

MARA MONTHLY

MAY 2011

Magnificent male leopard with his warthog kill found just below Serena hill.



MARA CONSERVANCY CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT FOR MAY 2011

By Brian Heath

GENERAL

The rains at the beginning of May were heavy and prolonged; in some instances it rained the whole night. This was wonderful for the grass but terrible for the roads. However, the rains have been below average and tailed off towards the end of the month – enabling us to start work on grading the roads.

Warden J Kimojino attended a Mara/Serengeti meeting at Seronera – to discuss collaboration on the protection of our joint rhino population. This was a useful meeting and highlighted the need for working together – the collaboration between TANAPA (Tanzania National Parks - Serengeti) and the Conservancy are constantly hailed as a model.

A traditional herbal medicine man, Reverend Ambilikile Mwasapila (Babu), in Loliondo – East of the northern Serengeti has caught the attention of everyone in East Africa with claims of a miracle cure for five key illnesses, including AIDS and cancer. People have been flocking to Loliondo in the hundreds of thousands and one of the main routes from South-western Kenya has been through the Triangle. To begin with the influx of transit vehicles was manageable but by the middle of May the volume of traffic started becoming a major problem – we were getting in excess of 40 vehicles passing through the Triangle on any given day. The vehicles

were mainly hired “matatus” a mode of transport infamous for their lack of discipline and complete disregard for the Highway Code. It did not take long for this indiscipline to be felt in the Reserve. We had numerous cases of littering, over-speeding – one vehicle overturned on the 15th, the following day a lion was run over and killed near Keekorok – we were getting complaints from the Lodges and from tourists, and the drivers were trying to give our rangers bribes. Vehicles were arriving at the gates well after closing time, causing considerable stress to our gate staff – no one wants to host 70+ visitors who suddenly arrive with no food or bedding. In the end we decided to charge all these vehicles for transit and would like this to take effect from 1st June.

In a twenty-hour period on the 14th and 15th we had two vehicles overturn in the Triangle – both from over-speeding. One person broke an arm and one person subsequently died from internal injuries. Two weeks later, on the 30th another two vehicles overturned.

WILDLIFE

Two African wild dogs (*Lycan pictus*) were seen on the road to Ngiro-are on the 3rd. This is the first wild dog sighting in the Triangle for several years and many of our rangers had never seen one.

Two African wild dogs spotted by the rangers on patrol.



A group of lions have moved into the Oololo area – creating a real threat to the pride male; he, and one of his sons, now spend a great deal of their time up on the escarpment. They killed two cattle on the 15th and there was a scare that the cattle owner would poison the lions. We feel that their chances of survival are slim and can foresee a pride take-over in the reasonably near future. This would be a disaster for the pride – the new males will almost certainly kill the 12 remaining cubs. We are paying compensation for cattle killed by these lions but this will probably be insufficient to save them.

There was an evening of great drama when one of the Mugoro lionesses attacked a newborn giraffe calf. The mother was able to fend off the first attack, kicking the lioness with her front feet. After about an hour of following the mother and calf, the lioness again attacked the calf – again she was fended off with some well-aimed kicks. However, sadly, the tables turned when four other lioness joined in the fray. Three lionesses chased off the mother while two remained with the calf – a very sad ending for a brave mother and her calf.

RESEARCH

The Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) teamed up with Dr Arne Witt, Coordinator: Invasive Species unit of CABI Africa, based at the ICRAF Complex; to eradicate *Parthenium*, an invasive weed, from the Mara. They spent the first week collecting any plants they could and we assisted with our back-hoe to dig a trench and bury the plants.

Chris Dutton and Amanda Subalusky returned on the 29th; to conduct their field research on the Mara River for their degrees.

A new paper has been published: Continuing wildlife population declines and range contraction in the Mara region of Kenya during 1977-2009. J O Ogotu, N Owen-Smith, H P Piepho and M Y Said. *Journal of Zoology*. (2011) pp 1-11.

We can not challenge the science and agree with the general conclusions but would like to correct the impression that poaching is a major factor within the Mara Triangle. We have caught 1,600 poachers in the past ten years BUT more than 95% of these poachers were arrested in the northern

Serengeti and almost all were Tanzanians – wa Kuria from the western border of the Serengeti. Our work with the Serengeti National Park is hailed as a model for cross border collaboration and has had a major positive impact on wildlife populations within the Lemai Wedge, and we believe, the Triangle. As Ogotu *et al* stated in their paper, rainfall in the Triangle is in the region of 1,300 mm (>50 inches) per year – 50% more than the rainfall at the eastern end of the Mara. One would assume that higher rainfall translates into more food, therefore more animals. Not necessarily so. The Triangle is largely made up of poorly drained, clay soils that create wonderful grasslands. These soils and grasslands actually drive animals away during the rains – firstly the soil becomes too sticky and muddy, secondly the grass becomes too tall for all but the largest

herbivores. As soon as it rains the

wildebeest, zebra and Thompson's gazelle leave and most of the resident herbivores head for well-drained, short grass islands. However, as soon as it dries out, hundreds of thousands of wildebeest and zebra move into the Triangle to utilize the vast fodder bank that has been created during the rains.

Poaching within the new Conservancies is at extremely low levels. Habitat Loss - the massive increase in the human population and corresponding interference with the habitat – through agriculture, the development of unplanned tourism facilities (taking up most of the riverine thickets and forest patches), proliferation of shanty villages and, of course, the huge increase in livestock numbers must surely carry most of the blame (none of these apply to the Triangle). However, there is some light – the establishment of conservancies on land surrounding the National Reserve, and their emphasis on livestock management and the restrictions on development are having a positive impact. I look forward to another paper in 2-5 years to see if these developments are having any effect. I believe that they will. I would also like to see a study that only looks at the Mara Triangle, and possibly, the Lemai Wedge.

DOGS

Two people were brutally hacked to death near Angata Barrikoi on the night of the 15th. A request was made for the dogs the following morning and Morani managed to follow the tracks to a homestead on the Tanzanian side of the border. The matter was then left with the police on either side of the border to follow up and we heard that three suspects were subsequently arrested; one of them came from the homestead.

Ng'wetui, the last of our puppies for sale has found a home in Uganda, he left on the 22nd. We remain with four of the puppies as working dogs.

VET

The vaccination unit continues to work along the escarpment towards Angata Barrikoi. The unit has vaccinated 1,608 dogs to date and will continue for another two months.

STAFF

The staff held their welfare meeting on the 1st and elected Cpl J Kipirir as their chairman. The staff voted to set aside funds for advances, to be managed by the office. This will help supplement limited, mid-month, advances given by the Conservancy.

We established a ranger post at Ol Kurruk on the 2nd. This will greatly enhance our ability to monitor an important section of the escarpment and help us keep an eye on the lions and rhino in that area.

Will Deed leaves on the 1st June and Ms Alice Coulson will be assisting us as a volunteer for three months. Alice has been working with William and will be responsible for the web and Facebook sites.

All our staff went to Loliondo in shifts – see above.

TOURISM

Usually May is at the height of the low season but this year we have noticed excellent, if somewhat erratic, occupancy in the camps and lodges. There are days when the camps are virtually empty and others when they are full. We have noticed a significant increase in the number of Chinese visitors this year.

SECURITY

Fourteen poachers were arrested in May, bringing the total to 1,601. Eighty-six wire snares were recovered, all of them in the northern Serengeti.

The rangers conducted a patrol along both sides of the Mara River on the 3rd and came across a place where poachers had just butchered a hippo, near Mlima Hotel – unfortunately the poachers managed to escape when one of the vehicles slipped into a large hole and got stuck.

The Ngiro-are rangers went on a very early patrol on the 4th and came across a group of poachers near the road to Lemai. They called the Iseyia rangers and jointly arrested nine, of ten, people. The poachers were on their way to hunt warthogs with dogs.

The Ngiro-are rangers recovered 16 wire snares near Miungu on the 5th. They found one dead topi in a snare – it had been eaten by hyena.

The Ngiro-are rangers arrested one, of two people on the 10th near Kasarani in the Lemai Wedge on the morning of the 10th. The two were on their way to Miungu to set snares – four snares were recovered.

The rangers found a dead hippo – with a spear still lodged in it – near Daraja la Mzee in the Lemai Wedge, on the 12th. The hippo had been dead for about two days.

Our rangers had to shoot an elephant in self-defence at Masanja on the 15th. The rangers checked the following day, found the elephant dead and reported it to our Tanzanian counterparts.

There were three incidents on top of the escarpment in which our rangers and dogs were deployed. The first has been reported under the dog section. The following day there was an armed robbery and the day after another murder. Cattle ruined the track after the robbery and motorcycles seem to have been used after the second murder – almost certainly contracted by a jealous and angry wife – she was arrested and arraigned in Court.

The Ngiro-are rangers arrested one person on the 26th as he entered the Lemai Wedge quite close to the Kinyangaga ranger post. Two days later they arrested three people in a combined operation with our Tanzanian counterparts at 5.00 am, along the Mara River, just upstream from Lemai. The three were part of a group of four, who had come in to fish.

The Ngiro-are rangers collected 19 snares on the 15th and another 47 on the 27th – all these snares were near Miungu in the Lemai Wedge.

REVENUE AND ACCOUNTS

Kenya Airports Parking Services (KAPS) recruited seven new revenue clerks, to replace the ones who have been prosecuted for fraud and theft. We still have a few loopholes at the gates – mainly relating to late entry and early exit – when the KAPS staff are no longer on duty.

April revenue was higher than for the corresponding period last year – Ksh 16,557,675 against Ksh 9,675,797 in 2010.

We have still not resolved the issue of clients staying at Little Governors. For the past two years clients to Little Governors have been paying Narok and not Trans Mara County Councils. We seem to have a major problem with balloon companies not paying their cess – both SkyShip and Governors are months in arrears.

We are expecting the new Park entrance (Conservation) fees to come into effect from the 1st July 2011. The rates were proposed and gazetted for implementation earlier in the year but the tourism industry lobbied for a delay until the high season – we have heard nothing to the contrary and will be implementing the new rates come July. For the first time it has



Loliondo bound matatus lined up by the Oloololo gate.

been proposed that there be a price differential for those staying inside and outside the Reserve. The new rates will be US\$ 70 per Non-Resident Adult for people staying within the Triangle (Mara Serena and Little Governors) and US\$ 80 for those staying in camps and lodges outside the Reserve.

All the pundits are expecting an excellent high season and we can expect a very busy season from mid June to October. We hope to replenish our reserves, almost depleted by the salary increase and normal low season drop in revenue.

REVENUE COLLECTED & DISTRIBUTED FOR THE MONTH OF APRIL 2011

Collected	Gate Revenue		Balloon Revenue	
	US\$	Ksh	US\$	KSH
Ticket sales	153,930.00	1,556,325.00	-	-
Non-ticket sales	24,195.00	181,350.00		
Balance for Distribution	178,125.00	1,737,675.00	-	-
Distributed				
Trans Mara County Council	68,722.05	660,019.50	-	-
Group Ranches	29,246.70	295,701.75		
Sub-total	97,968.75	955,721.25	-	-
Mara Conservancy	80,156.25	781,953.75	-	-

DEVELOPMENT

- We completed the new uni-huts at Ngiro-are. They were painted and will be ready for habitation once they have been thatched.
- We completed renovations at Ol Kurruk and installed a solar lighting and charging system.
- We started grading the roads, starting with the main and river roads to Purungat (Mara Bridge) – both completed.
- We cut the grass around the Serena airstrip.
- We installed one new culvert on the lower road to Purungat.
- We repaired the hub on our Case tractor and collected the new chassis for the large trailer. These are now both working.
- We worked on the flooded section of road near Little Governor's and also worked on gravelling the road from Sankuria to Little Governor's. We also installed one new culvert on this road.
- We purchased and installed a solar system for the old uni-huts at Ngiro-are.

REPORT ON FOCUS ON MAY

Install new uni-huts at Ngiro-are	Done
Work on railing at hippo pools	Steel work being done in Narok
Hold Board meeting in the Mara	Postponed to 10 th June
Move rangers to Ol Kurruk	Done
Complete sandbag section of road near Little Governors – weather permitting	Almost completed
Hold meetings to resolve outstanding balloon payments	Delayed until June

FOCUS FOR JUNE

- Continue grading main roads;
- Cut grass tracks;
- Hold Board meeting;
- Resolve balloon payments issue;
- Extend workshop; and
- Renovate Earthview Uni-hut at Iseiya.



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