



Governors' Guide to the Masai Mara in October

The first few weeks of the month are dry and windy which give rise to very colourful sunrises and sunsets. The sun rises noticeably earlier with first light at 6am. The day produces big temperature variances with the midday temperatures reaching around 30 Celsius. The grasses on the plains are short due to the constant grazing by the large herds of **zebra and wildebeest**. Towards the end of the month the rain arrives giving the grasslands a new green flush. Sometimes there are dramatic late afternoon thunderstorms, bringing wonderful photographic opportunities. This weather activity excites the herds leading to big game movement and more river crossings. These quick heavy storms stimulate the growth of Fireball and Pajama lillies which dot the plains bringing unexpected splashes of colour to the grasslands.



The Mara river tends to be lower during the month of October and it is not unusual to see the herds splashing easily through the river without having to swim, making themselves vulnerable to the massive Mara River **crocodiles**, who are happily basking on the river banks having feasted for a couple of months. With river levels lower a number of young hippo calves are taken by crocodiles.

October has always been a great month for the **migration**, the vast herds moving around a little more, following the smell of rain and searching for the new nutritious growth. From one day to the next they moved around vast distances, travelling from the marsh area, over Rhino ridge and to the Talek river and back again. As the month draws to a close the majority of the herds file down in long lines from the plains moving south towards the Serengeti, but some large groups remain in the area. There are daily River crossings and on occasion wildebeest cross the river one way and Zebra crossing the other. These immense herds providing spectacular game viewing from the hot air balloon.



The big **buffalo** herd with all its maturing young has spent most of its time in search of any remaining long grass that the zebra and wildebeest have left behind but are mainly seen on the West of the Bila Shaka lugga where there is courser grass. They return every few days to the marsh for water or drink from the pools left by the seasonal streams leading to the Mara river. A great survival tactic, giving birth to their young whilst the migration are in the area, as their main predators Lion and hyena are largely busy preying on easier game.

Most plains game have their calves in October in anticipation of the November rain. The **Thomson gazelles**, **Impalas** and **warthog** tend to give birth at the start of the month and the Impala, **Topi** and **Cokes hartebeest** mostly calve towards the end of the month. The young have to be able to get up and go after 15 – 20 minutes of being born as part of their survival regime, there are some very anxious and protective mothers, bounding away from the slightest threat with their calves following in hot pursuit on their skinny, precarious legs. Many of the **Thomson Gazelle** calves are taken by the resident **Black Backed Jackals**.

Thompson gazelles use the lower river levels as a time to cross, which leads to very dramatic with heart-wrenching action with some of the herd crossing, some being taken by crocodiles and then the remaining herd turning back and not crossing. It is not uncommon to see part of a herd of plains game at a crossing looking longingly at the other part of their herd on the other side of the river, with the river and crocodiles in between.

The **Elephant** family groups are back from the conservation areas to the marsh and woodland. The *Warburgia Ugandensis* trees (Elephant Pepper) are fruiting which gets them into the riverine forest as they love these hot berries. It is very common to have family groups of elephant in the camp.



These family herds have some very young calves too, still so small they fit easily under their mother's chest and with a thick protective coat of bristled hair. Young calves is a good sign for the elephant population in the Mara, as when they are stressed they very often miss their oestrus cycle.

Warthogs – the characters of the plains, have piglets a few weeks to a few months old. Lion are starting to depend on them for meals as the grass is short so they are easy to spot. Sadly it is not uncommon for lion to eat the whole piglet family. We have sadly on a number of occasions in October seen a lioness eat the whole piglet family. **Primates** – Troops of Baboons with 6 week old young riding jockey style are often seen foraging on the plains having left the riverine forest which is their home for the night. The Black faced vervets are also more commonly seen in the month of October.

The **Marsh Pride of lions** tend to spend their time at the Marsh in front of the Governors' camps as they have for the past few months now. The pride hunt at night and are found coming back to the marsh after following the wildebeest which are on the move further afield. The Lion Prides follow the migration and move into other territories, which can potentially cause fights and upheavals. Add to this the Nomadic males who are also following the migration, and looking for potential take overs of females and territories from current dominant Male lions of the Mara. The October lion action is excellent, with many kills being witnessed, great entertainment from the playful young cubs and then drama evolving with nomadic males vying for taking over prides by fighting with the resident dominant males and possible mating with the females.



October is a good month for **cheetah** as they prey on the young Topi, Thomson Gazelle and Impala calves. It is not unusual for us to see a variety of 8 different cheetah and some with cubs. We have followed the lineage of some of these cheetah for over twenty years



and is it always exciting meeting up with the offspring of Honey of BBC fame, as they delight our clients with their tendency to bonnet hop on our vehicles.

We have several **leopard** which we regularly see and the large male who lives down at the Main Wildebeest crossing is very visible and active on his migration kills. Leopard enjoy a time of plenty in October due to all the calves over the short grass plains.

Hyena – Their dens and burrows are set up out on the plains around the migration. The young cubs vary from a few weeks to a couple of months old. During October our guides report more hyena being killed by Lion than on any other months with as many as 6 being killed in the month.

A rare spotting of a **striped hyena** has occurred in October, as has the rare sighting of a side **striped jackal**. We believe that they come in with the Migration. An **Aardwolf**, even with cubs have been seen during the month of October, due to higher harvester termite activity from the abundance of dung from the great herds on the plains. The Black backed Jackals have pups as do the Silverback jackals.

Bat Eared Foxes are regularly seen in October. **Serval Cats** are being seen more often now and it is not because they are not abundant, it is that the grass has to be grazed low in order to portray these grassland species of Cat.

Birds

We have had a few migratory birds passing through the Mara in October: **European and White-fronted bee-eaters, Montague and Pallid harriers, Common Kestrels, Steppes Eagles, African Cuckoos, Spoon-billed storks** and there are a couple of rare sightings of **Egyptian Vultures. Caspian plovers** have been seen and they often give away their presence by their call. **The Saddle Bill stork** with chicks is frequently seen in the Musiara marsh. Fairly large flocks of Open billed storks are being seen near watercourses.

Earlier on in the month large flocks of **Eurasian Bee-eaters** were seen and smaller flocks of **Blue Cheeked Bee-eaters**, which are migrants from the Middle East. Rare sightings of **Willow Warblers**, which arrive at night. The **Madagascar Squacco** Herons have been resident in the Musiara Marsh since June and by the middle of October they had all but gone. *Breeding records:* **African Jacana** on nests and several chicks seen in the Musiara marsh. **Long-toed plovers** on two nests and three chicks seen. **Wahlberg's Eagle** pair has been seen nest building near Governors Private Camp.

In the woodland – **Mocker swallowtail** and **Green banded swallowtail** are being seen during the month.



The trees and lianas in the Mara River forest flower and fruit, one in particular the *Turrea floribunda* has flowers and has a beautiful scent almost like Jasmine. The *Pristemera polyantha* seeds have dropped off and fly away like mini helicopters. The bright red fruit of the *Lepisanthes senagalensis* is a big favourite of the Baboons as well. The Gardenias are also flowering.