

2015 Tanzania Tour with VENT

February 19-20: Routine Travel Day

We left home at 7:30 pm to go to San Francisco airport to catch the first flight on our trip to Tanzania. We left at 10:00 pm on a US Air leg to Philadelphia. I had been watching the weather with trepidation, but there was no snow in the area, so nothing to worry about. Nothing, that is, save the outside temp of -1 Fahrenheit.

We had a four hour layover, which we spent most of in the British Air Lounge courtesy of Qatar Air. The only plug I could find for recharging was near a window, and somehow cold air leaked in. I had to dig my fleece from the rollaboard just to stay reasonably warm. Naturally, we were dressed for our destination, where the only snow is on the top of Kilimanjaro. (See below.)

Finally, we boarded Qatar for a long flight to Doha. We had splurged on Business Class, where Qatar was undercutting the market price by a significant amount. For a flight of 11 hours, it was well worth the extra cost. We had two superb meals (on an airplane!) and seats that reclined to full horizontal for sleeping. I still couldn't sleep and wound up watching two so-so movies while Linda slept in the next seat.

In Doha, we had about an hour to make a connection to Dar es Salaam. At 5:50 am, I expected no problem. That was until I saw the "transfer security screening" area, which was a mob scene. Why is it that airlines want you to go thru screening when you have just gotten of an 11-hour flight? We opined that they simply don't trust the screening on the other end.

Fortunately, there was a shortcut for "premium" customers. That got us into the scrum sooner, but we still had to cope with the crowds forcing their way thru an inadequate number of metal detectors.

No problem. We arrived at the gate in time to wait for the announcement, which came after about 20 minutes. "Economy class passengers for flight 1437 should proceed to gate 21 now. Business class passengers, please wait for us to call you." What? We thought that paying extra meant you got on the plane early, before all the overhead bins were full. I inquired about the wait and learned that "the coach was not ready."

This was one of those airports where you take a bus ride to get to the plane. Of course, you don't want *premium* customers mixing with the *hoi polloi*, so we waited for the appropriate vehicle. There was still a small space left for our rollaboards, and even our backpacks, excuse me, our personal items. Then it was time for the five-hour trip to Dar es Salaam, with another leg to Kilimanjaro.

Ironically, I slept for about two hours on this flight.

Finally, we had arrived at the last airport, facing only a car trip to the lodge. We got thru immigration and customs and emerged onto a typical tropical climate, where we saw no one holding a sign with our names on it. Alerted to this lack, several people attached themselves to us offering suggestions for alternatives. We refused all these, thinking back to an encounter we had in Caracas once, where we were sorry to accept an offer from a gypsy taxi. We opted to wait, and after about 30 minutes, our driver appeared, very apologetic, and we were off.

We traveled on a two-lane paved road mostly populated by large trucks and motorcycles. The former were much slower than us, and the latter much faster. Passing was an interesting exercise in long range planning.

We turned off onto a dirt track that appeared to go nowhere, but in fact led to the Ngare Sero Mountain Lodge, our final destination. We had arrived. It was about 4:00 in the afternoon. I always get confused when trying to figure out how long we have been gone, due to the big change in time zones. I think the trip took 34 hours door to door, not even close to a record, but long enough that we were a bit tired.

We found Kevin Zimmer, our trip leader, as he headed out for some birding around the grounds. Tired? Not us. We spent the next couple of hours walking around, finding 35 species, 3 lifers, on what was not officially part of the trip. When we returned to the lodge, we were happy to find that the mountain had emerged from the clouds. Here it is, as seen from the veranda of the lodge.



After a quick shower and dinner, we finally hit the wall. Slept until time for breakfast the next morning.

[February 22, 2015: Monkey Business](#)

There are several reasons to arrive early for a trip:

- You may have travel interruptions, and you have a chance to recover.
- You have an extra day to get over jet lag.
- You have an extra day for birding.

Today, we took advantage of the opportunity to get used to African birds again. It has been several years since we were here last. After a quick pass along the pond and down to the dam past the trout farm, we set off to explore the area outside the neatly manicured lawns and lush gardens of the lodge.

As soon as we exited the back gate, we came upon a troop of Blue (Sykes) Monkeys. Here is a picture of the alpha male, who watched us closely, unsure whether we represented a threat. After a bit, he concluded that we were OK, and we settled down to watch as they fed on berries in the trees. One small monkey began calling, a thin, high pitched note.

As we watched, an adult female came running down the road right toward us. Then, she scampered up the tree and hugged her offspring, who quieted down immediately. So, now we know how to say “Mama!” in Blue Monkey.

We walked quite a way down the road, thru small farmsteads. Church music and a loud sermon in a language we don't know, punctuated the silence. We saw a few birds that weren't to be found around the lodge, none of the lifers. Eventually, we turned back and sat on the veranda waiting for something interesting to come our way.

What came by was a troop of Guereza Colobus monkeys, an amazing species, black and white with an incredible fluffy white tail. Here is a photo of a mother and child.



Jenny and Terry Cloudman arrived a short time later. They also came thru Doha, but unlike our flight, theirs arrived too late to catch the plane to Dar es Salaam. So they enjoyed the lounge at the airport for several hours before catching an early flight. We had exchanged some text messages, so we knew about when to expect them. Fortunately, the monkey troop was still around.

After lunch, we napped until four in the afternoon. Then Linda and I with Jenny but not Terry set off for some more birding. Along the path to the trout farm, we had two new species, one difficult to identify and one ridiculously easy.

The Gray-olive Greenbul is about as colorful as the name implies. Luckily, we were able to watch a pair of them foraging in the leaf litter for a long time, so we were able to see the pinkish bill and legs, which together with the mucklededun color of the rest of the plumage, was enough to clinch the ID. While we watched them, Linda spotted a Peter's Twinspot foraging in the same area. This spectacular bird was easy to identify, but virtually impossible to photograph as it skulked around the undergrowth. Thanks to the internet, [I found a good photo online.](#)

Bit by bit, our group is assembling. Jan Kelly and Susan Fortunow came late last night. The remainder were expected this evening.

We spent the afternoon lazily wandering around looking for more birds and trying in vain to get a good look at the Red-chested Cuckoo that calls often from a large tree near the veranda. We have counted it based on several fly-bys and some sightings of everything except the red chest, but it a frustrating bird.

After dinner, we all retired to bed. About 10:30 pm, my phone rang. This was totally unexpected. I had signed up for an international plan that lasted only a month, and planned to use it mainly for text messages. I scrambled out of bed and saw that the call was from Bay Alarm. I managed to answer in time. Our pet sitter had accidentally set off the alarm and didn't know the code word. (Stupid of me!) We cleared that up and I sent the code word to her for the future.

Somehow, I managed to fall asleep again.

February 23, 2015: [Would You Like Owl with That?](#)

The rest of the group arrived during the night, long after Linda and I had retired:

- Linda and Me
- Jenny and Terry Cloudman, our old friends from Rice and frequent travel companions.
- Jan Kelley and Susan Fortunow, from Miami
- Bill Jeffrey and Casey Bayles, from Brooklyn.
- Barbara and Jerry Hoganson, from Arlington, who barely made their connection in Amsterdam due to weather delays at Dulles airport.
- Merrill Lester, from Hickory, NC.

So, after meeting at breakfast, we set off to show the newcomers the birds of the area. Everyone was delighted with two Gray Crowned Cranes around the pond. One of the loveliest birds in the world, the pair foraged in the short vegetation on the other side of the pond. They seemed to be starting nuptials, dancing around and spreading wings. It seems it was still preliminary, but still a great show to watch. Here is a photo of some of the action:



With that as a start, you know the morning had to be a good one. We even managed to finally get a scope view of our nemesis, the Red-chested Cuckoo, and verified that it did indeed have a red chest, or a red throat at least.

We wandered down the now familiar trail along past the trout farm to the dam, picking up all the birds we had seen over the previous two days except the Gray-olive Greenbul, who refused to show themselves.

Linda, Terry, and I got separated from the rest of the group while I tried, with some success, to get a photo of a beautiful *Gasteracantha* species spider. Linda spotted this right beside the trail. Although it was prettiest when viewed dorsally, we had to be satisfied with this shot as she tried to repair damage to her web.



We had to search for the group, who turned out to be watching a male Peter's Twin-spot that Kevin turned up near where we had seen it before. Alas, we arrived a bit late for the show, the price you pay for loving spiders.

Most of the group, as you'd expect, were ready to relax after the trip, so we took the afternoon off. We tried out the pool, which would have been great for swimming laps. Instead we lazily let the water cool us off before repairing to the veranda.

After dinner, we set off on an owling expedition, which provided a perfect coda to the day. Kevin

called in a pair of African Wood Owls for great looks.

It was 10:00 by that time, and we were all ready for bed. Tomorrow we start in earnest, with a trip to Arusha National Park, about an hour away.

February 24, 2015: Arusha NP

After breakfast, we met our local guide, Anthony, and boarded two Range Rovers for the short trip to Arusha National Park.

Shortly after entering the park, we encountered this Olive Baboon, who seems to be doing a Robert DeNiro imitation, looking at us and saying, “You looking at me?” We also had our first look at Kirk’s Dik-dik, a tiny deer with a semi-prehensile nose that helps them graze. Here’s a photo of one of them.



We drove to a strange tree, a fig that long ago strangled its host tree. Following tradition, we had a picture taken of the two of us positioned near yet another big tree.



We saw many nice birds and animals during the drive, but the best sighting of the day was a family group of completely un-photographable Greater Painted Snipe. This is a frequently sought after species, difficult to see well, and *polyandrous*, with the male responsible for incubation and feeding chicks. Females are free to mate with any male they find. As usual in such species, the female was more colorful than the male, but both were spectacular. The presence of two chicks was a bonus. Since the female was hanging around, there probably isn't another male anywhere nearby.

We had seen one bird in Uganda several years ago, but this was a much better view.

February 25, 2015, Mwanza and Speke's Bay

Today, we left the environs of Arusha behind and flew to the second largest city in Tanzania (Dar es Salaam is by far the largest), Mwanza. Then we drove to the edge of Lake Victoria, a small bay somewhat isolated from the main body, but still quite extensive,

called Speke's Bay. We had several very nice birds right around the lodge, including a nesting Verreaux's Eagle-owl, who cooperated by showing us the striking pink eyelids the species is famous for.



A nice, and common, bird that we saw several times on the trip is the Silver Bird, named for the gray back rather than the stunning orange throat and breast. This was our first view of the bird on this trip.



Linda picked the Heuglin's Courser as

one of her birds of the trip. We saw several of them on the grounds of the lodge, with many opportunities for good photos:

February 26-27, 2015: Into the Serengeti

Today, spent all day driving thru the Serengeti to the Serengeti Serena Safari Lodge, where we spent two nights. Two bustards, both on Linda's list of birds of the trip, were first seen on this drive. First, a male Kori Bustard displaying. This involves rotating the tail feathers up to his neck, exposing the white fluffy undertail coverts while puffing out similar feathers on his neck and throat. This was temporarily Linda's New Favorite Bird™. It soon ceded that honor to the White-bellied Bustard, which has a lovely blue throat to go with its white belly.



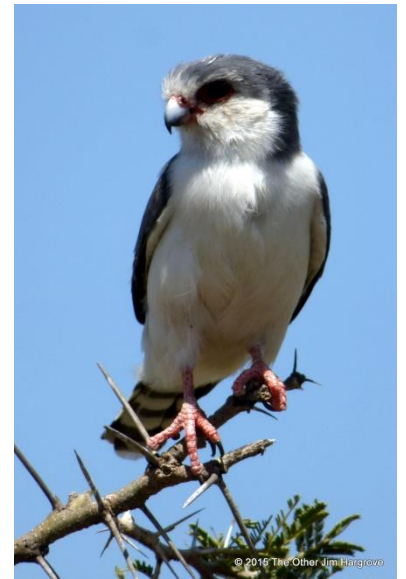
As you might expect, we had many great photo-ops today, with some



non-avian ones for variety. This Pygmy Falcon is a species we have seen several times, with two 5-star sightings in Namibia. It seems to be

a very cooperative bird in general, and this one was no exception:

My favorite photo was at a visitor's center where we stopped for lunch.



Two Dwarf Mongooses provided an X-rated photo:



February 28-29: Moving on to Ndutu

Today, we drove thru the Serengeti into the Ndutu area. The Serengeti was extremely dry as the rains are much later than normal. The Ndutu area was greener, and the Wildebeest were moving out of the Serengeti into



Ndutu. When we finally caught up with the main herd, we were told that we were looking at about 1 million animals. Here's a photo of some of them showing the plains and the huge expanse of sky.

Along the way, we saw many other interesting sightings, such as these Spotted Hyenas lounging in a mud puddle:

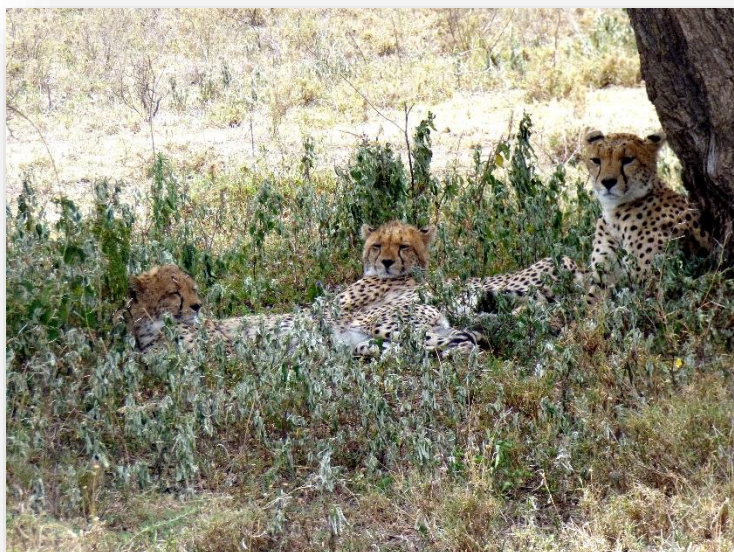
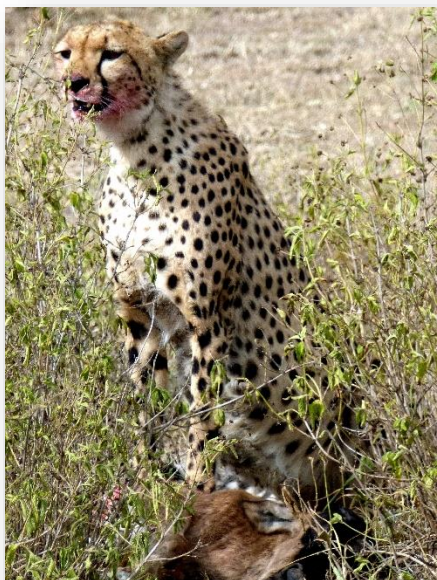


During the day, a cold that had been circulating thru the group got to Jenny and me. Jenny grabbed a short nap when we stopped for lunch. I still felt OK at lunch, but by the time we got to the lodge, which took longer than I hoped because we kept seeing good birds, I was ready to skip supper and go to bed. Linda arranged to have a bowl of soup sent to the room. It was delicious, and I felt much better, though still a bit less than my best.



One big highlight of the lodge, a family of Genets that lived in the thatch roof of the dining area, came out every evening. Completely used to people, they posed for photographs.

The next day, we set out to look for more birds and mammals. We had spectacular sightings of Cheetahs, especially one that was polishing off a recent kill. Here is his photo, complete with "face paint."



Later, Linda was lucky to see a mother Cheetah with a pair of year-old cubs. We did see some birds. One interesting sighting was this Red-billed Ox-pecker, who was searching a zebra carcass for bugs that hadn't gotten the memo about their host's demise.



A small pool near the dining area proved irresistible to some birds. Here is a photo of a Fischer's Lovebird getting a sip of water while a Blue-capped Cordon-bleu waits nearby.



This lodge was one of my favorites on the trip, but our next destination was even better. We set off to visit the World Heritage Site, the fabled Ngorongoro Crater.

March 2-3, 2015: Olduvai Gorge and [Ngorongoro Crater](#)

Today, we visited two famous sites in Tanzania. First, was a stop for lunch and a quick museum tour of the area near [Olduvai Gorge](#), site of Louis and Mary Leakey's paleoanthropological research. The museum and picnic area stands on top of a cliff with a view of the gorge below:



The rock structure on the right in the photo, named “the castle” for obvious reasons, and serves as a landmark for the place where two arms of the gorge meet. Imagine working in this area during 1931, when Louis Leakey began there. It must have been brutal. At least three hominid species occupied the site from 1.9 to 1.4 million years ago. *Homo sapiens* first appeared on the scene about 17000 years ago. Not far away, but closed to visitors, is the famous Laetoli trackway, where footprints of (presumably) *Australopithecus afarensis*, of Lucy fame, show that clear evidence of bipedalism. Our ancestors walked upright long before they developed large brains.

There were even a few birds in the area, including one hiding behind the women's restroom that I missed while using the Gents. We also managed to get photos of brilliantly colored lizards, two different kinds of Rock Agamas:





After a short drive, we reached the rim of the Ngorongoro crater and descended onto the floor. About 20kms across, 600 meters deep and 300 square kilometers in area, the Crater is a breathtaking natural wonder, home to numerous animals of many species. One of these is the Black Rhino, a critically endangered species still hunted for the horn, which allegedly has aphrodisiac properties. The horn, ground into a powder and fortified with some Viagra is sold in Chinese pharmacies. The horn is also used to make ceremonial daggers. We saw several of these incredible animals.



However, I nominate this photo of a Warthog as the best mammal photo of the entire trip. We have titled it, "When you got an itch, you gotta scratch."

We saw quite a few nice birds as we made our way across the crater and up the other side to our lodge, the appropriately named Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, one of the nicest of the trip.



This Rosy-throated Longclaw strongly resembles our Meadowlarks, though with an orange rather than yellow throat. However, the two species are unrelated, an example of convergent evolution.

Klaas's Cuckoo was a bird we had seen before, but this photo is much better than anything we captured previously.

Many Abdim's Storks foraged on the crater floor. Not the prettiest bird we have ever seen, but among storks, one of the better looking.





When we reached the lodge, we had time to puzzle out one of the many similar weavers we saw on the trip. This is the Lesser Masked Weaver, told by a combination of features. We won't bore you with the details.

The next morning we birded around the lodge before breakfast. Linda and I each tallied our 900th African species during the walk. In a reversal of our usual tradition, hers was a Tree Pipit, a typical little brown bird, and not a lifer. (We saw many in India, where we had to puzzle them out from Olive-backed Pipit.)

My 900th was a spectacular male Tacazze Sunbird, which I was not able to photograph. This image on the net shows you what I mean: <http://www.africanadventuretours.net/Albums/Birds/images/Tacazze%20Sunbird.jpg>.

After breakfast — wonderful buffet — we set off to go back down to the floor of the crater. We spent the entire morning getting there, stopping repeatedly for additions to our growing list, including many lifers such as the stunning Golden-winged Sunbird. Alas, most of these were not easy to photograph.

We returned to the lodge for another night before heading to the next leg of our trip.

March 5, 2015: Tloma Lodge by way of Gibb's Farm

In other years, the route included a stop at Gibb's Farm, near the town of Tloma. However, recently a "Texas firm" bought the farm, made some improvements to the accommodations, and jacked up the price too much even for a VENT tour. Instead, we stopped there for a gourmet lunch, some quick birding, then proceeded to Tloma lodge a short distance away.

We were delighted with Tloma Lodge, which offered express laundry. We took advantage of the opportunity and had our clothes back in two hours! The lodge also had the best food of the entire trip, which is saying a lot, as the food was excellent almost everywhere.

At dusk, we got spotlight views of Montane Nightjar, which responded to a recording of its call and flew over the swimming pool repeatedly.



At breakfast, a Black Bishop fed on Lantana near the dining area. I couldn't resist taking a photo as he was so close.

After breakfast, we selected our own food for a box lunch, a nice innovation to cut down on waste. Then, it was on to final stage of the tour..

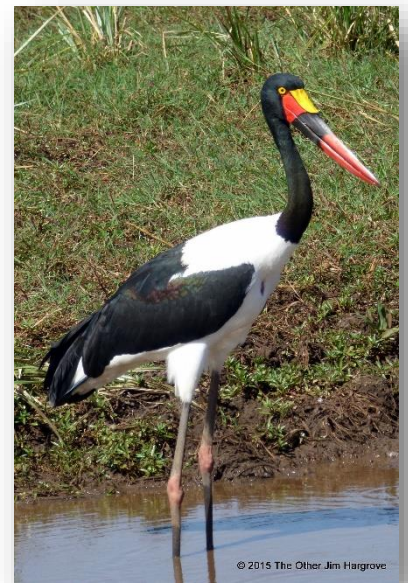
March 6-8: Lake Manyara and Tarangire NP

We had one day at Lake Manyara before heading to Tarangire NP, the home of more elephants than anywhere else in Tanzania, and maybe in all of Africa.



The "lake" part of Lake Manyara was mostly fiction, but a lunch stop at the picnic area produced the consensus bird of the trip. The Red and Yellow Barbet won the honors for the second year in a row. As the cover of the field guide we used, it may have had a head start in the voting.

In a shallow pond, a reminder that there really is a lake here sometimes, we got a look at our favorite stork, a beautiful one unlike most of its cousins. We have seen Saddle-billed Storks before, but they are always a treat. This one is a female, as she has a yellow eye.





The next morning, we moved to Tarangire National Park. On the way, we stopped at a promising scrub field, where we searched for and ultimately located this Rosy-patched Bushshrike.

Then it was on to the park. We spent some time birding around the entrance, finding several new additions to our list and yet another big tree to add to our collection. Here we are in front of a huge Baobab tree:



That really is the two of us standing in front of the tree.

The park proved to be a great spot for photographs. Here are several that we took during the two days of our visit.



This Lilac-breasted Roller was on the short list for Bird of the Trip. We saw several of them in Uganda, but they are always appreciated as one of the most beautiful birds of the world. We have a poster of one with the title, “Jewel of the Serengeti,” which is appropriate. This photo shows the number of different colors in its plumage, including the turquoise patch in the wings.

A pair of Banded Mongooses took over a termite mound as their bailiwick, and posed for a photo. These are much larger than the Dwarf Mongooses shown in *flagrante delicto* earlier in the trip.



Of course, we saw many elephants in the park, but always at a respectful distance that precluded getting a good picture.

Here is a bird naming mystery to ponder. The bird on the left is a Double-banded Courser, standing on a mound of elephant dung. The bird on the right, however, is a **Three-banded** Plover. No one seems to have a good explanation for the curious numerical nomenclature.



When we arrived at the Lodge, Anthony, our local guide for the entire trip, spotted a chameleon in the garden. He picked it up and put it on his arm for a photo. Chameleons can change color to match the surroundings, but it takes a while. This one is in the process of adapting to the color of Anthony's arm.



The charming Yellow-collared Lovebird was common around the lodge.



March 9, 2015: Back where we started



Our trip was at an end. After a stop for lunch, some shopping and a bit of culture in Arusha, we returned to Ngare Sero Mountain Lodge to await our flight home. We had a long wait, as our initial flight didn't leave until the next afternoon.

Kevin alerted us to a new trip bird, Broad-billed Roller. That was a lifer for him as it wasn't usually in this part of Africa until later in the season. We had seen others before, but it was still nice.

While Terry worked on his photos, Linda, Jenny, and I wandered the area looking for whatever we could find. We managed to get wonderful views of Peter's Twinspot, both male and female, near where we saw them the first time. Jenny spotted a bird that looked different, and we spent a while puzzling it out. It turned out to be a Brown-chested Barbet, another lifer.

We managed a "record shot," an inferior picture that at least documents the fact that we saw the bird.



That was our final bird. We had a very satisfactory tour, with a total of 403 species, 107 lifers, 124 new for Africa using the newer IOC taxonomy. (Linda's numbers are slightly different: 402, 109, 125.) The numbers are also different using the more conservative Clements taxonomy.

We thoroughly enjoyed this trip, even the day when I felt sick. Now, on to other parts of the world before we return to Africa, probably in 2017.