Full Detailed Itinerary - Tanzania: Birding Among the Beasts

Day 1: Arusha

After arrival at Kilimanjaro airport, we head to a lodge near Arusha National Park.

Day 2: Arusha NP

We'll spend the day on Mt. Meru, which looms over Arusha. The mix of habitats here includes montane forest, and offers us many exciting birds including Crowned Eagle, Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, and splendid songster Rüppell's Robin-Chat. As we head up the mist-shrouded slopes, the yellowwood trees become draped in Usnea old man's beard lichen and we search for skulking gems such as White-starred Robin and the dapper Brown Woodland-Warbler. The park is also an excellent place to find large herds of buffalo grazing the mountain's lower slopes, not to mention a remarkable abundance of giraffes and a chance for scarce forest antelope like Harvey's Duiker and Suni.

Day 3: Arusha District

We drive around the looming Mt. Meru to the lark plains. These grasslands are home to the last 100 or so Beesley's Larks on Earth, and we will search long and hard for this critically endangered Tanzanian endemic. Other interesting species here include Chestnut-bellied and Yellow-throated Sandgrouse, shrikes, migrant wheatears, pipits, and larks galore. The plains are lined by Drepanolobium whistling thorn trees, while hills offer a scrubby habitat that can deliver Red-fronted and Black-throated Barbets, Red-throated Tit, eremomelas, and crombecs. Thicket habitat and riparian strips offer many great birds, including Slate-colored Boubou, Nubian Woodpecker, the highly gregarious Gray-headed Social-Weaver, and the possibility of migrants like Spotted Flycatcher and Common Nightingale.

Days 4-6: Tarangire National Park

From Arusha we head to Tarangire, where we shall enjoy some of northern Tanzania's finest birding. The low baobab-clad plains and fever-tree groves here support many cool species including three Tanzanian endemics and near-endemics: Ashy Starling, Yellow-collared Lovebird, and Rufous-tailed Weaver. The lush grasses are full of ground birds like "Northern" White-bellied Bustard and both Red-necked and Yellow-necked Spurfowls. This is one of the better places to see elephants, which can occur in great numbers along the Tarangire River. We also stand a good chance of seeing our first lions, and maybe even a leopard or cheetah.

Day 7: Tarangire to Ngorongoro Crater

After leaving Tarangire, we'll stay in the Rift Valley, spending most of the day birding the fabulous Lake Manyara National Park. This diverse gem of a park holds lush forest with Silvery-cheeked Hornbill and Crowned Eagle, vast mudflats which might be covered in migrating shorebirds, and marshes that support the likes of African Swamphen and a range of herons and egrets. This park is also good for mammals like African Buffalo and Hippo. Around mid-afternoon, we'll drive up the western Rift escarpment, wind through some pleasant agricultural areas, then enter the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. Our lodge here enjoys spectacular panoramic views of what might be the world's most famous wildlife preserve, and with good

reason.

Day 8: Ngorongoro Crater

We have a full day to explore the magical Ngorongoro, though in the morning we won't be in a hurry to descend into the crater, as the forest and heath along the rim offers excellent birding. We'll keep our eyes peeled for flowering Leonotis; if we find a patch, we might be get to savor the coolest sunbird spectacle in Africa: the impressive Golden-winged, coppery-colored Bronze, and iridescent-purple Tacazee Sunbirds all competing for nectar from the same flowers. Descending into the crater with its towering vertical walls is like finding Africa's Garden of Eden. Inside, we seek myriad grassland and woodland birds, as well as scavenging vultures amidst a thronging wildlife spectacle virtually unequalled on earth. Thirty thousand-some big mammals are resident here, and a decent proportion of them can be seen from a single view point within the crater, an indescribably magnificent sight.

Days 9-10: Ndutu

From the crater rim,we move through the Malanja depression and onto the Serengeti plains, where sandgrouse, bustards, and larks abound. Grant's Gazelles are scattered across the plains, while Common Ostrich and Maasai Giraffe walk swaying in the haze. Towards Ndutu we enter beautiful mature Acacia woodland with alkaline lakes and swamps. The lodge's waterhole is a bird magnet with ever-present Fischer's Lovebird, a variety of bishops, waxbills, and widowbirds, and the endemic Gray-breasted Francolin. The woodlands harbor Rufous Chatterer, Cardinal and Bearded Woodpeckers, Black-faced Babbler, and Green Woodhoopoe. With a bit of luck, and depending on the rains, the wildebeest will have recently calved in this area, and up to half a million females may be in attendance with their young, presenting a wildlife spectacle of awesome proportions, impossible to describe and enthralling to experience. The attendant predators, particularly lions and hyenas, follow their movements closely, and the vultures await each kill with renewed enthusiasm.

Days 11-12: Serengeti NP

We explore the vast acacia-studded plains of Serengeti NP, encountering herds of wildebeest, zebra, gazelle, and giraffe alongside their associated predators. Although it's always difficult to find, this is one of the best places in East Africa for leopard. The birds, of course, are party to this drama. We'll search for Meyer's Parrot, Tanzanian Red-biled Hornbill, Bare-faced Go-away-bird, "Usambiro" D'Arnaud's Barbet, and Gray-headed Silverbill.

Day 13: Serengeti to Kilimanjaro Airport

We return to Arusha, stopping for lunch at the picturesque Gibbs Farm, a good place for Green-headed Sunbird and Grosbeak Weaver. Flights should depart no earlier than 8pm but we recommend the next morning.

Tour Extension 1

Day 1: Arusha to Same

First, we head for the arid Tsavo-corridor woodlands of Same. Nestled in the rain shadow of the Usambaras and Pares, the thornscrub here offers fantastic birding. There is a whole range of species that are found

between here and Somalia, the Somali-Masai endemics. These targets include Black-throated Barbet, Purple Grenadier, White-bellied Go-away-bird, Orange-bellied Parrot, Red-fronted Prinia, Rosy-patched Bushshrike, Somali Bunting, and many others.

Day 2: Mkomazi to Lushoto

After a morning birding in the thornscrub, searching for whatever eluded us on the previous day, we'll drive up into the heights of the West Usambara Mountains. The lush landscape of montane forest and agricultural fields here is a radical change of scene from the dry country below.

Day 3: West Usambaras

The West Usambaras are higher than their eastern counterpart, and also feature more intact forest, though both ranges have been heavily deforested. One of our main targets here is Spot-throat Modulatrix, a weird sort of relict of evolution. Although it is fairly common by voice, it is devilishly difficult to see well. Another major target is Usambara Weaver, endemic to this mountain range, though seeing this bird requires a lot of luck. The mountains also offer good general birding, with extra chances to see birds like Bar-tailed Trogon, which we'll also be seeking in Arusha NP, on the main tour.

Day 4: Lushoto to East Usambaras

Transferring from the West to the East Usambaras requires a fairly long drive, back down into the lowlands, along the southern flank of both ranges, then up the eastern slopes of the East Usambaras.

Days 5-6: East Usambaras

Next on the agenda are the East Usambara Mountains, which are part of an ancient arc of crystalline mountains. These treasure troves are full of endemics and montane species not easily available elsewhere in Africa. Highlights may include a bird that is found nowhere else in the world, the Usambara Akalat. Other rare specialties we'll search for include Usambara Thrush and Long-billed Tailorbird, a relict species of Asian affinities, which requires much luck to see. The lowland coastal forests in the East Usambaras at the Amani-Sigi reserve support Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrike, Red-tailed Ant-Thrush, and the beautiful Green-headed Oriole.

Day 7: Tanga to Pemba

Driving down the mountains, we head to the coast, where we'll catch our ferry to the island of Pemba. Along the way, we'll certainly be watching for any coastal birds like shorebirds or terns to "pad" our trip list!

Day 8: Pemba Island

Our final stop is the idyllic and laid-back Pemba Island. One of the Spice Islands, cloves are spread throughout Pemba's streets. Here we bird Ngezi Forest Reserve looking for the island's four endemic birds: the dainty Pemba Scops-Owl, Pemba Sunbird, Pemba White-eye, and Pemba Green-Pigeon. There may also be an opportunity for some snorkeling on the nearby Manta Reef.

Day 9: Pemba to Arusha

We catch a short domestic flight that will bring us back to Arusha, where we started the pre-tour.

Day 10: Departure from Arusha OR Connect with Main Tour

Anyone who isn’t joining the main tour will fly out today. The others will meet the rest of the group, for the start of the main tour, exploring the avian and mammalian riches of northern Tanzania, including the Serengeti and the Ngorongoro Crater.

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