MPALA

Fieldnotes

March 2026 Issue #37

Nelly Palmeris appointed as Acting Executive Director

As of March 1, 2026

Nelly joined Mpala in 2021 following a distinguished career with the Kenya Wildlife Service spanning several decades and has served most recently as Chief Operating Officer and Deputy Director. She brings over two decades of experience in wildlife management and conservation, an MBA in Strategic Management, and extensive work in community development.

As Acting Executive Director, Nelly is committed to advancing Mpala's mission of transformational ecosystems research and teaching. Guided by Mpala's strategic pillars of People, Place, and Purpose, she will expand access for African scholars and scientists, steward Mpala's resources with care, and ensure that the staff, researchers, and students who make up Mpala's global community can thrive. She will also deepen Mpala's engagement with surrounding communities, whose partnership is essential to the Centre's long-term impact and sustainability. We are grateful to have someone of Nelly's experience and dedication leading Mpala through this next chapter.

In addition, former Mpala Trustee Dr. Scott Miller, Senior Scientist and former Deputy Under Secretary at the Smithsonian Institution, will now serve as Senior Science Advisor for Mpala, working remotely from Washington, DC. In this expanded role, Dr. Miller will provide high-level scientific oversight and leadership for Mpala Research Centre, while continuing to co-chair the Mpala Research Advisory Council alongside Dr. David Ndeereh, Deputy Director for Research at the Wildlife Research and Training Institute of Kenya.

Featured *Course*

Two students from the TBA course learning about fire ecology at Mpala Research Centre

Ecology Masterclass at Mpala Research Centre

About this Course

The Tropical Biology Association, in partnership with the British Ecological Society, runs an intensive field-based Ecology Masterclass at Mpala for early-career scientists from across Africa. The next course takes place in **October 2026**.

The course takes participants through the full research cycle: observation, question framing, method design, data collection and analysis, using Mpala's savanna ecosystem as a working laboratory. Sessions cover topics such as fire and herbivory, pollination ecology, and plant-insect interactions, led by East African university researchers. Participants finish by designing and presenting their own independent research projects to Mpala's scientific community.

What distinguishes the course is its practical emphasis. Students often arrive with little opportunity to develop their own research questions; many leave with the confidence and analytical skills to lead projects independently. As TBA's Head of African Office Anthony Kuria notes, this hands-on, tailored training is critical to building a generation of African scientists leading research and conservation on the continent.

The course is open to applicants from Africa within five years of completing a first degree in biological or environmental sciences, who have not yet started or are in the early stages of a PhD. Full scholarships are available. With over 900 applications for 24 places in 2025, demand far outstrips availability, which is why TBA is working to expand the programme.

Applications for 2026 are closed. For 2027, to apply or find out more: courses-Africa@tropical-biology.org

Featured *Researcher*

Featured Guest: Alice Burton

Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Manchester

Alice Burton is a zoologist working at the intersection of animal health, disease ecology, and conservation. She first came to Mpala during her Master's research at the University of Manchester, where she focused on conservation endocrinology, analysing hormone levels in Grevy's zebra and black rhino using faecal samples. She later returned for her PhD, expanding her work to explore gut health and parasitic infections across both wildlife and livestock.

Her research spans a wide range of species, including impala, buffalo, elephants, giraffes, zebras, cattle, sheep, goats, and camels. She investigates how parasites move between species and how drought, environmental stress, and veterinary interventions influence infection and immunity. Through developing non-invasive faecal biomarkers, she has introduced new ways to measure inflammation in free-ranging animals. Alice is currently completing a postdoctoral project under the Shared Landscapes initiative with Professor Susanne Shultz, focusing on translating research into impact through community and policy engagement.

"The people you meet through working here are what make the place so special. Whether it's conversations about research or sharing sundowners in incredible landscapes, I feel very lucky to work here."

This perspective reflects the collaborative and immersive nature of Mpala, where research, community, and environment come together to create meaningful impact.

The *Faces* of Mpala

Claudencia Ojimmy

Clerk of Works, Infrastructure Department

Claudencia oversees construction projects and facility operations across Mpala. Originally from Kiambu County, she studied Construction Management at JKUAT, her interest driven by a strong foundation in physics and an awareness of infrastructure's role following devolution in Kenya.

Her early career included project management, interior fit-outs, real estate, and roles at the Office of the Former Prime Minister and the British High Commission. She joined Mpala in 2023.

"Every day feels like a safari. Seeing elephants in herds by the river, especially on the way to the Ranch house, never gets old. At the same time, being able to interact with researchers and learn from their work has made me feel part of the conservation conversation."

She is particularly interested in biophilic design and construction practices that respond to the natural environment.

"I aspire to be a professional who can advocate for construction that integrates with ecosystems, instead of working against them."

By the *Numbers* (2025)

742	17	31	34	90+
Students and researchers hosted	active research projects	peer-reviewed publications	field courses and workshops	guineafowl tagged with solar GPS

Featured *Publications*

Antibodies and Inflammation: Fecal Biomarkers of Gut Health in Domestic Ruminants

Burton, A.M., K.J. Else, J. Irving, I. Mair, and S. Shultz

Gastrointestinal infections are a major challenge for ruminant livestock, yet monitoring gut health typically requires invasive methods. This study developed and validated enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays for three fecal biomarkers, immunoglobulin A, immunoglobulin G, and lactoferrin, in cattle, sheep, and goats. The assays were tested as potential indicators of clinically diagnosed gastrointestinal pathologies in cattle and compared with helminth fecal egg counts in sheep. Results support the use of these non-invasive fecal markers as practical tools for tracking gut health and disease status in livestock populations, with implications for welfare monitoring and disease management in field settings.

Continue reading

Faecal oestrone, rather than an androgen, is a sensitive and consistent marker of male reproductive state in equids

Burton, A.M., J.A. Britnell, G.K. Davies, and S. Shultz

Measuring faecal steroid hormones offers a non-invasive window into the reproductive biology of wild and threatened species, but many assays in use have never been properly validated. This study tested four potential biomarkers of male reproductive state across three equid species: Grevy's zebra, Mountain zebra, and Carneddau Mountain ponies. Contrary to expectations, faecal oestrone, an oestrogen rather than an androgen, was the only marker that reliably distinguished reproductive males from foals across all three species and showed predicted seasonal peaks ahead of the breeding season, while testosterone, androstenedione, and epiandrosterone all failed. These findings caution against the continued use of native androgen assays in equid endocrinology and establish faecal oestrone as a more robust tool for monitoring reproductive state and population health in wild and endangered equids.

Continue reading

Responses of African Savanna Trees to Large Herbivore Extinction and Rewilding

Coverdale, T.C., M. Sankaran, A.B. Davies, J. Ratnam, B.J. Wigley, and D.J. Augustine

At Mpala Research Centre in Kenya, this study experimentally excluded a diverse large-mammal community from replicated savanna plots for 18 years, then removed the fences to simulate rewilding. Exclusion caused tree cover to nearly double within a decade, driven by increases in tree density, canopy growth, and recruitment. Reintroducing herbivores rapidly reversed many of these changes, returning tree height and overall cover to pre-exclusion levels within years. However, tree density remained persistently elevated, as many individuals had grown beyond the height at which browsers could effectively control them. These results suggest that even relatively short-term herbivore loss can produce vegetation shifts that are only partially reversible through rewilding.

Continue reading

Support *Mpala*

Africa's painted dogs need more than protection. They need a landscape that works for everyone.

African wild dogs disappeared from Laikipia for decades. Since 2000, the Samburu-Laikipia Wild Dog Project has worked to bring them back by fostering coexistence between wild dogs, people, and livestock entirely outside protected areas. The work is ongoing, and every contribution helps keep it that way.

When you donate to Mpala, you are directly funding the overarching research infrastructure that makes critical initiatives like the Samburu-Laikipia Wild dog Project possible.

Donate to Mpala

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