



Africa is a land of beauty: what with the vast landscape and wilderness full of the most spectacular wildlife collection; a serene atmosphere, cool climate; and the African sun setting in the backdrop of some of the most majestic hills and valleys.

But probably the most famous of all attraction has to be the great wildebeest migration. A journey so amazing that its worth the title of one of the greatest wonders of the world.

The wildebeest (also known as Gnu), is a herbivore that belongs to the antelope family. These large antelopes have different sub species, the most common being the Blue wildebeest, the Nyassaland wildebeest and the Eastern white-bearded wildebeest (common in Kenya and Tanzania).

The wildebeest can be described as having a well built front, a slender back side and thin legs. They have a large head, resembling that of a cow, large curved horns, a shaggy mane and a pointed beard. These massive antelope stand at an average of 1.4 meters tall, and may weigh in at an incredible 280 kilos. They also have a bushy tail that can be 50 centimeters long.

A wildebeest's habitats are the grassy plains and open woodlands. Their diet includes juicy grass and succulent plants. It is for this reason that large herds migrate from place to place in such of water and fresh pasture.

Wildebeest live in large herds, where dominant males take control. Females carry pregnancies for 8 and a half months. Usually, new born calves walk within minutes of being born. They follow and suckle their mother for 6 months, after which they are old enough to be on their own. A healthy calf, if lucky, may grow up to be more than 20 years old.

An important fact to note is that wildebeest are the only animals capable of controlling their births simultaneously to within a period of 2-3 weeks. Their migration therefore ensures that their young ones have enough food and water for survival.

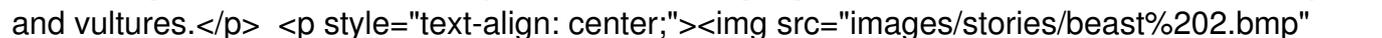
Males mature at around three years. This is the age at which they establish their dominance in the group. They do this by marking their territories with faeces and other secretions, and guarding it from other males.

The Great Wildebeest Migration usually starts at Ndutu; a special place between the Serengeti plains and the Ngorongoro highlands. During the start of the short rains, between February and March, more than half a million calves are born. Food is in plenty, and hence the chances of survival are high.

By April, the grass is mostly depleted and the migration heads towards the western boundaries of the Serengeti. This usually goes on till May. During this period, the long rains in the western region ensures plenty of pasture for the large numbers of wildebeest and zebras.

Zebras and wildebeest, though not bearing any origin, have a perfect partnership. The wildebeest with their keen sense, can detect moisture from miles away. The zebras complement this with their keen eyesight. When it comes to feeding, zebras take precedence, feeding on the long grass. The wildebeest follow behind, feeding on the short grass, which is now just the right size for them.

Once the dry season beckons, the wildebeest move further north. During the months of July and October, they break into the Maasai Mara. With numbers totaling into millions, the wildebeest and zebras cover the vast grasslands and savannah as far as the eye can see. These large herds attract a lot of predators including big cats such as lions and cheetahs, hyena and vultures.





The spectacular part of this great journey is always centered on the Mara River. This is where the wildebeest, and occasional zebras, huddle in their thousands on one side of the river; their sounds filling the African air. Inside the river, large crocodiles lay in wait. For a moment, the wildebeest seem to

hesitate, each anxious to cross, but for some reason, none making a move. Then suddenly, one brave wildebeest steps forth and takes the first plunge into the muddy waters of the Mara River. This sets off a stampede, with each animal for itself, swimming and fighting to get to the other side. The crocodiles rush in for the kill, not wanting to waste this golden opportunity. Sought of like the proverbial **◆**manna from heaven**◆**.

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Many wildebeest lose their lives by drowning and others from the teeth of the hungry crocodiles. And still, some unlucky few that manage to cross the Mara River end up being a meal to the big cats and hyenas that lay ambush on the other side. For the other thousands that escape this ordeal, it's a time to feast and enjoy their stay at the Masai Mara reserve, for once the grass is depleted, they will have to make their way back to the Serengeti.

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In total, the wildebeest cover a distance of 2800 kilometers from the Serengeti, to the Maasai Mara, and back to the Serengeti. Around 250,000 animals die during this time. Amazingly, another 500,000 are born. Truly, the cycle of life comes full circle.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr33OEnqn14>

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