

# Safari Journal

## In and Out of Africa with Dennis Curry

Once, sometimes twice, each year, artist Dennis Curry travels to Africa to gather new inspiration for his work. The original lithographs he produces on his return are a testimony to the love and awe he feels for the African wildlife he carefully depicts. U.S. ART asked Curry to describe one of his recent African experiences and, not surprisingly, his words, like his images, convey the excitement and majesty of this beautiful land.

As we climb into the crater highlands of northern Tanzania, huge lichen-covered trees loom out of the mists that engulf the rim. We stop at a look-out point, and I look down into the Ngorongoro Crater. I'm startled by its size.

Twenty-three hundred feet below stretches an extinct volcanic caldera, measuring 10 miles by 12 miles, and home to some 30,000 animals. In the center of the crater is an alkali lake ringed by white circles caused by salt drying in the sun. A soft pink borders the edges of the blue water; thousands of pink flamingos line the shores, and around them are patches of green swamps where water seeps up from underground.

Even at this distance, I can see herds of elephants grazing along the water courses and swamps. Through field glasses, I spot a herd of eland, the largest of the antelopes, as they head in-

to a forest of yellow fever trees. This is what I came to see.

I've been to Africa many times since 1982; the first trip was a turning point in my life. I'm a print maker and did etchings for 10 years before I began working

in lithography in 1980. Through the years, I used wildlife as a subject for my work and was particularly drawn to the big cats. Although I went out on a limb to go to Africa the first time because of the expense, it paid off beautifully with the first print I completed.

I was originally drawn to Africa to see big cats in the wild, but that first print was *Ndovu*, Swahili for

elephant. *Ndovu* portrays a lone elephant in the Zambezi River Valley in Zambia. This print has a completely different feeling from my earlier work. I feel it captures the dignity and quiet grandeur of the elephant in its own space rather than the portraiture of my earlier work, which had no environmental elements. Africa has an atmosphere all its own and the animals are very much a part of it. Animals in a zoo are an oddity; they don't fit in, even if they are in a nice environmental display. After my first trip to Africa, my understanding of how these animals fit into their world was greatly broadened.

From the caldera, I watch weather patterns developing and the lighting change. Lighting is always difficult to capture in a landscape. The lighting here is intense, yet it's diffuse. There's always a little dust in the air, which seems to make the rich red sunsets linger on and on. With the large open savannas, I can see bright sunshine in one area and clouds passing over, breaking the light, in a nearby area. Sunlight here seems to be affected by things around it, particularly by the earth and plants. Not only does the sun have a certain color, but the reflected browns and greens add to the special quality of African light.

After we settle into our rooms at the Crater Lodge on the edge of the rim that same evening, I



Above: Dennis Curry; right: Lake Manyara National Park, Tanzania.



take a walk. Suddenly, out of the brush 20 feet away appears a hyena. We startle each other, but he reacts first by disappearing back into the forest. Somewhat more apprehensively, I continue my walk, watching the rich golden yellow of the setting sun light the green forest. Sounds drift up from the crater floor—a lion roars and a hyena laughs, both amplified by the encroaching stillness

**BY DENNIS CURRY AND DON MONKERUD**





Above: Ndovu lithograph 17" x 24"; below: elephants crossing the Uaso Nyiro river in Samburu.

of nightfall.

It's very foggy the next morning. As we begin our drive down to the crater floor, an elephant with huge tusks looms out of the mist not 10 feet away! What a great image for a print, but I don't have time to sketch him. I take photographs, although because of the fog I doubt they will come out; always the wrong film. A short time later some tribesmen approach crying, "Simba! Simba!" They point ahead and stay close to our Land Rover. There, right next to the road, sit a male and female lion, half hidden in the tall grass—a definite drawback to traveling by foot.

We drop out of the fog and spend the day exploring the crater. About noon, just as the sun breaks through, we find two hippos mating in a wide placid pond, churning the water and filling the air with grunts of enthusiasm. We stop nearby for lunch, and a kite, a bird about the size of a red-tailed hawk, swoops down and tries to snatch food from my hand.

Evening finds us in a forest of fever trees, one of the many varieties of acacia trees that grow in east Africa. Many are more than a hundred feet tall and their trunks glow yellow-green in the afternoon light; the light on the yellow fever trees against the blue-gray sky is exactly the effect I am trying to achieve in a print I'm working on, *Cathedral of the Elephants*. I hold the scene in my eyes, letting the colors saturate me. In the center of the print, a herd of elephants comes in for water with a lead cow as a lookout. The rest of the herd hangs back; the matriarch is on guard to make sure there is no threat. The elephants are huge, especially in a herd, and yet they are dwarfed by these magnificent glowing trees, the crater rising into the mist

in the background.

Elephants are one of my favorite animals. Because of their size, they work nicely in the vastness of landscape composition. They are very emotional and social animals: We sit with a family group and watch them rub against each other, clasp trunks and continually touch each other. A small elephant charges us and makes a great deal of noise, until its mother comes over and herds it back to the group. These elephants have a tremendous presence, an ancient grandeur and a slowness that's unique.

As we leave Crater Lodge the next morning and drop out of the highlands, the mist clears, revealing a gently sloping landscape, dotted with flat-topped acacia trees. Suddenly, a vast plain spreads before us—the Serengeti means "endless plain" in the Masai language—Masai villages dot the land, plumes of smoke rising from their houses. In the distance, a family of giraffes moves in graceful slow motion. We stop off at Olduvai Gorge, where the Leakey family discovered prehistoric human fossils, and I sit at the edge of a spectacular chasm, contemplating the beginnings of mankind as a curator explains the two-million-year-old fossils. Later, when we sign in at Serengeti Park headquarters, I get out to photograph three giraffes browsing the tree tops. I'm sobered when, 300 yards down the road, our Land Rover passes two full-grown male lions sleeping under a bush.

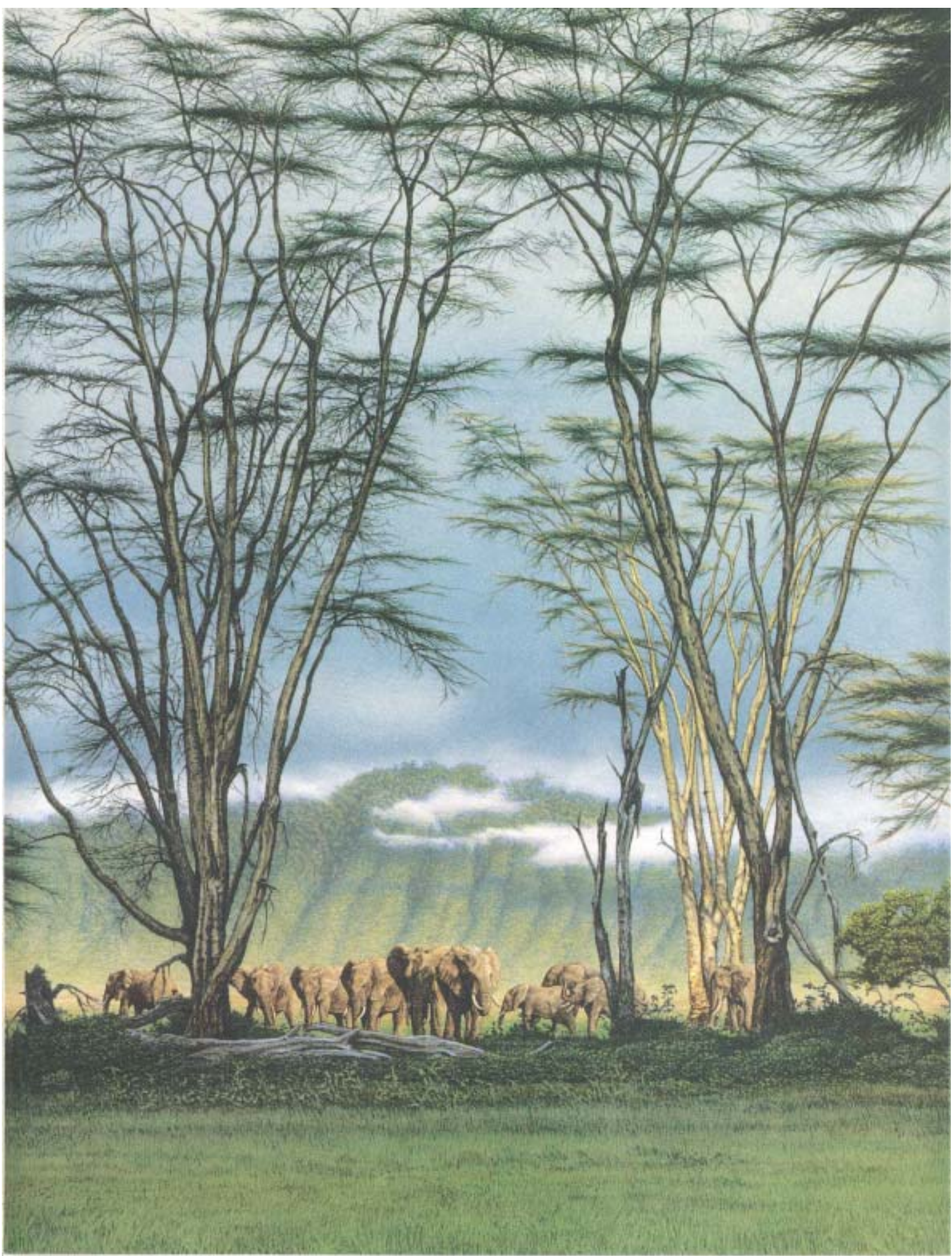
As we drive south into the Serengeti, scattered acacia trees give way to gently rolling savanna, dotted with outcroppings of weathered granite, called *koppie*, surrounded by trees and bushes. The *koppie* form islands in this otherwise flat, nearly featureless landscape. Lions and leopards choose this high ground to survey herds of zebras, wilde-



beests and gazelles. I envision a print with lions looking out on this vastness with herds of animals scattered here and there and giraffes walking in their peculiar undulating motion.

The sky is the color of heavy slate, and great thunderheads rise above the plain; patches of rain appear in the distance next to patches of sunshine. The sun, rich in yellows and oranges, filters through the clouds and lights a line of migrating









zebras. There must be hundreds of them; I watch in silence, enchanted by this glorious spectacle. Finally the rain reaches the Land Rover, bringing with it the smells of animals, bark grasses and the dampening earth. There's a dramatic shift in the atmosphere and I have a feeling of what it must be like when the rains come to break the dry cycle. There's a sudden intensity of activity and lightning strikes nearby. A rainbow rises in the distance.

We spend a few days on the Serengeti plain, but there are only a few animals; despite the brief rain, it's the dry season and the animals have migrated north. The grasses are being burned off, and a line of fire fills the horizon for days. On the way to Lake Manyara, we stop at the rim of the western escarpment on the Ngorongoro Crater and look down on the great Rift Valley, the largest geographic feature on earth. The Rift Valley system stretches for 3,500 miles from the Red Sea to Mozambique, and this is

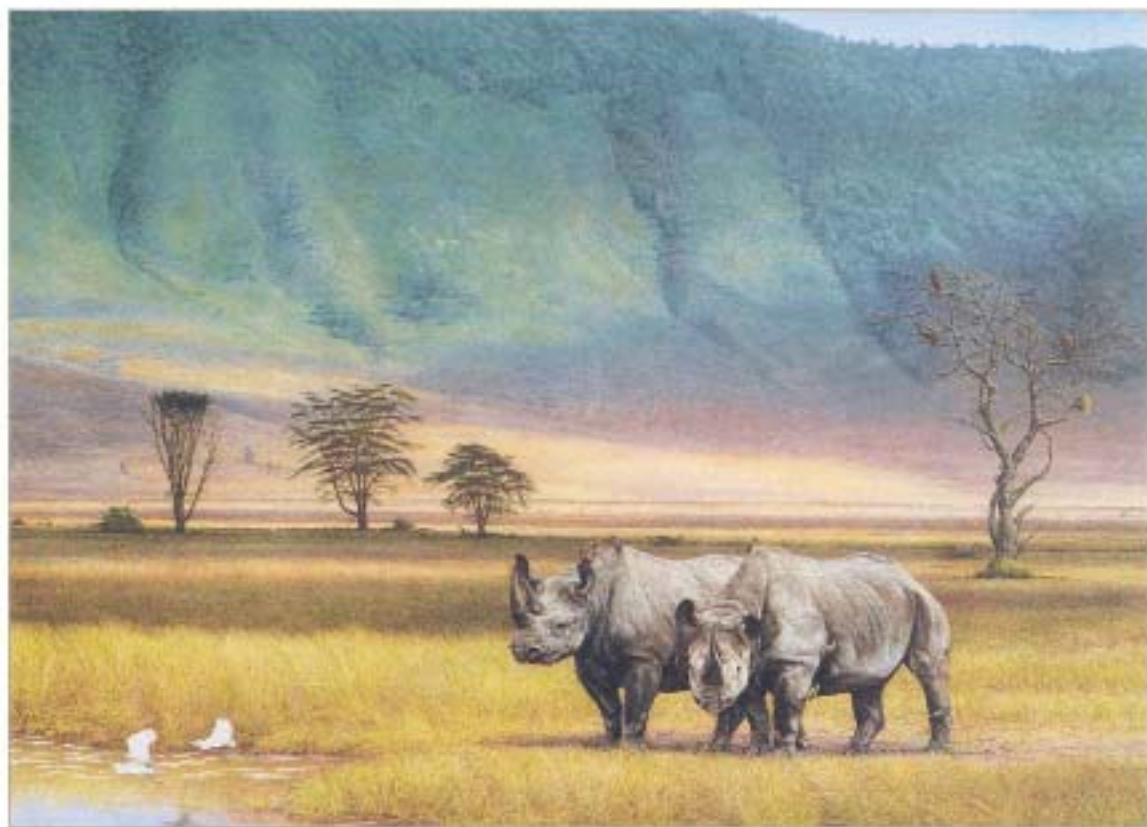
the eastern branch reaching through Tanzania and Kenya.

At Lake Manyara, a great swirling flock of white pelicans rides the thermals from the lake 2,000 feet below and spiral another 3,000 feet above us. As they go around, they turn their shadow sides toward us, making them appear black, and then the sunlight hits their other side reflecting brilliant white feathers. Thousands of pelicans form a black and white dance of birds rising into the African sky.

Birds are always a part of the scene in Africa. In my print, *Companions*, two black rhinoceroses are coming down to a watering hole in the Ngorongoro Crater. Two cattle egrets fly by in the foreground. The floor of the crater stretches out behind with the broken shadows of clouds passing overhead. Behind the rhinos, vultures perch on a dead tree; I feel it's an apt symbol for the disappearing rhinos.

At the border, we transfer to Kenyan vehicles and shortly afterwards, Mt. Kilimanjaro rises out of the plains, standing snow-capped and solitary. I've driven this way three times without seeing the peak. It's a perfect setting for a print; the mountain rises up behind the animals, adding a whole different scope to the scene. Because it's misty on the horizon, Kilimanjaro seems to reach above the clouds, hovering over the earth.

In the morning, ruddy colors reflect off the



Above: *Companions of Ngorongoro* lithograph 18 3/8" x 26 1/4"; top: black rhinoceros, Ngorongoro Crater.



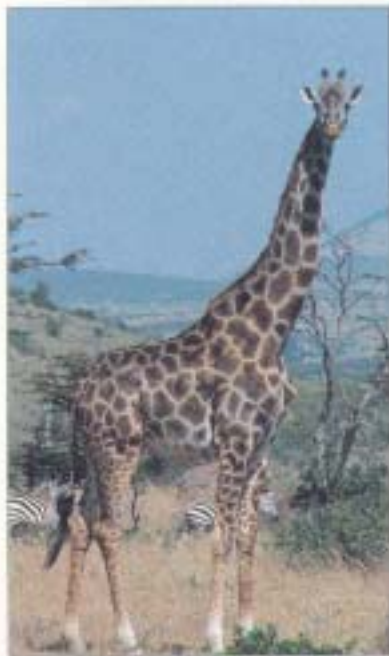


Above: Leopard Portrait etching 6" x 8"; below: Masai giraffe, Masai Mara, Kenya.

snow on the peak, and a herd of wildebeests, grazing among umbrella acacia trees scattered around the vast, dry lake bed, raise dust in the morning light. A swampy watercourse meanders along the edge of the dust bowl. A dozen elephants graze in a nearby swamp, and a baby elephant keeps falling in the holes made by its mother's footsteps as it tries

to follow her. I'm close enough to hear the soft maternal noises made by the mother elephant.

The road north from Nairobi captivates me with its lush colors; these are the agricultural highlands of Kenya. The land is rich with corn, bananas and giant candelabra euphorbia trees growing in a rust-red earth under great puffy clouds in a blue sky. The sunlight is clear and strong. Women in brightly



patterned *kaungas*, or wraps, work the land beside their round, thatched *bomas*, or houses. These are incredibly beautiful people; their lives are so interconnected with the earth. I would like, eventually, to make prints of the people here, but I haven't gotten to them yet; animals have taken all my time.

At the Ark, a lodge in the Aberdare Mountains, I have time to sketch at last. Sketching is difficult in the safari vehicles, because you're never in one place long enough. It seems like we're always on the move; spending three days in a park is like taking a snapshot. I take lots of photographs, but it's nice to stay in one spot all day and watch the animals come by; I try to capture the changing light and get more feeling for the wholeness of the land. The Ark is enclosed with an open observation deck on three levels, looking out on a salt lick and a water hole. My favorite location is the bunker at ground level, an ideal location to sit with tea and sketch. Two cape buffaloes bash heads with stunning force not 20 feet away. Later an elephant scratches against the thick stone walls next to me and reaches an inquisitive trunk through the open port. I jump back. This is really a close-up study!

We board a WW I Dakota M.K. for a flight to Fig Tree Camp in the Masai Mara near Lake Victoria, and I'm surprised at the terrain; it seems flatter when you drive through it. The Mara triangle at the northern tip of the Serengeti is composed of gently rolling hills bordered by the rift valley escarpment



that sends down the rivers that give it life.

The next day, this becomes the site of what must be the most incredible balloon ride in the world. We lift off at dawn and look down on the landscape and animals with their long shadows in the early-morning light. The panorama opens below us as we rise higher. The wildebeests form long lines with the zebras nearby, stretching to the Mara River and beyond. The hills, rivers and forest look as though they were an illustration out of a fabulous children's book. Dropping down, we float low over a nesting eagle and her chick, and are challenged by an irate elephant, resentful of anything larger than itself. After more than an hour of this magic, we finally settle back to earth as the wildebeests make a slow detour around us. To them we seem but a mild curiosity, best avoided. We finish this morning with a champagne brunch where we land, animals milling around us.

In camp along the Talek River, the sun is just setting and the sounds of wildebeests grazing across the river fill the night. The morning light is cold and drab, but the evening's game run reminds me of why I love the Mara. Grassy hills are studded with small, single-trunk fig trees with round tops, and the rolling landscape is covered with wildebeests migrating up from the south. They romp and chase each other, making unmodulated and constant noise, a cross between lowing and honking. I see lots of Thompson's gazelles, the second

most populous animal here, and a comparative abundance of lions, leopards and cheetahs. There's a scattering of topi antelope and herds of impalas. The trees are full of raptors, several species of vultures, eagles and marabu storks that stand five feet tall. Even after two weeks in the Mara, there's never enough time to see everything.

The more I return to Africa, the more I appreciate what's typical and special about the various landscapes. You aren't just doing landscapes but trying to capture something that's at the heart of each place. It's rewarding to get compliments from Africans who say I'm expressing something in my work that is at the heart of their special heritage. After two months traveling, my head is filled with feelings and images I want to include in my art work. I'm anxious to return to my studio and draw from this new material. Δ

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*Art and photographs courtesy of Dennis Curry, Cambria, Calif., and The Foundation Fine Arts, Ltd., Hansville, Wash. Curry, who is planning to visit Africa again this January, is published and represented by The Foundation Fine Arts, Ltd. Don Monkerud is a freelance writer in Aptos, Calif. He recently completed a travel book about Mayan ruins of the Peten region in Guatemala, and is working on a novel, Angling in the Ocean of Darkness, about growing up in the Ozarks.*



Morning Hunt lithograph 17 1/2" x 24"