

Amboseli

by Clare Shorter

In this article we learn about
what visitors may expect to see in Amboseli today.



David Keith Jones

Elephants are a feature in Amboseli; their numbers have increased in recent years and they can often be seen in large herds.

Amboseli is a National Park of spectacular natural beauty, yet it is also a bewildering place to visit for the first time, due to both unusual natural phenomena and poor visitor management. The various paradoxes of this area are epitomised by the first feature of the Park reached by the majority of visitors (who approach from Namanga): "Amboseli Lake, seasonal", as it is so clearly labelled on maps of Kenya. To drive across a lake is a contradiction in itself, but to see so many wild animals there—flickering herds of zebra, columns of weary wildebeest, nervous groups of ostrich, jaunty oryx, dainty Grant's gazelle, and even a common jackal—surrounded by parched and cracked earth is quite astonishing. Where do the animals eat and drink in this arid landscape?

Travelling towards the centre of the Park, desolate scenes of battered bushes, tattered trees and occasional gazelle dotted about the dusty plains meet the eye. Nearly a century later, Thomson's inquiry: "How can such enormous numbers of large game live in this extraordinary desert?" still seems valid. What do all the well-known Amboseli elephant eat? How can the cheetah find prey to hunt or the abundant lions find a shade tree to rest under? Why do so many people (almost 80,000 in 1979) come game viewing in Amboseli? These confusing and conflicting impressions increase as one's vehicle travels along dusty tracks which proliferate in all directions with never a signpost to be seen, so unlike other National Parks in Kenya.

Raising your eyes from the plains above the mirages and heat haze, dust devils and clouds permitting, you may see the glaciers of Kilimanjaro glistening in the sunshine, much higher than you

expect. Africa's highest mountain (5,895m) is the *raison d'être* of the Amboseli basin, wherein lies the 390 km² Park, so famous for its abundance of wildlife and its particularly photogenic lions and cheetahs. Kilimanjaro not only spewed out fine volcanic ash in geological history to form the light, powdery soil so characteristic of the area today, but it also now feeds the permanent swamps, without which Amboseli would simply not exist. Kilimanjaro provides yet a third service to the Park — the most spectacular background for wildlife photos in Africa!

In time, the snow of Kilimanjaro



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As the compiler of our *HORIZONS* column and a regular contributor she will be well known to *SWARA* readers.

Clare has also done valuable work for the Society as a member of Council and the Management Committee.

shining high above, and the rain from the frequently encircling cloud belt, will sink down through the porous rock and flow northwards to well up along the edge of a lava flow in the Park. The three main lush green swamps which arise here are the essence of life for a myriad living creatures, from massive elephants to minute insects. In the dry seasons, hundreds of people gather daily at the swamps and most of these are tourists who flock from all around the world to see Kenya's prolific game animals in this almost too accessible and over popular Park (only third behind Tsavo and Nairobi Parks with regard to visitor numbers — despite its small size and being 230 km from Nairobi).

No visit to Amboseli is complete without a walk up Observation Hill. The superb view over the swamps, plains and woodlands, which make them uniquely attractive to wildlife, explains the puzzle of abundant game living in an apparently arid environment. The sinuous green ribbon of Enkongo Narok swamp, lying below, may occupy only a tiny fraction of the Park's area, yet its long borders allow large numbers of animals to gain access to its vital water supplies. This swamp is remarkable both for its sharp boundary with the pale, dry grasslands and also the variety of habitats it offers: large pools for hippos to live in; islands for them to bask on; reedbeds for herons and harriers to hunt in; aquatic plants for hippos and elephants to feed on; and fringing pools for zebra, rhino, wildebeest, kongoni, buffalo, giraffe and antelope to drink at.

No other Park in East Africa combines three such different major habitats as does Amboseli, hence its diversity of mammals and birds (little is known about the insects and reptiles). The length of the

...Amboseli

boundaries (ecotones) between the *Acacia* woodlands, swampy vegetation and grasslands accounts for the high numbers of animals, as they are able to utilise more than one habitat. Trails, deeply rutted by wildebeest and zebra hooves, show how these grazers use the swamps for drinking whilst feeding on the plains in the dry seasons. In the wet seasons (November to December and April to May) these two species and also elephants regularly migrate up to 30 km north and northeast onto surrounding ranchland, where there are better grasses. In the intervening dry seasons 95% of the wildlife (expressed as biomass) in the 2,900 km² Amboseli ecosystem concentrate in the small Park in order to find water. Therefore for most of the year the better known wild animals and their predators are within easy driving distance of the central lodge area. It is this fact, coupled with good visibility due to generally sparse vegetation, and the year-round presence of resident wildlife that makes Amboseli such a rewarding Park to visit in terms of game viewing and photography.

However, in terms of experiencing African wildlife in its natural environment, Amboseli currently leaves a lot to be desired. The problems of visitor control (off-the-road driving, overcrowding of animals etc.) and poor infrastructure are currently being rectified. All-weather roads are being built and new Park gates and staff housing are nearing completion. Hopefully landscaping of the lodge area and construction of the viewing platforms and interpretation sites will follow in the not too distant future.

Despite the present inadequacies visitors continue to come to Amboseli, albeit in decreasing numbers, simply because there is so much of interest and beauty to enjoy here.

Some herds of elephants remain in the Park all through the year. They can often be observed at short range feeding on the grasses below the palm and *Acacia* trees of Ol Tukai swamp south of



Oh, how these tourists bore me!

the lodge area, or in the open expanse of Loginye swamp to the east. Small groups of huge, ponderous buffalo bulls are always to be found near the swamps, where they can eat, drink and wallow in peace during their old age. Large buffalo herds with lively brown calves tend to lurk in the reeds of tree-fringed swamps. Waterbuck and impala are often seen in the woodlands, where giraffe, monkeys and also baboons feed. Gazelle frequent the open plains although water-dependent Thomson's gazelle regularly risk ambush in order to drink at the pools. In contrast, reedbuck are rarely seen and only then deep in reeds. The few rhino and some kongoni, zebra and wildebeest are permanent residents, rarely straying from their home ranges. On the other hand, eland, oryx, gerenuk and ostrich are seen in the Park rather less often as they do not need to drink and can feed further afield. For the same reason one has to be extremely lucky to catch a glimpse of the beautiful lesser kudu. Tiny dikdik are often seen in the drier, bushy areas. Warthog, mongooses and ground squirrels — to name some of

the more obvious smaller mammals—are also frequently seen in Amboseli.

Predators such as leopards and servals (smaller spotted cats), which are rarely seen in other Parks, appear to be more tame and are therefore seen more often by visitors in Amboseli. Lions and cheetahs are so used to the visitors, which they attract away from rhino and elephant, that they seem to be quite bored by their human audiences. Unfortunately cheetah actually suffer from too much human attention, to the extent of being too disturbed to hunt at the appropriate time of day.

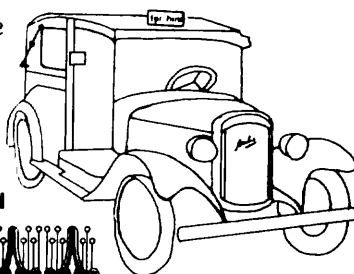
Waterbirds, surprisingly, are a striking feature of this arid area. In Amboseli one can also see unusual birds such as the pratincole and also large numbers of vultures. The glittering blue pools attract fish eagles, darters and various sorts of ducks and storks. The lilies and floating vegetation support lily trotters and crakes. Many species of herons, plovers and ibises—to name only the better represented bird families—feed on the insects and amphibia in the reeds, sedges and wet grassland which fringe the swamps.

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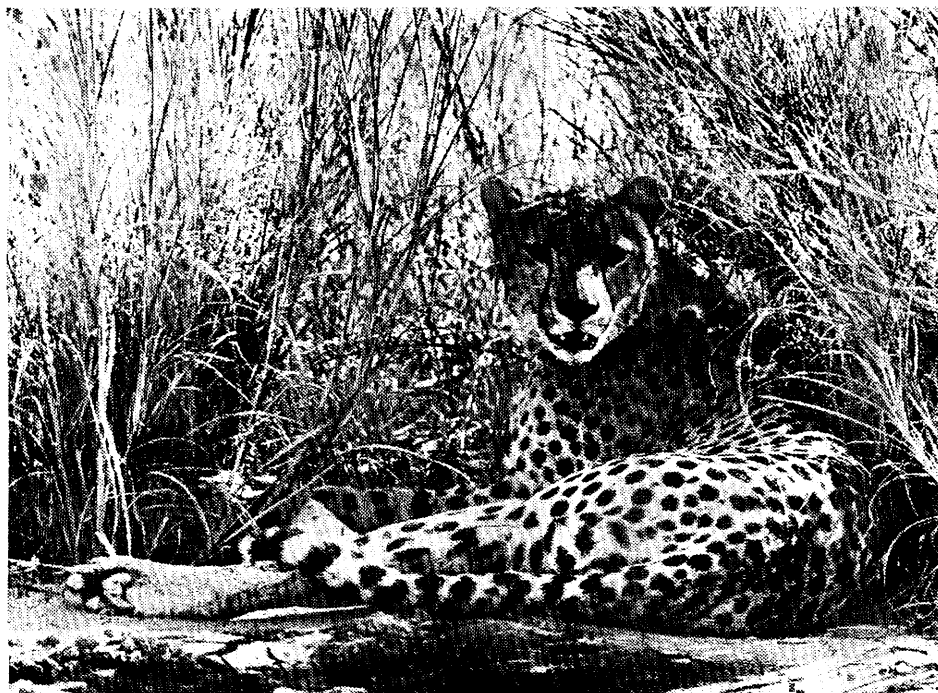
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Cheetah have suffered in Amboseli from tourists moving in too close when the animals are trying to hunt.

Dawn, for me, is a magical time in Amboseli. The pink-grey mass of Kilimanjaro, surmounted by the icy crater rim of Kibo, seems to float ethereally above the wildlife below. Silent lines of gnus and giraffe file towards

water. Flocks of white egrets fly low towards a swamp whilst 'V' formations of sacred ibis follow higher in the sky. Black-backed jackals busily trot past on their way to or from the pickings of a larger predators' kill. Early in the year, dawn greets thousands of damp, skinny newborn wildebeest calves—as it has done for millenia and will hopefully continue to do in the future.

Access

By road from Nairobi: tar road south to Namanga then murrum road east to Ol Tukai; Mombasa road to Sultan Hamud then 'pipeline' road south. It is possible to reach Tsavo West National Park via the murrum road out of Amboseli towards Oloitokitok. There is an airstrip in Amboseli Park.

Accommodation

There are five lodges in Amboseli Park: four in the central lodge area (Amboseli Lodge, Ol Tukai Lodge, Kilimanjaro Safari Lodge and Kilimanjaro Buffalo Lodge), and Amboseli Serena which lies a few kilometers south. Ol Tukai Lodge is, in fact, a group of rather expensive self service bandas. All five lodges can be booked through Let's Go Travel, P.O. Box 60342, Nairobi.

The campsite has been moved away from Ol Tukai swamp, where troublesome elephants and monkeys and a lack of facilities made it unattractive. As from 1st July this year, camping will be at the new site 3 km south of Observation Hill and on the Park boundary. Toilets have been built and the Masai group ranch which runs the campsite intends to have piped water available by the end of August.



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Society A.G.M.

As we mentioned in the last issue of *SWARA*, the East African Wild Life Society's Annual General Meeting will take place at 5.00 p.m. on Thursday 9th September in the Hilton Hotel. The Chairman will report on the achievements of the Society over the past 12 months and the accounts for the last year will be formally adopted. The terms of office of the Chairman and the members of the Council expire at the A.G.M. so elections will be held for these posts.

Christmas cards and calendars

Details of this year's Society Christmas cards and the calendar for 1983 are on page 2. Both calendar and cards are in full colour and feature African wildlife so make ideal moments for people who enjoy safaris here. In addition, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that every sale will help us in our conservation efforts.

Society shop

The Society's new shop opened in what is known locally as the "off season" but even so the response from customers in the first few weeks has been most encouraging.

The shop will soon be stocking items that will make suitable Christmas presents, including Ralph Thompson's animal prints, jewelry and a fair selection of books. Long-standing Society members will be pleased to know that the traditional EAWLS tie, in forest green and navy blue, is being reintroduced and will soon be available from the shop.

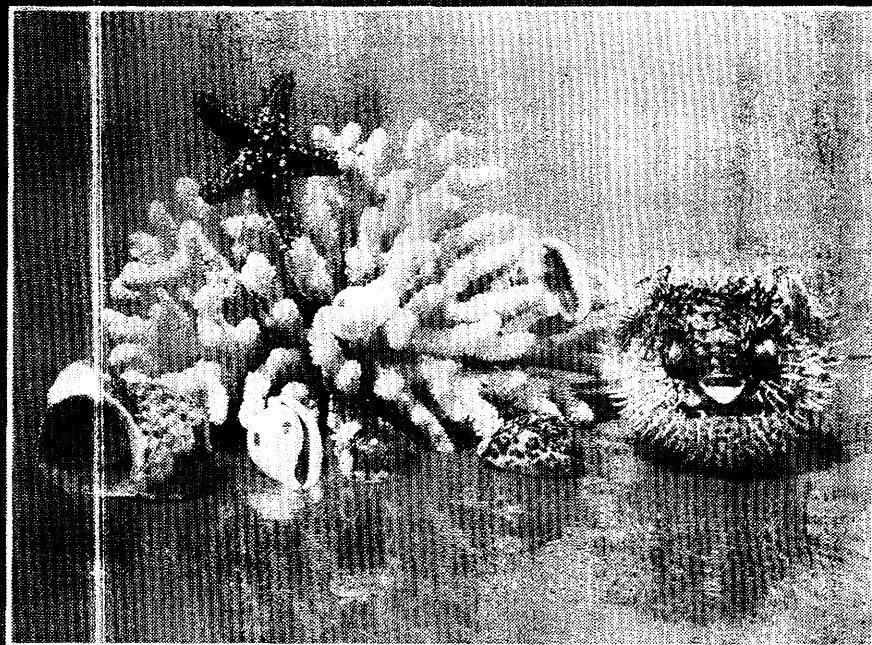
Donations

There has not been space in the last two issues to mention all our donors, but since the beginning of February we have received nearly KShs. 49,000/00 from 75 people and organisations. We would like to thank them all, especially the following who each donated KShs. 500/00 and over: J.G. Steel, Mrs Lorna Hayes, Kaplan and Stratton, Tropicana Hotels, Gordon Hanes, Mrs Barbara S. Chase, Chas G. Allen, California State University, Mrs Peter B. Benedect, Sportmen's Travel Centre, Jambo Hotels Ltd and the American Life Insurance Company.

The elephant caves of Mount Elgon

Ian Redmond's fascinating article on the elephant caves of Mount Elgon appears on page 28 of this issue. For those of you who will be in Nairobi, he will also be giving an illustrated lecture about the caves on Thursday 23 September at 5.00 p.m. in the Louis Leakey Memorial Hall at the National Museum. The talk has been organised by the Society but non-members will also be very welcome.

Save Kenya's coral reef!



Mnaombwa tafadhali msin nne wala msikanye makoa, malumbawe au samaki kwa ajili ya mapambo. Natuvifahadi viumbe hvi vya bahari viendelee kuishi pwani Kenya ili uzazi viavyo na wageni wetu wapate pia kufurahia

Bitte kaufen oder sammeln Sie keine Muscheln, Korallen oder Fisch-Souvenirs. Lassen Sie diese wunderschönen Meereslebewesen weiterhin in Kenias Korallenriffen leben, damit auch künftige Ferien Gäste sich daran erfreuen können

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Those of you who are unable to join the Kenya Exploration Society's 1982 expedition to the Kenya coast might still enjoy a copy of our marine conservation poster, which is printed in full colour. Copies are available from the shop at KSh. 5/00 and free to government offices and hotels at the coast.

Conservation education

The Society is sponsoring two of the participants in the Kenya Exploration Society's 1982 expedition to the Kenya

coast. The month-long expedition is being jointly organised by the Brathay Exploration Society, UK, and the National Museums of Kenya and will be concerned with studying marine ecology. It should be an ideal opportunity for the two young Kenyans from the Starehe Boys' Centre and Highway School to gain more knowledge about their own country's environment and to learn something of the experience of their counterparts in Britain.