

The 1966 East African Tour

A REPEAT of something which all who took part in it rated an outstanding success is always a gamble, this time rendered more anxious by the fact that several of the thirty-two participants were old hands. The chances of being told that last time "we saw twenty-eight rhinos" or "we always got free champagne on picnics" loomed large as the party gathered at Gatwick on the night of January 28.

However, the same team as was responsible in 1966, Mr. Sizer and Mrs. Lawday of Kendall's, and Mr. Gilbert in Nairobi, again took charge of and improved on the organization; the tour-leaders, Hugh Elliott and Leslie Brown, were on their home ground; the national park staffs, lodges and mini-bus drivers went out of their way to be helpful—in short East Africa as usual found it impossible to disappoint. The proverbial African gift of something new was not denied even to the most experienced—the quintet of swallow-tailed kites, for instance, most graceful of raptorial birds, which decorated the dust-laden potholed passage between Suswa and Longonot.

This unexpected (though not unprecedented) occurrence, far south of the regular haunt of the species, and indeed many other 'bonuses' of the tour were probably due to the weather. The notion that the latter is more reliable in tropical Africa than in Britain dies hard. This time the "short rains" had failed over a wide area. As a result the tour got off to a specially warm reception, a temperature of 108°F in the office of the Paraa Lodge of the Murchison Falls Park. This led in turn to an unseasonable but well-timed splash of rain on February 7 and 8. Only the fringe caught the party as it was exploring Crescent Island in Lake Naivasha, but an inch and a half had refreshed the Masai Mara area which next day was at its best—pools of water and a flush of green without the concomitants of tall grass and unfathomable mud. Small wonder that the Keekorok list was the longest of the tour!

In the 15 days, or about 185 daylight hours, between the touch-down at Entebbe and the take-off for home, of those few members of the party unable to take advantage of the 'extensions' to Serengeti, Samburu or the Coast, some 420 species of birds and 55 of other vertebrate animals had been identified—a rate which it would be hard to beat anywhere in the world. There had been highlights for everyone's taste—with 32 tastes, too numerous to mention individually. But the half-hour performance of a leopard viewed from the 'stalls' of a Kazinga channel launch, the courtship 'scrums' of lesser flamingos just returned in good numbers to Lake Nakuru after an absence, and the square-lipped rhinos settled down so nicely at Murchison, were items which suited all palates.

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