

The Great Wildebeest Migration explained



What exactly is the Great Wildebeest Migration?



The Great Wildebeest Migration is the mass movement of hundreds of thousands of wildebeest, zebra and other antelope species around the Serengeti in Tanzania and the Masai Mara in Kenya. The Migration is a year-round event and is always happening somewhere but exactly where depends on the time of year.

The annual calving of the wildebeest takes place in Tanzania's southern Serengeti plains in February and early March each year. They then start moving north, arriving in the Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya around early July before heading back to Tanzania around October. As there are so many animals, they are spread out over a vast area, and are not all found in the same place at the same time.

When heading through the northern Serengeti and into the Masai Mara the wildebeest herds have to cross the Mara river and this scene has featured in numerous books, magazines and TV documentaries. As a result, many people are under the impression that the 'Migration' is the crossing of the river and are very keen to see this happen! This means there can be large numbers of tourist vehicles on the river banks in the hope of seeing a "crossing", often without success.



Where can I see the Great Wildebeest Migration?



The map below broadly shows the typical movement of the wildebeest herds throughout the year, but please note that the movement of the wildebeest and other animals is dependent on weather and therefore very unpredictable, and the exact timings vary every year.



While the movements shown in the map remain broadly true most years, it is important to recognise that the Migration is dynamic, unpredictable and is often occurring across many miles of land at the same time, and every year the precise movements and timings are different.

The best approach is to get yourself in broadly the right location, and travel in hope not expectation – as nothing is ever guaranteed with wildlife, despite what the TV documentaries might show. The documentary makers have dozens of vehicles spread across a wide range of territory and spend months on the ground for 12-14 hours a day, then condense the best of the action into short 30-60 minute bursts of excitement.

It is also worth bearing in mind that the popularity of the Wildebeest Migration attracts a human migration too – and particularly for river crossings you can easily see 50+ vehicles all jostling for position on the river banks, and many people find this distasteful.



Where is the best place to see the Great Wildebeest Migration?



The Migration is a year-round event and is always happening somewhere but exactly where depends on the time of year. Many experts would say that the two best Migration experiences are:

- the Masai Mara in Kenya in the months July – early October, when you have the best chance of seeing large herds crossing the Mara River, made famous by countless documentaries over the year showing this amazing spectacle. At this time of year the herds can also often be seen in large numbers in the northern Serengeti, where they also have to cross the Mara river, as they migrate to or from the Masai Mara. Indeed large numbers of wildebeest often remain in the northern Serengeti and do not cross into the Masai Mara at all
- the Ndutu/southern Serengeti plains in Tanzania from January-March. This is when the migrating wildebeest herds congregate in this area to enjoy the nutrient rich short grass that has been watered by the 'short rains' of November and December. At this time they also give birth to their young, swelling the number of animals and creating an abundance of prey for the Big Cats and other predators.

Expert Tip: As well as the Serengeti Wildebeest Migration, there is another migration of wildebeest from the Loita plains, north east of the Masai Mara Reserve in Kenya. This moves through Ol Kinyei Conservancy in February/March when they calve (at the same time as the Serengeti wildebeest) and then spreads into Naboisho and Olare Motorogi Conservancy during the next few months before the Serengeti migration arrives.



The Great Wildebeest Migration in the Serengeti



The Serengeti National Park and its surrounding conservation areas cover an enormous expanse of grassland - about 15,000km². The Migration is generally always to be found somewhere in the Serengeti but depending on the timing of your visit, it can be best to locate yourself in one or more of the southern, western, central or northern 'sectors' of the park.

In the early months of the year (January – March) the Migration is best seen in the southern plains of the Serengeti National park and adjoining Ndutu sector of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. This is when the migrating wildebeest herds congregate in this area to give birth to their young.

Through April and May the herds generally begin to head in a northerly direction and at this time the central Seronera area of the park can be a good location. This central area is the busiest sector of the park, due to the large amount of accommodation options here and because the resident wildlife makes for excellent game viewing all year round. You just have to share it with a lot of other vehicles! The Wildebeest Rut tends to occur around this time, with males forming temporary territories and defending them from other males in order to mate with the females.

Between about May and July and migrating herds head through the western sector of the Serengeti, crossing the Grumeti river as they head north.

The northern section of the Serengeti reaches to the Kenya border and the Masai Mara beyond. The herds generally arrive in this area in July moving northwards into the Masai Mara. They then move through this area again as they head south in October. Many of the wildebeest stay in this part of the Serengeti and do not cross into the Masai Mara at all, making it a good location for witnessing the Migration from around July to October.

During October to December the herds head south down the eastern side of the Serengeti arriving back on the southern Serengeti plains around the end of the year.

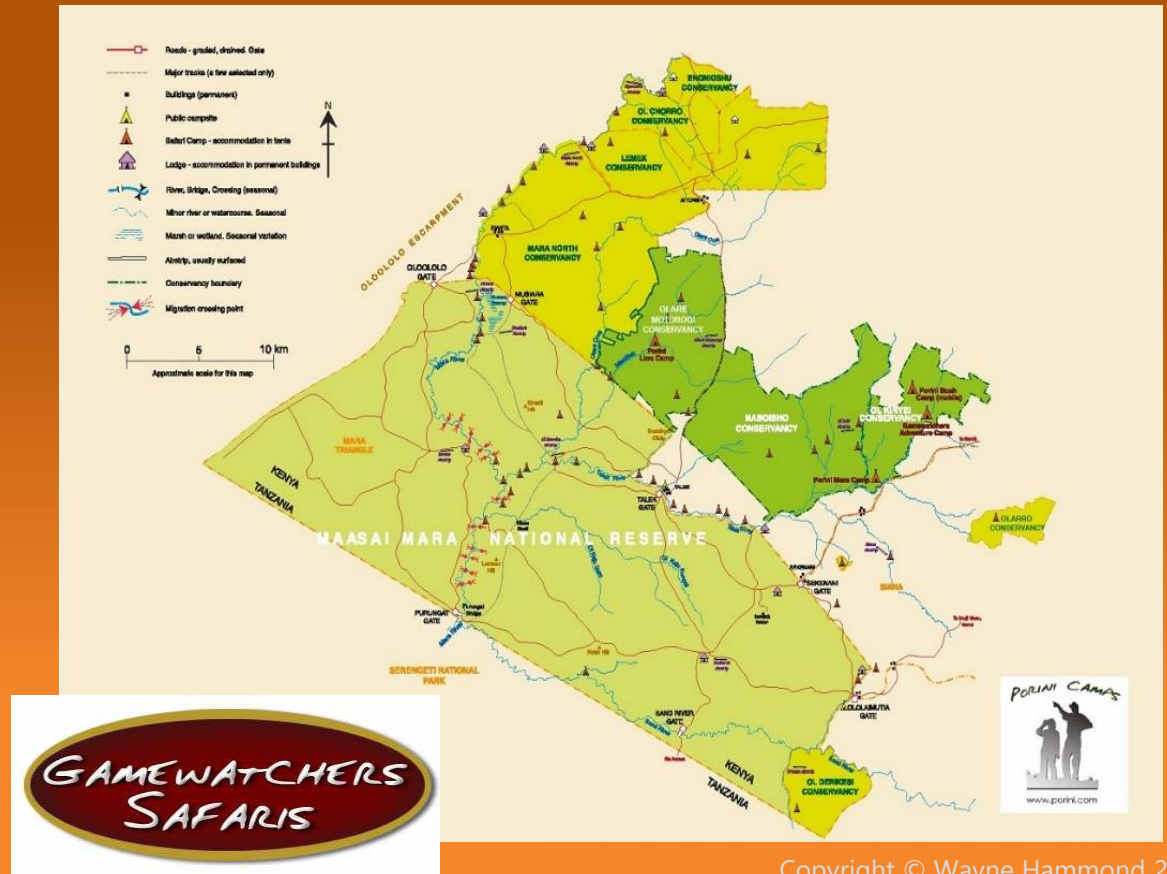
As is always the case, these broad timings can vary year to year depending on weather patterns and all of the wildebeest do not move in a single cohesive unit but are spread out over many miles and in many different groups.



A large herd of wildebeest and zebra grazing in a savanna. The animals are scattered across a field of tall, dry grass under a clear blue sky. In the bottom right corner, there is a small text credit: "© 2009 by National Geographic Society".

The Wildebeest herds cross the Mara River inside the Masai Mara National Reserve (crossing points are shown on the map). However this is also the busiest part of the Mara-Serengeti eco-system so while staying inside the Mara Reserve means you are closer to the river crossing points, it also means you will be in the busiest part of the Mara with sometimes dozens and dozens of other vehicles around you and the animals. Indeed many people who visit the Mara Reserve in the Migration season leave disappointed because of the sheer number of vehicles they see particularly near the river.

What many people do is stay in a Camp in a Private Conservancy, where tourist number are limited, for the quieter and higher quality overall wildlife experience and then go inside the Reserve for one day to go to the river. It is worth noting that your chances of seeing a wildebeest river crossing are always small if you are staying in the Mara for just a few days, wherever you stay, as nobody quite knows when the herds will cross the river – they do it multiple times over a period of months. Other than river crossings all of the wildlife is present in the Conservancies, and the general game viewing is usually better than inside the Reserve.



Questions and Answers



What is a Private Conservancy?

A Conservancy is land outside of the government-controlled national parks and reserves that is set aside as additional protected habitat for wildlife by an individual or community for use in Kenya's conservation efforts. When community members set aside their land to be designated as a Conservancy, the land owners receive rents paid on a per-acre basis from safari camp operators, and are incentivised to participate in conservation efforts. In addition, there are opportunities for employment and other income-generating activities, all of which benefit local people.

Why stay in a Private Conservancy?

There are a number of advantages to staying in a Private Conservancy compared to a National Park or Wildlife Reserve. Within the Conservancies there is a strict limit on tourism by keeping to a policy of no more than one guest tent per 700 acres of conservancy land and a maximum of 12 tents in any camp. This means those staying at camps located in the Conservancies do not see huge numbers of other tourists and vehicles, as is often the case in the National Parks and Reserves where tourist numbers are not regulated, and overcrowding can be an issue around animal sightings. You can also enjoy night drives and nature walks and drive off road to get closer to the animals – these are not allowed in the National Parks and Reserves. And many camps in Conservancies will take you to the Reserve for a day if you want to.



Questions and Answers



Are there as many animals in the Masai Mara Private Conservancies compared to the National Reserve?

The Migration (thousands of wildebeest spread out across the Plains) can be seen from Camps in the Masai Mara National Reserve, or the Private Conservancies that surround the Reserve. Migration river crossings are best seen from locations inside the Reserve. However, it is worth bearing in mind that from any location the chances of seeing a river crossing when you only have a few days in the area are quite low, as nobody can predict the location of the wildebeest or when they will cross the river. The Big Cats and all the other wildlife can be seen in either the Reserve or Conservancies and arguably they are better seen in the Conservancies. Indeed latest research just published shows that 2 of the places with the highest density of lions in Africa are Olare Motorogi Conservancy and Ol Kinyei Conservancy in the Masai Mara eco-system, where we have our Porini camps. [Click here](#) for more details.

Is there fences between the Masai Mara National Reserve and the Private Conservancies?

No. It is important to note that the Conservancies are not fenced and the animals come and go between the National Reserve and the Private Conservancies as they please – they do not recognise a line on a map!

Can I combine a stay inside the Mara Reserve and a Private Conservancy?

Yes. This can work well if you want to focus for a few days on seeing a river crossing (and accept the overcrowding for this part of the safari) and then want to experience a more private and less crowded Conservancy experience for some of the time also.



More Information:

- [The Great Migration](#)
- [The Masai Mara](#)
- [Responsible Tourism](#)
- [Porini Camps](#)
- [Loita Migration](#)
- [When is the best time to visit Kenya?](#)

