

NEW PERSPECTIVE: Dipping down low over the Suguta River in northern Kenya's Suguta Valley

Sarah Gilbert joins a flying safari that puts the focus on preserving Kenya's endangered species, including rhino, wild dogs and cheetah, and gives her easy — and comfortable access — to key conservationists and their work

High hopes

Having seen off a smaller — but still enormous — bull, alpha elephant Jager made a beeline for a young female on heat and mounted her without preamble. Their far-from-private coupling was over as quickly as it began, but the rest of the herd continued to circle them, ears flapping, trumpeting loudly with excitement, while our small group sat awestruck and speechless in the midst of this tumultuous celebration.

It was a spectacular finale to our morning in Samburu National Reserve in northern Kenya. "Sit quietly," whispered Bernard, our Samburu guide, "and they'll come to us." And they did — the fuzzy-haired, week-old calf that stood under its mother's stomach to feed, two teenagers engaged in a play fight and the testosterone-fuelled male in musth that came a little too close for comfort. We saw all this and more.

Samburu was the third stop on Scenic Air Safaris' Endangered Species Flying Safari. It's no ordinary safari, and it's no ordinary bush plane. Our Cessna Grand Caravan was fitted with just eight fully rotating — and reclining — leather seats and large panoramic windows to frame the stunning landscapes, and it transported our small group in style around Kenya's national parks and reserves with a focus on frontline conservation efforts to preserve vulnerable and endangered species, giving us unrivalled access to key conservationists.

We were in Samburu to meet Saba Douglas-Hamilton and Frank Pope of Save the Elephants (STE). According to the Great Elephant Census, more than 100,000 African elephants were slaughtered between 2007 and 2014, and despite an international ban on ivory trading coming into force in 1989 — followed by a Chinese ban this year — illegal trafficking is still big business. But at the long-running Samburu Elephant Project, working closely with the local communities and state-of-the-art technology is key in the fight against poaching.



RIGHT: Flying high over Amboseli National Park's natural pools, which are a haven for elephant.

INSET: Elephant collaring, in Kenya's Masai Mara, is a vital part of conservation efforts

STE is a pioneer in tracking, designing and testing the

first-ever elephant collars; now staff can map the routes of dozens of elephant, providing insights into their habits and just how far they travel in search of food and safety. They can also pinpoint areas where elephant and people coexist, preventing clashes with a variety of innovative techniques, including beehive fences – elephant are afraid of bees. Tourism, too, is playing its part. “Tourism is an economic driver to protect the elephants,” Frank told us. “When we create employment here, we show people the benefit of conservation and create elephant ambassadors at the same time.”

Our first stop was the Masai Mara, the northern extension of the Serengeti and a seemingly endless, undulating savannah, renowned for the great spectacle of the wildebeest migration with predators in hot pursuit.

There wasn't much left of the zebra by the time we arrived. Ten lion cubs circled its carcass, heads down, bottoms bobbing, to the unforgettable sound of teeth crunching on bone. Oblivious to our presence, two adult females lounged in the shade with full bellies, while a third grizzled and growled as she tugged at the last few morsels.

While we were lucky enough to spot more than 30 lions in our day-long game drive, over the past 20 years Africa's lion numbers have dropped dramatically to an estimated 20,000. Over a bush breakfast, 'lion man' David Mascal, the former curator of an orphaned lion programme in Nairobi who's spent 30 years in the Mara, explained that the main threat to lions are humans. “Livestock is hugely important to the pastoralist Maasai communities that surround the Mara, both economically and socially, and where bush meets grazing land there are losses on both sides – lions kill livestock and villagers kill lions in retaliation. Engaging their support is vital to conservation success.”

To that end, Mascal has developed solar-powered, flashing predator deterrent lights, known as lion lights, to install around cattle enclosures. Also joining us on our game drive was the ebullient Dr Elena Chelysheva, a Russian zoologist with more than 30 years' experience of captive and wild cheetah ecology and behaviour. The Maasai call her Mama Duma – Mother of Cheetahs – and as head of the Mara Meru Cheetah Project, she's out in the field every day.

It's estimated that there are only around 7000 of the world's fastest land mammal left worldwide, 65 of which are in the Mara, and we soon came across the Five Musketeers, a coalition of young male cheetahs sprawled on a termite mound surveying their terrain.

Cheetah face a complex range of threats,” Elena explained, “including habitat loss, prey depletion, hunting, →

THE MARA ELEPHANT PROJECT



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SCENIC AIR SAFARIS

THE COST QUESTION

Flying safaris may come with a hefty price tag but **Simon Penfold** of Scenic Air Safaris explains the true value of this once-in-a-lifetime experience

"Prices for our Endangered Species Safari start from about US\$1000 per person per night. This may seem high but it's worth every penny. The rates include everything from full-board accommodation, meals and house drinks to national park and concession fees, excursions, guided activities and even tips to camp staff. In addition, guests have their own private plane with a pilot-guide and a Kenya Wildlife Services Silver-accredited guide on board. Moreover, they fly at low altitudes, so the journey between the locations is very much part of the experience. Most importantly, it includes access to some of the world's leading conservation experts. So, dollar for dollar, I believe a flying safari is competitively priced day for day; it enables you to explore some of Kenya's most remote areas without wasting any time."

SCENIC AIR SAFARIS



OUT OF THIS WORLD: Cathedral Rock rises from the middle of Lake Logipi – which, 10,000 years ago, extended 2500sq km across and nearly 1000ft deep. But today, much of it isn't even knee-deep and its size is constantly changing. **ABOVE:** Wild dog expert Simon Kenyon tracks this endangered canine (pictured top right) in Laikipia



NIELS VAN GUN

poaching and human-wildlife conflict – they're often mistaken for leopards who kill livestock. They also lose their cubs to lions, leopards and hyenas; in fact, 75 per cent of cubs die within three months. They're in a race for survival but our aim is to secure their habitats through scientific research and community outreach and education programmes."

We left the savannah, crossing the craggy peaks of the Great Rift Valley, flying low over a string of jewel-coloured lakes, including Lake Nakuru, where hundreds of vibrant pink flamingos took flight rippling the turquoise water's mirror-flat surface; and over the fertile slopes of the Menengai Crater, one of the world's largest calderas, to the Laikipia Plateau.

Our base was the 227sq-km private Loisaba Conservancy. It's a critically important wildlife habitat and a highly successful example of collaboration between conservation, communities, ranching and tourism. Yet the country's rapid population growth and a surge in poaching are threatening the resident wildlife.

Dedan Ngatia is the project manager for the Kenya Rangelands Wild Dog and Cheetah Project, founded in 2001 with a focus on endangered wild dogs. These animals cover long distances and his job includes searching for collared individuals – he was following 10 packs in early 2017 – to collect data on their movements and social behaviour.

But disaster struck in 2017. "There are high levels of human-wildlife interaction in Laikipia and as a result of illegal grazing and an increased number of domestic dogs, there was an outbreak of canine distemper that killed over 95 per cent of the wild dog population we were tracking," Dedan told me.

However, his work continues. He's a co-founder of the Laikipia Rabies Vaccination Campaign, which to date has inoculated around 14,000 domestic dogs. "The project's goal is to protect people, wildlife and livestock from this deadly virus," he explained. "If you vaccinate 70 per cent of the region's domestic dog population for several consecutive years, it's possible to eradicate rabies. Our target is to increase our coverage every year by reaching out to more communities."

Meanwhile, San Diego Zoo Global has been working in Loisaba for more than four years studying the population levels, movements and ecology of reticulated giraffe, as well as their interaction with local herders. And earlier this year, in collaboration with environmentalists from the Loisaba Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy and Space for Giants, the organisation opened a one-of-a-kind conservation centre to help educate visitors about the benefits of community-based conservation and its role in preserving habitat.

Next, we flew to the pioneering Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. It began life as a cattle ranch before becoming a privately owned rhino sanctuary in the early 1980s. Today, →



OTHERWORLDLY VIEWS: Soaring over the salt-encrusted Lake Magadi, the southernmost lake in the Great Rift Valley. TOP RIGHT: A white rhino in Ol Pejeta Wildlife Conservancy, Laikipia

SCENIC AIR SAFARIS

SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** The Ultimate Travel Company offers a nine-day Endangered Species Flying Safari, including return flights from the UK, private camp-to-camp flights in a Cessna Grand Caravan, full-board accommodation, expert talks in each camp and private game viewing activities.

■ **Where to stay** The trip includes excellent accommodation, such as Spirit of the Masai Camp in Loisaba Conservancy; Loisaba Tented Camp in Loisaba Conservancy; Elephant Watch Camp in Samburu National Reserve; Lewa Safari Camp in Lewa Wildlife Conservancy; Sarara Camp in Namunyak Wildlife Conservancy; and OneFortyEight in Nairobi.

■ **When to go** Kenya's long dry season is from July to September, which also coincides with the Great Migration and a high number of visitors. There's still good game viewing in the rainy seasons and fewer visitors; there are short rains in November and December, but avoid the wettest months of April and May.

■ **Health** Be sure to check with your GP or local travel clinic which vaccinations you need, and buy your antimalarials well in advance.

■ **Further reading** *Lonely Planet Kenya* (9th edition) by Anthony Ham, Stuart Butler and Kate Thomas; *Bradt's Kenya Highlights* by Philip Briggs.



ARADNE VAN DUNDEKEN / AFRICA IMAGES

it's a model for successful conservation, balancing human use and the protection of wildlife and wilderness. It supports the surrounding communities with progressive farming initiatives, education and healthcare, as well as focusing on safeguarding endangered species, including the construction of an elephant corridor for migrating pachyderms.

Zebra may not appear to be in short supply, but the stocky Grevy's zebra — the largest of the wild equids, with a wide black stripe running the length of its back and a white belly and rump — is endangered, according to the IUCN Red List, and Lewa is home to 14 per cent of the wild population remaining in East Africa.

On a game drive across Lewa's remarkable landscape — forests of yellow-barked fever trees, marshland and granite peaks — Mary Mwololo, Lewa's research manager, explained that Grevy's have a different social structure to the more common Burchell's zebra, with adult males living in splendid isolation, making them more vulnerable to predators, especially lions. "Lewa is focusing on reducing mortality and increasing survival rates, protecting high-risk foals in an enclosure for six months."

Lewa also has a very successful Rhino Conservation Programme, protecting 87 critically endangered black rhino and 79 white rhino. Security is the main concern and Lewa's operations centre is manned 24 hours a day, with rhino rangers, military-style anti-poaching units and close cooperation with local communities who are the first line of defence against poaching.

"Rhino have distinct personalities. They're passionate, sensitive and very intelligent," scientist Ian Lemaiyot told us, as we watched three white rhinos happily hovering up grass. "We haven't lost a rhino since 2013 but protecting and nurturing them takes up to 50 per cent of our annual budget." Along with donations, tourism provides valuable income, as do rhino naming and adoption schemes.

In just over a week, I'd not only travelled in grand style — with breathtaking wildlife encounters matched by equally splendid scenic flights — I'd seen and learnt an enormous amount. Accompanied by knowledgeable and engaging local guides and wildlife experts, I'd realised that there's no one-size-fits-all solution to the myriad threats facing Kenya's wildlife. But with community involvement, the dedication and passion of the experts that I'd met and adequate funding, there is definitely hope. ▮