



Merry Christmas & Happy New Year

Hello all,

I apologize for the formletter approach but I fear that it's the only option if I'm to wish you all a happy new year before getting caught up in safaris, elephant surveys and other adventures. Thanks to many of you for your emails, cards and telephone calls over the holidays. I hope that you are all well and that this next year is a truly brilliant one for you.

CNN is buzzing away on this sultry January morning and I'm finding your winter weather report hard to fathom. I hope that the blizzards and ice storms leave all of you, on both sides of the Atlantic, unscathed. I know that I wrote barely a month ago but so much has been happening here in Kenya and I never did take the opportunity to wish you all a happy entry into 2004. Here are a few glimpses of our own African Christmas and New Year.

This Christmas we found ourselves in a truly extraordinary situation, spending the holidays as a family at home! We are usually on safari during the holiday season and it was lovely to be tucked away in our old stone cottage teaching Christian some of the more lively holiday traditions, both American and British. Christian caught on quickly and he thoroughly enjoyed belting out carols under the stars and tramping into the paddock with his Dad on Christmas Eve to select the most ungainly tree possible.

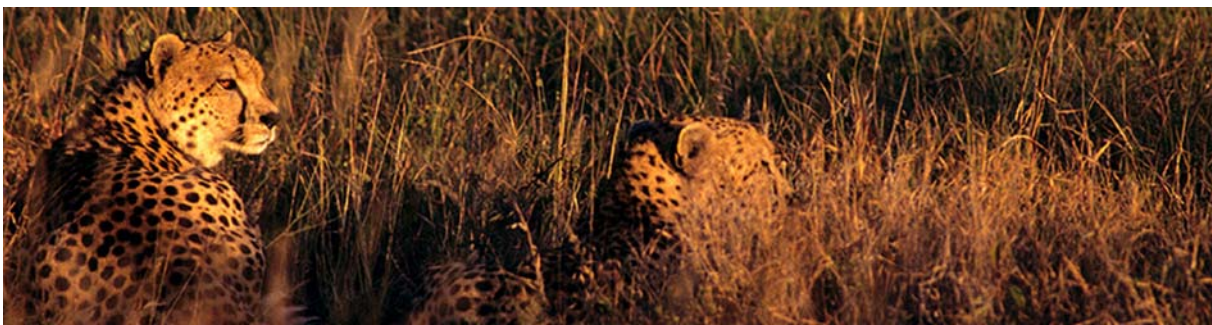


Our First Rhino of 2004

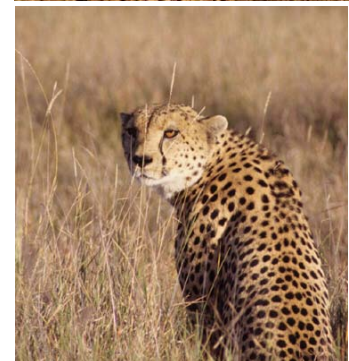
Ah yes, the "tree" in question was a 17 ft cypress limb which, apparently, proved irresistible despite its anemic appearance and its location- 30 feet above the ground. The boys were not to be dissuaded and they arrived at the front door, grinning, lacerated and dripping with sap. Jared quickly pronounced the severed limb as "a true Charlie Brown Christmas Tree" and continued to praise his creation as it was levered into position and draped with lights, baubles and random scraps of aluminum foil. Evening fell, milk, cookies (and beer) were carefully arranged by the fire for Father Christmas and we settled in to await the inevitable thud of the tree careening off the walls and hitting the floor.

Christmas morning brought with it the happy discovery that the tree was still upright. Well, nearly. For the next few hours Christian repeatedly braved the steady rain of sap, needles and foil to retrieve his presents and shred wrapping paper in all directions. Once the devastation was complete we set off to a lunch hosted by a truly brave new member of the Mathews clan. Nadia attempted to feed 4 generations of Mathews at one endless table under the safari mess tent. This was no mean feat as 42 of us settled down to fill the home with the sounds of laughter, clashing cutlery and the pop of Christmas crackers. We were still at it many hours later when the sun dipped down over the national park and disappeared altogether.

2004 was born in the glow of the bonfire and the warmth of small gathering of friends. It was wonderful to sit back and watch friends circle the fire in animated discussion and migrate back and forth to the BBQ grill. Midnight went nearly unnoticed amidst the laughter and the evening trundled happily along until the wood supply was thoroughly exhausted. New Year's morning brought the arrival of Lord and Lady Geddes (my parents) and the launch of a exploratory trip up to the "white" highlands of Kenya and on to the sandy outcrops of Samburu. The theme was to try fresh safari ideas and to pop into new camps and lodges to see if they would be suitable for our guests.



Our first few days of 2004 were spent amongst hungry cats and massive pachyderms on the several hundred thousand acre Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. We arrived at the conservancy after circumnavigating Mt. Kenya and sweeping over the edge of the 9,000ft Tamau escarpment and down towards the austere deserts of the Northern frontier. Lewa occupies the highlands overlooking Samburu and Buffalo Springs Reserves. In the distance stands the sheer stone walls of Ol lokwe massif and the arid lands of the north. Lewa's rolling grasslands, palm-fringed gorges and acacia woodland were once cattle ranches belonging to settler families. Now, due to an impressive effort by the land-owners, local communities and environmentalists, Lewa is one of Kenya's leading conservation areas. In fact, the Conservancy has become so successful in protecting rare species that large numbers are relocated to the parks that need them. The conservancy and the surrounding lands are private and subsequently numerous activities are available which are not usually possible within the confines of the national parks. We spent many magical hours exploring Lewa on foot and a few, much Jared's chagrin, on camelback. Sadly, we did not have time try the horse safaris which come highly recommended.



Throughout our days in the conservancy elephant herds dotted the hillsides and rhinos seemed to pop up behind every bend. Unseasonably cold evenings produced a very friendly mob around fire and late night sprints to our rooms became the fashion. But the chill did lend a Christmas spirit to our adventures, especially since evening gamedrives ended with all of us tightly bundled in bright red Masaai blankets in the back of the Land Cruiser. While on the ranch we tested a new luxury hideaway, Lewa Safari Camp, an option for guests seeking active days in the bush and reasonably-priced lodging. Our days and nights at the camp produced a positive recommendation but one that would be conditional on Jared and Paul applying their culinary magic to the lodge kitchen and the catering in the bush. Our hosts and the resident-guides were wonderful but my thoughts of Lewa will forever be dominated

by a blond and his two cheeky brothers. We first encountered Blondy standing in a tree near camp, promptly disproving my assertion that cheetahs don't climb trees. Our time with the cheetah brothers were punctuated by two main events - a nose to nose standoff with a somewhat apoplectic warthog and a magical, sun-drenched, morning following the brothers as they stalked gazelle through the high grass. The three were usually powerful and confident, as Cheetah go, and the hours spent with them on that last morning strengthened my conviction that the cats in the National Parks suffer from overcrowding by tourists. The Lewa brothers were simply Cheetah at their best. That said, I still laugh when I think of how that hapless warthog trotted right into the cheetah's hideout and still managed a chaotic getaway.

Our next stop was Samburu National Reserve, several thousand feet below us to the North. Samburu offers a wonderful contrast to the lush, cool highlands of Lewa. The countryside was dry, bleached and hot, forcing most of the visiting herds of elephants down along the riverbanks at least once a day. The views of elephant families splashing about in the shallow waters were truly exceptional and we spent many morning hours lingering on the palm-fringed banks before trailing them up into the thorn-covered hills. Lions and giraffe and cheetah put in stunning appearances as well and our evenings were spent dining on the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro river under the shelter of graceful



fever trees and high thatch roofs.

My mapping work with Save the Elephants provided us with the opportunity to head out with David Debalen, a Samburu tribesman who has become an expert on the behavior patterns of herds which pass through the area. Up to fifteen elephant matriarchs and bulls are radio collared at any one time (they tend to misplace them here and there) allowing us to track the progress of elephant families throughout the Mt. Kenya area and into the Northern Frontier. Spending time amongst the elephants with a field-based wildlife researcher offers a truly unique insight into the drama which unfolds daily in the bush. Heavy on David's mind was the recent death of a grand old elephant who led her extended family for years. It was thought that her death was caused from snakebite to the trunk and, before long, she was too weak to climb the riverbank. As she fell, her family rallied around her in vain attempts to lift her to her feet and guide her into the safety of the forest. Her passing is made increasingly poignant by the understanding that it will take years for the herd to replace her and they will have to rely on another family for leadership until a new matriarch can be groomed.

As if to offer a comic foil to the tragedy, the bull elephants, or "Tuskers", provided superb entertainment in the form of high spirited jousting and generally bad behavior. It was the season in Samburu when the eligible bulls come into musth, making them aggressive and confrontational. This soon became apparent when we encountered a large herd of elephant in the thick bush north of the river. The bulls stood their ground on the rough track and the females were agitated as well, having spent days putting up with the rowdy boys. We had intended to traverse the wooded hill in search of lion but, after carefully testing the elephant's intentions, Jared turned the Land Rover around and we retreated. I had worried that the tension amongst the herd was due to poaching but David later explained that elephant sensibilities had been set all askew by an ongoing rivalry between two massive tuskers. It appeared that Petty Bam Bam, the highest ranking bull in Samburu and Apollo, a dashing interloper from Shaba had been battling for days over the same girl. Meanwhile, the young bulls in the area were not to be upstaged and took every opportunity to clobber each-other in mock battles. Nearly every elephant family we encountered had its share of rambunctious young males, tossing their heads from side to side, brandishing their trunks and flapping their ears violently. We will keep you posted as the drama unfolds.



We took the opportunity to drop in for lunch at the luxury camp owned by the Douglas-Hamiltons.

They have used their years of experience in wildlife conservation to create an unforgettable setting for Elephant Watch Safaris. The exclusive 8-bed camp is graced with sublime shade trees and some of the country's most unique bush architecture. A new initiative on conservation land outside the reserve also got our attention and we will keep you posted on their plans to develop a health spa and a bird hunting facility to compliment their exquisite camp.

The return to Nairobi was made easier by the timely arrival of Rory and the Cessna and we followed a wonderful, meandering, route over Mt. Kenya and through the central highlands while Jared and Christian took the long way around in the Land Rover.

Our last stop was the elephant orphanage near our home in Nairobi. The staff at the center raise elephants, rhinos and other young animals orphaned due to poaching or other causes. The task of



finding the right methods to raise wild animals is a daunting one and, ultimately, most of the animals are released back into the wild.

We are now settling into a new year which promises to be a exciting one. I will follow with more adventures and news in a few months. Meanwhile, I'm off to Chad to count some more elephants for the UN and Jared plans to split his time between our clients and his conservation work. His next adventure out of town is to cater a charity cricket match on the edge of the Chalbi Desert. The camp staff may be less than enthusiastic as they look forward to a 3 day drive to the site and the task of setting up a camp for 22 players, their families and the press in 100 degree heat. Jared is working with our Tanzanian outfitter to design much more active and innovative itineraries including new areas for walking and more exclusive routes up Kilimanjaro. Serengeti may also be the stage for our first cooking safari. We will keep you up to date.

That's all from a very busy 2004 thus far. All the best and have a great start to 2004.

Mathews Safaris

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