



# **Chalbi Desert Herp Adventures**

Robert L. Bezy

**Dedicated to  
Kenneth E. Stager**



**Cover photo:**  
*Bitis arietans*  
(Puff Adder)  
by Vaughan Jessnitz

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2023

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### **Introduction.**

This work of fiction chronicles the adventures of two friends exploring the amphibians and reptiles of the deserts of northern Kenya. It has its herpetological roots in my 1971 trip to that region and I have endeavored to accurately portray the herpetofauna I encountered. I provide citations a few of the LACM specimens collected. However, the events and people in the stories are fictional. For example, the interactions with Robert Drewes (CAS) depicted in the story never occurred as I did not have the opportunity to meet him in Kenya. He generously provided photos from his field work.

### **1. Chalbi bound.**

"Billy, I want to explore the herpetofaunal transition from thornscrub to desert on other continents. I have been reading about the Chalbi Desert in northern Kenya and I think it would be interesting to visit it and examine the transition from the savanna to the desert."

"Sounds like fun to me. How are we gonna get around?"

"We can fly to Nairobi, rent a Land Rover, and drive to the Chalbi. When the tracks end in the far north, we can go on a camel safari far out into the desert."

"You're on Bobbybro. Let's just do it."

Our youthful spirits were soaring like eagles as we stepped out of the plane in Nairobi and walked across the tarmac, grabbing our gear and getting a taxi to the car rental agency. The rental agent was very friendly and asked where we were planning to go on safari.

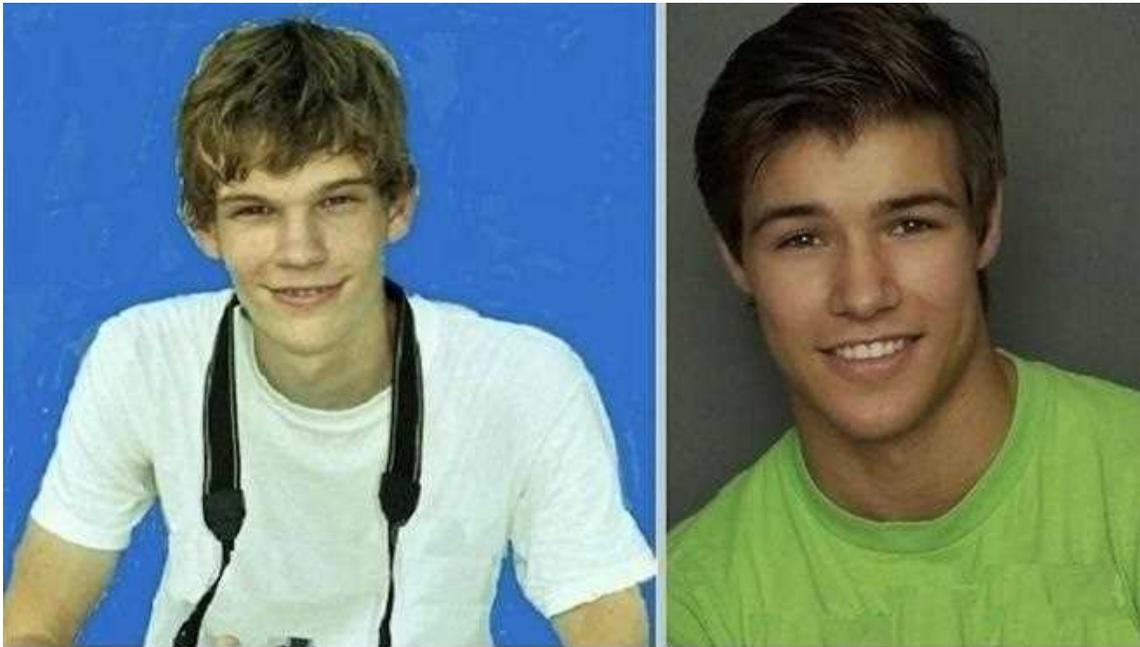
He was surprised to hear that we were heading to the Chalbi Desert rather than to the game parks where all the tourists go. When we explained we were interested in herps, he said his son Jabali was a member of a reptile club and invited us to come along and attend their meeting tonight.

"Wow, would I ever like that!" Billy enthused.

We were the star guests that night and presented an informal discussion of the herpetofaunal transitions in the Sonoran Desert. We were assisted by young Jabali who knew English as well as Swahili and Maa, the language of the Samburu.

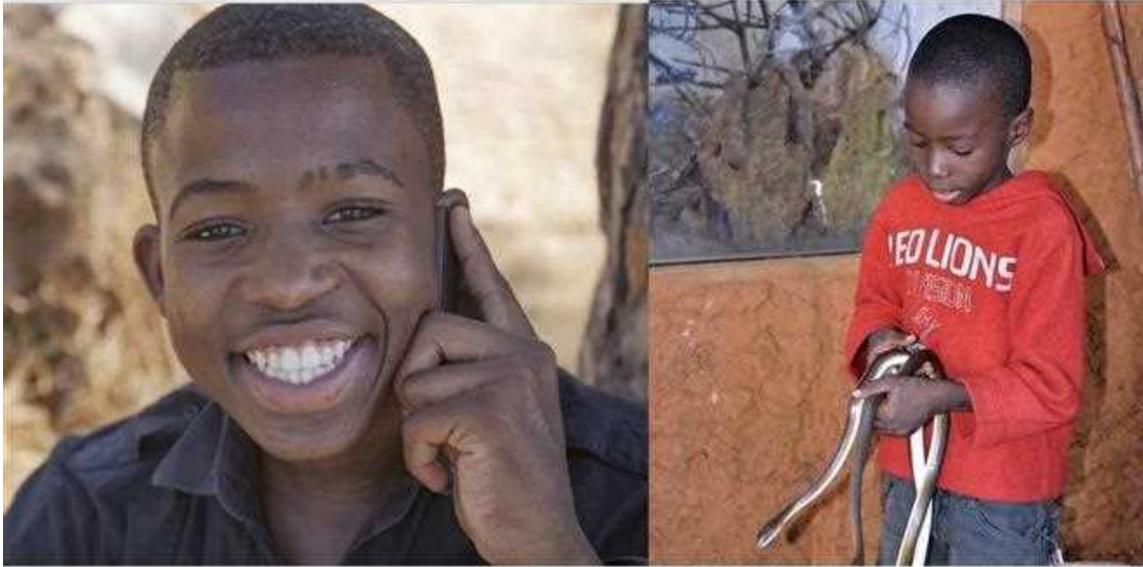
Jabali and his friend Asani wanted very much to go with us to the Chalbi. The boys assured us they could be a great help interacting with the people on the trip. After long discussions with their parents we decided that the two kids would could come along.

We gassed up the Rover, filled the petrol and water cans, bought chapatti, peanut butter, and bananas, and got a sack-full of one-shilling Kenyata coins to purchase reptiles from the people. We set out at dawn in the Rover with Jabali and Asani on our exciting adventure deep into the Chalbi Desert.



**Bobby**

**Billy**



**Jamali**

**Asani**





## 2. Loiragai Spring.

"Billy, I want to spend a few days up here in the wet savanna to see its herpetofauna so we can better understand just how the Chalbi Desert differs."

"I am not sure where we could camp, Bobbybro."

Jabali spoke up, "I know a family who lives at a spring called Laragia and they would be willing to let us camp on their land. They are mixed Samburu and mzungu."

The many hours of rattling on the wash-board road were beginning to get to me and I was very relieved when we finally reached the Loiragai spring. The family was most welcoming and showed us a large acacia to camp under.

After dark a very loud frog chorus broke out and we went out with our headlamps to investigate. We were delighted to see and photograph *Hyperolius kivuensis* (Kivu Reed Frog; LACM 66052) and *Kassina senegalensis* (Senegal Running Frog; LACM 66069). As we were trudging back to camp Asani caught a *Dasypeltis scabra* (Rhombic Egg-eating Snake; LACM 66076).

Billy and I will always cherish this wonderful memory of our first day in the Kenya bush.



***Hyperolius kivuensis* by Shayna Asherwood**



***Dasypeltis scabra* by Jade Hastings**



***Dasypeltis scabra* by Justin Ponder**



***Kassina senegalensis* by Chad Keates**



3.

### 3. Jon's Puff Adder.

At dawn several boys from the Loiragai farm arrived at our camp to join in the reptile search. As usual Billy loved interacting with the kids and they taught him to speak Swahili. The oldest, Jon, was an avid snaker and he and his friend Khari organized a grand herp hunt and made sure the kids brought the reptiles alive instead of hacked with a machete. Jon loved showing off bare-handling Puff Adders (*Bitis arietans*; LACM 66155), but fortunately he was not bitten.

We spent the afternoon watching the *Agama lionotus* (Kenya Agamas; LACM 66129) on the rocks and the *Acanthocercus atricolis* (Blue headed Agamas; LACM 66155) mating on the tree trunks.

Jon and Almasi invited us to have dinner with the family at the farm. The lamb curry they served was absolutely delicious, and we really enjoyed getting to know the entire family.



***Bitis arietans* by Ecoview**



***Acanthocercus atricolis* by Bernard Dupont**



***Agama lionotus* by hannok**



**Jon**



**Khari**



**Jon with *Bitis arietans***



#### **4. *Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia* (Herald Snake).**

The wet savanna was far too cold and rainy for me, but Billy loved it, and we spent five days at Loiragai. Billy and Jon herped together and bonded strongly and became inseparable buds.

Jabali and I herped together and flipping rocks we several *Mochlus sundevallii* (Sundevall's Skinks; LACM 66027) in the and. Billy and I were excited to see our first chameleon ever, *Trioceros bitaeniatus* (Two-lined Chameleon; LACM 66021). Walking at night with the headlamp Asani found a *Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia* (LACM 66079).

In all we found 15 species at Loiragai Spring and felt we were had gotten a bit of a handle on the herpetofauna of the wet savanna.



***Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia* by Bernard Dupont**



***Trioceros biteniatus*** by Jacob Penner



***Mochlus sundevallii* by Chad Keats**



**Jabali**



**Bobby**



Jon

Billy

## 5. Latakwen.

Billy and Jon had a long good bye hug as we prepared to depart from Loiragai Spring for our Chalbi adventure. Bro rarely makes such deep attachments and I gave him lots of support and help to recover from parting with Jon, and he slowly healed.

The washboard road rattled on and on across the broad savanna. When we eventually reached the rim above the great Rift Valley I was totally awe-struck by its immensity.

"Billybro, lets just stop and sit together a long while and let the grandeur of this place soak in."

"You got it, Bobby."

My heart sang with joy as Billy and I sat close together letting the enormity of the landscape reach our spirits. The euphorbs dotting the rift reminded me of Organ-pipes in the Sonoran Desert and I fell in love with the arid regions of northern Kenya.

Billy negotiated the switchbacks down into the lowlands and we headed towards the dry bed of the Milgis River. Rover bogged down in the sand of the luggah several times and we hopped out and pushed.

We decided to camp along the Milgis a few kilometers past a little shop called Latakwen run by a family that appeared to be of Indian extraction. The Samburu kids thronged around us and Jamali told them in Maa that he would give them Kenyata coins for live reptiles.

We headed out on a lizard walk and I was absolutely thrilled to see my first *Heliobolus spekii* (Spek's Sand Lizard; LACM 65821). The whiptail-like lacertids poking around the spinny euphorbs were a desert-rat's homecoming welcome I will always cherish.



***Heliobolus spekii* by Thomas Kennedy**



*Heliobolus spekii* by Robin James



*Heliobolus spekii* by titi-uu



*Heliobolus spekii* by Robin James













## 6. *Psammophis tanganicus* (Tanganyika Sand Snakes).

Walking up the Milgis luggah we encountered a mzungu (white dude) camped under an acacia. We were shocked to discover that he was Bob Drewes, a CAS herpetologist there studying the fauna of the region. His knowledge of and experience with the herps of Kenya was impressive, as was his infectious enthusiasm for the region, the reptiles, and the people.

Bob was particularly interested in looking for Sand Snakes of the genus *Psammophis*. He found that *P. b. biseriatus* (Line-marked Sand Snakes) and *P. b. tanganicus* (Tanganyika Sand Snakes) occur together in the far north of Kenya, suggesting they were separate species. Bob and I later collaborated on a research project and found that their differences in scalation and color pattern were relatively consistent. But, interestingly, the head shape of *P. tanganicus* seemed much narrower and more attenuate where it occurs with *P. biseriatus*, suggesting the possibility of habitat-driven character displacement in these analogues of *Oxybelis* (Vine Snake).

We discussed with Bob our plan to undertake a camel safari deep into the Chalbi Desert. He thought that would be an exciting adventure for us and suggested we should contact his people, the Rendeli who are camel herders.

Bezy, R. L., and R. C. Drewes. 1985. Specific status of the east African colubrid snake *Psammophis tanganicus*. *Journal of Herpetology* 19:246-253.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270390049\\_Specific\\_Status\\_of\\_the\\_East\\_African\\_Colubrid\\_Snake\\_Psammophis\\_tanganicus](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270390049_Specific_Status_of_the_East_African_Colubrid_Snake_Psammophis_tanganicus)



***Psammophis tanganicus* by Matthieu Berroneau**



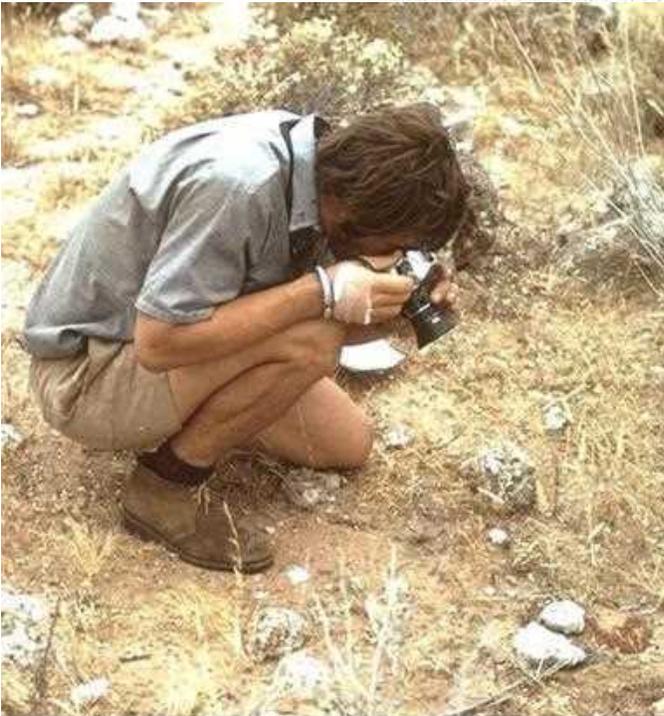
***Psammophis tanganicus* by Matthieu Berroneau**



***Psammophis biseriatus* by Daniel Liepack**



**Robert Drewes, Kenya**



**Robert Drewes, Kenya**



**Robert Drewes, Kenya**



**Robert Drewes, Kenya**

### **7 *Psammophis punctulatus* (Speckled Sand Snake).**

Jabali and I herped together constantly and I was becoming quite fond of the kid. I tend to be way too serious and introspective, and like people who smile a lot and are innately happy. Billybro has always met my needs for "happy go lucky" sunshine in my life, but Jabali was filling that niche more and more.

Billy understood entirely. Although bro has little insight into his own neuro-wiring, after many years he pretty much understood mine. He saw that Jabali brought me smiles and happiness. I had emotionally adopted--and lefty--many kids in Mexico, but this was entirely different. Jabali had adopted me and he enjoyed giving me the happy spirit that I have always needed.

Billy herped with Asani whom he enjoyed mentoring. And indeed the two were emotionally complementary and becoming inseparable. Asani was an overly serious type and Billy was his happy herp bud. Previously Jamali had always filled that niche for Asani. It took time for the four of us to work out our emotional

relationships, and we all took care to meet each other's needs without causing jealousy.

To help us down that path Billy and I sat close together by ourselves for an hour each day, usually at sunset, while Jabali and Asani went off to spend bro time together. There is nothing like one-on-one time to maintain tight emotional bonds.

After our bro time we went on a late afternoon reptile walk. Eagle-eyed Asani spotted a snake racing off in the far distance down the luggar. He and Billy chased after it and they nabbed it. We were delighted to see our first ever *Psammophis punctulatus*.

"Wow this is sure Sand Snake heaven. Look at this analog of *Masticophis taeniatus* (Striped Whipsnake)," I exclaimed.



***Psammophis punctulatus* by Vlada Trailin**

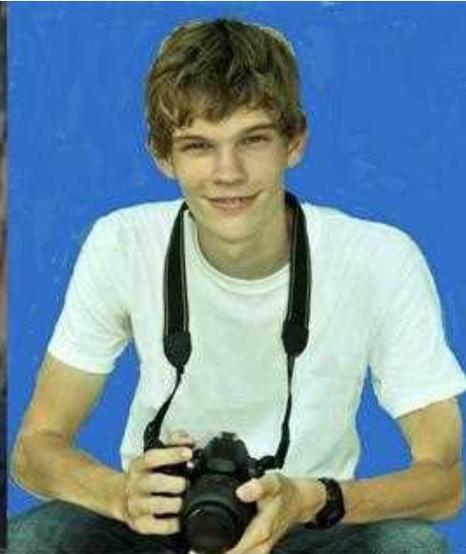


***Psammophis punctulatus* by Vlada Trailin**

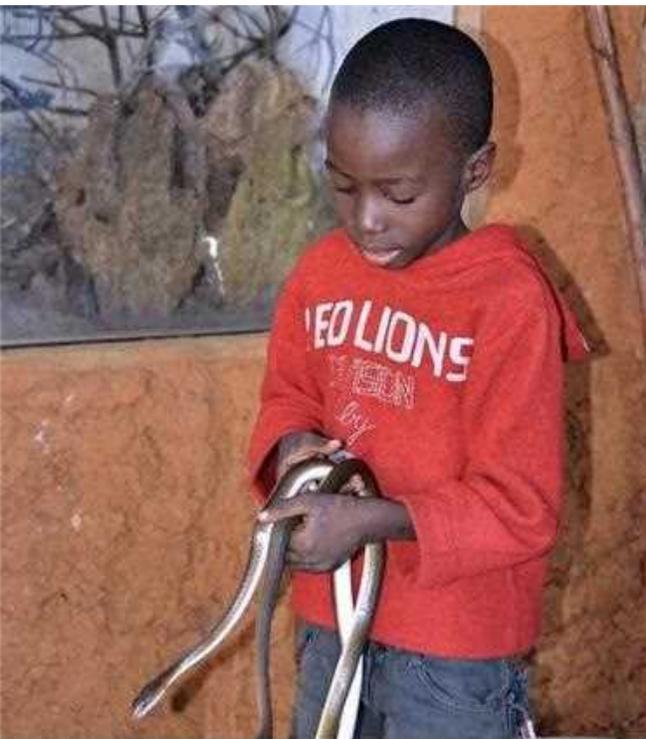




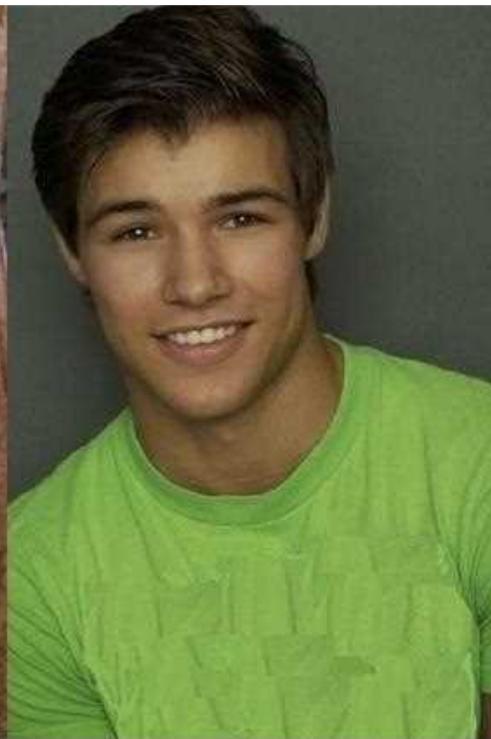
**Jamali**



**Bobby**



**Asani**



**Billy**

**8 Vine snake evolution.**

"Billy, these *Psammophis* (Sand Snake) species have got me wondering about

the ecology and evolution vine snakes in general. I would think they would be most abundant and species-rich in thick viny tropical forests, but they seem to live mainly in thornscrub and desert."

"Well, Bobbybro, this is a lot like your thinking about Night Lizards. You miss the boat because you are too cerebral and do not recognize basic appetites like eating. Snakes, like all animals, enjoy eating. Long skinny snakes such as *Psammophis* (Sand Snakes), *Thelatornis* (Twig Snakes), *Oxybelis* (Vine Snakes) and even *Masticophis* (Whipsnakes) evolved to prey primarily on lizards and there are few lizards in closed tropical forests due to the lack of sun for basking."

"Holy shit, Billybro, you are really something else. I wished I were more like you, more physical, and more happy."

"Well that is why we are bros forever. You live in the cerebral world and I live in the physical world, and we complement each other in both senses of the word."

And bro gave me one of his strong hugs that thrill me to the core.



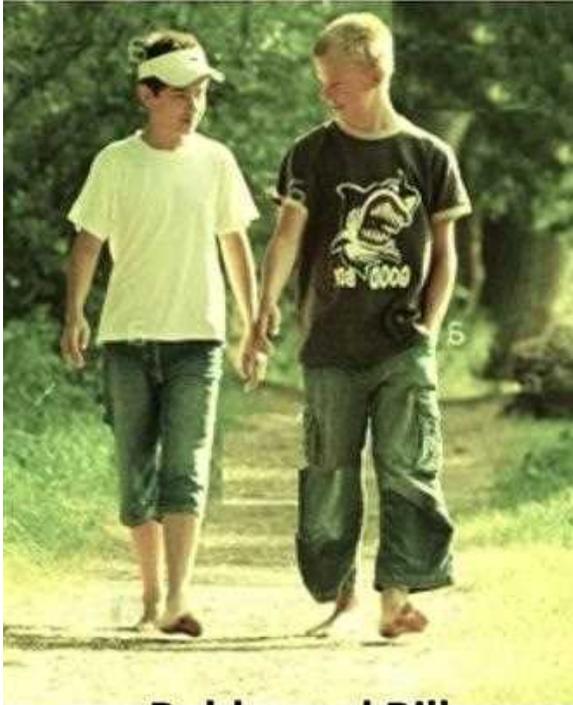
***Thelatornis capensis* by María Salustia Valencia**



**Thelatornis capensis by Charoen Pattariptak**



***Oxybelis aeneus* by María Salustia Valencia**



**Bobby and Billy**

### 9. *Dendroaspis polylepis* (Black Mamba).

On our morning walkabout I was thrilled to find another lacertid analog of whiptail lizards, *Latastia longicaudata* (Southern Long-tailed Lizard; LACM 65825). I pondered if the strong similarities of these lacertids to whiptails reflected their close phylogenetic relationship, or was it entirely convergent or parallel evolution? The long tails and active foraging mode of the members of the two families were quite similar, although the lacertids seemed to lack the jerky movements of teiids.

I was actually quite frightened by our encounter with a *Dendroaspis polylepis* (LACM 66156). The long thin snake was poking its head into a log right next to my walking path. It seemed to be very alert, aware of my presence, and showed no sign of "fear" or fleeing. I wondered if the mamba might actually attack me.

"Bobby you just have an overly rich imagination," Billy said, and he knew the real me.

When we returned to camp we were delighted to see five smiling Samburu boys with live herps of several species. The kids liked getting the Kenya coins that Jamali paid them, but for them it was not entirely about the money. Like us they

had fun chasing the reptiles. The kids seemed to have a special name for each species and Jamali began to collect the words for a Samburu herp lexicon.



***Dendrosaspis polylepis* by Johan Marais**







***Latastia longicaudata* by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski**



***Latastia longicaudata* by Markus Lije**

### **10 *Varanus albigularis* (White-throated Monitor).**

Ayuba, our ace lizard-catching kid, came running up yelling something. Jamali did not recognize the particular Samburu Maa word he used and explained in Swahili it was a very large lizard. We all went running with Ayuba to see what he had found. There in the luggah was the most magnificent *Varanus albigularis* (LACM 66181). We watched the reptile for a long while, as I have always loved seeing Monitors in the wild and imagine them to be miniature dinosaurs. Unlike most

Monitors, *Varanus albigularis* is relatively docile and I could not resist holding it for a photo.



***Varanus albigularis* by Ricky Taylor**



***Varanus albigularis* by Kevin Ulett**



***Varanus albigularis* by Mary McDonald**





**Ayuba**

## 11. *Malacochersus tornieri* (Pancake Tortoises).

Kabili had a knack for finding very unusual reptiles. So when he said he wanted to show us something special, we dropped everything and followed him. He led us to an area that had boulders and pointed to a crevice. We peered in and were shocked to see a tortoise with a very flat carapace (LACM 66160). *Malacochersus tornieri* (Pancake Tortoises) are truly unique chelonians with very flat shells for wedging into crevices to escape predators. Kabali was able to work his small hands into the crevice and extract the tortoise for us to photograph.

Billy noticed that there had been no teen boys among our reptile hunters during the last week and asked Kabali what happened to them. We learned that they were being prepared for Munget Lemouyo, the ceremony in which the boys would become a morans or warriors . To become a warrior the boy must be brave enough to endure the circumcision cutting without flinching. It is performed about every 10 years and the boys entering moran-hood together form a temporal cohort.

Billy asked if we could attend the ceremony and was told we could watch from a distance. Beforehand we were given an opportunity to bid goodbye to our adolescent reptile catchers as once they were morans they would not participate in the activities of boys, such as catching reptiles

Moll, Don, Lauren E. Brown, and Evan S. Brown. "The Evolutionary Ecology of the African Pancake Tortoise *Malacochersus tornieri* (Siebenrock 1903): A Review and Synthesis Based Upon Current Knowledge." *Tropical Natural History* 21.1 (2021): 61-78.

file:///Users/robertbezy/Desktop/pomme,+61-78+Moll+edit-2.pdf.



***Malacochersus tornieri* by F. Schmidt**



***Malacochersus tornieri* (from Moll et al. 2021)**



***Malacochersus tornieri* by Matt Pilkington**



**Kibili**



## **12 *Hemirhagerrhis nototaenia* (Mopane Snakes).**

We had not encountered any new snakes in a long while and were delighted when young Hami came in with a *Hemirhagerrhis nototaenia* (LACM 65966). We wondered why we had not seen this species before and whether Hami and *Hemirhagerrhis* were somehow linked by their similar phonetics.

We asked Hami to show us where he caught snake. He led us up the Milgis to a grove of acacias with many downed logs and pointed to the piece of bark under which he had found the animal. We started flipping bark and uncovered a second Mopane Snake (LACM 65966). There were also many *Hemidactylus isolepis*

(Scaly Leaf-toed Gecko; LACM 65930) that we guessed were probably its principal prey. Maybe Hami and *Hemidactylus* were also phonetically connected.

The Rendili camel herders arrived and we were shocked to see how different in every way they were from the Samburu. Their facial features were quite different and one even had blue eyes. They were not as thin as the Samburu and we guessed that they ate more meat. The Rendili language also was very different, but fortunately they also spoke some Swahili so Billy could communicate with them. When the Rendili learned we were herpers they said that Bob Drewes was a member of their tribe and that they had caught reptiles with him.

We said a sad goodbye to Jamali and Asani and all the Samburu herper kids we had become very fond of.



***Hemirhgerhis notataenia* by Reto Güttinger**



*Hemirhgerhis notataenia* by Courtney Hundermark



**HEMIDACTYLUS ISOLEPIS BY R. SINDACO**



**Hami of the *Hemirhagerrhis***

### **13 *Pseuderemias smithi* (Smith's Racerunner)**

We were off with the Rendili and their camels to the Koroli Desert south of the Chalbi. We were shocked how different these people were from the Samburu. Their culture, their language, and even their DNA were more akin to that of the Turkana and the people in the Horn of Africa such as the Afar.

Billy took to the Rendili in a major way, but I had left my heart with the Samburu herper kids along the Milgis. Bro also was intrigued by Ayanna, the Rendili woman with hazel eyes. With his Swahili Billy was able to communicate with her

and discovered she had kids with blue eyes. I was very interested in photographing them.

We were shocked when we saw the kids. Their eyes were a knock-out and we took lots of photos. Ayanna said that anthropologists had visited her to get samples from her and all of her relatives for DNA studies.

We went on our first walkabout in the Koroli Desert and I was thrilled to see yet another species of lacertid lizard, *Pseuderemias smithi*. It looked for all the world like a spotted species of *Aspidoscelis* (whiptail), but I could discern its head was shaped like a lacertid rather than a teiid.



***Pseuderemias smithi* by Claude Kolwelter**



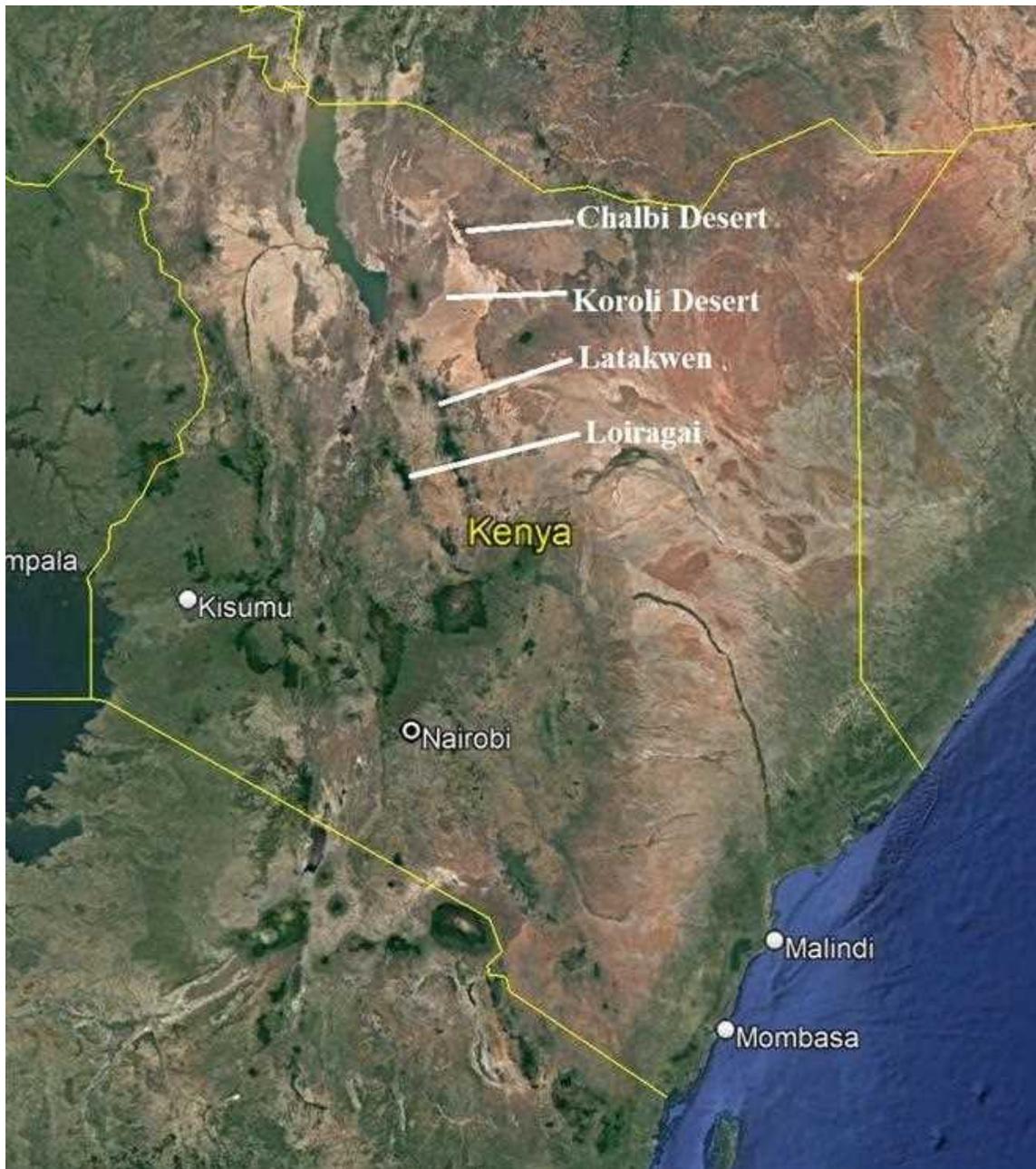
***Pseuderemias smithi* by Roberto Sindaco**



***Pseuderemias smithi* by Roberto Sindaco**



**Ayanna and her family**



#### **14 *Stigmochelys pardalis* (Leopard Tortoises).**

Billy and I needed some exclusive bro time together and we decided that the two of us would do a walkabout into the Koroli Desert for a few days. We filled two water packs and I donned the small one and of course Billy was delighted to wear the large one. We also took a bag of trail mix and a nylon cloth to serve as a shade canopy as there were only widely scattered bushes and euphorbs in this hyper-arid desert.

The stars were absolutely glorious and our hearts sang with joy as we set out that night on our bro walkabout together. About midnight we found a sandy spot in the luggah to spend the night.

At dawn I suggested, "Billy, lets just sit together for the whole day and allow this desert to reach our sprits. We can spread the canopy on this bush for shade at midday."

I knew that such a long sit would be very challenging for Billy as he was an active and energetic physical bro.

"Bobby, I think I can sit still all day if we bro talk."

And we talked all day sitting close together in the small patch of shade beneath the canopy and by night fall we were the tightly bonded bros we have always been.

The next morning Billy was raring to go. He loved using his muscles to walk at top speed and I had difficulty keeping up. But he slowed down and so we could stroll together.

We rounded the bend in the luggah and were shocked to see two youths sitting under a shade canopy. We began chatting with them and soon learned that Kito was a Samburu originally from Maralal and Xander was from Mombasa. They were camped here observing the ecology and diet of *Stigmochelys pardalis* under the hyper-arid conditions of the Koroli Desert. They invited us to spend the day with them and offered to share their shade, water, and food with us.

Xander and Kito took us on a long walk making the rounds to observe all their Leopard Tortoises. After dark they showed us the many *Hemidactylus mabouia* (Tropical House Geckos) that they were also observing.

The four of us talked all night about herps, deserts, and our personal lives. Kito had left Maralal because the other Samburu rejected him.. Xander had to leave the game ranch because his father could not accept his relationship with Kito. Due to laws in Kenya they kept a low profile and preferred to live in the desert where they were safe.

We had become fond of Xander and Kito and were sad to say goodbye, but our bro walkabout had come to an end. Billy and I returned to the Rendili camel camp with renewed feelings for the desert and its herps and people, and for each other.



***Stigmochelys pardalis* by Nico Smit**



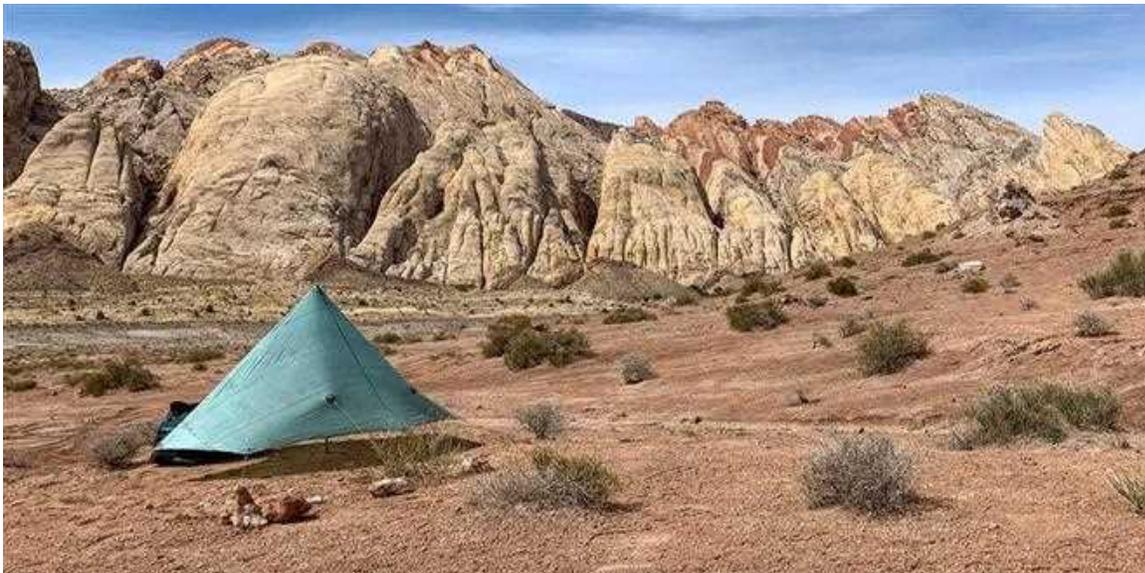
***Hemidactylus mabouia* by Thiago Marcelo**



**Xander**



**Kito**



**15. *Acanthocercus atricolis* (Southern Tree Agama).**

We were on the move again with the Rendili and their camels. I was beginning to warm up to these people even though they still seemed a bit aloof, reserved, and noble. I enjoyed seeing that females have a more visible role in their culture. The Rendili seemed to place a great emphasis on physical beauty and both males and females were very good looking. The extremely ornate beaded necklaces and arm bands were nothing short of astonishing.

We had one last camp with the Rendili before entering the true desert. The landscape had scattered volcanic outcrops and short acacia trees. With our renewed closeness Billy and I set out to herp on our own. We found several *Acanthocercus atricolis* (Tree Agama) on the acacia trunks and *Agama lionotus* (East African Rainbow Lizards) on the rocks. Their color was absolutely magnificent and and I took lots of photos.



***Agama lionotus* 42855**



***Acanthocercus atricolis* by Rudi Hulshof**



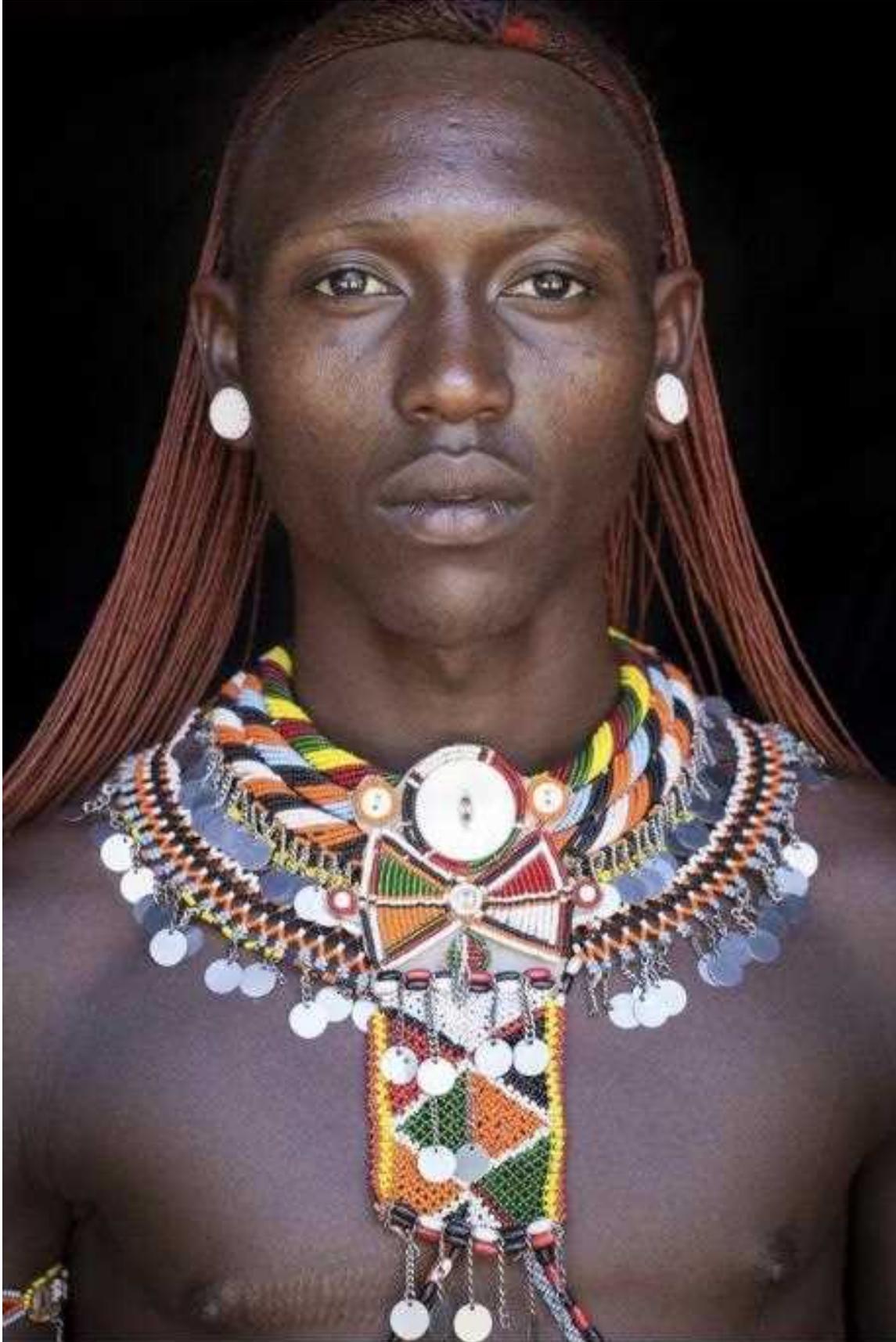
***Acanthocercus atricolis* by Bernard Dupont**





***Acanthocercus atricolis* by Bernard Dupon**

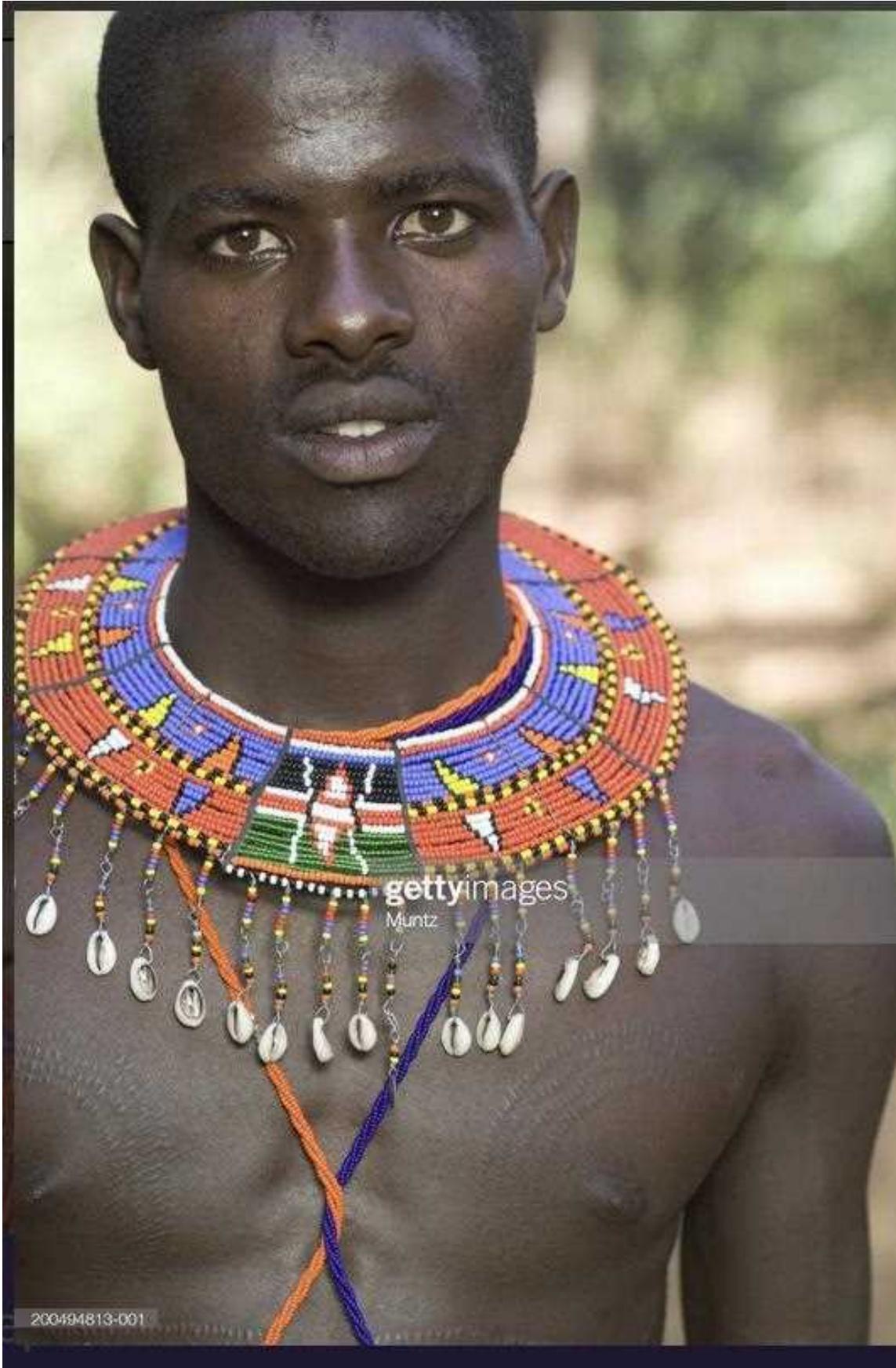














## 16. *Crocodylus niloticus* (Nile Crocodile).

The Rendili and their camels were going to be camped in the Koroli for a few days, and Billy was chomping at the bit for another adventure.

"Bobby, Lake Turkana is just a days walk west of here. Let's go there."

"Well, I know how much you love water and I would like to see the *Crocodylus niloticus*. Let's head out in the morning."

We were off at dawn on our Lake Turkana crocodile adventure. About noon we encountered two youths and I was delighted to learn Jabari and Kahri were Samburu rather than Turkana. They explained much about the geography of Lake Turkana and its people. They said that the far southern part of the lake is mostly Samburu and are replaced to the north by the Turkana and then farther north by the Omo. We decided to spend most of our time in the south as I was most comfortable with the Samburu.

When we reached the lake we were delighted to hear that someone was studying the crocodiles just an hour walk to the north.

"Wow, Billy, this is really a golden opportunity to see *Crocodylus niloticus*, lets go there."

We were glad to meet Jim and Thimba from the University of Nairobi. They talked enthusiastically about their research on ecology, behavior, and pack-hunting in *Crocodylus niloticus*. They introduced us to their two undergraduate students, Robert, an Australian photographer, and Elijah, a painter from California. They were using their talents to capture the magnificence of crocodilians and were interested in human - crocodile interactions. They had been coaching some of the Turkana boys to bond with the large reptiles rather than fear them.

I was spell bound by Elijah's paintings and I immediately took to him, clearly a very talented and sensitive artist. And Billy was totally enamored with Robert, a fellow physical bud who loved swimming with the crocodiles.



*Crocodylus niloticus* by Arno Meintjes



*Crocodylus niloticus* by André Gilden



***Crocodylus niloticus***



**Crocodile charmer by Dean Ilango**



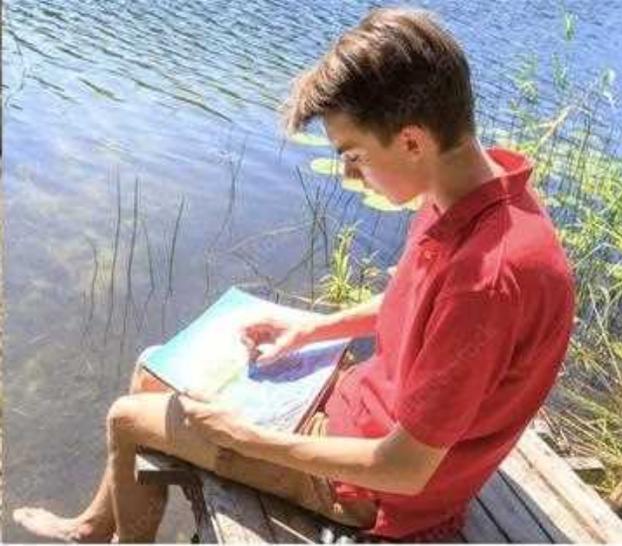
**Nile Crocodile art by Kathie Miller**



**Thimba and Jim**



**Robert**



**Elijah**





### **17. *Naja pallida* (Red Spitting Cobra).**

We walked north along the shore of Lake Turkana and were delighted to be in an uninhabited stretch. Billy and I had a long sit close together to renew our bro feelings.

We soon came across a Turkana youth with a large bass. Nuru spoke Swahili and invited us to share the fish with him. He built a fire and cooked the bass to perfection and the three of us ate the whole fish. We could see Nuru knew the lake area and its inhabitants well and he happily accepted our offer for him to serve as our guide. The cultures around the lake had complex relationships and we were delighted to have him helping to interact with the different tribes.

Nuru relayed that his friend Simba knew a lot about snakes and offered to take us to him. We soon discovered that Simba's specialty was cobras and he volunteered to take us on a cobra walk in the morning.

We were very excited as headed out at dawn on a cobra walkabout. Simba explained that he no longer helped the two wild white dudes that get their rocks off bare-handling the cobras and getting venom in their eyes. We were about to give up when Simba spotted a magnificent *Naja pallida* in the rocks. He showed me how to use the camera as an eye shield when I moved in for a close-up. The cobra seemed much more intelligent than any other snakes we had encountered.



***Naja pallida* by Johan Marais**



***Naja pallida* by Johan Marais**



**Nuru**



**Simba**



### **18 *Pelomedusa subrufra* (African Helmented Turtle).**

We were sure glad we had Nuru to guide us through the sociological complexities of Lake Turkana. Billy and I were totally clueless if someone we encountered was Samburu, Rendili, Turkana, Omo, or whatever. There was even an occasional white kid of unknown origins. After we had interacted with someone, Nuru would clue us in about their informative characteristics and their phylogenetic relationships. But it was all way too subtle for Billy and me. The degree of social sensitivity of these people was clearly not that of the "African savages" we had been led to expect.

We encountered a warrior named Omari who had a very well-constructed body and Billy asked me to get good photographs.

Nuru was very perceptive and immediately recognized the situation. He warned bro and me not to try to even take photos of the warrior. Omari was Muslim and if

Billy's interest in him was detected it would result in imprisonment or death. We decided to keep a lower profile in this area.

We topped a little rise and there lay Nuru's village nestled along the shore. We visited his home and he suggested that to understand the people of this area we needed to directly experience the fishing way of life.

Nuru made arrangements for bro and me to spend the day with the fishermen. It was indeed a transforming experience. The men worked long and hard to bring in a few fish to feed their family. And in the village every gram of nourishment was wrung from the catch. The bones were boiled for soup that was consumed for many days and the fish skin was used to fertilize the soil. Nothing was ever wasted.

It was time for us to depart from Lake Turkana and head inland into the Koroli Desert and return to the Rendili and their camel safari. Nuru was happy to accompany us on this last leg of our lake adventure.

What we saw on the trek had a big impact on bro and me. As we headed inland we expected that the villages would get smaller, but that was not the case at all. The villages became larger and larger until the inhabitants were desperate for food and water. They dug deep holes hoping to reach enough water just for drinking.

We were delighted to find a *Pelomedusa subrufra* (LACM 66159) in one of the water holes.



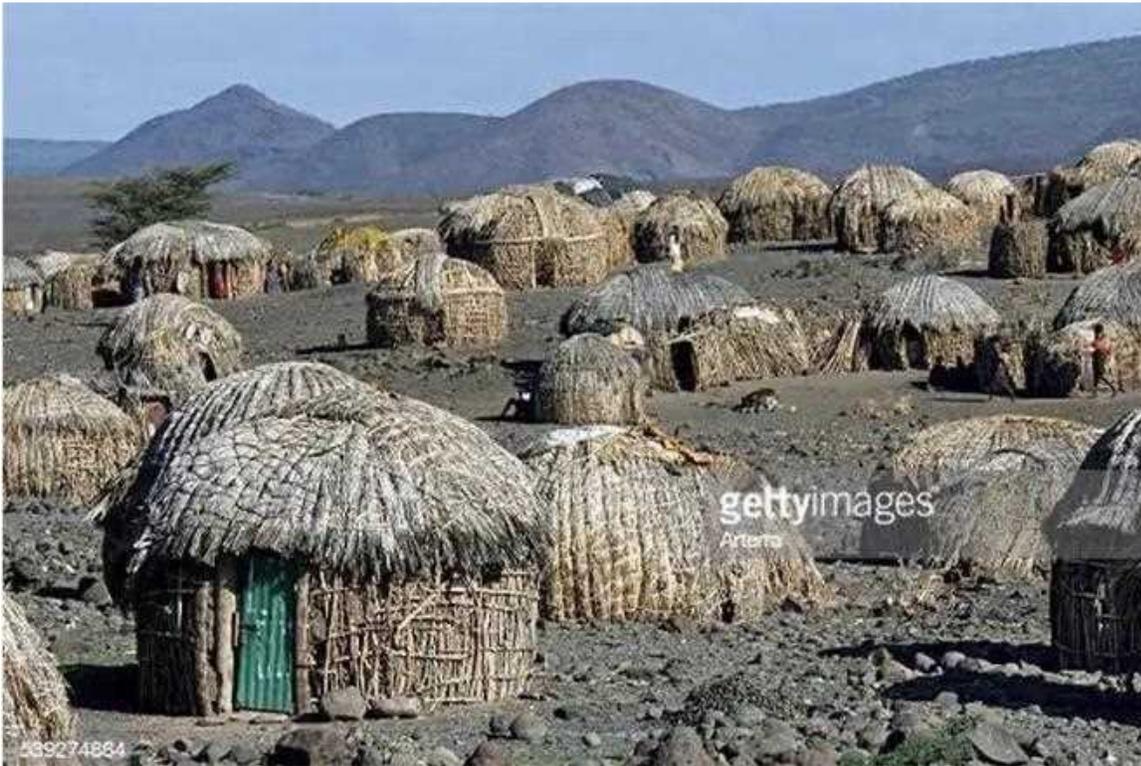
***Pelomedusa subrufra* by Matthijs Kuipers**



***Pelomedusa subrufra* by Bildagentur Zoonar GmbH**



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**Omari**







## 19 *Echis carinatus* (Saw-scaled Viper).

The Rendili were happy that we had returned from Lake Turkana and they were eager to head north from the Koroli into the actual Chalbi Desert. Several Afar had joined the safari to make the trek back to Somalia.

Abedi was in charge of the safari and by dawn the camels had been loaded and we rode out on our adventure into the Chalbi. Billy, of course, had no problem riding his camel, but it was difficult for me.

We were spell bound by the dunes, volcanic desert "pavement," and the total lack of vegetation in this unique hyper-arid desert of far northern Kenya. At sundown we reached an oasis and dismounted. Abedi's son Ayaubu was in charge of watering the camels. Billy and I wanted to spend some time alone and we walked across the dunes to a secluded swale and spent the night.

At dawn the camel safari was on the move again. The destination was North Horr, but Bro and I did not want to camp there as we felt it wise for us to keep a low profile in this region. Abedi was a bit hesitant to abandon us in the middle of the dunes without water or camels, but he pointed to a green clump in the distance and said it was Kofi Wadi, a palm oasis that is seldom visited.

We trudged across the sand to Kofi and were delighted by the beautiful oasis and shady palm grove. We striped and dove in the cool water for the afternoon.

We were shocked when two youths walked up and asked to join us. Tommy and Omar were undergraduates at the University of Arizona and were volunteering with EcoCorps to survey the fauna of the Chalbi. After our dip, the two students sat with bro and me under the palms enthusiastically talking about deserts, herps, and their life together.

Tommy and Omar had seen very few species of reptiles around this oasis. At their suggestion we began flipping the fallen palm frons and uncovered many *Mabuya quinquecarinata* (African Five-lined Skinks) and I was shocked by their extreme sexual dimorphism in color pattern.

After sundown we went on a headlamp walkabout with Tommy and Omar and found many *Hemidactylus brookii* (Tropical House Geckos). We were about to give up when Tommy sang out, "*Echis carinatus*!"

I was blown away by the sight of this sidewinder-like viper eating a scorpion. After many photos we all shared a last-night-out hug together.

Casewell, N. R., Harrison, R. A., Wüster, W., & Wagstaff, S. C. (2009). Comparative venom gland transcriptome surveys of the saw-scaled vipers (Viperidae: Echis) reveal substantial intra-family gene diversity and novel venom transcripts. *BMC genomics*, *10*(1), 1-12.  
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Drewes, R..C & Sacherer, J. (1974). A new population of carpet vipers *Echis carinatus* from northern Kenya. *Journal of East African Natural History*, *1974*(145), 1-7.  
[https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA00128317\\_437](https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA00128317_437)

C. E., Joger, U., Stümpel, N., & Wüster, W. (2009). When continents collide: phylogeny, historical biogeography and systematics of the medically important viper genus *Echis* (Squamata: Serpentes: Viperidae). *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution*, *53*(3), 792-807.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/WolfgangWuester/publication/222511736\\_When\\_continents\\_collide\\_Phylogeny\\_historical\\_biogeography\\_and\\_systematics\\_of\\_the\\_medically\\_important\\_viper\\_genus\\_Echis\\_Squamata\\_Serpentes\\_Viperidae/links/5e96cd8ba6fdcca78918afb3/When-continents-collide-Phylogeny-historical-biogeography-and-systematics-of-the-medically-important-viper-genus-Echis-Squamata-Serpentes-Viperidae.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/WolfgangWuester/publication/222511736_When_continents_collide_Phylogeny_historical_biogeography_and_systematics_of_the_medically_important_viper_genus_Echis_Squamata_Serpentes_Viperidae/links/5e96cd8ba6fdcca78918afb3/When-continents-collide-Phylogeny-historical-biogeography-and-systematics-of-the-medically-important-viper-genus-Echis-Squamata-Serpentes-Viperidae.pdf)



***Echis carinatus* by Mvshreeram**



***Echis carinatus* by karakurt**



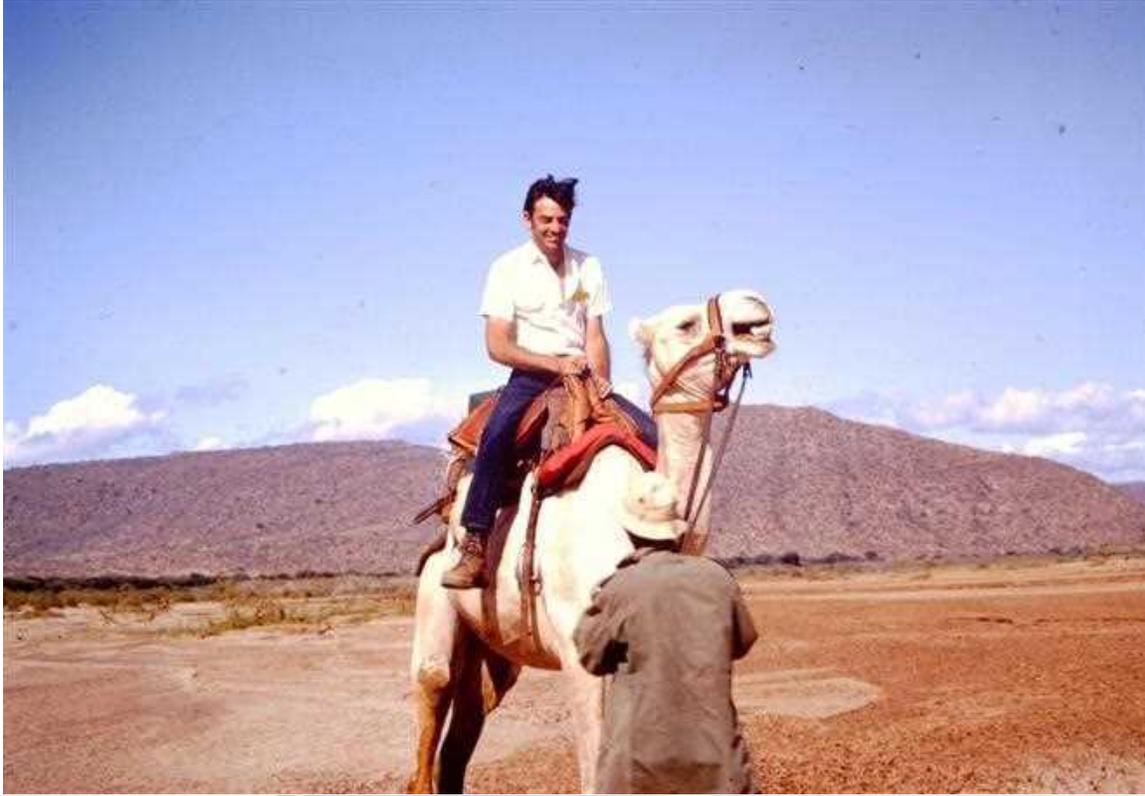
***Echis carinatus* by nativecreep**

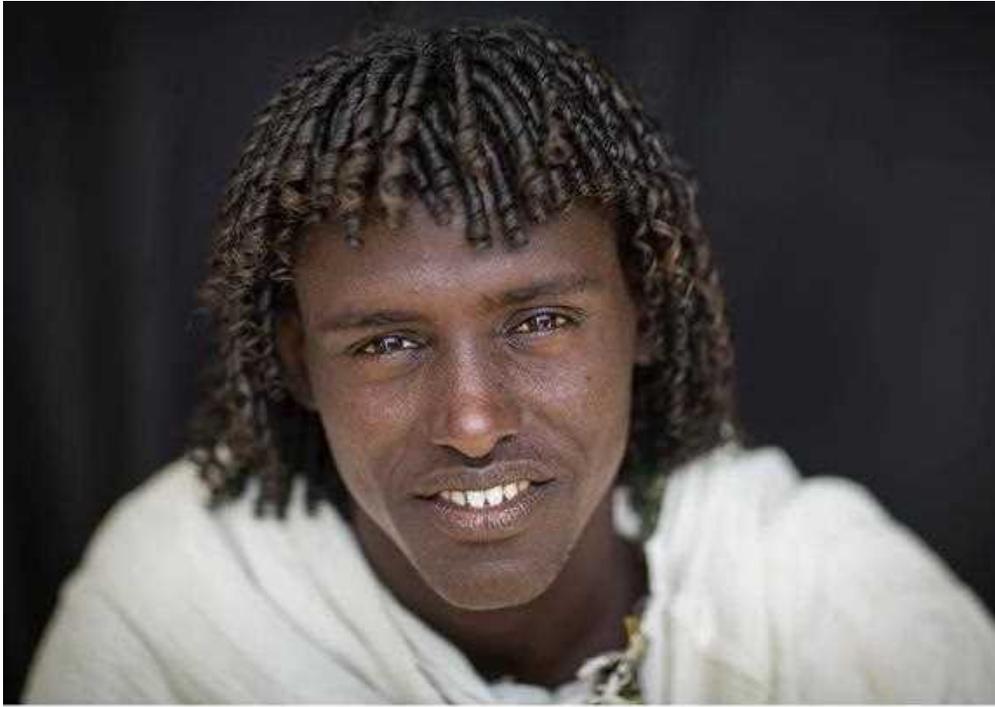




Turkana © Nigel Pavitt  
[www.johnwarburtonlee.com](http://www.johnwarburtonlee.com)







**Abedi**







**Ayubu**







**Tommy**



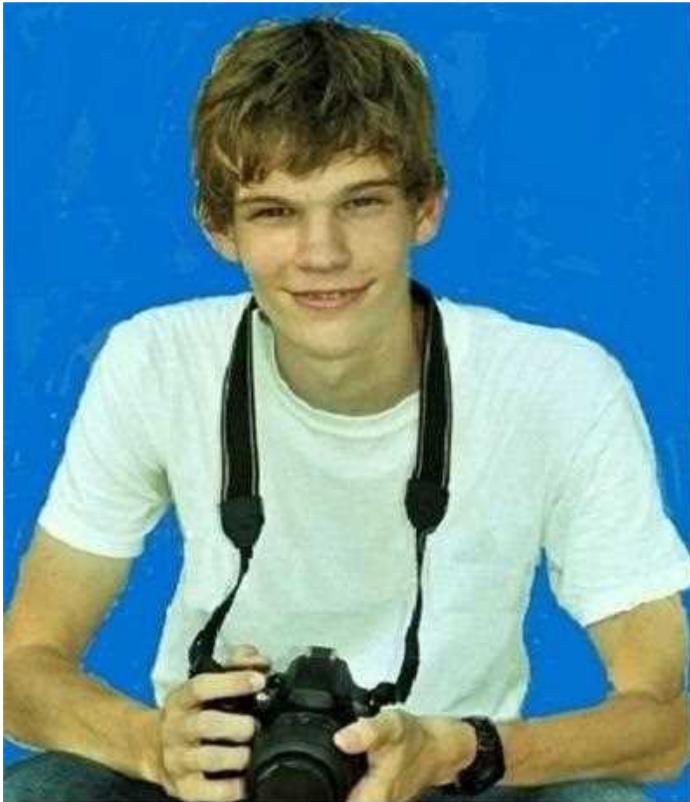
**Omar**

## 20. Departure.

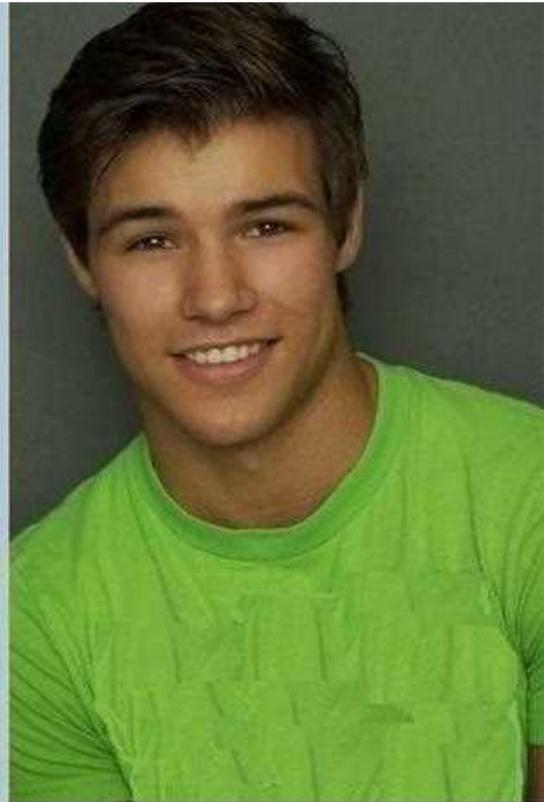
We arrived back in Nairobi and returned the Land Rover to the rental agency. The reptile club was meeting the next day and we were invited to attend. We were surprised and delighted to see Jabali, Asani, Jon, Khari, Xander, Kito, Robert, Elijah, Tommy, and Omar. But the real shock came when Bob Drewes walked in, stepped to the podium, and gave a great enthusiastic presentation on the biogeography of the herpetofauna of East Africa.

Bob's talk was the perfect cap to our Kenya adventures and afterwards all our friends accompanied Billy and me to the airport to see us off. Tears were in my eyes as I declared that my heart would always be with them in the Chalbi and we would return someday.

### THE END



**Bobby**



**Billy**

