The Great Migration of the Savanna

Each year, around 1.2 million wildebeest and over 200,000 zebra travel between 500 and 800km across the Tanzanian and Kenyan Serengeti to find the food they need to survive and to give their young the best start in life. Following the seasonal rain patterns leads them to the freshest, most nutrient filled grasses, but also sees them fighting for survival against some incredible challenges. Not least of these challenges is the famous Mara River crossing which marks the border between Tanzania and Kenya. Both countries see tourists flock to witness the huge herds risking their lives crossing the crocodile-infested waters.

Take a look at this video to watch scenes from this perilous event for yourself!

Heading in the right direction

Scientists don't know exactly what tells the herds when to move on from one area to the next in perfect time with the rains, nor where exactly to go. One part of the puzzle that there is growing evidence for is that the animals are guided by soil chemistry! The make-up of the Serengeti soils are determined by the geology, volcanoes and tectonic activity, with different levels of nutrients affecting vegetation growth. It might be that the wildebeest and zebra know where to go because the quality of the food available guides them.

Did you know?
Wildebeest and zebra herds can happily live side by side because they are excellent at sharing. In fact, they both prefer to eat different parts of the same grasses.

Navigation Skills

While humans may not need to migrate like wildebeest or zebra, we often find ourselves in need of sharp navigation skills for our survival. You too can learn how to navigate using just an analogue watch and the sun.

Hold your watch flat in your hand and point the hour hand towards the sun. Now imagine there is a line halfway between the hour hand and where 12 o'clock sits. That line marks the direction of south. Facing south you know that north is directly behind you, east is to your left and west to the right. Give it a try!