

# feasting on the fallen

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS  
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The annual wildebeest migration between the Serengeti and the Masai Mara in East Africa is world renowned as one of the continent's greatest wildlife attractions. During the migration, the total number of animals on the move is estimated to vary between 1.5 and two million individuals. By far the most numerous of these are wildebeest, but zebras, topis and gazelles also make up part of the herds.

We are all aware of the iconic images of wildebeest braving the threat of crocodiles as they navigate river crossings, but this glut of meat on the march also presents an irresistible attraction for carnivores such as lions, spotted hyaenas, cheetahs and leopards, which make the most of their opportunities to prey on the animals. In addition, a significant number in the herds die of natural causes or from injuries sustained while crossing difficult terrain; it is estimated that some 250 000 wildebeest and 30 000 zebras perish each year during the course of the migration.

A number of bird species also benefit directly from this considerable source of food. The carcasses attract a range of >

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vulture species and I typically see Lappet-faced, Hooded, White-backed, Rüppell's and, more rarely, White-headed vultures coming in to pick over the kills. The vultures are not alone at the banquet: Marabou Storks also arrive to jostle for carrion, as do Yellow-billed Kites, Tawny Eagles and, at certain times of year, Steppe Eagles.

On one occasion I watched a number of Southern Ground-Hornbills feeding for several hours on a wildebeest carcass,

taking full advantage of the absence of competition from any mammalian scavengers to gorge at their leisure on the rich food source. At times when the animals are moving through en masse, there is so much food on offer that the local carnivores and scavengers are so satiated that they can eat nothing more, at least for a few hours.

In February, the wildebeest congregate on the Serengeti's plains to calve, as this is when

the best grazing conditions are available for the nourishment of their young. An estimated 300 000 calves are born each year and all the afterbirths left lying on the ground once the new-born calves are standing provide more prime sustenance for scavengers. At the height of the calving season, Steppe Eagles, vultures and Black Kites can be seen flying from one afterbirth to the next to get their fill. The circle of life and death continues. ♦



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