

Somewhere Along the Way column
for Sunday, September 4, 2005

“At home with” a Noah’s Ark-full of African animals
by
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[Today’s column continues a series about a mid-summer mission trip to Kenya, where I was one of a 14-member team from First Presbyterian Church in Nashville.]

Our mission team journeyed to two game preserves — Nakuru and Masai Mara. I’ll group the animals alphabetically, starting with a species we didn’t even see:

ANTEATERS—On a walking tour, we saw huge holes nocturnal anteaters/aardvarks dug to get to their food. The abandoned holes don’t go to waste. Hyenas and warthogs use them to hide their babies from cheetahs and other predators.

Many types/sizes of ANTELOPE roam Kenya’s vast grassy plains — gazelles, impalas, waterbucks, elands — grouped according to structured social “rules.”

For example, one antlered male accompanies each herd of impala females. Other impala males live in bachelor herds until they can beat up some dominant male and take over his harem.

A rare sighting: two tiny deer the size of rabbits gazed up at us from the tall grasses alongside our Land Rover. They are called dik-diks; but considering their small size and carnivorous neighbors, we dubbed them “appetizers.”

At Nakuru Preserve’s highest point, we walked about admiring the vista below. Resident BABOONS didn’t pay us much attention until someone opened a bag of Starbursts. The “whoosh” of its seal breaking signaled, “Treat time!” He who was holding the bag ran to a nearby vehicle to escape being mobbed by sweet-toothed baboons!

Sullen-on-hooves describes CAPE BUFFALO. “They’re mean and grumpy,” we were told. “Even lions usually don’t mess with them.”

Exception: A lone Cape buffalo was eating tender grass along a riverbank. “Its old teeth won’t chew the plains grass,” said our guide. “Tonight, it’ll be some lion’s supper.”

We watched a huge ELEPHANT snack on a tree, almost uprooting it, then harvest and munch swaths of grass before sort of melting into the thicket of trees.

Large herds of elephants out in the open were hard to count because small ones hid behind the adults.

Wading FLAMINGOES by the thousands rimmed Lake Nakuru’s shoreline. On an early morning outing, the coffee-deprived among us mistook that wide pink “ribbon” to be an ultra-dramatic sunrise.

A roadside herd of GIRAFFE in the Rift Valley continued feeding while we walked toward them to take only-in-Africa pictures.

A large late-comer ran to join the herd, its tiny [by giraffe standards] baby skittering to keep up. As fast as the adult was going, someone commented, “They always look like they’re moving in slow motion.”

The Masai call giraffes “gardeners” since, by munching the tops of Acacia, they prune the trees.

We somewhat saw an indeterminate number of HIPPOPOTAMUS submerged in a muddy river because they don't like the sun. Occasionally a nose and upper head would surface for air.

HYENAS were plentiful, trotting along solo or grouped on the fringes wherever there was a carcass. A hyena carrying a rib clued our guides to scan the trees, point to a side of meat hanging in one, and announce:

LEOPARD—Curled in a cat-at-rest pose in the bushes, the leopard calmly stared back at us before ambling out of sight. Leopards cache their kill in a tree, and can carry twice their weight up there.

LIONS—Early on at Masai Mara we saw a male lion and two females. As our Land Rover got real close, our driver explained, “When they are in mating season, that's all they do for seven days.” This was one of those days.

We traveled from lions to lions. One pride had six teenagers and a mama. The “kids” romped and played until “mom” muttered something from quite a ways off. Then they went down to the water's edge until “mom's” next muttering sent them across the shallow river and up its opposite bank.

That day's total was 17 lions.

If WARTHOGS ever look in a mirror, it may be the death of the species. Their wide warty faces must be on stiff necks, since they get down on their knees to eat. At the Giraffe Center, warthogs wander among the tourists and will eat out of the hand of anyone who can stand to feed them.

WILDEBEESTS [gnus], word has it, were constructed by a committee – thick head/shoulders and a narrow body on dainty deer-like legs and hooves — and created to feed the lions. They buck like bulls, and canter, trot, gallop like horses.

Sit quietly in a wildebeest herd's midst to hear continuous waves of muttered grunts [like pond frogs at evening]. As the herd moves, the rustle of haunch-high grass it passes through sounds like a quiet rain-stick.

The wildebeests were migrating. They moved by the thousands in single file with one occasional guard posted like a school mom at a crossing.

On the plains, wildebeests like to hang with ZEBRAS, who have three-dimensional eyesight that can spot trouble coming.

The zebra herds ignored vehicles that drove by. But if we stopped, they clumped together with their rear ends toward us.

“They do that to look like one big animal and confuse the lions,” said our Masai guide.

He should know. For centuries, including the 20th, the Masai people have co-existed with Africa's wild beasts.

Next week's column will conclude this series with a visit to Masailand.

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