



A livestock farmer herds in his flock of sheep into a newly constructed predator-proof boma.

PHOTOS: SIMON SHARTI

Predator-Proof Bomas

A new dimension in human-wildlife conflict resolution

As the sun sets in the Maasai Mara, Narok County, neighbouring herders usher their livestock to the bomas (livestock enclosures) for the night. For Joshua Salaash the experience is different today – Joshua is leading his herd of cattle into a newly constructed eco-friendly and secure predator-proof boma.

In March 2020, Joshua lost six sheep to a lion attack at night. Before the construction of the new boma, the return of livestock each evening marked the beginning of a long restless night of listening for any commotion and shooing away predators.

"The possibility of losing livestock to a lion or a hyena was very high back then. My old boma was not strong to prevent attacks. It had many loopholes that made it easy for predators to breach and prey on my livestock. With this new shed boma, I can sleep more comfortably," says the 37-year-old.

Maasai Mara is a human-wildlife conflict-prone area because of the proximity of human settlement to wildlife conservancies. Humans, livestock, and wildlife share the same space. Most conservancies are vast and not fenced, leaving wild animals free to roam, occasionally straying into villages and attacking livestock. Most herders in the Mara

ecosystem say they have had their livestock preyed on by wildlife several times.

Wildlife attacks on livestock result in retaliatory assaults most of the time. Affected herders hit back by poisoning carcasses of sheep, goats, or cattle with pesticides. The poison is aimed at the predator, but it kills non-target species such as vultures in the process. In Kenya, these poisoning incidents are responsible for 60 percent of vulture mortality.

Conservation organizations working in the Mara ecosystem have devised new tactics to reduce human-wildlife conflicts in the area. Construction of the predator-proof bomas is one such intervention. Nature Kenya has partnered with the Mara Predators Conservation Programme to construct five predator-proof bomas in the Maasai Mara ecosystem.

The selection of five predator-proof bomas beneficiaries was conducted in June 2020. Officers from Nature Kenya and the Mara Predators Conservation Programme met with representatives from conservancies, the local administration, and local communities. The five beneficiaries were chosen based on the history of wildlife attacks, proximity to human-wildlife conflict hotspots, and assurance of permanent residence in their respective areas.

"Human-wildlife conflict issues are sensitive because they touch on the livelihoods of the affected herders. We had to carefully select beneficiaries to best bring out the advantages of this new initiative to the communities as part of solving human-wildlife conflict," says Simon Shati, a Vulture Liaison Officer working for Nature Kenya.

The predator-proof bomas are constructed using recycled plastic poles that are surrounded by triple-twist chain link and barbed wire. A steel gate is installed to control livestock entry and exit. The boma is impenetrable for large carnivores as it is sealed all round. The recycled plastic and corner metal poles are sunk two feet deep into the ground. Their pits are filled with mortar to make them stable.

"The poles are high, standing at about two metres tall, which is high for a predator to scale up," says Simon.

One boma can comfortably hold a herd of 700. Simon says that in addition to being made from a material that can withstand harsh weather and pests like termites, the herders do not need to cut down any trees.

Already the effectiveness of the bomas has been tested unintentionally by recent attacks.

In the small village of Oloolchuura, sandwiched between two conservancies and the Maasai Mara Reserve, Siloma Ole Reiya considers himself a lucky man. On one corner of his shed boma the wire mesh is slightly deformed outwards following a commotion by cows. The deformity is proof of the events of the night of July 7, 2020 when a pride of lions unsuccessfully attempted to break into the predator-proof boma.

"I would be counting it as my fourth loss of animals this year were it not for this new shed. The layers of chain-link and barbed wire made it impossible for the lions to come close to the herd. Thankfully I was also able to scare the pride away in good time," says Siloma.

A few kilometers away in Ingila village, Letutuk Tira's homestead is not easy to miss; it is surrounded Naboisho and Olare Motorogi conservancies and the Mara Reserve. For Letutuk, predator attacks are a common phenomenon. Letutuk is another beneficiary, and his account of a July 14, 2020 attack reads like a scene from a movie:

"The big cat pounced on my motorbike, damaging the headlight, before attempting to enter the locked shed. I fled from the scene and I must say I am fortunate to be alive and for my animals to be safe," says Letutuk.

The improved bomas are one among many projects aimed at reducing the cases of predation of livestock by wildlife. Nature Kenya has since 2018 been working with the Maasai Mara Wildlife Ambassadors, the Maasai Mara Important Bird Area (IBA) site support group (SSG), to create awareness about wildlife poisoning and its consequences. The group conducts market and village outreaches, using traditional dances and other forms of performing arts to spread conservation messages. Nature Kenya has recruited "vulture volunteers" who are members of local communities engaged in vulture conservation activities. All these efforts are geared towards helping communities to take up better human-wildlife conflict prevention mechanisms.

There are prospects of expanding this project to other areas within the Mara Ecosystem, and to Kajiado County in the coming months. 🐾

Covid-19 leaping into year 2021

Happy festive season! The year 2020 is historical. The whole world has been worried. The fear of an invisible enemy—Covid-19—will never be forgotten. Masks were mainly used by medics, but now we all know their usefulness, better than any other generation. In December, the promise of a vaccine was announced, but it may take a long time to arrive and be widely administered. The festive season will be celebrated within Covid-19 challenges. We urge all to stay safe.

Despite the pandemic, Nature Kenya has remained highly adaptive and resilient. Virtual meetings are now a norm. Staff work from home or under stringent Covid-19 response protocols in the office. Delivery of field conservation activities has continued including advocacy at the national and county level and working with communities to protect sites and species and sustain livelihoods, ensuring that staff and partners can be safe.

Some activities remain postponed and some may be postponed further as new ones are started:

1. You are receiving a special January Nature Net by e-mail.
2. Some water bird counts in Nairobi and environs will be arranged. Counters will meet at the count sites. Occasional outings may be announced through the Nature Net, the Nature Kenya website or by e-mail. Transport will not be provided. Wednesday morning birdwalks, Sunday bird walks, field trips and in-person talks remain suspended until further notice. Virtual talks through zoom may be announced by e-mail.
3. The Membership office and shop is closed until further notice. Membership recruitment and renewal continues. Visit <http://naturekenya.org/support/membership/> and use cashless payment options such as M-Pesa or credit/debit cards. Your membership cards will be processed and e-mailed to you for you to print or keep in your phone. Laminated hard copy cards will only be produced on request.
4. Members may also buy Arabuko-Sokoke honey or books. Pay by M-pesa (Pay bill 100300, account "Honey" or "Books"). Collect them on Mondays or arrange another time to collect the honey or books. Ring the bell at the entrance of the office behind the galleries.
5. The 'Lungs for Kenya' Charity Golf Tournament 2020 has been tentatively moved to a date in March 2021.
6. Museum galleries and sites are open to the public under Ministry of Health guidelines (as at 22 December 2020).

Threats remain to species and habitats, and conservation work must go on. Please continue to support Nature Kenya, and to observe and enjoy nature from wherever you are.

For clarifications or to report your observations on species and sites, kindly contact us through email: office@naturekenya.org or telephone: 020 3537568, 0780 149200, 0751 624312, 0771 343138

Dr. Paul Matiku,

Executive Director, Nature Kenya – the East Africa Natural History Society

CONSERVATION NEWS



FOREST CONSERVATION: Recipients of energy-saving stove liners from Vuria, Taita hills, pose for a photo. Nature Kenya is distributing the energy-saving stoves to households in Taita as part of reducing pressure on forests for fuelwood. One hundred and fifty stoves were distributed to 75 homes in December 2020. PHOTO: GILBAY OBUNGA



HABITAT RESTORATION: A member of the Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group participates in a tree planting exercise to rehabilitate a riparian zone of River Yala. A total of 200 indigenous trees were planted during the exercise. PHOTO: EMILY MATECHE



GREENING TANA DELTA: Workers install a shade house at Hewani, Tana River. The shade houses will be used for climate-smart agriculture, one of the livelihood activities aimed at increasing climate change resilience of communities at the Delta. PHOTO: BONIFACE MUSYOKA

For updates visit
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LORESHO IN THE RAIN

By Peter Usher

When the rain falls, out come Safari Ants. As their name implies, they are on a constant journey and woe-betide anything in their path, including people! The column consists of blind, sterile, female Workers; Soldier Ants with sharp mandibles that drive painfully into flesh; A Queen to lay thousands of eggs and a few male ants to fertilize them. The males are winged and to prevent them deserting, the wings are cut off by workers. Here, the column guides a male that was going the wrong way.



Planets over sunset

■ BY FLEUR NG'WENO

Jupiter's orbit overlapped Saturn's orbit in December, and from Earth, we saw a Great Conjunction of the two large planets. Now, from about January 7 to 14, 2021, Mercury joins Saturn and Jupiter in the evening sky for another brilliant show. Mercury rises rapidly over the sunset as Saturn and Jupiter sink towards the western horizon.

Mercury orbits the sun between the Earth and the sun, so we only see it near sunrise or sunset. It's a small planet, but it is brighter than Saturn this month. Mercury passes Saturn on January 9, and passes Jupiter on the 11th. On the 14th, Mercury appears close to the faint new moon. The small planet is visible for the rest of the month, while Saturn and Jupiter sink into the sunset glow.

Mars is high overhead at sunset, still glowing brightly orange, but fading now. The waxing moon is near Mars on January 21. In the morning sky, bright Venus rises later each day. The waning moon is near Venus on January 11 and 12 before dawn.

January stars

On clear January evenings, the sky is filled with bright stars. The star pattern Orion the Hunter rises due east. Viewed from Greece, he seemed to walk across the sky, setting in the west. Actually, it is the Earth that spins towards the east. And to us near the equator, Orion seems to lie on his back as he rises in the east.

Three bright stars in a row form Orion's belt. Three fainter lights in a row hang from the belt. Among these is M42, the Orion Nebula. You can see it with the unaided eye on a clear, dark night, or with binoculars.

In other cultures, the three stars of Orion's belt were seen as a celestial bridge by the Aymara people of the South American highlands. The glow of M42 was considered the fire of creation by the Maya people of central America. According to NASA, "The Mayan culture's likening of the Orion Nebula to a cosmic fire of creation is very apt. The nebula is an enormous cloud of dust and gas where vast numbers of new stars are being forged."

Four bright stars like the corners of a box form Orion's body. Imagine bright blue-green Rigel, at the upper right, as Orion's knee

kicking into the sky; and orange Betelgeuse, at the lower left, as Orion's left shoulder.

Orion is followed by his hunting dogs: Sirius, the brightest star we see at night, in the southeast, and Procyon in the east. Here near the equator, we can also see the second brightest star, Canopus, low in the southeast. To the right of Canopus, the bright star Achernar is low in the southwest.

To the north of Orion there are a series of constellations, or star patterns, named by the ancient Greeks. The Pleiades cluster or "Seven Sisters", is high overhead. With binoculars, you can see the blue haze that surrounds them. Between the Pleiades and Orion, the Hyades cluster forms a cone-like shape, the face of Taurus the Bull to the ancient Greeks. Aldebaran, a bright, reddish star, the Bull's fiery eye, is at one end of the cone.

Further north, bright stars form a large pentagon, Auriga the Charioteer. At Auriga's northern end is the bright star Capella. Below Capella, low in the north, is the constellation Cassiopeia, shaped like the letter M. To the west of Cassiopeia is the Great Square of Pegasus.

In the northeast, between Auriga and the dog Procyon, the constellation Gemini, the twins, is rising. The waxing moon is near the Pleiades and Aldebaran on January 23, and near the star Pollux in Gemini on January 27.

The Milky Way, a pale band made of millions of stars, stretches behind the constellations, from the M of Cassiopeia in the northwest, through the pentagon of Auriga, past Betelgeuse in Orion, past Sirius, to the southeast.

In the morning before dawn, the beautiful constellation of the Southern Cross is prominent in the southern sky.

Moon, Jan '21

Last quarter (half-lit moon overhead at dawn), Jan 6. New moon, Jan 13; the slender crescent moon is near Mercury on the 14th. First quarter (half-lit moon overhead at sunset), Jan 20. Full moon, Jan 28.

January sun

In Nairobi in late January, the sun rises at 6:41 am and sets at 6:51 pm.

Birding Updates

January 2021 Waterbird Counts on the Rift Valley lakes

Lakes Bogoria and Baringo, January 8, 9, 10.

Lakes Nakuru and Elmenteita, January 22, 23, 24.

Lake Ol'Bolessat, February 6-7.

If you would like to take part, and you are experienced in identifying and counting waterbirds and can meet the group at the lakes, please contact Ireene Madindou at <ilhanmadindou@gmail.com> or phone 0701-028739.

Counts in the Nairobi area may also be organized.

If you can meet at the count sites, and you are experienced at identifying and counting waterbirds, please contact birds@naturekenya.org once the office reopens on January 5.

Mombasa Birdwalks are held the 3rd Saturday of each month. To check meeting time and place, check Facebook page:

<<https://www.facebook.com/groups/FFJmombasa/>>

Or contact:

Taibali Hamzali <thamzali@gmail.com> / 0733-980540

or Kelvin Mazera <klvnrua@yahoo.com> / 0720-928783

Wednesday Morning Birdwalks and other Nature Kenya field trips are still postponed.

Bird-watching is safe – we encourage you to go out birding with friends in your local area and send your records to:

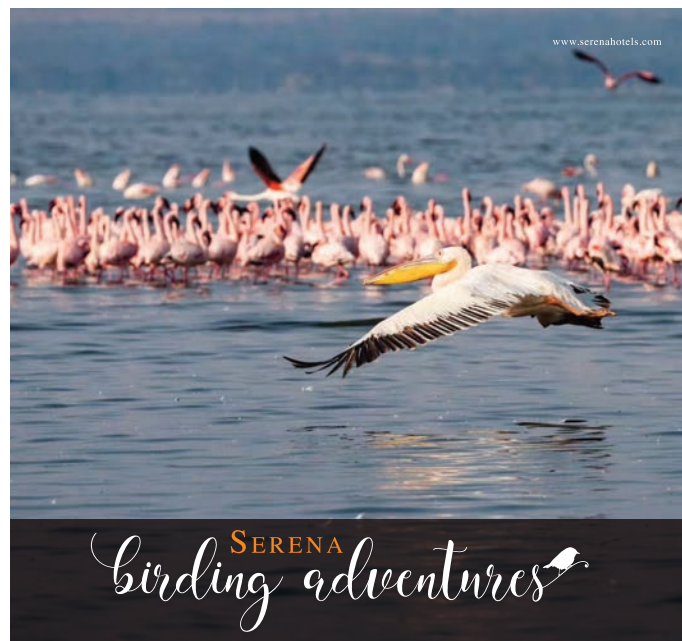
Kenya Bird Map <<http://kenya.birdmap.africa/>>

If you have questions re KBM, write to <kenyabirdmap@naturekenya.org>

Online birding:

- Wings Over Kenya Facebook page
- "The Safari Naturalist" on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCajjLtyL9G6mJ20Ajw1RLxA>
- "The Safari Naturalist" blog website: <https://www.thesafarinaturalist.com/virtual-birding-tours/>
- Ndege Wetu (14-part blog series on the birds of Kenya) <<http://www.shotsbyshema.com/category/ndege-wetu/>>
- BirdLife International and eBird

To stay updated with the birding scene in Kenya, sign in to the new Kenyabirdsnet platform on Google Groups at: <https://groups.google.com/d/forum/kenyabirdsnet>



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For details on associated groups such as Youth Committee, Succulenta, and Friends of Nairobi Arboretum, City Park or Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, contact office@naturekenya.org