

Camera sightings set on beauty of Masai Mara

THERE'S a knack to photographing the little bee-eater.

The picture you want is this: The bird in mid-flight, its green wings flung wide and a bug clamped in its beak.

Precision timing, a steady hand and a little specialist knowledge are all essential.

Paul Goldstein has that specialist knowledge. An award-winning wildlife photographer who has coaxed, cajoled and demanded the best from amateur snappers for years.

I joined one of his safaris in Kenya's Masai Mara, hopeful of returning with pictures worthy of a frame.

Within minutes of arriving at our luxurious camp, we were bouncing along in one of Paul's vehicles in

pursuit of a cheetah. After barely half-an-hour in Paul's company, it was clear he takes no prisoners.

"Stop mincing!" he yelled, as I fumbled with my kit.

My just-out-of-the-wrapping digital SLR body was eventually attached to a lens the size of a rocket launcher, borrowed from a fellow traveller.

We found the cheetah family bathed in honeyed afternoon light.

"They're hungry," said our guide Patrick, setting off a flash of

excitement in Paul.

"She'll hunt!", he cried, "Go, go, go!"

We swung away from the deceptively languid scene, adrenaline racing, our eyes scanning the countryside.

In the distance, a juicy-looking Thomson's gazelle grazed.

Small and spry, the gazelle munched on rough grass while we raced to find a perfect view.

She was on the move by the time we stopped, slinking through the brush to within feet of the gazelle. Then, she pounced.

It was over in a second, the predator so close there was barely a chase.

However, for a novice wildlife photographer, the thrill was intense.

Only afterwards did I realise I had caught the action on camera – the cheetah lunging from a swirl of dust, front paws stretched out.

I was helped by the fact my camera was primed with the shooting action.

The Mara has life in mind-boggling abundance and often we found sightings of the area's smaller characters as enjoyable as the big predators.

We were not forced into a rigid itinerary and we could stop to watch a kingfisher or delight in the antics of a warthog family.

The BBC's Big Cat diaries were filmed in the Mara and many animals we saw on our trip were celebrities with – much to Paul's disdain – cutesy western names. So famous is Shakira the cheetah that one fellow photographer described her as "the cover-girl for Safari Vogue".

Olive provided the most memorable experience of our trip, leaping into a tree only feet from our vehicle.

Leopard-spotting revolved around an area accurately described as "smelly crossing", a stomach turner in the morning with its sulphurous stench.

Leopards love dense thickets around the edges of the stinky waterways.

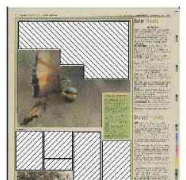
Huge crowds of wildebeest gathered for annual crossings of the Mara, heading for the Serengeti, and we watched in wonder.

Wildebeest can take hours to build up the courage to cross, so we took lunch, gazing at fish bone clouds.

Returning to the campfire, we buzzed from the excitement of the day.

Much is made of the idea that we have progressed from shooting wild creatures with guns to using cameras.

While there are similarities, we wanted the right light, a good camera and plenty of action.





COOL OFF: A cheetah and her cub take a break from the heat of the Masai Mara in Kenya.

TRAVEL FACTS

KELLY Macnamara was a guest on an Exodus Photographic Safari, with photographer **Paul Goldstein** and local guides. Group sizes are four to 12, with a minimum age of 16. A nine-day package costs from £2,699, including six nights' tented camping, return Kenya Airways flights ex London, internal flights and transport by open-sided four-wheel-drive vehicles in the Mara.

Regional connecting flights incl Manchester from £35.40 (single), Glasgow from £32.50.

Next departures are in June and September. Call Exodus reservations on 0845 863 9601 or visit www.exodus.co.uk.



GRACEFUL: A little bee-eater caught in mid-flight.