



Mpala Newsletter

December 2024 | Issue #25



End-of-year celebration at Mpala

Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Mpala Community,

As we wrap up 2024, we want to take a moment to express our heartfelt thanks to all of you—our Board of Trustees, staff, research teams, partners, and neighbors. Your support has been the backbone of everything we've accomplished this year, and we are so grateful for your commitment to our shared mission.

This year brought its challenges, particularly the floods that damaged key infrastructure. But through it all, we've seen incredible resilience and teamwork within our community. Thanks to your efforts, we've been able to restore vital roads and bridges, ensuring continued access and connection.

Our research teams also faced a tough permitting process, but with the support of the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and the Wildlife Research and Training Institute (WRTI), they persevered and kept pushing forward. These partnerships have been invaluable in helping us continue our work.

We'd also like to thank the County Government of Laikipia, especially His Excellency Honorable Joshua Irungu, for their ongoing contributions to our projects and infrastructure improvements. Their support has been essential in enabling us to keep moving forward.

This year, we made some real progress. We were proud to take part in the National Wildlife Census, a vital initiative that will guide our conservation efforts for years to come. We also hosted the fourth Livestock Health Training Workshop, where we helped equip local communities with important skills in wildlife forensics and veterinary care. On top of that, we made major strides in improving infrastructure—upgrading public roads and launching the Mpala Solar Project, which will support our sustainability goals and enhance our operations for years ahead.

Looking to 2025, we're excited to keep building on these achievements, strengthen our partnerships, and continue to expand our impact. We couldn't do any of this without your unwavering support—thank you for everything. Here's to a new year filled with even more milestones.

Warm regards,

Dr, Winnie Kiuru, Executive Director

Faces of Mpala



Featured Project Staff: Melanie Wangui

Melanie Wangui is the Veterinary Project Manager of the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behaviour's Baboon Research Project. With a background in Veterinary Medicine and Surgery from Egerton University, she brings a wealth of experience in clinical interventions, translocation of wildlife, disease surveillance and control, community engagement, and management of human-wildlife conflict.

[Read more about Melanie](#)



Featured Researcher: Laiyon Lenguya

Laiyon Lenguya is a wildlife conservationist focused on large carnivore biology and primatology. He coordinates the Uhifadhi wa Chui (Leopard Conservation) program under San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, where he is currently focused on maintaining long-term leopard camera traps to monitor their population abundance and gain valuable insights into their behaviour.

[Read more about Lenguya](#)

Updates from the Field

Uhifadhi wa Chui - Leopard Conservation Program



The 'Uhifadhi wa Chui' - Leopard Conservation Program was initiated in 2017-2018 by the [San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance \(SDZWA\)](#). The study focused on African leopards in Mpala, nearby conservancies, and communal lands, named Uhifadhi Wa Chui in Kiswahili, meaning Conservation of Leopards.

Uhifadhi Wa Chui is divided into two core objectives:

- Population Status:** Led by Dr. Nicholas Pilfold, PhD from San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, a biologist with formal training in the population ecology of large carnivores.
- Community Coexistence:** Led by social scientists Dr. Kirstie Ruppert and Tomas Pickering, specializing in understanding human dimensions.

On the ground, Ambrose Letoluai leads community coexistence, and Laiyon Lenguya oversees the population aspect.

A closer look at melanism - Laikipia continues to surprise many; while little is known about the melanistic leopards in this region, we have 6 confirmed, with Mpala hosting 2 resident black leopards. The upcoming genetic work on the collected hair samples of known individual leopards will bring us closer to understanding the prevalence of melanism in Laikipia. Over the past two years, we have observed 3 golden mother leopards giving birth to black cubs. The genetic study will be one of a kind, unravelling the proportion of golden leopards with the recessive gene and their relatedness or possible source. There are golden tradeoffs that black leopards may need to make in the savannah compared to their golden-coated counterparts, yet the ones we track appear to be very healthy, and diligently patrolling their territories.

Starting January 2025, the team is hoping conduct a rapid leopard assessment across the larger Laikipia region to provide comprehensive large-scale population estimates. In collaboration with KWS, this will involve initiating a leopard collaring project in key areas such as Mpala, Loisaba, Mugie, and neighboring communities.

[Learn more](#)

Featured Publications

We have updated the list of [publications](#) on our website to include research from 2024!



The Integral Nature of Encounter Rate in Predicting Livestock Depredation Risk

Claire F. Hoffmann, Nicholas W. Pilfold, Kirstie A. Ruppert, Ambrose Letoluai, Laiyon Lenguya, Isaac Limo, Robert A. Montgomery

Carnivore depredation of livestock is one of the primary drivers of human-carnivore conflict globally, threatening the well-being of livestock owners and fueling large carnivore population declines. While interventions designed to reduce carnivore depredation typically center around predictions of depredation risk, these spatial risk models tend to be informed by data depicting the number of livestock attacked by carnivores, which omits important stages in the predation sequence needed to predict predation risk. This study developed and applied a system to incorporate encounter rate to quantify carnivore-livestock encounters at livestock corral, concluding that a better understanding of carnivore-livestock encounter rates is necessary for effective prediction and mitigation of carnivore depredation of livestock.

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Spatial patterns of large African cats: a large-scale study on density, and home range overlap of lions *Panthera leo* and leopards *Panthera pardus*

Vilis O. Nams, Dan M. Parker, Florian J. Weise, Bruce D. Patterson, Ralph Buij, Frans G. T. Radloff, Abi Tamim Vanak, Pricelia N. Tumenta et al.

Spatial patterns of and competition for resources by territorial carnivores are typically explained by two hypotheses: 1) the territorial defence hypothesis and 2) the searching efficiency hypothesis. This team measured home range overlap and used a novel method to compare intraspecific home range overlaps for lions and leopards in Africa. Researchers discovered that although lions and leopards are territorial, their territorial behaviour was less important than the acquisition of food in determining their space use. Such information is crucial for the future conservation of these two iconic African carnivores.

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When people are away the cats will play: African leopards alter visitation patterns at a safari guest lodge in association with the COVID-19 quietus on Loisaba Conservancy, Kenya

Nicholas W. Pilfold, Laiyon Lenguya, Ambrose Letoluai, Hannah Campbell, Megan A. Owen

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced human activity within protected areas during periods of government lockdowns, providing a natural experiment to study animal response to reduced human activity. Based on visitation data of African leopards at Loisaba Conservancy during the COVID-19 pandemic, leopards were detected more frequently at the lodge during the COVID-19 quietus than either before or after, expanded their seasonal use to include more frequent visitation in the wet season, and spent more of their activity budget engaged in territorial marking.

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Mpala explores solutions to current and emerging challenges by advancing transformational ecosystems research and teaching, conserving our environment, and partnering with our community

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Our Partners



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