



Community & Conservation

Mpala hosts first Unity Day Celebrations for Kenya's 63rd and the United States' 250th anniversary of independence

On Saturday, the 4th of July, the Mpala community celebrated a new event, Unity Day, in honor of the United States' 250th and Kenya's 63rd anniversary of independence. Festivities were in full swing at the centre with resident researchers, student groups, staff, and children coming together for exciting games, races and celebratory food. Organized by Dr. Dan Rubenstein, the day featured a Pentathlon of games for the adults and welcomed over 100 pupils from the Northern Kenya Conservation Clubs (NKCC).

Runners pushed their limits across 5km (3.1 miles), blazing through three intense loops around Mpala's challenging 1.4km ring road. Right after the race, precision met tradition during the Maasai spear throw, a high-stakes javelin competition that had the whole crowd roaring alongside the 100m dash and basketball speed shoot.

For the younger champions, the day began with an exhilarating game drive to play Safari Bingo, which quickly rolled into exciting mimes, skits, and traditional dances. "The noted Oxford African Evolutionary Biologist, Jonathan Kingdon, asked us about a decade ago when he visited Mpala in July, how were we going to celebrate the 4th of July, American Independence Day", said Dan Rubenstein.

"We answered his question by having a traditional meal of hamburgers, hotdogs, ice cream and cake and games for students and children that lived in Mpala's villages. This year we decided to enhance the day since it was the 250th Independence Day for Americans. We did so by honouring the schools in our Northern Kenya. The student performances were widely appreciated, as were the games that followed", Dan concluded.

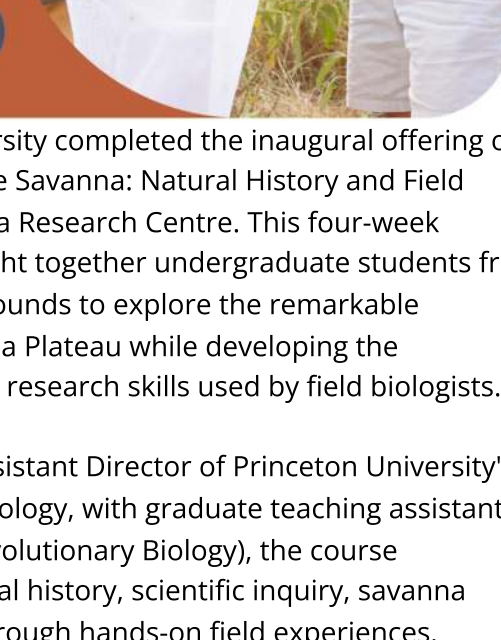
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Featured Course

Graduate teaching assistant Jocelyn Wang and her student collecting ecological data

Mpala hosts inaugural 'Life on the Savanna' Princeton University field course

About this course



In July 2026, Princeton University completed the inaugural offering of STC/EEB/AFS 229 – Life on the Savanna: Natural History and Field Biology in East Africa at Mpala Research Centre. This four-week immersive field course brought together undergraduate students from a variety of academic backgrounds to explore the remarkable biodiversity of Kenya's Laikipia Plateau while developing the observational, analytical, and research skills used by field biologists.

Led by Dr. Craig Marshall, Assistant Director of Princeton University's Center on Science and Technology, with graduate teaching assistant Jocelyn Wang (Ecology and Evolutionary Biology), the course introduced students to natural history, scientific inquiry, savanna ecology, and conservation through hands-on field experiences. Students built foundational skills in species identification, ecological observation, and field research methods before designing and conducting research projects inspired by their own observations in the field. Working in small groups, they collected and analyzed ecological data, presented their findings, and produced formal research papers, experiencing every stage of the scientific process from asking questions to communicating results.

"Mpala Research Centre provides an extraordinary outdoor classroom where students can experience the process of scientific inquiry firsthand," said Dr. Marshall. "Rather than simply learning about ecology and field biology in the classroom, students developed their own research questions from field observations, designed studies, collected and analyzed data, and communicated their findings as practicing scientists. At the same time, they gained an appreciation for Mpala's incredible biodiversity and the important connections between conservation, research, and local communities. My hope is that students left not only with stronger scientific skills, but also with a deeper understanding of how natural history, culture, and conservation intersect."

Guest Article



Featured Guest:
Philip Momanyi

Infrastructure Manager at
Mpala Research Centre,
overseeing maintenance and
projects since 2023



The Bulwark of Scientific Enquiry

Every noble work of infrastructure project hath its beginning with those who possess a fervent heart to fashion lasting solutions. For me, infrastructure at Mpala isn't just about design and construction, it is about enabling science while respecting nature, improving communities and leaving a legacy for future generations.

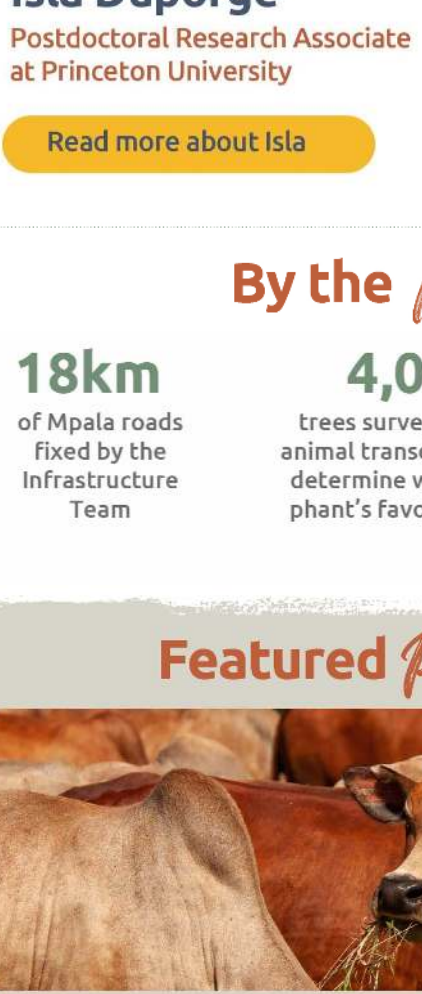
As infrastructure manager at Mpala, I have come to appreciate that the highest accord a man may afford my department is to have no cause to remember we exist. If no one is talking about leaking roofs, impassable roads, faulty generators, or broken water pipes, then we are quietly succeeding. Infrastructure is seldom appreciated until it disappears.

Managing infrastructure within a conservation landscape is unlike managing a conventional institution. Every decision must harmonize engineering with ecology. Roads must serve researchers without disrupting wildlife. Buildings should complement the landscape rather than dominate it. Even routine maintenance demands careful choreography around research schedules, weather patterns, and occasionally an elephant that has developed an inconvenient fascination with freshly repaired fences.

This revelation has elevated my appreciation that nature is an exceptional project manager. She respects neither deadlines nor Gantt charts.

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The Faces of Mpala



Isla Duporge

Postdoctoral Research Associate
at Princeton University

[Read more about Isla](#)

Originally from France and the UK, Isla Duporge is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Princeton University, holding a PhD in Zoology from Oxford and prior experience with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's wildlife crime programme, the European Commission, and the U.S. Department of Defense, tracking animals via satellite data.

This summer at Mpala, Isla supervised four Princeton undergraduates through the HMEI Internship Program, applying computational tools to animal movement — from drone-based ethograms for baboons to zebra escape behaviour using pose-estimation software. A highlight: she and her interns ran the Lewa Marathon, placing 1st, 4th, 10th, and 19th.

By the Numbers

18km

of Mpala roads
fixed by the
Infrastructure
Team

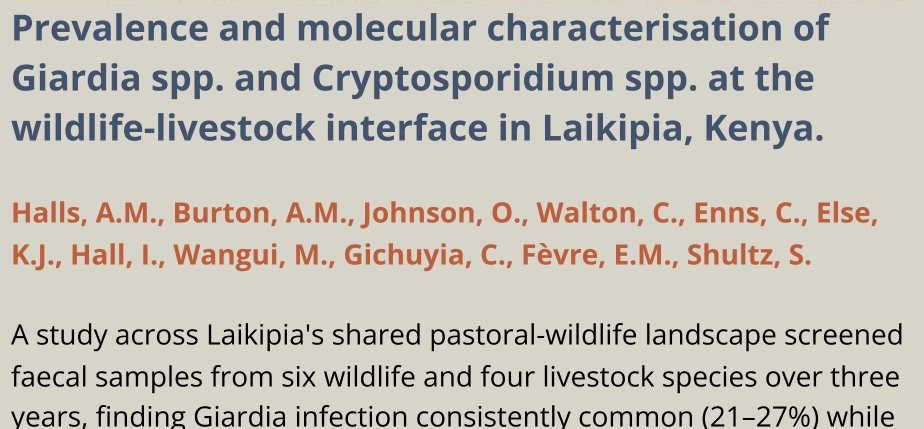
4,000

trees surveyed by the
animal transects team to
determine what an ele-
phant's favorite food is

1,135

faecal samples
collected by the
Vulturine Guineafowl
Team

Featured Publications

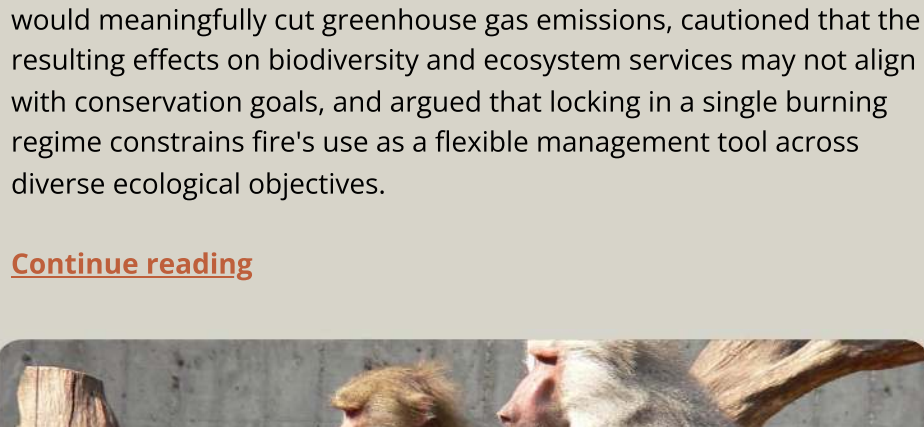


Prevalence and molecular characterisation of Giardia spp. and Cryptosporidium spp. at the wildlife-livestock interface in Laikipia, Kenya.

Halls, A.M., Burton, A.M., Johnson, O., Walton, C., Enns, C., Else, K.J., Hall, I., Wangui, M., Gichuyi, C., Fèvre, E.M., Shultz, S.

A study across Laikipia's shared pastoral-wildlife landscape screened faecal samples from six wildlife and four livestock species over three years, finding Giardia infection consistently common (21–27%) while Cryptosporidium stayed rare (0–5%). Genetic typing showed livestock mostly shared the livestock-adapted Giardia assemblage E, with only a small share of potentially zoonotic assemblages, while Cryptosporidium sequencing turned up mainly ungulate-specific species alongside the zoonotic C. ubiquitum.

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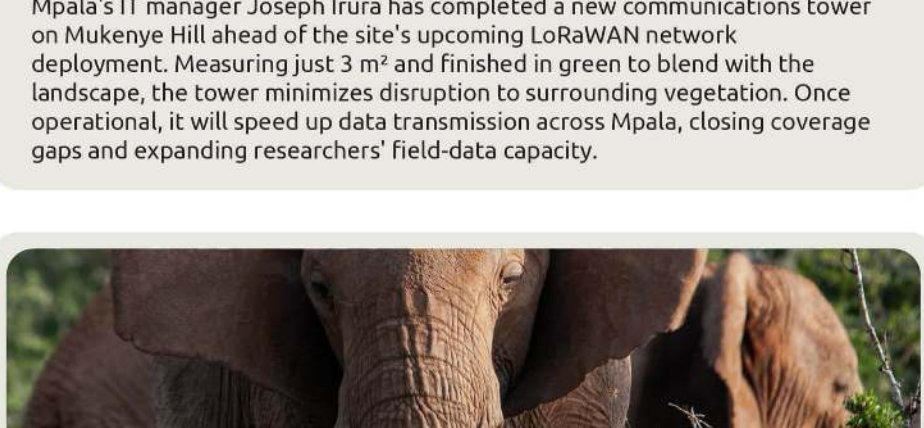


Viability and desirability of financing conservation in Africa through fire management.

Knowles, T., Stevens, N., Amoako, E.E., Armani, M., Barbosa, C., Beale, C., Bond, W., Chidumayo, E., Courtney-Mustaphi, C., Dintwe, K., Dobson, A., Donaldson, J., Dziba, L., Govender, N., Hempson, G., Humphrey, G.J., Kimuyu, D., Laris, P., N'Dri, A.B., Parr, C.L., Probert, J., Ruecker, G., Smit, I., Strydom, T., Syampungani, S., Archibald, S.

Examining the growing push to shift African conservation areas toward early dry-season burning, pitched as both ecologically favourable and a viable carbon revenue source, the authors reviewed existing peer-reviewed evidence on fire ecology and biogeochemistry across the continent. They found insufficient support for the claim that this shift would meaningfully cut greenhouse gas emissions, cautioned that the resulting effects on biodiversity and ecosystem services may not align with conservation goals, and argued that locking in a single burning regime constrains fire's use as a flexible management tool across diverse ecological objectives.

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A New Large Primate for Kenya: Hamadryas Baboon Papio hamadryas (Primates: Cercopithecidae).

de Jong, Y.A. & Butynski, T.M.

Surveying northern Kenya from the eastern shore of Lake Turkana to Malka Mari National Park and Wajir over eight expeditions between 2023 and 2025, the authors encountered 37 baboon groups, most of them olive baboons whose range now extends roughly 50 km further east than previously known.

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News Briefs



New LoRaWAN communications tower commissioned on Mukenye hill

Category: Infrastructure
Mpala's IT manager Joseph Irura has completed a new communications tower on Mukenye Hill ahead of the site's upcoming LoRaWAN network deployment. Measuring just 3 m² and finished in green to blend with the landscape, the tower minimizes disruption to surrounding vegetation. Once operational, it will speed up data transmission across Mpala, closing coverage gaps and expanding researchers' field-data capacity.



What's an Elephant's Favorite Food?

Category: Research
This summer, a Princeton team led by postdoc researcher, Megan Sullivan surveyed nearly 4,000 trees to determine elephants' feeding preferences. Elephants browsed about 40% of all plants, favoring 82% of Phyllanthus and 50% of Acacia trees, but just 4% of Croton. While acacias rely on thorns for defense, Croton uses chemical compounds to deter herbivores, insights now shaping how researchers understand elephant foraging at Mpala.



Mpala Celebrates World Ranger Day with Kenya Wildlife Service Event

Category: Community
On July 31st, Mpala celebrated its 63 male and 5 female rangers at a Kenya Wildlife Service event in Nanyuki, joined by rangers and partners from across Laikipia. Security Manager Thomas Kaitimot nominated Jackson Lopokot and Josephine Nantito for the Ranger Award. Congratulations to all rangers for their dedication and leadership.

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.

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