Research

Mpala convenes Smithsonian-funded workshop on shaping the scientific agenda for rhino range expansion research in Kenya

From the 4th to 7th of May 2026, Mpala Research Centre convened a workshop funded by the Smithsonian Institution to help shape the scientific agenda for rhino range expansion in Kenya. With the leadership of Francesca Vitali of the Smithsonian Institution and a dedicated steering committee, Mpala brought together researchers, conservation practitioners, government representatives and NGOs with relevant expertise.

Mpala's board partners, the Kenya Wildlife Service and the Wildlife Research and Training Institute, provided important national context for the development of rhino research priorities, as discussions on rhino range expansion continue across Laikipia. The workshop focused on five fundamental objectives including population viability, wildlife health, and human-wildlife coexistence.

"Rhino management in Kenya is shifting from intensive sanctuary-protection toward long-term viability through population management, translocations, and range expansion, which integrates with efforts to rebuild connected, resilient ecosystems," said Dr. Scott Miller, Senior Science Advisor at Mpala. "Thus the rhino as a flagship species is catalyzing renewed effort to manage the Laikipia landscape for conservation and sustainable livelihoods, with Mpala and its partners centrally placed to provide the needed science. The outcomes included identifying prioritiy management needs and key areas where science, research, and monitoring can best inform decision-making. The discussion also helped shape a vision for a scientific strategy that strengthens coordination and collaboration across institutions and stakeholders."

Leveraging its deep institutional expertise in the landscape, Mpala facilitated this interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange across sectors. By synthesizing diverse perspectives, the workshop underscored the importance of coordinated research, adaptive management, and shared scientific priorities in informing conservation decision-making.

"The recent Rhino Range Expansion Workshop held at Mpala provided an important platform for partners to exchange ideas, learn from one another, and collectively shape practical, forward-looking solutions that will benefit both rhinos and the wider Laikipia landscape for generations to come," said Mpala's Acting Executive Director Nelly Palmeris.

Letter from Mpala

Dear Mpala Community,

May was a month defined by learning, exchange, and capacity building at Mpala Research Centre, spanning scientific workshops, training programmes, and hands-on educational engagements.

The research team led by Cosmas Nzomo is looking forward to increasing collaboration, efficiency, and innovation within Mpala Research Centre by creating a more connected and supportive working environment for all researchers and staff. The team plans to foster clear communication and stronger coordination through monthly researchers' meetings where ongoing projects, challenges, and progress can be openly discussed. In addition, early-career sessions involving Principal Investigators and Professors will provide mentorship, guidance, and opportunities for young researchers and staff to learn, share ideas, and grow professionally. By encouraging open dialogue and teamwork, Mpala hopes to strengthen relationships across departments and improve the overall flow of research activities. The team also looks forward to building stronger collaborations with universities, conservation partners, and other research institutions to encourage knowledge sharing and innovation. By working together and maintaining a culture of accountability and mutual support, Mpala will continue to grow as a leading organization for impactful research, teaching and scientific excellence.

Throughout the month, we continued to strengthen our role as a hub for research, teaching, and conservation by hosting field courses and visits from Michigan State University, Colorado State University, St. Lawrence University, and the Wyss Academy for Nature. We also invested in internal capacity building through a two-week ranger training course for our security department and expanded engagement with emerging researchers through internships and outreach activities with students from St. Lawrence University and Daraja Academy. In addition, we marked Mental Health Awareness Month with activities focused on staff and researcher wellbeing, including a community cleanup, awareness walk, and mental health support session.

Finally, Mpala management is keeping abreast of all the developments, particularly related to travel requirements, surrounding the ebola outbreak in eastern DRC. With no reported cases in Kenya, Mpala is operating at full capacity, and excited to welcome everyone for the busy summer season.

Warm regards,
The Mpala Team

Featured Research

About this research

The role of African elephant and Olive baboons in the seed dispersal of Invasive Opuntia species

Invasive Opuntia species (*Opuntia stricta* and *Opuntia engelmannii*) are spreading at an alarmingly rapid rate across the Ewaso ecosystem, threatening biodiversity, reducing available grazing land, and negatively affecting both wildlife and local communities. This project seeks to understand how wildlife, specifically African elephants and olive baboons, contributes to the spread of these invasive plants, with the aim of informing more effective management and conservation strategies.

Data collected through the study will be compared across the two disperser animals and the two Opuntia species to assess whether these animals facilitate or limit the invasive spread. By integrating wildlife ecology, invasive species management, and conservation science, the project addresses a growing environmental challenge in the region.

"Ultimately, this project aims to inform invasive species management and wildlife conservation policies in Kenya and beyond. By understanding the mechanisms through which wildlife disperses invasive plants, conservation managers can design more targeted strategies to control Opuntia spread while maintaining healthy wildlife populations and ecosystem balance."

~ Jackline Mwangi, Save the Elephants

Guest Article

Featured Guest:
Jake Goheen

Research Scientist & Long-time Mpala Collaborator

A perspective on the last 25 years at Mpala: an uncorrelated random walk

I never was one of these kids who dreamt of working in Africa. I spent lots of time at my grandparents' farm catching snakes and making plaster casts of raccoon and coyote tracks; I also spent lots of time looking at field guides. I watched PBS Nature specials on savanna wildlife, but working in East Africa seemed so completely beyond the realm of what was possible, like traveling to Jupiter.

In March of 2002, I first came to Mpala. It seemed like a big-boy step at the time, as I'd barely been out of the U.S. Midwest and never to another country. My connection to Mpala was through Felicia Keesing (Bard College), whom I met during the summer of 1998. After about two years of asking/nagging her to host me, she relented. Altruist that she is, Felicia took a leap of faith and fully supported me to do proverbial "independent" work in her ongoing studies of small mammal populations. That work itself was conducted in collaboration with the Kenya Long-term Exclosure Experiment, and its PI (Truman Young; U California, Davis) likewise welcomed me with open arms.
So, Felicia and Truman taught me about inflection points in life: rare, pivotal moments that shape where we wind up professionally and personally. It's a reminder of the position that we professionals are in when we interact with aspiring, motivated youngsters—the scientists-to-become.

Three other Mpala scientists—Todd Palmer (U Florida), Rob Pringle (Princeton U), and Corinna Riginos (The Nature Conservancy)—taught me that research is best done when ideas are shared openly, and with curiosity, passion, and humor. There's so much to do, and there are so many ways to do it, that intellectual turfiness is never the way to go. For best Mpala moments, conversations with these three and many others on Baboon Cliffs, in the dining hall, or in UHURU S2MEGA rank right up there with seeing an aardvark or trapping a broad-headed stink mouse for the first time.

Mpala has grown in the last quarter-century in ways that few of us long-termers could've anticipated. While the pros outweigh the cons (we used to have electricity for four hours a day, phone calls were virtually impossible, we went to Lekiji for alcohol, and we drove on roads worse than those currently to Nanyuki for dial-up internet), maintaining collegiality and familiarity, and making new friendships, can take a bit more effort.

Continue Reading

The Faces of Mpala

Steve Karuri Wangari

Plumber, Mpala Research Centre

Read more about Steve

Originally from Nyeri, Karatina, Steve first came to Mpala Research Centre as a football player for the organization's team, occasionally taking on casual work alongside his sporting commitments. He now works as a plumber, while continuing to represent Mpala at a range of sporting events, where he has also achieved notable success, including completing the Lewa Marathon and winning the Binti Mwangaza Charity Race.

Steve is committed to being a positive role model for his colleagues and a good example to those back home, and ultimately for his children. One of his favourite aspects of working at Mpala is the friendships he has built through both sport and day-to-day collaboration. Working across plumbing, maintenance, and infrastructure teams, and engaging with a wide range of colleagues has supported his continued professional and personal growth.

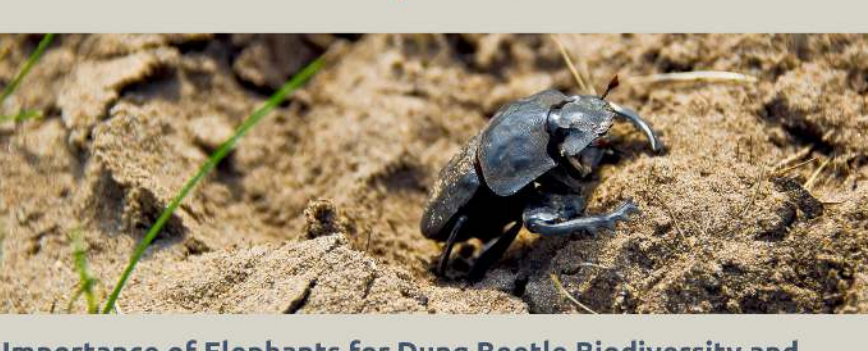
By the Numbers (May)

69
Grevy's zebra counted in a single afternoon game drive, ~2% of their total wild population

182
Bird species identified at Mpala on Global Big Day

3335
Meals served

Featured Publications

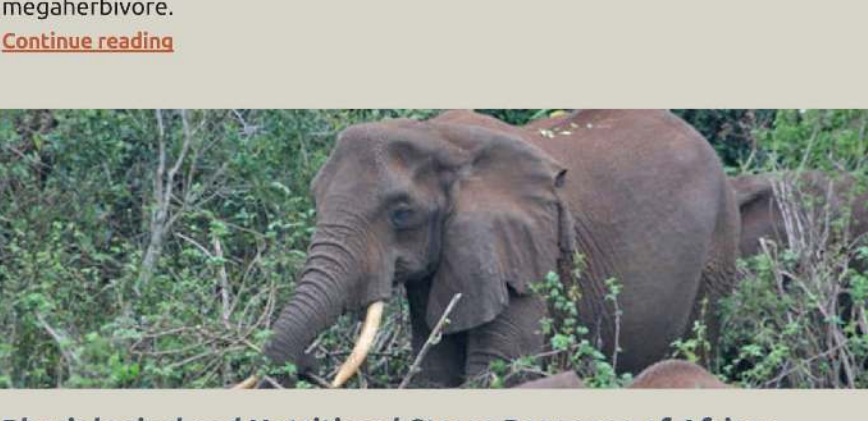


Importance of Elephants for Dung Beetle Biodiversity and Ecosystem Functions

Gijsman, F., Nutter, C.M., Khamis, F.M., Ombura, F.L.O., Hutchinson, M.C., Palmer, T.M., Goheen, J.R., Miller, S.E., and Pringle, R.M.

Drawing on Mpala's long-term herbivore exclusion experiments, this study reveals that elephants are central to a generalized network of interactions between dung beetles and large mammals. Their removal triggers cascading losses of beetle diversity and ecosystem functions, providing rare empirical evidence for the coextinction consequences of losing a keystone megaherbivore.

Continue reading



Physiological and Nutritional Stress Response of African Elephants within the Lantana-dominated Lower Imenti Forest Reserve in Kenya

Oduor, S., Lekolool, I., Ndunda, M.M., Mulindi, S., Kaitopok, J.P., Weeks, S., Ochieng, E., Brown, J.L., Murray, S., Parker, J.M., et al.

This study used hormonal biomarkers to assess the physiological and nutritional condition of elephants in Kenya's Lower Imenti Forest, an area heavily invaded by lantana. Findings suggest that habitat degradation and restricted movement are driving elevated stress and compromised metabolic function in the resident elephant population.

Continue reading

Foraging History of Individual Elephants Using DNA Metabarcoding

Gill, B.A., Wittemyer, G., Cerling, T.E., Musili, P.M., and Kartzinel, T.R.

Using DNA metabarcoding, this study reconstructed individual-level dietary histories for elephants from two family groups in Kenya, detecting at least 367 plant taxa consumed. The findings reveal how foraging strategies shift between wet and dry seasons and vary across individuals within and between family groups.

Continue reading

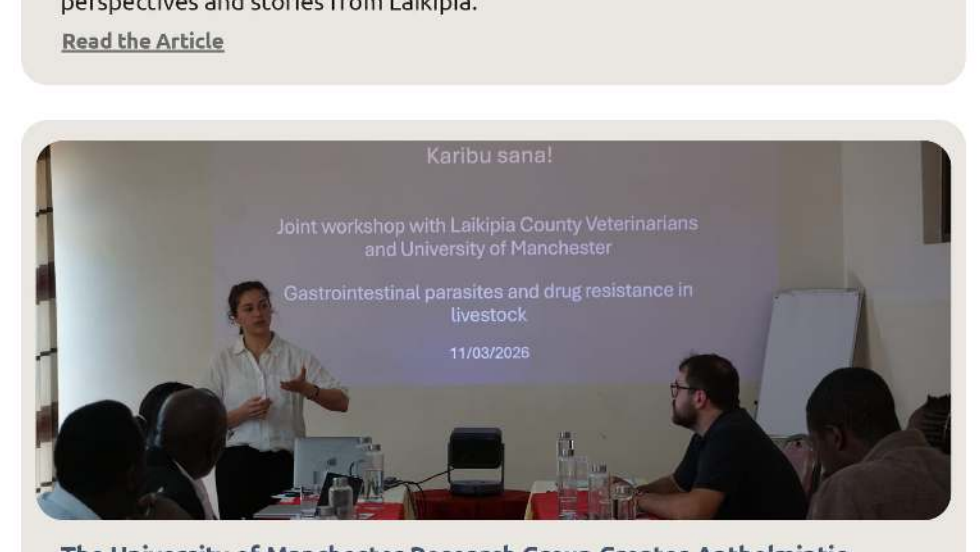
News Brief

Princeton LISD Students Publish Global Voices Article on the Lekiji Community

Category: Community & Education

Princeton LISD students Cooper and Sydney published an article in Global Voices highlighting the Lekiji community and their experiences. The piece was developed with support from Mpala staff and community members, including valuable contributions from Fardosa, helping bring attention to local perspectives and stories from Laikipia.

Read the Article



The University of Manchester Research Group Creates Anthelmintic Resistance Awareness Videos

Category: Research & Community

Researchers from The University of Manchester have released a series of animated awareness videos focused on anthelmintic resistance. Produced in English, Maa, Kiswahili and Kinyarwanda, the short videos aim to support community education around livestock health and sustainable parasite management practices.

Watch the Video

Mpala Hosts its First Early-Career Networking and Skills Session

Category: Community & Education

Led by PI Jake Goheen, Mpala hosted the first session in its new summer early-career networking and skills series on Thursday, 21 May. The session focused on how to deliver an effective research presentation and brought together students, researchers and staff members for professional development, mentorship and community building.

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.

Supporting Mpala helps ensure that Mpala can continue to facilitate critical research like the Samburu-Laikipia Wild Dog Project.

Donate to Mpala

Our Partners

Princeton University · National Museums of Kenya · Smithsonian · Kenya Wildlife Service · Wildlife Research & Training Institute

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