



Wildebeests graze on the Serengeti. Over a million of these animals migrate 12 to 15 miles a day to reach Kenya in June.

Exploring the great migration of THE SERENGETI

BY HOLMES ROLSTON III
For the Coloradoan

"Look, there's a calf that's gotten lost. It must have fallen behind and now it's out of the line, confused. Poor thing, it'll never make it." We were surrounded by wildebeest, hooves pounding as they trotted single-file northward across the Serengeti savannah. We drove five miles parallel to the eight or ten regimented lines with no ends in sight. Our guide estimated we had seen over 200,000.

We were witnessing the annual migration, which begins at the start of calving and the long rainy season in Tanzania, in early April of this year. The wildebeest instinctively follow a somewhat circular pattern. But also they seem able to sense the storm clouds in the distance across the savannah and perhaps also to smell the rain.

1.5 million wildebeest

In the vast migration, 1.5 million of these massive, ungainly antelope move 12 to 15 miles a day to reach Kenya in June. Calves are born en route. Park officials estimate that the wildebeest dropped 8,000 calves each day in this three-week prime period.

The migration seems partly to be in search of grasses with better nutrients for the calves. This is al-

so prime time for the lions, leopards, cheetahs, hyenas and jackals who find the calves an easy catch soon after birth. But the calves are almost born running. They are on their feet in 10 minutes and within three hours; they struggle to keep up with the herd.

Ahead, they will have rivers to swim, swollen by rains and filled with waiting crocodiles. Their endurance during nearly 1,000 miles of migration belies their clumsy appearance. Only about a third of the calves survive.

"Wait, here comes one going the wrong way. Maybe it's the mother coming back." Sure enough 100 yards out, we watched a wildebeest returning. "She's found it!" Cow recognized calf, more by smell than sight and the two were reunited. The six of us in the Land Cruiser cheered!

Cows, even when they lose their calves, do not adopt others.

Made with leftover parts

Wildebeest look like some primitive beast, ugly, at least in contrast to the graceful antelopes, were made last by God, or so the Masai say, out of leftover body parts.

Wildebeest often meander during their migration, depending on where there has been recent rain, or where skies grow

dark and stormy. Our safari guides pitched camp for us in an acacia grove, where the wildebeest were anticipated. Some were already coming through by midday and the herds increased that afternoon.

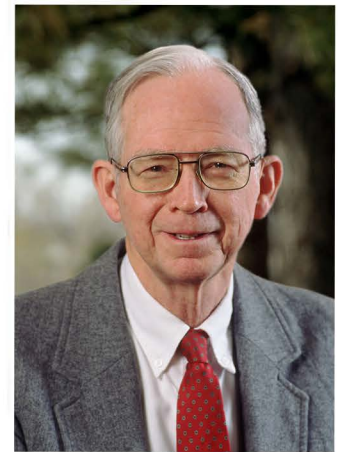
In camp that night we could hear their "gnu," a deep grunt, like a croaking frog. Hence another name: the brindled gnu. Just outside camp that morning, we found the spectacular herds. Next day they were mostly gone.

A lucky trek

We were doubly lucky. The guides managed to find all the big five: buffalo by the thousands, a hundred elephants, a dozen lions, two leopards and a solitary black rhino. Leopards, active at night, are hardest to find. We spotted a mating pair sleeping in a tree.

Rhinos are the rarest. A dozen or so survive in Ngorongoro Crater. We were lucky, too, with the cats: half a dozen cheetahs, a serval and we glimpsed an African wild cat, the still wild ancestor of domestic cats.

The American West once had a more vast migration: more than 30 million bison, perhaps 50 million. "The moving multitude ... darkened the whole plains," wrote



Courtesy Holmes Rolston III

Holmes Rolston III, a Colorado State University environmental ethics professor, traveled to Tanzania in April to witness the wildebeest migration.

Lewis and Clark. In our quest for development, we lost that greater wonder, before we could even count them. In 1900 there were less than 300. Today populations, almost all behind fences, have somewhat recovered.

To their credit, the Tanzanians, among the poorer nations, are resolved to keep the wildebeest free. Older than human history, today this is the greatest wildlife show on Earth. Never have I seen anything wilder.