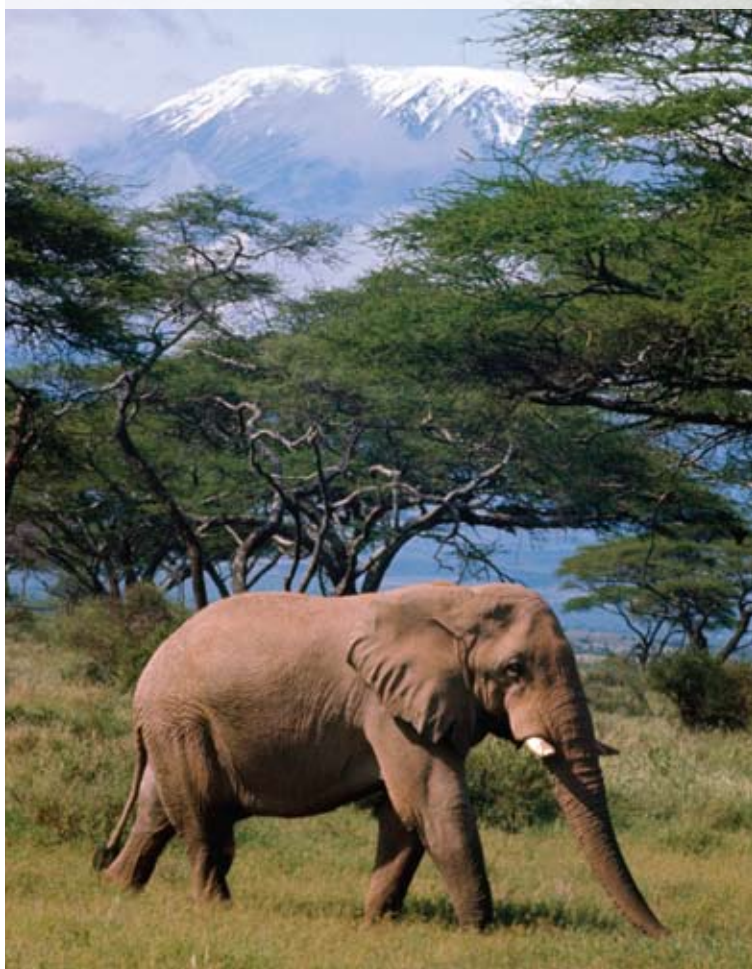


# THE BEAUTY OF AMBOSELI



**CAMERAPIX**  
PUBLISHERS INTERNATIONAL





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Production Director: Rukhsana Haq

Text: Jan Hemsing

Revised Text: Phillip Briggs

Editorial Assistant: Cecilia Gaitho

Design: Fatima Janmohamed

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Special thanks to Karl Ammann for use of his photograph on pages 82-83.
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Half-title: Zebra in Amboseli National Park with Mount Kilimanjaro in the background.

Title page: An Amboseli herd moves in stately procession against the impressive backdrop of Kilimanjaro.

Following pages: A herd of wildebeest files past as the sun sets over Amboseli National Park.

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## 5. The Heavyweights

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Ask anyone returning from Amboseli for the first time to describe in three words their main impressions and the answer is invariably 'Kilimanjaro, elephants and dust' though not always in that order. If they had particularly hoped to see elephants, then it would be 'Elephants, dust and the mountain'. Forty years ago it would have been 'Kilimanjaro, lions and rhinos', for it was lions then that most visitors wanted to see, especially the handsome black-maned variety. Lions were once prolific in this part of Maasailand, where they were hunted until Amboseli was set aside as a reserve in 1948 and in the Maasai Mara until it was declared a reserve in 1961. And perhaps more than any other park or reserve in Kenya, Amboseli was famous for its black rhinos. The desperate years of 'Save the Elephant' and 'Save the Rhino' have been of the last quarter of the 20th century.

As a national reserve, the wildlife at Amboseli was 'protected' but 'the reasonable needs of the human inhabitants living within the area' took precedence, and the Maasai continued to graze their herds in the park alongside the wildlife as they had always done previously.

Once declared a national park in 1971, however, this 'human' facility was withdrawn, since the domestic stock of the Maasai could hardly be classified as 'wildlife' and the preservation of the wildlife and the ecology became paramount with the park's changed designation.

Not surprisingly, the excision of this relatively tiny pocket of land – 392 square kilometres (152 square miles) – to ensure the preservation of its animals and ecology, did not appeal at all to the local Maasai, cutting them off from their favourite watering places.





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In 1991, three rhinos were speared by Maasai as their continuing protest, following the earlier poisoning of six of the park's few remaining lions, alleged to have killed some of their donkeys. These conflicts have to be borne in mind when appraising the whole Amboseli scene.

Records show that 40 years ago, it would not be unusual for elephants, black rhinos, lions, leopards, cheetahs, giraffes, buffalos, vervet monkeys and yellow baboons all to be seen in a single morning's drive in the park. As well, there were hippos in the swamps, eland, hartebeest, wildebeest, warthogs, waterbuck, bushbuck, lesser kudu, reedbuck, dik-dik, gerenuk, oryx, impala, Thomson's and Grant's gazelle, hyena (spotted and striped), golden and silver-backed jackals, bat-eared foxes ('basking in the sun outside their dens on the open plains' writes the late John Williams in his *Field Guide to the National Parks of East Africa*), six types of mongoose and, with luck after dusk, from AA to ZZ, aardwolf, armadillo, gorilla and quite a lot of plains zebra.

Forty years later, the sharp-eyed park visitor – perhaps not in a morning's game drive, but in a game drive or two which would include entering the park and departing from it – can still see quite a lot of these, and enough not to be in any way dissatisfied. It is believed that there are more zebras and wildebeest in the park now than ever before – perhaps due to the tragic demise of the lions.

**ELEPHANTS** – *Loxodonta africana* (Kiswahili: *Ndovu* or *Tembo*) Many books have been written and films made in recent years about the lives of Africa's





Dawn paints a pink blush over a lone elephant and the early morning Amboseli landscape.





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elephants, most of which, in the face of their persecution and merciless poaching for ivory, show human behaviour at a disadvantage.

Described by Kipling as 'a gentleman' and by the poet John Donne as 'Nature's great masterpiece', Daphne Sheldrick's description – and who could say it better? – who for years on the fringe of Nairobi National Park has been rearing orphaned baby rhinos and elephants, many of them parent-deprived through poaching, is: 'Great in stature, great in goodness too, noble, peaceloving, placid and tolerant. Capable of deep devotion, unbelievable gentleness, unswerving loyalty and mysterious intelligence, the elephant is a being apart, a creature endowed with all man's better qualities and few of his bad.'

The focal point of a wider-ranging elephant population estimated to stand at 1,600, Amboseli is the park nearest to Nairobi in which large numbers can be seen, and has suffered from over-use as a result.

There are few more thrilling sights than a large herd of old bulls, bulls in *musth*, young bulls, matriarch cows, young and middle-aged cows in calf and calves of all ages 'at foot', though it is a matriarchal society and the bulls do not hold a permanent place in the matriarchal herds.

An elephant bull in *musth* is usually an awe-inspiring sight. He is in this mating condition for about nine months of the year, bent on the pursuit of a willing mate. It is as well to keep out of his genitals and 'marking' trees, bushes and other obstacles in his path. *Musth* bulls are high ranking and therefore have the identity that is the cornerstone of male wellbeing. It is his rank within the male hierarchy that determines whether or not he



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is fit to breed. Sightings of mating in Amboseli are not rare, but it is the fortunate one-day visitor who is likely to witness one.

The gestation period of the elephant is approximately 660 days or nearly 22-24 months and the average weight of the calf at birth is plus or minus 100 kilogrammes (220 pounds), the male weighing slightly more than the female. Like human babies they come in all sizes – varying in height from between 66 centimetres (26 inches) and just under one metre (three feet) to the shoulder. The calf will grow a foot or more in its first year. The tusks begin to show when it is between two and three years old. It reaches puberty around the age of 11-12 years and can mate (but does not necessarily do so) any time after entering its teens.

The Ol Tukai area of the park, with its plentiful drinking water, attracts the elephant herds for one elephant will drink, if it can get it, between 136 and 272 litres (30 and 60 gallons) of water daily. This helps to wash down the daily minimum of 136 kilogrammes (300 pounds) of food required by the adult, of which it digests only 40 per cent and deposits mountains of manure. Habitually the elephant also likes a daily bath in mud or water, completely submerging, if it can, to cool itself and wash off parasites. Mud seals moisture in the skin and helps to protect it from the sun. An elephant calf, which for its first year is almost entirely dependent upon its mother's milk, learns to swim at an early age.

When Amboseli elephants look 'pale' in comparison with, say, those of Tsavo, it is because the volcanic ash which sticks to their great bodies is white, silver and



Elephants with young. These creatures have similarities to human society including the young's craving for constant contact with their elders.







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sometimes palest pink, whereas in Tsavo it is more often a rich ochre-red. See Amboseli elephants by moonlight and they are glistening silver ghosts. If they have been galumphing through the swamps the water-blackened, ash-free skin of their massive legs and feet give the bizarre impression that they are wearing giant-sized Wellington boots.

Elephants spend 16 out of each 24 hours eating, continuing to browse throughout the night, and sleep only between three and five hours in each 24.

Because the Amboseli herds are accustomed to vehicles and have been for many years, the park affords ideal opportunities for close-up photographing and viewing them – from the vehicle, never out of it. Observe amongst family groups their collective and shared care, concern and tenderness for their young.

Like a human, the elephant is in its prime of life between the ages of 30 and 50 years. Its life expectation is up to 70 years, though there have been notable exceptions. Its chances of survival in Amboseli are as good as anywhere on the continent, providing it stays within the confines of the unfenced park – although the creature is migratory by nature, ever in search of the right diet and minerals which it needs. Even as a protected species in Kenya it becomes endangered once outside the park, not just from poachers, but if it gets into conflict with the surrounding agricultural, farming and ranching interests.





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### **RHINOCEROS** – *Diceros bicornis* (Kiswahili: *Kifaru*)

In the 1950s and 1960s black rhinos were the pride of Amboseli, more so even than the elephants. No ambitious park visitor returned without photographs of ‘Gertie’, famous for her magnificent horns, and ‘Gladys’, who may have been either her sister or her daughter. The horns of both were of record length, ‘Gertie’s’ believed to have been 1.22 metres (four feet). Their names were given to them by the legendary hunter-turned-conservationist Syd Downey, co-founder of Ker & Downey Safaris, who regularly took clients into the park on photographic safaris. Another great park favourite was ‘Pixie’, the earless bull calf born to ‘Gertie’ in 1953.

Herbivorous, the black rhino is a browsing species, living on plants, shrubs, herbs and small amounts of grass. Sophisticated and mysterious, in terms of nature its design has remained unchanged for millennia – ‘an ancient, outdated animal, complex and fiercely territorial, moving by memory, scent and hearing’. Its vision is myopic but only because it doesn’t need its eyes, which are useful in close combat only.

According to John Goddard, who did much rhino research in Tanzania and Zambia, the rhino is a creature ‘of temperament, moods, and, to be quite unscientific, personality ... a short-sighted, harmless old beast that deserves the greatest degree of sympathy.’

A one-time Chief Game Warden’s description of them might have applied equally as well to the human members of any gentleman’s club: ‘some are moderately even-tempered and some irritable; some are brave and some are timid; some are volatile and some phlegmatic.’



Above: The 'horns' of the Black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*) are not really horns at all, but hair-like fibre growing from the skin.

Opposite: Rhino, 'An ancient, outdated animal, complex and fiercely territorial moving by memory, scent and hearing'.





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Those who have been gored by rhinos and survived might not agree with me. Discounting the fallacy that its horn is an aphrodisiac, Terry Mathews, former hunter now famous for his meticulous bronze sculpture work, after being almost fatally gored in Nairobi National Park whilst helping the photographer/author Peter Beard to get close-up rhino pictures, said, upon assessing his injuries, that he 'had never felt less sexy in his life'.

A rhino weighs anything between 1,000-1,364 kilogrammes (2,000-3,000 pounds). The length of its horn, for which it has been poached practically out of existence in Eastern Africa, measures between 50 and 90 centimetres (1.5 and three feet) for the front one situated just behind its nostrils and 50 centimetres (two feet) for the smaller one behind it, almost over its eyes. The horn, if broken off, will in time grow again, composed of closely packed hair-like fibre growing from the skin.

Amboseli's rhino population in 1967 – already then on the decline – was about 60. Nineteen were killed in the three years preceding 1970 due to action by man; 15 by spear wounds. Others succumbed to the drought years of 1970-71. By 1975 the number was down to 25. Assessed at an optimistic 17 in 1990, only two remained in 1992. Rhinos are now extinct in Amboseli, though a couple of hundred individuals still persist in the relatively nearby Tsavo West National Park, so recolonisation is not out of the question though it's unlikely they will ever again populate the plains to the scale of the 20th century's first half.

Few would disagree that if left in peace to go about in their own way, although sometimes tending to be a bit



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quarrelsome amongst themselves, they are harmless enough creatures, but make formidable enemies if sensing danger or provoked. Their main means of defence is attack. They are great survivors, but need seclusion and solitude.

Their greatest allies in the wild are their *askaris* (or policemen), the noisy, red-billed and yellow-billed oxpeckers – the tick birds – which accompany them everywhere, cleaning their skins and skin lesions and their open sores of flies and larvae. The tick birds' clamour at the sight of anything and everywhere they consider dangerous, either by day or by night, gives the rhino sufficient warning for it to be prepared.

There were never any white rhino *Ceratotherium simum* in Amboseli, but these wide-mouthed grazers can be seen in Lake Nakuru National Park and a few of the private reserves on the Laikipia Plateau region near Mount Kenya.

**BUFFALOS** – *Syncerus caffer* (Kiswahili: *Nyati* or *Mbogo*)  
Because they love wallowing, and the more mud the better, Ol Tukai attracts African buffalos ('the wild black cattle of Africa'), where they can be seen, often in large numbers, not very far from water of some sort, muddy or clear. They are almost always attended by oxpeckers and snowy-white cattle egrets.

Heavily built and dull black in colour, though calves and young animals can often be browner in tinge, a large bull buffalo weighs as much as a rhino – 1,000 kilogrammes (2,000 pounds) – and, with his thickset body and neck, massive head and horns spreading from a solid shield-like boss in the centre of his forehead up to a metre







Top: The African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer caffer*) emerges from a long wallow in the swamp with his jockey – the friendly tick bird.

Above: Water birds find a useful perch when the hippos carpet the pools from bank to bank.

Opposite: Buffalo herd (“the wild black cattle of Africa”) beneath Kilimanjaro.





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(40 inches) or more from tip to tip, is not in peril of being mistaken for any other ungulate of the plains.

Herds of up to 40 or more are not unusual in Amboseli, but not the huge herds encountered in the Maasai Mara or, more recently, of 200 or more in Nairobi National Park. Old buffalo bulls are usually rejected by the younger males and tend to lead a solitary existence or congregate, as outcasts, in small groups.

Buffalos are grazers, and find the sweet grass around water and the papyrus and sedges bordering the swamps very much to their taste, as well as the short grass of the plains when they can find it. But they need shelter from the midday heat as well as drinking water. Like cattle they need to drink each morning and evening, which tends to keep them in the vicinity of the waterholes.

Before Kenya brought in the ban on big-game hunting in 1977, seasoned hunters' opinions of which of the 'Big Five' was the most dangerous – lion, rhino, elephant, leopard or buffalo – often pointed to the buffalo as the most formidable enemy. Many are the tales told of their cunning and vindictiveness; their lust for vengeance or destruction.

One of the most violent sights of Africa is a buffalo stampede, when with pounding hooves in a cloud of dust and gathering 'an appalling momentum' (to quote zoologist Hugh B. Cott) the herd thunders off in a solid, mighty, heaving tidal wave, from which every other animal flees for its life.



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**HIPPOPOTAMUS** – *Hippopotamus amphibius* (Kiswahili: *Kiboko*) The Greeks called them ‘River Horses’, but the hippo is of such a weight – similar to that of an adult cow elephant – that it can walk on the bottom of a lake or swamp with its whole body submerged. They are found in the Ol Tukai region where there is enough water to accommodate them, grunting and blowing water noisily through their nostrils throughout the night, but distant enough from the luxury lodges not to disturb the visitor’s night’s peace.

Though amphibious, hippos still have to raise their nostrils (which can be closed with valves when it submerges) out of the water every three or four minutes to breathe. Obese and grotesque of body and with stumpy legs – their ungainly shape copied so often in flower-decorated pottery for children’s piggy banks – their bulging eyes and tiny ears high on the head give a false impression of a good nature which is not lived out in the flesh, though they can be inoffensive enough if left undisturbed.

They have been known to snap a man in half between their jaws, and for no greater offence than having walked, mistakenly, between the creature and its refuge in the water when it was grazing on dry land.

Both male and female hippos are endowed with four curved tusks projecting from the front corners of each jaw and ugly, forward-projecting incisors. An average curved tusk measures 75 centimetres (30 inches) and a straight one 51 centimetres (20 inches) – the males’ tusks larger than the females’. Fights between the males quite often end in death.





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An extraordinary scene witnessed near Ol Tukai in 1991 involved a hippo which, by ill fortune, had fallen into a disused pit which no one knew was there. It was stuck there for three anxiety-filled days for the lodge staff, though park personnel came to give a helping hand.

The ground was dug away from behind its back where it could not get at them but it remained jammed in the hole until a gradual slope was created and it was eventually able to stagger out. It instantly charged its exhausted helpers who were fortunately aware that it doesn't take much to turn a hippo nasty, and this hippo had three days more than enough. They managed to flee to safety before any injuries were done.

Opposite: Hippo in the crystal clear waters of the Mzima Springs, in Tsavo West National Park.