

The Great Migration

Part 2:

Crossing the Mara River

By Todd Gustafson



Wildebeest Crossing
Nikon D3 Nikon 200-400mm lens

Successful nature photographers always seem to capture great subjects engaged in dramatic behaviors in beautiful habitats. A glance at the photographer's calendar will illustrate the importance of scheduling a nature destination photo shoot. Obviously one would expect to find nature subjects in their habitat. Classic examples of this are:

Polar bears in the Arctic, penguins in the Antarctic, Tigers in India, and gorillas in Uganda and Rwanda.

For some species it is simple to schedule a photographic shoot; go to the place they live and photograph them. For many subjects, however, other factors affect the timing of the trip. Harsh seasonal weather can make a destination inaccessible. Dreadfully hot, cold or rainy seasons can make certain times of year impractical.

Migratory routes and the seasons associated with a species' life cycle can also affect the success or failure of the photo shoot. Examples of this include: Grizzly bears fishing for Salmon in Alaska in June, Snow geese and sand hill cranes flocking to New Mexico starting in November, Polar bears waiting for Hudson Bay to freeze in December, and the Great Migration of wildebeest and zebras reaching Kenya's Masai Mara in August-September.

The Masai Mara is a wonderful destination at almost any time of year with the exception of March, April and May during the long rains. In June and July the Mara hosts a huge number of animal and bird species. Herbivores include eland, impala, Masai giraffe, and waterbuck, to name a few. 350 bird species inhabit the Mara's, planes, marshes, forests and rivers. This is also a park where you can photograph the Big Five; lion, leopard, elephant, Cape buffalo, and rhino.

Searching for these photo subjects in great situations is a fun, challenging, and rewarding way to spend safari time.

With the arrival of the wildebeest and zebras for the rut in August, the Mara is transformed into a habitat teeming with an estimated 2,500,000 migrating animals. The grass is high and the animals are hungry. They arrive from Tanzania in small groups that join to form larger groups that steam across the plains in seemingly endless lines to form herds of 10,000, 20,000 and even 30,000 animals. Lone wildebeest and small groups are not necessarily photogenic, but when they gather into the huge herds of the migration the sheer number of animals is staggering.



Wildebeest Herds from a Balloon
Nikon D3 Nikon 200-400mm lens

In the dry season grass is dry and the herds look for new, green grass. Afternoon showers are common and the wildebeest will start to follow the smell of rain and new grass. The problem for them (and the drama for us) is when the rains and new grass are on the other side of the Mara River. Imagine the staggering number of animals all energized to one purpose: crossing the river. Now the fun begins! The challenge is to find a huge group of animals that have gathered at the river and are prepared to cross. The waiting game that ensues can be absolutely nerve wracking. A few animals can be joined by more groups until the pressure to cross becomes overwhelming. In an instant the energy can dissipate for no apparent reason and the whole group can exit the scene and find a new place to cross. They can decide not to cross for many reasons. Foremost is the great risk of entering the churning waters of the Mara River where giant crocs, broken limbs and drowning are all real possibilities. An animal could be spooked by a vulture's shadow and panic the whole herd. A safari vehicle,

hoping for a better vantage point, could park too close to the herd or the exit point on the opposite bank, causing a panic. The good thing about this herd mentality is that once one animal, be it an adult wildebeest, a calf, or a zebra, starts to cross, the rest of the group follows and a crossing begins. Once they start crossing it is time to move your vehicle to a vantage point where the sun is at the best angle relative to your angle of view.



Wildebeest Herds Crossing the Mara River
Nikon D3 Nikon 200-400mm lens

The direction of the animals as they enter the water will affect the drama and power of your photographs. It is wise to have several empty and formatted cards for quick changing as the action can be fast and furious. Two camera bodies with different length lenses is also a good strategy. Having several views and themes for your crossing will add lots of interest and give a good variety of photographic views to choose from.



Wildebeest Leaping into the Mara River
Nikon D3 Nikon 600 mm lens, 1.7 teleconverter



Wildebeest Leaping
Nikon D3 Nikon 200-400 mm lens



Wildebeest Herds Crossing the Mara River
Nikon D3 Nikon 600mm lens f22 1/20th

Also, when the buffer fills up on one camera you can simply pick up the second body and start shooting.

If the crossing is a long one you can get beyond the “safe shots” and attempt some higher risk zoom or blur shots. These shots are another way to illustrate the energy and action of a crossing that goes beyond an animal frozen in mid air.

Crossings come in all shapes and sizes. 100 wildebeest can cross or it *Nikon D3* could be a heard of tens of thousands. The river’s water level affects the drama of a crossing. High water levels force the animals to swim across and allow submerged crocodiles to swim close to the crossing point for an ambush. In low water situations it is difficult for crocs to hide and the wildebeests can literally walk across.

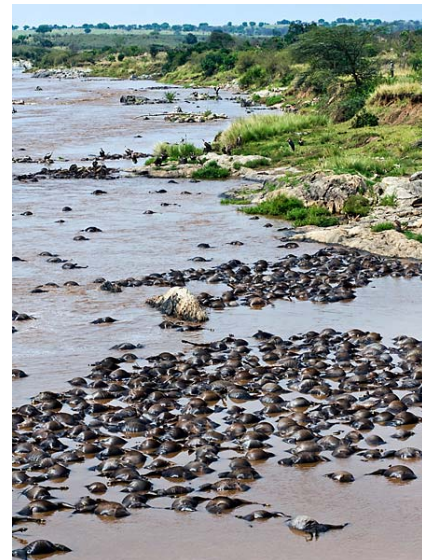


Wildebeest Leaping into the Mara River
Nikon D3 Nikon 600mm lens

Sometimes the chosen crossing point has no easy access, forcing the animals to jump from 5, 10, or even 20 feet into the river. Images from these crossings are especially dramatic. One of the challenges is to capture multiple animals launching from the river bank and suspending them in midair.

Sometimes the wildebeest herd crosses where there is no easy exit point, causing mass confusion on the far river bank. An extreme example of this happened in 2007 near the Mara Bridge where thousands of wildebeest couldn’t exit due to the steepness of the far bank, causing thousands of drownings. The bodies were swept down stream and piled up south of the bridge. It was a sobering sight.

In 2008 we had what one of our drivers called “The Mother of all Crossings”. 50,000 animals were stacked up along the far bank of the river.



Wildebeest Drowning
Nikon D3 Nikon 70-200mm lens

Crocs were lined up in the water waiting for a meal, while scores of vultures circled overhead waiting for the main event. Once the crossing started we photographed and watched for 3 hours.



Hundreds of animals at a time were in the water. The push of the animals from behind kept the ones in front moving. Crocs swam in and took animals in an instant. The animals that made the crossing safely clamored up the rocks on the far bank and started grazing.

The surprise came when hundreds and the thousands of them turned around, jumped into the water and started crossing back to the other side! (After 3 hours the sun went down we left. They were still crossing and recrossing.)

When all is said and done, your Mara experience will be affected by these factors:

The timing of your visit

Your location of your lodge affects your access to the crossing points

Your patience and understanding of wildebeest behavior

Your luck

Says Todd to his driver

“Charles, will these wildebeests cross?”

Says Charles to Todd

“Yes, Todd. They will cross. We may not be here when they do, but they will cross.”

Contact Todd Gustafson

(847)373-5622

Email gustaphoto@aol.com

Website gustafsonphotosafari.com

I am proud to be a contributing travel writer for BirdPhotographers.Net online magazine. Look for six articles a year dealing with travel, equipment, and photo destinations. Have fun!

Next trips...

Tanzania for Wildebeest Births

Madagascar for Chameleons and Lemurs

India for Tigers and the Taj Mahal

Big Game Safari to Kenya for river crossings

Rwanda for gorillas and golden monkeys

Brazil for Jaguars and Jabaru Storks