complete refurbishment of signs and install new ones	Done

FOCUS FOR SEPTEMBER

- Board meeting on 23rd;
- Complete annual audit;
- Work on the roads to Ngiro-are – repairing areas that were washed away in a rainstorm;
- Start on new culverts near the River Camp swamp;
- Try and resolve revenue issues with Narok County Council; and
- Collect new Suzuki, tractor and trailer..



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