LAIKIPIA
– A NATURAL HISTORY GUIDE
Hyparrhenia collina

Butterfly: Colotis aurij ineus
Double-banded Orange

Butterfly: Euema brigitta
Broad-bordered grass yellow

Harpactine schimperti
“Upside-down grass”
LAIKIPIA
– A NATURAL HISTORY GUIDE

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD 5

WELCOME 7

INTRODUCTION
► The Lie of the Land 9
► The People 12
► The Conservation Effort 15

THE ECOLOGY
A Land of contrasting habitats 19
► Grassland and Open Woodland 21
► Acacia–Commiphora Woodland 25
► Forests 29
► Evergreen Bushland 33
► Rivers and Wetlands 35
► Scarps and Inselbergs 39

MAP OF LAIKIPIA & ENVIRONS 42–43

THE FAUNA
1. INSECTS 45
2. Other ARTHROPODS 51
3. REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS 53
4. BIRDS 57
5. MAMMALS 63
   – Checklist 67

Ten of a kind – ALOES 73

ADVISORY
Useful Information for Visitors 77
Further Reading 80
Credits and Acknowledgements 82

LAST WORD
About the Laikipia Wildlife Forum 84

Laikipia – A Natural History Guide 3
Grants gazelle (Gazella granti) on the central plain. Dry weather, noon.
FOREWORD

In this day and age of climate change and of escalating human population pressures, the natural world – and humanity’s place in it – is becoming increasingly embattled. The Laikipia region of Kenya stands out as one of only a few places without any formal Protected Area status where it has been possible, across vast expanses of private and communal land, to consolidate wildlife habitats and to preserve their biodiversity, while managing critical natural resources sustainably for the benefit of all.

This is no mean feat, given the many different land uses such an integrated conservation and resource-management vision must take into account. All the people of Laikipia – ranchers, pastoralists, commercial growers, small-scale farmers, small businesses, cooperatives, local community groups, and the operators and staff of tourism concerns – are to be congratulated on pooling their interests for the common good. The benefits of a secure and healthy natural environment are becoming ever more readily apparent to all these stakeholders.

At a time when wildlife populations outside National Parks and Reserves elsewhere in the country are in steep decline, Laikipia’s abundant wildlife – in Kenya, second only to that in the famed Masai Mara Ecosystem in terms of density – is proving a particularly valuable asset, underpinning a now-thriving eco-tourism industry. The growing economic benefits of tourism have discredited earlier perceptions of wild animals as being unavoidably in conflict with human endeavour. Faced with the prospect of an increasingly arid climate, the people of Laikipia can expect, over future generations, to have to depend more and more on spin-off from the wildlife in their midst.

Against this background, the publication of this guidebook – the first comprehensive account of the natural and human history of Laikipia – is a particularly welcome development. Laikipia – A Natural History Guide sheds important light on the region’s diverse habitats and wildlife, as well as on the conservation challenges of meeting the needs of future generations of people. The Laikipia Wildlife Forum is to be commended for producing a booklet that, over time, will help Laikipia to build on its fast growing and fully deserved reputation as one of Africa’s and the world’s most scenic, interesting and rewarding travel destinations.

Francis Ole Kaparo
Chairman
National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), Kenya
Welcome to Laikipia

Laikipia is one of Africa’s and the world’s most exciting wilderness safari and wildlife tourism destinations. The combination of abundant wildlife, spectacular scenery and extraordinary cultural diversity in a setting dominated by the iconic backdrop of Mount Kenya makes for an unforgettable experience.

After Tsavo, Laikipia is Kenya’s most extensive wildlife haven, forming part of the much broader 56,000-km² Ewaso Ecosystem. All of the ‘Big Five’ mammals – elephants, buffaloes, rhinos, lions and leopards – occur in Laikipia. Indeed, the Ewaso elephant population (of about 7,000 animals) is, in Kenya, outnumbered only by that in Tsavo. Wildlife population densities in Laikipia are, in Kenya, comparable only with densities to be found in the globally renowned Masai Mara Ecosystem.

Half of all the endangered Black Rhinos found in Kenya today are in Laikipia, which is home to no less than 37 % of Africa’s overall Eastern Black Rhino population. Moreover, Laikipia may now support as many as 250 lions – a significant proportion of the estimated 2,000 individuals that remain in Kenya.

The Ewaso Ecosystem hosts the largest populations left on Earth of various other endangered, range-restricted mammals, including both Grevy’s Zebra and the Reticulated Giraffe. In both cases, fewer than 3,000 animals survive, of which nearly 40 % are in Laikipia, which also supports the only remaining viable population of Jackson’s Hartbeest, as well as an expanding population of the globally endangered African Wild Dog.

In providing a safe refuge for four of the world’s last eight surviving

Northern White Rhinos, Laikipia may represent the final chance this embattled subspecies has of breeding again in a wild setting and thus of staving off otherwise certain extinction. The four rhinos were in December 2009 transferred to the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Laikipia from the Dvur Kralove Zoo in the Czech Republic.

The ‘Laikipia experience’ comes largely free of the constraints that apply in most National Parks and Reserves. Night game drives, guided nature walks, bike tours, horse-riding and camel treks – all prohibited in most parks – are just some of the exhilarating activities that await visitors to Laikipia. People too are an integral part of the Laikipia experience. A well-developed tourism infrastructure complete with high levels of community involvement and participation gives the visitor privileged access to the cultures and customs of the region’s Mukogodo Maasai, Samburu, Pokot and other peoples.

Our hope, in presenting this comprehensive and beautifully illustrated guide, is to give all of Laikipia’s visitors the perfect companion to what promises to be a rich and intensely rewarding Laikipia experience.

Welcome to Laikipia!

Maj. Gen. (rttd) Peter Waweru
Chairman
Laikipia Wildlife Forum
Laikipia is a land of high plains and rolling hills straddling the Equator in Kenya between Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Range on the eastern edge of the Great Rift Valley. Lying in the rain shadow of Mount Kenya, the 9,500-km² upland – despite its elevation (1,800–2,000 m above sea level) – receives much less rainfall than other parts of Africa of comparable altitude. As a result, most of Laikipia enjoys a cool, dry climate. To the north, the landmass drops away over the Laikipia Escarpment to the arid semi-deserts of northern Kenya.

Laikipia is one of only a few areas in East Africa, outside the region’s National Parks and Reserves, with sufficient natural habitat to support a full complement of large mammals – including elephants and lions. Wildlife can move freely across landholdings, private and communal, where people are an integral part of the landscape. The varied nature of the landholdings reflects a complex history of human settlement and a steep rainfall gradient, with small-scale farmers tilling wetter areas in the south, commercial cattle ranches in the intermediate areas, and semi-nomadic pastoralists in the dry north.

The natural vegetation is a mosaic of grassland, savannah (open woodland) and forest.

Land Use
Extensive ranches, of 3,000–125,000 acres apiece, cover much of Laikipia. The ranches are mostly privately owned, but one belongs to the Kenya Government, while two (Ol Pejeta and Eland Downs) are owned by conservation organisations. A foundation owns Mpala Ranch, setting of the Mpala Research Centre. On most of the private ranches, wildlife conservation and tourism activities are combined with raising livestock, mainly Boran crosses. These are humped cattle, originally from Ethiopia and descended mainly from the Asian zebu, which have been interbred with both European and locally domesticated African cattle.

Land in the Mukogodo area of northern Laikipia is divided up into ‘Group Ranches’ – community-owned private companies that allow people to maintain a traditional semi-nomadic system of rearing cattle, sheep and goats. Some group ranches have set up conservancies dedicated to wildlife conservation through community-operated tourism enterprises.

Since Kenya’s Independence in 1963, nearly 30% of Laikipia has been turned over to small-scale farming. Plot sizes in the settlement areas are typically of two to six acres. Productive farming areas in the south and the west, some irrigated, have human population densities exceeding 100 people per km². Cultivation is mainly of maize, often intercropped with beans and other vegetables.

Irrigated commercial farms on the slopes of Mount Kenya grow vegetables and flowers for export markets.

The only formally protected areas of Laikipia include seven indigenous forests, managed as forest reserves by the Kenya Forest Service. The Kirimun National Reserve in
NW Laikipia, gazetted in 1992 by the Laikipia County Council, has yet to be developed for conservation and tourism.

Laikipia’s only major towns are Nanyuki, with a population of roughly 49,000 (2009 Census) and Nyahururu (about 51,000). Smaller trading and administrative centres include Rumuruti (about 33,000).

Geology
Laikipia’s geology is dominated by ancient metamorphic rocks (gneisses) and by much more recent volcanic rocks (mostly basalts). The gneisses are derived from marine deposits more than 4,000-million years old that were pushed underground and exposed to heat, pressure and chemical action. These processes formed hard, crystalline rocks resembling granite, but containing a high proportion of quartz. Protruding remnants of these gneisses, exposed after millions of years of erosion at the earth’s surface, form distinctive outcrops, such as the Mukogodo Hills and Mukenya on Mpala Ranch.

Lying between the Rift Valley and the extinct volcano of Mount Kenya, Laikipia has in relatively recent times also been affected by volcanic activity. In the west are lava sheets from volcanoes that erupted on the Rift’s edge. Rocks overlying the basement gneisses in the east and south stem from the volcanism that some 3-million years ago formed Mount Kenya. These more complex rocks are a mixture of old mudflows, volcanic ash, lava sheets and basalts.

Weather
Laikipia has one of the most agreeable climates in the world – warm during the day and cool at night, with low humidity and plenty of sunshine. Mount Kenya is responsible for this moderate climate. Laikipia is on the Equator, so temperatures vary little year-round, although daily fluctuations can be marked. Mean monthly maximum temperatures are typically around 25°C, but northern areas are warmer. July and August are usually overcast and cool.

Rainfall in Laikipia is erratic. It is highest on the slopes of Mount Kenya and the Aberdares, in the SE and SW, where annual means exceed 1,000 mm. In the drier north annual means drop below 400 mm. There are two main rainy seasons, one (known as the ‘long rains’) in March–May and another (the ‘short rains’) in November. ‘Continental rains’ shed by clouds bearing moisture from Lake Victoria may fall between June and October. Sporadic showers may also fall at other times of the year.

Different parts of Laikipia receive their rainfall at different times. In the west, the main rains are the long rains and continental rains, while to the east the short rains are more pronounced. Severe droughts tend to occur at roughly ten-year intervals. In some years there may be exceptional rainfall, associated with the El Niño phenomenon. Weather records kept since the 1920s show no change in the average annual rainfall; only that rain now tends to fall in more intense bursts, with longer intervening dry periods. Most forecasts based on global warming models suggest that, while rainfall in northern Kenya is likely to increase, it will probably become even more erratic.

Most of Laikipia drains northward via the Ewaso Ng’iro River, which is joined by tributaries from Mount Kenya and the Aberdares. A major tributary, the Ewaso Narok, passes over Nyahururu’s spectacular Thomson’s Falls, named after the region’s first European visitor.

Streams rising in Laikipia flow only after prolonged heavy rains. Except in swampy areas, these watercourses remain dry for most of the year. Boreholes are used to feed water tanks on most of the ranches, where there are also an increasing number of artificial dams.

– CT
INTRODUCTION
The People

The earliest signs of a human presence in Laikipia are hand-axes dating back 500,000–1.5-million years, probably fabricated by Homo erectus or Homo ergaster. Other early signs include rock art, stone cairns and stone circles. Compared with the Rift Valley, there are few known archaeological sites in the area.

Laikipia’s inhabitants of 20,000 years ago were itinerant hunter-gatherers whose stone tools, made from flaked obsidian, were traded over considerable distances. Cattle arrived about 3,000 years ago, probably with the southward expansion of pastoralists from what is now Ethiopia. Sheep and goats soon followed. The relationship between the hunter-gatherers and the pastoralists is not clearly understood – in terms of whether they remained distinct groups, or whether each borrowed aspects of the other’s lifestyle.

Laikipia’s vegetation then consisted largely of Olive and Pencil-Cedar woodland. After the pastoralists arrived, conditions became drier and more seasonal, and there was an increase in Acacia bushland cover, giving way eventually to open grassland. The pastoralists’ use of burning to promote the spread of grassland and to remove ticks may have triggered this change. A general drying out of the area may also have played a part. Conditions in 1600–1800 are known to have been much drier than at present.

Until about 1550, most of Laikipia’s people are thought to have been hunter-gatherers from the Mukogodo and Ndigiri groups, some of whose descendants still live in northern Laikipia. Another group, the Wardei Darya, then migrated from present-day Ethiopia, trading and inter-marrying with both groups. The Mukogodo (or Yaaku), who were specialist elephant hunters, adopted the Wardei Darya’s Cushitic language, still spoken by a few old people today. But then, in about 1790, Maa-speaking pastoralists arrived, displacing the Wardei Darya and going on to dominate the region for the next one hundred years.

In the early 19th Century, the Maasai moved away from what had been a mixed livestock and arable economy to become specialist pastoralists. They also acquired a high level of social organisation and developed a warrior caste – the morans – that allowed them to hold sway militarily and to capture cattle from other groups. Two main groups emerged: the Laikipiak Maasai on the highlands, and the Purko-Kisongo Maasai in the Rift Valley. Fighting between these two groups erupted in about 1870. Initially, the Laikipiak dominated, but it was the Purko-Kisongo who eventually prevailed, after the rallying of massive warrior bands under Mbatian, their laibon (spiritual leader).

In the early 1880s, a calamitous cattle epidemic – probably pleuro-pneumonia – checked Purko-Kisongo expansion. This was curtailed further by the rinderpest epidemic that swept through Kenya in 1889–1891, killing huge numbers of livestock. The resulting famine, together with a smallpox epidemic, greatly reduced the area’s human population.

Late in the 19th Century, the first Europeans arrived, and soon afterwards – in the early years of the 20th Century – Britain consolidated its Colonial dominion over Kenya. At the time, Maasai livestock herds in Laikipia had been building up again. But, for various reasons, not least
the desire to open up land for European settlement, the Colonial administration persuaded Lenana (Mbatian’s successor as laibon) that Laikipia’s Maasai population should move to Narok, near today’s Masai Mara National Reserve. The Maasai departed in June 1912.

The Maasai exodus left few Africans in Laikipia, except for hunter-gatherers such as the Yaaku and the Ndigiri in the Mukogodo Reserve. This paved the way for European settlement, which began immediately after World War I with the allocation of farmland under the Soldier Settler Scheme. Initially, most of the farms were of 1,000–5,000 acres. Many, though, were found to be too small for profitable livestock ranching. Before the Great Depression of the late 1920s, many of the ranches were consolidated into larger holdings, of 20,000–40,000 acres apiece. Early on, the focus was on raising cattle, but later sheep would often prove more rewarding.

Under the European ranchers, recourse to burning declined. The result was a period of bush encroachment—a trend elephants have since partly reversed. For much of the 20th Century, ranchers relied on intensively managed fenced paddocks. But, when elephants destroyed the fences, many reverted to more traditional methods, using herders to look after their animals, and thorn bomas to protect them at night.

After Independence in 1963, many Europeans left Kenya. The Government—or, in some cases, settlement companies—bought farms in wetter areas along Laikipia’s southern rim, and small-scale arable farmers moved in. The settlement process has been gradual, as incoming farmers have faced many problems, including land too marginal for agriculture, severe human–wildlife conflict and general insecurity.

Only farmers in the wetter areas have been successful. Those in drier areas have struggled, and some have given up, depending instead on remissions from family members elsewhere, or on famine relief. Occupation of plots in some marginal areas stands at 5–10%, compared with 80% in the wetter areas. Crop-raiding elephants have presented an added problem, as has conflict with pastoralist squatters on some abandoned plots.

Laikipia’s current population consists mainly of Kikuyu people, whose families hail originally from Nyeri and other areas SW of Mount Kenya, and of Meru people from the mountain’s eastern foothills. More recently, there has been an influx of people from elsewhere in Kenya, who have come to work on the area’s commercial flower and vegetable farms.

A small number of Europeans still own and work on the big ranches. Most are Kenya citizens whose families have lived in the country for several generations. Many of the ranch workers are pastoralists from within Laikipia, but there are also some Turkana people from the north, among representatives of other ethnic groups.

The inhabitants of Mukogodo, now known as Mukogodo Maasai, are of mixed ethnicity. Some groups, such as the Mumonyot, are remnants of the Laikipiak Maasai, while others are descended from the hunter-gatherers formerly known as Ndorobos. Pokot pastoralists have moved into western Laikipia from the Rift Valley, while in northern Laikipia there are some Samburu pastoralists. Several Kenyans of south Asian origin run businesses in Nanyuki and in Laikipia’s other towns.
Laikipia is widely hailed as a model for wildlife conservation on private land in Africa. Until the 1980s, however, its significance for conservation was overlooked in favour of other, better known wildlife areas such as the Masai Mara, Tsavo, Amboseli and Samburu.

Before 1980, very few Laikipia ranchers took kindly to the presence on their land of wild animals. Some tolerated the wildlife for sentimental reasons; others did so because they were benefiting from safari hunting or from other forms of consumptive use. To the majority, however, wildlife was a costly nuisance. It competed with, or preyed on, livestock, and as such, it had to be ‘controlled’.

The devastating rinderpest epidemic of the 1890s had greatly reduced Laikipia’s wildlife numbers. From this low base, numbers were further kept in check by the slaughter of antelopes and zebras during World War II to feed Italian prisoners of war held in Nanyuki. Subsequent game control kept numbers down. Zebras, buffaloes and other animals were culled regularly, as they were seen to be competing with cattle and because their presence made ticks and tick-borne diseases harder to control. The shooting on ranches of lions and other large predators was commonplace.

Yet, despite decades of game control, there were – in the 1970s – still significant wildlife populations in Laikipia. The area’s first tourism camp, on Lewa Downs, was set up on the back of Kenya’s tourism boom of the 1960s and ’70s. As tourism activity expanded, ranchers came to view the wildlife on their land in a new light. Presented with tourism as a viable land use, they took an interest in conservation, becoming more tolerant of wild grazers and of lions and other predators.

In the 1980s, amid global concern over the fate of the Black Rhinoceros, then the target of unprecedented poaching activity across Africa, Laikipia took the lead in providing sanctuaries for the region’s last remaining rhinos, captured in remote parts of northern Kenya. This initiative, spearheaded by Solio and Lewa, proved so successful that today Laikipia is home to most of the Black Rhinos in Kenya.

As conservation interest continued to grow, new challenges arose. Most daunting was a sudden influx of large elephant herds. Before the 1970s, elephants were largely absent from Laikipia. Small groups would be seen occasionally, passing through forested northern areas. Ivory poaching in neighbouring Samburu in the 1980s, however, drove more and more elephants into Laikipia. Elephant numbers have been increasing ever since. While elephants are a valued tourist attraction, their destructive impact continues to have far-reaching implications for land management and conservation.

Initially, ranches bore the brunt of the damage, as elephants flattened fences and broke water piping. But then, as herds moved further south into farmlands, they took to crop-raiding as well. The resulting human–elephant conflict triggered a political uproar. A 150-km-long elephant-proof fence has since been erected between the conservation and the farming areas.

In this context, the original goals of the Laikipia Wildlife Forum – a group of local landowners formed in 1992 and registered in 1996 – seem surprisingly modest. The body’s
prime functions then were to coordinate the cropping for meat and skins of surplus Plains Zebras on commercial ranches and smallholdings where the animals were proving a menace, and to develop a radio system through which to alert members and security personnel to incursions by poachers and cattle rustlers.

The Forum has since taken on a far broader role, spanning all aspects of conservation and land and resource management. To have succeeded in devising and implementing an integrated conservation strategy for the entire region is remarkable, given that land uses and ownership structures in Laikipia vary so widely. The Forum’s membership is necessarily wide-ranging, in the interests of ensuring that all sectors of the broader community are represented.

Tourism provides much of the funding for conservation. In Laikipia, the Forum has paved the way for development of some of the world’s most innovative and successful community-run eco-tourism and conservation ventures. Proceeds from tourism have enabled local people to benefit directly from wildlife, while having the Forum to provide advisory support and marketing and promotion.

The success of community-owned tourism and conservation enterprises (such as Il Ngwesi) on the communal (group) ranches of North Laikipia has not only provided shareholders with much-needed supplementary incomes; it has also helped secure important wildlife dispersal areas. The strong sense of ownership among community groups has helped to conserve habitats such as the remote Mukogodo Forest. Similarly, tree cover in the Ngare Ndare Forest, adjacent to the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, has increased since responsibility for managing this forest was devolved to neighbouring communities.

Given Laikipia’s erratic rainfall, it is important for wildlife to be able to move freely within the ecosystem, so animals can follow the rains. The Forum has encouraged its members to limit fencing on and between ranches.

Conservation education is another priority, and in the Forum’s bus schoolchildren are given guided tours of Laikipia’s conservation areas.

A scarcity of water is Laikipia’s single most pressing challenge. Formerly perennial streams emanating from Mount Kenya and the Aberdares are now increasingly seasonal in character. Even the Ewaso Ng’iro River, the region’s main artery, has in dry years stopped flowing – severely impacting downstream wildlife and human populations. Commercial farmers, no longer able to rely on river water, have been forced into operating irrigation systems utilising floodwater collected in dams and reservoirs. Growing human populations along the upper reaches of rivers, coupled with illegal water extraction (mostly by small-scale farms), remains a serious conservation concern. Support from the Forum has enabled communities to establish River Water Users’ Associations, providing for better management of water resources.

In continuing to meet all these challenges, the Forum is fortunate in being able to draw on the collective expertise of an extensive support network of major scientific and research institutions. The work of the Mpala Research Centre, for example, as an institutional member of the Forum, has provided crucial insights into many of the region’s complex wildlife and environmental issues.

– CT
Mimosaceae

Acacia mellow
Wait-a-bit thorn

One of the best trees for honey production.
Laikipia – Principal Habitat Types

- Grassland and Open Woodland
- Acacia–Commiphora Woodland
- Forests
- Evergreen Bushland
- Rivers and Wetlands
- Scarps and kopjes
Laikipia’s diverse habitats are a reflection of the prevailing climate and of local variations in rainfall and drainage, altitude and soil composition. Other major influences include our own activities and – more recently – those of elephants.

The dominant vegetation is savannah, comprising a mixture of grassland and open woodland. Coarse grasses, interspersed with stunted Whistling Thorns, *Acacia drepanolobium*, are typical of the region’s volcanic ‘black cotton’ soils. Other trees cannot easily get established in these soils, which are parched for long periods, but rapidly become waterlogged after rain.

In areas of red soil, derived from a mixture of uplifted Precambrian basement rocks and phonolites deposited by lava flows that swept in during the formation of the Great Rift Valley, the grass cover is sparser, but often more nutritious. On hillsides, various *Acacia* species come into their own, in places forming thickets with *Euphorbia* trees. Elephants have in recent years destroyed many of the *Acacia* trees in flatter areas.

The principal habitat in dry northern parts of Laikipia is a transitional form of *Acacia–Commiphora woodland* dominated by *Acacia* trees, notably *A. mellifera*. This spiny, mostly deciduous vegetation grows largely in reddish soils that receive little rainfall.

**Forests** of African Olive and Pencil Cedar once covered much of the region. Today’s more arid climate, however, coupled with increased human settlement and activity, have dramatically reduced this forest cover. What pockets of upland dry forest remain in settled areas can be found mainly in sheltered gorges and on steep slopes. There are, however, seven designated Forest Reserves in Laikipia.

Some once-forested areas that have been cleared or degraded have experienced a proliferation of evergreen bushland. This consists chiefly of the shrubs *Euclea divinorum* (or Mukinyei) and *Acokanthera schimperi* (the Arrow Poison Tree). Browsing wild animals and livestock avoid the latter, which is toxic, and will eat *Euclea* leaves only as a last resort. Coppicing readily when disturbed, *Euclea* can be a prolific invader of grass-and-open-woodland habitats.

Overgrazing in some western parts of Laikipia has resulted in a proliferation of the evergreen Lelesha Bush, *Tarchonanthus camphoratus*. Another hardy shrub, *Dodonaea angustifolia* (the Sand Olive), now appears to be spreading.

Fringing woodlands of yellow-barked Fever Trees, *Acacia xanthophloea*, have long been a feature of Laikipia’s various rivers and wetlands. These woodlands are now in decline, following destruction by elephants and recourse to the draining and burning of marshlands. Reed beds and stands of papyrus have diminished correspondingly. Some huge fig trees grow on rocky stream banks, providing plentiful fruit year-round for birds, bats and other animals.

Rocky landscapes in Laikipia include scars and kopjes. The kopjes are spectacular isolated outcrops of ancient metamorphic bedrock known as gneiss, while the escarpments are the aftermath of relatively recent lava flows. Both rocky habitats provide secure niches for diverse plant communities, sheltering a number of uncommon succulents and herbs.

– GB
Mimosaceae

Acacia drepanolobium
Whistling-thorn

Flowering twig showing cocktail ants which inhabit the galls.
Laikipia’s grassland and open woodland habitats epitomise the classic savannah scenery often associated with East Africa. Here, under wide skies and against a backdrop of low hills, herds of animals tramp across gently undulating plains of grass interspersed with scattered *Acacia* trees.

Such landscapes occupy more than half of Laikipia. The mix of grasses and the make-up of the open woodland vary, in keeping with local differences in rainfall, altitude, underlying soil composition, drainage, gradient and exposure to fire. Elephants and other large herbivores play a major part in shaping these habitats, as do humans and their livestock.

Rainfall, increasingly erratic and patchy over most parts of Laikipia, is critical in sustaining the region’s grass-and-open-woodland habitats. A few good downpours can, within days, transform grasslands reduced to virtual dustbowls during a prolonged dry season into rippling fields of green and gold.

Most of Laikipia’s grasslands derive from and depend for their existence on the grazing animals they in turn sustain, as the basis of the ecosystem’s food chain. Apart from herds of domestic livestock, these animals include African Buffalo, both Plains and Grevy’s Zebras, Jackson’s Hartebeest and Thomson’s Gazelles. Were it not for these grazers, the grass cover would become rank and unpalatable. Then, if browsers and mixed feeders (such as Grant’s Gazelles) are not present in sufficient numbers, woody shrubs will take root and proliferate.

Historically, deliberate burning encouraged the spread of grassland and kept encroaching woodland at bay. Today, in the absence of planned fires, it is mainly elephants that perform this function, pushing over trees and devouring shrubs, so creating more and more space and opportunity for grasses.

Almost wholly absent from Laikipia until the 1970s, elephants — now present in increasing numbers — have, in the past 40 years, reduced by more than half the density of *Acacia* trees on some grassy plains. Other browsing mammals, such as Eland, Reticulated Giraffe and (more recently) Black Rhinos as well, help to keep the woody vegetation in check.

Soil composition, above all, determines the make-up of Laikipia’s grass-and-open-woodland plant communities. ‘Black cotton’ soils, derived from mixed deposits of volcanic ash, old mudflows, lava sheets and basalt, cover vast areas of Laikipia, providing a substrate for the diverse grasses, herbs and other plants that together form Whistling Thorn grassland, so named for its distinctive scattering of stunted *Acacia drepanolobium* trees.

In areas of reddish brown soil bearing phonolites deposited by the lava flows that swept across parts of Laikipia during the formation of the Great Rift Valley, grass cover is sparser, but often more nutritious, and various other *Acacia* species — notably *A. mellifera* and *A. seyal* — come into their own, forming thickets in places, interspersed with spectacular *Euphorbia* trees.

Sandy soils of another type, derived from ancient granitic bedrock (gneiss), also support...
extensive Acacia woodlands. Features of these and of the phonolite-based woodlands are scattered open glades of grass. These treeless glades mark the sites of old bomas (cattle enclosures) used by the Maasai during the 19th century and, more recently, in modern boma management. The glades are the result of concentrations of nutrient-rich cattle dung. Grasses in the glades differ from those in the surrounding Acacia woodland, and are of fewer, yet highly palatable species. These grasses continue to attract numerous grazing mammals, which have ensured that the glades persist.

A form of ‘Highland Grassland’, complete with luxuriant, tall grass species such as Wild Sorghum, *Sorghum versicolor*, and Thatch Grass, *Hyparrhenia rufa*, is found around forest edges in some of Laikipia’s wetter, higher-lying areas.

The most widely occurring grass species on Laikipia’s ‘Scattered Tree’ grasslands is *Themeda triandra*, or Red Oat Grass, which on maturing acquires a distinctive coppery-russet hue. Fresh shoots of this grass, emerging from the parched ground as the rains approach, develop quickly into a palatable, nutritious sward that for long periods constitutes the staple diet of many grazing herbivores.

Clumps of the unpalatable Wire Grass, *Pennisetum schimperi*, have invaded some heavily grazed Red-Oat-Grass-dominated plains, where other grasses – including *Eragrostis superba*, Love Grass and various Star Grasses (*Digitaria* and *Cynodon* spp.) – as well as herbs such as *Indigofera* (an important legume for grazers) are usually also present. Short grasses, such as *Harpachne*, whose sharp spears cling unerringly to hikers’ socks, are common in sparser areas.

With the onset of the rains, small flowering plants of dozens of species appear on the grasslands. White ‘Tissue Paper’ flowers, *Cycnium* spp., briefly carpet the ground, while the long, drooping heads of the striking pink-and-white-striped Pyjama Lily, *Crinum macowanii*, appear here and there, as do yellow-flowering members of the Daisy Family (Compositae). At such times, roadsides are often lined with the dainty blue flowers of *Pentanisia ouranogyne*, a particular favourite among butterflies.

In Laikipia’s Whistling Thorn grasslands, tufts of *Ischaemum brachyatherum* grass – a specialist ‘black cotton’ perennial bearing tall spiky racemes – are dominant in places, replacing the otherwise plentiful Red Oat Grass. Small clearings in this habitat, resulting from subterranean termite activity, are dominated by the hardy perennial *Pennisetum stramineum*, the new shoots of which are prized among grazing animals. Dense, unpalatable clumps of the tall Bamboo Grass, *Pennisetum mezianum*, have become established in some overgrazed areas. Other grasses of the ‘black cotton’ soils include *Lintonia nutans* and *Brachiaria lachnantha*.

Parched for much of the year into uneven, deeply cracked and trampled clods of hard-baked clay, the ‘black cotton’ soils are seasonally inundated, rapidly becoming waterlogged and sticky after rain. Whistling Thorns and White Thorns (*Acacia seyal*) apart, trees cannot easily become established in these soils, which also support fewer grass species than the red soils. Whistling Thorn grasslands cover about one-quarter of Laikipia’s land area.

The ecology of the Whistling Thorn is fascinating in that it is shaped, not only by climate and topography and by the
actions of large browsing herbivores, but also by veritable armies of very much smaller creatures: ants.

The ants – Red-headed and Black-headed *Crematogaster* Cocktail Ants, of three species, along with another species of Skinny Black Ant, *Tetraponera penzigi* – live inside the swollen thorns (galls) of the trees, relying for their nourishment on the sugary secretions of special leaf glands called extra-floral nectaries. In return, the ants provide a round-the-clock security service, defending the foliage of their host trees by swarming over, biting and seeing off browsing mammals, including elephants and giraffes, as well as many smaller yet equally destructive would-be nibblers, such as caterpillars and locusts. The partnership between the ants and the Whistling Thorn is one of the most striking examples of mutualism in all of nature.

Dung Beetles, meanwhile, play a crucial role in maintaining the health of the grasslands. Were it not for these beetles, the accumulated dung of all the large, hoofed mammals would damage pasture quality and create breeding sites for biting and disease-carrying flies – as happened in Australia when cattle were introduced without dung beetles. By burying the dung, the beetles ensure it is broken down rapidly and recycled into soil nutrients. At the same time, the beetles effectively ‘plant’ seeds dispersed in the dung. Laikipia is a major centre of Dung Beetle diversity.

Other insects that play key roles in shaping the ecology of Laikipia’s grass-and-open-woodland habitats include termites, which by digesting plant matter around the clock ensure that soil nutrients are constantly replenished, and Harvester Ants, which are important dispersers of grass seeds on the plains. Termite mounds are often not obvious in Laikipia, but after good rains eruptions of mushrooms, the fruiting bodies of the fungi they farm underground, pepper the ground above nests, betraying the mounds of some common grassland termite species.

— DJM
Guenther's Dikdik
(Madoqua guentheri)
2. Acacia–Commiphora Woodland

The tangled, spiny, very often leafless vegetation of the dry, low-lying northern reaches of Laikipia, abutting on Samburuland, is a transitional form of the semi-arid Acacia–Commiphora woodland and bush that extends over much of northern and NE Kenya and across into the Horn of Africa.

The contrast between the high plains of central Laikipia and these semi-arid lowlands is dramatic. A sharp drop in altitude, from 1,800–2,000 m above sea level to 900–1,000 m, coupled with a rise in temperature and a marked decline in annual rainfall (from a mean exceeding 800 mm on the plains to one of below 400 mm), has created, in the north, a harsh, rugged landscape quite unlike any found elsewhere in Laikipia.

Steep SW–NE gradients mark the transition between two of continental Africa’s major ecological communities, or biomes: namely, the eastern African savannahs (of which Laikipia’s grasslands are the northernmost fringe) and the dry lands of the Horn of Africa.

A scarcity of water underpins the entire ecology of Laikipia’s dry north, where – as in other Acacia–Commiphora woodland habitats – extreme measures of self-preservation are called for. The dominant Acacia and occasional Commiphora trees, which give this habitat its name, form thickets with many other deciduous shrubs and trees that remain leafless for as much as nine months of the year. Only by ‘shutting down’ in this way can the trees conserve enough energy to withstand prolonged dry spells. As a result, these woodlands seem, for long periods, to be in a suspended state, just waiting for what precious, life-sustaining rain showers might come their way.

At such times, imposing Boscia trees – with iron-like trunks and small, leathery leaves, very well adapted to the dry conditions – and various scattered succulents, including Euphorbia magnicapsula var. magnicapsula, are among the few large evergreens on view.

New grasses spring up from the red dust and from sandy patches in stonier, more open ground. From rhizomes and tubers, or from seeds that had been lying buried in the soil, herbs and other plants emerge, in what – for wildlife and for the area’s semi-nomadic pastoralists and their herds...
of cattle, sheep, goats and camels – is a veritable, if all too brief, season of plenty.

Then, for a few months, the woodland is a lush green tapestry filled with flowers, creepers and exuberant insect life. Creeping Black-eyed Susans, *Thunbergia* sp., carpet the ground, while various Morning Glories, *Ipomoea* spp., climb over low-slung branches, imparting a riot of colour. There are flowering Aloes in scattered clumps on the ground, and – in places – eruptions of red-blooming *Boophone disticha* lilies. Rock Violets, *Craterostigma* spp., cluster around small rock pools, while miniature gardens of the delicate mints, *Ocimum* and *Orthosiphon*, form under shading Acacias, soaking up precious moisture while they can. And now, ironically, it is the towering *Boscia* trees that tend to lose their leaves, on being invaded by hordes of feasting caterpillars from the butterfly family Pieridae (the Common Whites).

Elephants, moving down from the highlands, take full advantage of the suddenly plentiful browse, migrating northward to Samburu, slaking their thirst in short-lived pools of standing water along the way. Stripping the bark from many of the *Acacia* trees as they go, the elephants – by spending more time in Laikipia North than in former times – are having an increasingly marked impact on local tree densities.

All too quickly, however, the temporary water sources dry up, and the trees, now festooned in seedpods, start to shed their withered foliage. And, as another long ‘shut-down’ begins, the elephants return to the highlands, where they know they can find water. The *Commiphora* trees, with their angular, twisted branches and peeling, papery bark, are reduced again to mere skeletons, offering little shade from the blistering sun. Specialist tree-browsers, such as Reticulated Giraffe and Gerenuk, are forced into making full use of their adaptive advantages (of height, in the case of the giraffes, and reach while standing on their hind legs, in the case of the Gerenuks) to pluck whatever green twigs can be found.

The woodlands soon revert to the monotonous grey tangle of bare, twisted limbs that will tide the starved shrubs and trees through the rigours of another long dry season. From low, spiky clumps of *Sansevieria* and other succulents, such as the ubiquitous, wiry *Euphorbia heterospina*, the Greater Kudu – another dry-country specialist, whose varied diet also includes the fallen pods of the Acacias –
draws vital sustenance. Of all the mammals living in these thirsty woodlands, the one that perhaps best encapsulates what it takes to survive is the diminutive, plucky dikdik, pairs of which manage, within the confines of small territories, to get all the moisture they need from a diet of shoots, buds, twigs and bark from various low herbs and shrubs, without ever having to drink at all.

In this land of extremes, overgrazing by livestock is a constant threat to the equilibrium of the Acacia–Commiphora woodland ecology. Overstocking and mismanagement can easily tilt the balance from a productive relationship to one that is damaging to both the environment and to the pastoralists who, with their livestock herds, depend on the fragile resources the habitat provides. Overgrazing quickly produces areas of ‘capped ground’ – where the soil is rendered hard and impermeable, preventing grass cover from re-establishing itself. Imbalances can be made cruelly apparent during periodic protracted droughts, when the rains fail repeatedly and livestock animals, mainly cattle, may perish in large numbers.

The Acacia–Commiphora woodlands depend, for their stability, on responding to the extreme conditions manifest at different times of the year. Flooding the market all at once with abundant browse and grazing for limited periods after rain mitigates the impact of large herbivores, which – momentarily spoilt for choice – disperse widely across the landscape, allowing the vegetation plenty of scope to regenerate. When, in the absence of water, the vegetation ‘shuts down’, many of the large browsing herbivores leave the woodlands, sparing the trees and shrubs.

Despite their generally austere appearance, these dry woodlands are – for some lesser creatures – the richest habitat in Africa. Here, the diversity of native bees, for example, is unparalleled, extending to several hundreds of species. More than 50 of these species may, at any one time, be found on a single flowering *Acacia*. The Acacia–Commiphora woodlands of Laikipia are renowned for yielding exceptionally high volumes of the finest quality honey from managed honeybees, especially in years when *Acacia mellifera* is flowering profusely.

– DJM

Facing page: *Ipomoea jaegeri* (top); *Commiphora schimperi*. Above: *Boscia angustifolia*. 
3. Forests

Forests and woodlands of Olive (*Olea europaea* ssp. *cuspidatus*) and Pencil Cedar (*Juniperus procera*) once covered much of Laikipia. We know this from pollen cores found in the area, dating back thousands of years – to a time when the region’s climate was much wetter than it is now.

Today’s more arid climate, coupled with the effects of escalating human activity, has greatly reduced Laikipia’s forest cover. What isolated pockets of natural forest remain in settled areas can be found mainly in sheltered gorges and on steep hillsides.

Technically, these forest remnants are of upland dry forest: the kind of forest that historically in Kenya flourished in exactly the altitude range – of 1,600–2,000 m above sea level – and under the same moderate climate that humanity finds most agreeable. Inevitably then, large swaths of forest in Laikipia have been cleared for cultivation and settlement, while being exploited for timber and firewood, as well as for charcoal production.

There are, however, still six protected upland dry forests in Laikipia. Of these, five – Rumuruti, Ewaso Narok, Marmanet, Shamanek and Lariak – are in the SW corner of the region, on the northern foothills of the Aberdare Range, north and NE of the town of Nyahururu. These are isolated, partially degraded fragments of a once vast and continuous expanse of forest bisected by the Ewaso Narok River. A sixth forest, Ngare Ndare, on the northern foothills of Mount Kenya in the east, is Laikipia’s best preserved upland dry forest, covering an area of 5,500 hectares.

A seventh forest, Mukogodo, in the remote northern reaches of Laikipia, differs in being a dry forest – rooted, not in volcanic soils, but on steep hillsides of granitic composition. Being relatively inaccessible, Mukogodo is the most pristine of Laikipia’s forest habitats. A strong sense of ownership among local people has contributed to keeping this dry forest intact.

Upland forests are critical in maintaining the hydrological balance of ecosystems, acting as live sponges that generate precipitation and hold rainwater, which they release slowly into streams, especially during dry periods. Laikipia is fortunate in having been able to depend on two primary forest watersheds – the Aberdares and Mount Kenya – that have remained largely intact. Increasing water off-take upstream of Laikipia, however, along feeder streams from both mountain masses, is reducing flows, turning some local rivers, once perennial, into seasonal streams.

The periodic drying of rivers has lent new urgency to upland forest conservation efforts. Rivers arising in Laikipia, in turn, help sustain downstream communities of people and wildlife, as far away as Samburu and Isiolo. All seven Laikipia forests are gazetted Forest Reserves. Each has a Community Forest Association, registered under the Kenya Forest Service and backed by various stakeholders and donors. The Associations are broad-based, representing all user groups, with interests ranging from beekeeping and water-use to tree planting and firewood-collection.

In the case of Ngare Ndare, the conservation effort has –
with guidance from the Trust set up to manage this forest on behalf of the Kenya Forest Service — resulted in significantly increased tree cover.

**Ngare Ndare Forest**

Ngare Ndare is located in the transitional zone between the montane forest of Mount Kenya and the dry Olive and Pencil-Cedar forests and woodlands of the lower elevations. As such, it receives more rain than other, more typical upland dry forests, and is moister. An enchanting place, Ngare Ndare offers some of the most scenic forest hiking and camping opportunities to be found anywhere.

The dominant trees are African Olives and Pencil Cedars, but there are also some magnificent stands of Podo, *Afrocarpus gracilior* (formerly *Podocarpus falcatus*). Springs and underground aquifers in the forest feed several streams, making Ngare Ndare a significant rainfall catchment for rivers flowing north into the dry country and on towards Samburu and Isiolo.

Along these clear, fern-lined streams, Wild Date Palms, *Phoenix reclinata*, form huge, attractive clumps, seasonally providing fruit for many bats, other mammals and birds. Tall, statuesque Strangler Figs, *Ficus thonnongii*, are equally bountiful. At times, the pale new leaves of *Celtis africana* — deciduous hardwood trees with sheer, straight trunks — give the forest an autumnal look. And the Cape Chestnuts, *Calodendrum capense*, when bedecked in exquisite pale pink flowers, are perhaps the most striking of all Laikipia’s forest trees. Fringing thickets of *Teclea*, *Vepris simplicifolia*, and other shrubby evergreens provide ample cover for buffaloes, Bushbuck, Bush Duikers and other forest animals.

Ngare Ndare is one of only a few remaining thoroughfares open to elephants moving between Mount Kenya’s forests and the distant northern rangelands of Samburu. Each year, some elephants ply the Elephant Corridor linking the Mount Kenya National Park with Ngare Ndare. Old pathways elsewhere, in the neighbouring districts of Meru, to the east, have been blocked by settlements and farmlands.

**Mukogodo Forest**

Mukogodo, spanning 30,189 hectares of rugged hillside terrain in NE Laikipia, is the largest and best preserved of all the region’s forests. That it has remained almost wholly intact can be attributed, not only to a relatively remote location with limited road access, but also to the traditional governance structures of the

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**Top:** Common Diadem butterfly, male. **Left:** Female Common Diadem. **Facing page:** False Tiger ‘Forester’ Moth.
hunter-gatherers who, for centuries, have lived near the forest.

This community has succeeded, in the absence of conservation interventions from without, in warding off loggers intent on plundering the area’s Pencil Cedar trees, and in regulating access by pastoralist communities to grazing in the forest during dry spells. The integrity of the forest has been widely respected as a result. Today, Mukogodo is extolled as a model of sustainable use, and of the capacity of local people to safeguard the forest resources on which they depend.

As well as impressive stands of Pencil Cedar and Olive, Mukogodo boasts some magnificent Crotons, *C. megalocarpus*, tall, graceful trees that are typical of dry forest habitats, having flattish, spreading crowns and layered silvery leaves. The nectar of the creamy-white Croton flowers attracts countless bees, providing local community groups with a rich source of honey. In the northern reaches of the forest, other plants – such as giant *Euphorbia candelabrum* trees and ‘Blue-Bark’ Commiphoras, *C. baluensis* – become prominent. Before the rains the Dombeya, *D. rotundifolia*, produces exquisite bunches of pale pink flowers resembling cherry blossoms.

After good rains, glades in the forest are carpeted with wildflowers, and for a few weeks the ‘Tissue Paper’ flower, *Cycnium tubulorum*, in particular, is ubiquitous, interspersed with clumps of the attractive white Gladiolus, *G. ukambanensis*, and other flowering lilies. Women enter the forest to gather the cucumber-like fruits of the creeper, *Coccinea grandis*. Turning orange when ripe, these fruits are a prized seasonal delicacy among local people, who are careful to discard the pith, which if eaten can cause severe stomachaches.

– AP
Fruit edible but said to give diarrhoea if too much is eaten. Leaves have high protein content but are protected from heavy browsing by volatile oils in tannins. Cattle will eat in a drought, especially if cut and provided at the bomas.

Specimen: El Karama Ranch.
4. Evergreen Bushland

Tracts of flourishing evergreen bushland now cover large areas of Laikipia. The bushland vegetation typically consists of just a few hardy plant species. Some of the bushland is monotypic, being dominated by a single indigenous shrub species. In parts of Laikipia, a marked increase in the extent of these bushlands has been observed in the recent past. This habitat type is most common in once-forested areas that have been cleared or degraded, as well as in areas with a history of overgrazing.

The native evergreen shrub *Euclea divinorum* (Mukinyei), once confined mainly to rocky slopes on upland forest verges, has become dominant in parts of south-central Laikipia. This multi-branched shrub remains leafy and green during even the most searing droughts, providing shade and cover for many animals. *Euclea* has a formidable root system, sending up suckers far from its main stems. It also coppices readily if it is cut down. These attributes, coupled with the fact that browsing wild animals and livestock will eat its foliage only as a last resort, have enabled the shrub to proliferate.

Few other shrubs or trees can compete for a place in *Euclea*-dominated evergreen bushland. One notable exception is *Acokanthera schimperi* (the Arrow Poison Tree). As its common name suggests, *Acokanthera* is highly toxic, containing compounds (carbohydrative glycosides) that can trigger heart failure. The arrow poison for which the species is renowned is made from chips of the bark or roots, boiled up into a tar.

A palatable shrub found in some of Laikipia’s *Euclea*-dominated bushlands is *Carissa spinosa*, a low, spiny evergreen bearing fragrant red-and-white flowers and dense clusters of fleshy berries that turn purple on ripening. Its leaves, along with those of various other hardy shrubs such as *Grewia*, *Rhus* and *Maerua triphylla*, which grow in some bushland areas, provide browsing wild animals with vital dry-season sustenance.

Another form of evergreen bushland, dominated by the silvery-grey Leleshwa Bush, *Tarchonanthus camphoratus*, common in Maasailand, has proliferated in some overgrazed areas of West Laikipia. Like *Euclea*, Leleshwa is extremely hardy and will regenerate vigorously if cut down or burned. Once established, it too can be difficult to eradicate. The leaves – long and thin with pale, furry undersides – are aromatic, yielding a camphor-like scent when crushed. Trials have shown that Leleshwa wood can be used sustainably for charcoal production. Extracts from the leaves, traditionally used as a perfume by the Maasai, have found commercial uses in the production of natural fragrances. Medicinal applications, in antibiotics for example, are now being explored.

Laikipia’s evergreen bushlands may be simply a successional stage in the re-establishment of woodlands. Studies carried out since 2004 suggest that *Euclea* and *Tarchonanthus* may no longer be spreading, but that bushlands dominated by another hardy shrub species – *Dodonaea angustifolia*, the ‘Sand Olive’ – are becoming noticeably more extensive in some overgrazed western parts of Laikipia.
5. Rivers and Wetlands

Riverine Habitats
In Laikipia’s arid lands, rivers are the life blood for people and animals. The region is blessed with two important rivers – the Ewaso Ng’iro and the Ewaso Narok. These rivers and their networks of tributaries support a narrow band of distinctive vegetation. Riverine habitats are Laikipia’s least extensive habitat type, as their vegetation depends almost entirely on the rivers’ groundwater. Exploring riverine habitats can be rewarding, yielding interesting sightings.

Yellow-barked Fever Trees, *Acacia xanthophloea*, form the most characteristic vegetation of riverine habitats. These tall, elegant trees are easily distinguished by their lemony-green bark, a colour that gives away the bark’s photosynthetic function. The common name stems from early perceptions linking these trees with the cause of malaria. Although the *Anopheles* mosquito – found in similar habitats – was long ago identified as the true vector, the name has stuck.

Fever Trees grow fast and die young. At all stages of life, they are much loved by elephants. Few trees reach maturity without scars from elephant tusking and bark stripping. The nectar of the trees’ golden-yellow flowers produces some of Laikipia’s finest honey, and ‘msingas’ (beehives) made from hollow *Euphorbia* trunks (see ‘Scarps and Kopjes’, pp. 39–41), are commonly seen festooning their branches.

Baboons and Vervet Monkeys snack on *A. xanthophloea* seed pods and sleep in the trees’ open, spreading crowns, seeking safety from Leopards and other predators. Fever Trees, scanned at dusk, are among the best places to catch glimpses of bushbabies – primitive, big-eyed primates that emerge as darkness is setting in to feed on insects and on the gum of the trees.

Another prominent tree of the riverine habitats is *Ficus sycomorus*, known to the local Maasai as *Ol Gaboli*. These trees have long sinuous trunks and gnarled branches that, when fruiting, are laden with dense clusters of figs resembling cauliflower heads.

One tree can produce tens of thousands of figs, which ripen quickly and in unison. Fruiting does not follow a seasonal pattern, so figs tend to be available year-round, serving as a critical resource when other fruits are scarce. Ripe figs are sugar-rich, are easily digested, and offer a good source of calcium. Not surprisingly, these bountiful trees are referred to variously as ‘trees of life’, ‘breadbaskets’ – even as ‘fast foods of the bush’.

*F. sycomorus* cannot reproduce without help from a tiny wasp, *Ceratosolen arabicus*. The wasps are in turn associated with nematodes and with other parasitic wasps, all reliant on the fig’s complex life cycle. Fruit-loving birds such as Red-fronted and Red-and-yellow Barbets, the African Green Pigeon, the Black-headed Oriole and the Common Bulbul are easily spotted on fruiting trees, tearing into and plucking figs. As dusk settles, fruit bats arrive in large numbers to partake of the feast.

Although more common in moister montane forests (see ‘Forests’, pp. 29–31), *Afrocarpus* (formerly *Podocarpus falcatus*) trees rise from the banks of many Laikipia rivers. Podocarps are the granddaddies of riverine habitats.
They may live for hundreds of years, attaining impressive girths and heights. Where they cannot be picked out by size alone, Podocarps can be identified by their long, sickle-shaped leaves, which give the trees a lacy overall appearance. Podocarps are primitive conifers (cone-bearing plants) that have been around since the time of Gondwanaland, the super continent that broke up 50–100-million years ago. The cones, which take more than one year to mature, are enveloped in a fleshy yellow pulp that inhibits germination. This sweet pulp attracts monkeys and birds, which strip away the flesh and disperse the seeds.

Wild Date Palms, *Phoenix reclinata*, with long feather-shaped fronds arching gracefully from stem-top crowns, add a splash of symmetry to riverine habitats. Economically, palms are among the most important and widely used plants of the tropics, and *P. reclinata* is no exception. The trunks and stems are used in building, as well as for roofing and as mats and brooms. The fruits, with a taste similar to that of commercial dates, are harvested for food and medicine, and in some areas the sugary sap is tapped for making wine. The palm hearts, as well as the fruits, can be eaten as a vegetable. Date palms are also important for wildlife. Brown Parrots use holes in the stems as nests. Green Wood-hoopoes search the old leaf stalks and axils for nutritious grubs. Vervet Monkeys chomp the palm nuts. Porcupines,mongooses and occasionally Bush Pigs too, snap up ripe fruits that fall to the ground.

Human activity has in recent decades significantly modified Laikipia’s riverine habitats. This trend is continuing, with clearing of habitat for cultivation, over-extraction of river water for irrigation, run-off and discharge of toxic effluents, and the introduction of exotic fauna. All these factors are dramatically changing the riverine environment. For example, the introduced Louisiana Red Swamp Crayfish, a prolific and aggressive crustacean, is out-competing and displacing native Freshwater Crabs. The crabs’ chief predator, the African Clawless Otter, now feeds mainly on the crayfish. Crayfish abundance, though, is subject to phases of ‘boom or bust’, and this instability – studies have found – is undermining the otters’ food security.

A recent arrival in highland Laikipia is the Nile Crocodile. The drying, lower down (in neighbouring Samburu), of rivers flowing through Laikipia is forcing crocodiles into moving further upstream, into water that is cooler than they have been used to in the past.

**Wetlands**

A number of small wetlands are scattered sparsely across Laikipia. The most important of these are in the western part of the region. One, the Ewaso Narok wetland, is a 20-km-long papyrus swamp near Rumuruti town. It has its main catchment in the Aberdare Mountains and receives seasonal floodwaters from the Eng’are Narok and Mutara Rivers. Its continued existence, however, like that of...
other wetlands in the region, is increasingly under threat.

The Ewaso Narok is rich in birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and plants. The most characteristic plant of this – and indeed of most wetlands – is Papyrus, *Cyperus papyrus*, a beautiful sturdy sedge forming dense stands, two to three metres tall. Papyrus was important to the early Egyptians, who used its pith to make the first writing paper. In Laikipia, local people still use Papyrus to weave baskets, fish traps, and winnowing and floor mats, and for making roofs, ceilings, twine and fences.

Typical wetland birds include the spectacularly coiffed Grey Crowned Crane, commonly seen around swamp edges. Yellow-crowned Bishops can usually be found flitting about among the papyrus stems. And Long-tailed and Jackson’s Widowbirds make for stunning viewing during their mating season. Normally small and dull brown, males undergo an astonishing transformation into shiny black birds with magnificently exaggerated tails that blow like streamers in the breeze as they jump up and down in display.

Hippos and African Buffaloes frequent many of Laikipia’s wetland habitats. Walking parties must be vigilant, if encounters with these potentially dangerous animals are to be avoided. In Kenya, hippos and buffaloes kill or injure more people annually than all other mammals, including elephants.

Wetlands provide critical ecosystem services through holding and filtering water for gradual release into rivers, while also making water available year-round for drinking and irrigation. Though still rich in biodiversity, Laikipia’s wetlands are – of all the area’s habitat types – undergoing the most rapid and far-reaching transformation. Swamps continue to be cleared, burned and drained to make way for additional farmland, which in turn is leading to an increase in human settlements around depleted wetlands. The inevitable consequences are dramatic declines in wetland species and escalating human–wildlife conflict.

One of Laikipia’s biggest conservation challenges is to find effective ways of conserving its wetland habitats, while at the same time benefiting local communities.

– MFK
Euphorbia magnicapsula
var. magnicapsula

Jan 2008

Specimens: Mvula Farm.

Fruiting

Flowering
6. Scarps and kopjes

Rocky landscapes interspersed with clumps of trees are a common sight in parts of Laikipia. The exposed rocks are of two contrasting types. Some are ‘islands’ of ancient metamorphic bedrock known as gneiss. Such rock islands range in size from chains of hills to spectacular isolated outcrops, referred to as inselbergs or kopjes, which resemble great, dome-shaped slabs of solid granite, rounded and worn smooth by millions of years of erosion.

Exposed rocks on view elsewhere in Laikipia are of comparatively recent volcanic origin. These volcanic rocks, often strewn with boulders, are typical of Laikipia’s weathered ridges and escarpments. They are the crumbling aftermath of lava flows that swept across western Laikipia during the tumultuous formation of the Great Rift Valley. Such terrain is described as phonolitic, after the mineral phonolite – the fine-grained, grey-brown igneous rock of which the lava mainly consisted.

Both types of rocky habitat support rich plant communities. Humus-filled cracks and crevices among the rocks provide sheltered niches for shade-loving herbs. Seepage and run-off channels allow the roots of flanking shrubs and trees to take full advantage of available rainwater. The rocks also create a safe refuge from bushfires, while shielding some vulnerable plants from the depredations of elephants.

Crevices in the rocks provide refuge and shelter for a diverse fauna, ranging from hives of nesting bees to rock agamas and various snakes, including cobras and Puff Adders. Bats roost in the darker recesses. Hyraxes dart in and out of cracks, or sun themselves on boulders and on ledges. Klipspringers, bounding on hoof-tip from rock to rock, are perhaps the abiding symbols of rock-adapted life. For foraging troops of Olive Baboons, the rocks provide a secure vantage point – and a launch pad too for scaling adjacent trees in their search for food. And from the rocks, catnapping Leopards scan their surroundings for prospective prey.

The granitic kopjes

Visible from miles away, the bald domes of Laikipia’s larger kopjes are imposing features, accounting for some of the region’s most dramatic and spectacular scenery. Up close, the kopjes are remarkable above all for the wealth of plant life they support.

Most striking, of the larger trees found growing on such kopjes, are figs. Some of these trees are immense, relying for buttressing on extensive, plunging aerial root systems that cling to and find wedges in the rock faces, penetrating fissures and fractures where water has accumulated. The figs begin life in recesses on the kopjes, germinating from seeds deposited in the droppings of birds and baboons. Their root systems eventually reach the ground, further anchoring the trees, which then grow rapidly, spreading over the rocks.

Of the eight fig species in Kenya that grow on rocks, five occur in Laikipia. The tallest and most impressive kopje-specialist is *Ficus ingens*, whose new leaves – produced...
twice a year before the rains – turn the trees pinkish red. The foliage of another species, *Ficus glomosa*, sprawls over some of the kopjes. Other fig species that grow on rocks in Laikipia include *F. lutea*, which occurs in forested areas along seasonal watercourses, and *F. populifolia*.

Debris from the figs, in the form of leaf litter and fallen fruit and twigs, collects in crevices and cracks. After rain, this organic matter forms a mulch in which other plants can grow, helped by the figs’ dappled shade. The fruiting trees attract birds of many species, including hornbills and go-away birds, along with baboons and other mammals.

Nestled between some of Laikipia’s spectacular granitic outcrops are pockets of dense deciduous forest. These forest patches – dominated by the Rock Rabbit Tree, *Haplocoelum foliolosum*, a member of the Litchi family – are thought to be surviving remnants of the vegetation that in wetter times, thousands of years ago, would have covered much of Laikipia. The showers of tiny leaflets shed by the *Haplocoelum* trees compost to form a rich substrate for a variety of under-shrubs. The purple *Haplocoelum* flowers provide plentiful nectar for bees, while birds flock in to feast on the fleshy orange fruits.

Obvious on some granitic outcrops are clumps of the Dracaena, *D. ellenbeckiana* – tall, spindly trees whose multiple silvery-grey stems terminate in palm-like crowns of tightly clustered leaves. Easily pushed over and destroyed by elephants, these trees now flourish in Laikipia only on steep rocky sites where the elephants cannot get at them. Dracaena trees produce abundant orange berries, feasted on by birds and baboons alike. Hunter-gatherers have traditionally used the cut stems to make arrow quivers, or – when dry – for burning as ‘smokers’ for harvesting honey.

The phonolite escarpments

Many of the plant species found on Laikipia’s granitic kopjes occur also on the region’s dry phonolite cliffs and escarpments. Examples, among the larger trees, include *Dracaena ellenbeckiana*, *Haplocoelum foliolosum* and – somewhat more patchily distributed – the Cabbage Tree, *Cussonia holstii*. The phonolite rocks break down into richer soils than their granitic counterparts, supporting a correspondingly more diverse flora.

A particularly striking tree associated with Laikipia’s phonolite escarpments is the succulent, *Euphorbia magnicapsula* var. *magnicapsula*. Until recently, stands of these trees were common in the rocky phonolite soils of West Laikipia. Since the 1970s, however, elephants – which consume the inner bark – have destroyed whole forests of these trees. As a result, the species is now confined mainly
Mature *Euphorbia magnicapsula* var. *magnicapsula* trees have tall straight, bare trunks, pock-marked with old leaf scars. Their compact crowns of curved, spiky branches bear brilliant yellow flowers twice a year that attract a variety of wasps and flies. From the buds, bees collect propolis, a resinous extract used in hive construction, which disinfects worker bees as they come and go. The fruits are shiny, bright red capsules that turn brown on maturing, before exploding with a loud pop to release their seeds. Many doves and other birds feed on the scattered seeds. The Mukogodo Maasai use the hollow trunks of dead trees to make beehives.

Other, smaller species of *Euphorbia* grow among the jumbled rocks on Laikipia’s phonolite escarpments. One, *E. heterospina*, is a low, spiny shrub that, given the chance, will scramble over piles of loose boulders. Another, *E. laikipiensis*, is a tiny plant with long spines and fibrous roots, wedged tightly in cracks in the rocks. These, and other succulent plants, including the Mother-in-Law’s Tongue species, *Sansevieria frequens*, provide dry-season browse for Greater Kudus and other mammals living on the boulder-strewn hillsides. Nests of some resident weaver birds consist almost entirely of stripped *Sansevieria* leaf fibres.

Various dry-country ferns can be found tucked away in shady nooks on Laikipia’s phonolite escarpments. One, *Pallaea calomelanos*, has attractive pale grey, leathery fronds and shiny blackish-red stipes (leaf stalks). The uncommon ground orchid, *Eulophia petersii*, may be found at the bases of some spiny shrubs. These orchids, which produce greenish-brown flowers just before the rains, have exposed root ‘bulbs’ and stiff, leathery leaves.

Laikipia’s rocky habitats have, for many thousands of years, been focal points for human activity, providing shelter, shade and secure vantage points and resting sites for generations of roving hunter-gatherers.

— AP
THE FAUNA
Laikipia is home to insects of more species than all of its other creatures and plants combined. Wherever you go – whether in the region’s grasslands or woodlands, in its forests or bushlands, along its streams, or on its rocky scarps and kopjes – you will find yourself, if you look around, in the company of thousands of insects. Though small, insects perform many critical functions in helping to sustain the broader ecosystem.

Laikipia’s most conspicuous and colourful insects are butterflies, of which more than 150 species have been recorded. Butterfly diversity in Laikipia is greatest in forested areas, with numbers peaking after the rains, in May–August and again in November–December.

In the heat of the day, numerous butterflies of many species congregate on damp spots beside streams or on wet roadsides, rising in a swirling cloud when startled by passing vehicles or people, before settling again. These butterflies are engaging in what is known as ‘mud-puddling’. Their thirst is not so much for water as for the salts and other nutrients the water leaches from the soil. Only male butterflies mud-puddle. Imbibed salts form an essential part of the nuptial ‘gift’ they must be able to bestow in order to attract a mate.

Often seen in mud-puddling aggregations are the Brown-veined White, *Belenois aurota*, the African Emigrant, *Catopsilia florella*, and various Grass Yellows, *Eurema* spp. In Laikipia, Whites of several species lay their eggs on *Boscia* trees, which their caterpillars go on to defoliate during the rains. These butterflies may appear in massive swarms, all flying steadily in one direction for days on end, as they disperse in search of fresh food plants on which to lay eggs.

After dark, moths of many species are drawn to artificial light sources. Saturniid or Emperor Moths, some species with wingspans exceeding 15 cm, are common in Laikipia’s forests and woodlands. On their hind wings, these...
large, strikingly patterned moths have brilliant eyespots, which they flash to distract would-be predators. But they are clumsy fliers, given to flapping about noisily under lights. Laikipia’s most common Saturniid is the Cabbage Tree Emperor, *Bunaea alcinoe*, whose larvae – jet-black caterpillars with rows of spiny white projections and lurid orange-red spots – feed on the leaves of Crotons and Desert Dates (*Balanites* sp.), as well as on those of Cabbage (*Cussonia*) Trees.

By contrast, the streamlined Hawkmoths are fast and very accurate fliers, whizzing about at dusk, uncoiling their long proboscises to access nectar secreted deep in the spurs of flowers. With a proboscis 10 cm long, the sleek Convolvulus Hawkmoth, *Agrius convolvuli*, a common species in Laikipia, is almost exclusively responsible for pollinating the region’s Pyjama Lilies (*Crinum* spp.), along with various orchids and other plants, including wild Jasmine.

Striking insects of Laikipia’s streams and wetlands include a variety of colourful dragonflies and damselflies. The dragonflies, fast flying and robustly built, perch with outspread wings, whereas the damselflies, dainty fliers of delicate and slender build, perch with wings folded. The larvae of both groups are aquatic nymphs that can survive only in well-oxygenated unpolluted water.

Large dragonflies patrolling Laikipia’s rivers include two stunning Emperors (*Anax* spp.): the Red Emperor, *A. speratus*, and the Blue Emperor, *A. imperator*. Another common species is the Red-Veined Dropwing, *Trithemis arteriosa*, most often seen perched, with veined wings thrust forward and down, on overhanging twigs at the water’s edge. The Broad Scarlet, *Crocothemis erythraea*, fat-bodied and vivid red, favours marshy areas with fringing reeds and sedges. The African Black Widow, *Palpopleura lucia*, with dark wing markings, can often be found sunning itself on path-sides near water.

Beetles have the distinction of being the largest and most diverse Order of creatures on Earth. This preponderance is reflected in Laikipia, which is home to beetles of hundreds of species, large and small. Some – like the dashing, if unwieldy, black-and-yellow Rose Chafer, *Pachnoda sinuata* – are familiar garden pests, reviled Skimmer, *Pantala flavescens*, a fast-flying, mustard-coloured species often abundant over grassy areas far from water, is the world’s most widespread dragonfly, arriving in Laikipia after a long-distance migration over the Indian Ocean via the Maldives and the Seychelles.

Damselflies abound in reeds and moist vegetation flanking Laikipia’s streams and wetlands. Particularly vivid is the Dancing Jewel, *Platycypha caligata*. Males are aptly named: Not only are they among the most colourful of all insects; they also ‘dance’ to attract females, hovering in the air and flashing their brilliant turquoise-blue abdomens while waving their red-and-white legs about.

The Banded Groundling, *Brachythemis leucosticta*, black-bodied with distinctive dark wing bands, flits about at the feet of passing animals and humans, snapping up startled small fry. The Globe
for despoiling flowers in their search for nectar and pollen. Various Longhorn Beetles (Cerambycidae), equipped with very long, flexible antennae (their ‘horns’), may also be found ravaging flowers. Some Longhorn larvae are maligned timber pests, boring into the woody stems of plants.

A ground-dweller to look out for is the tubercle-armoured Warty Darkling Beetle, Pso-rodes sp., built like a miniature tank, which scavenges from decaying plant and animal debris. Fast-moving, long-legged Ground Beetles (Carabidae) scuttle about after dark under camp lights, hunting moths and other insects. Beetles that perform a crucial ecological function in maintaining ecosystem health in Laikipia, as elsewhere, are the Scarabs, or Dung Beetles. Were it not for them, the dung of the large ungulates would accumulate, damaging pasture quality and creating breeding sites for biting flies and other vectors of disease. The beetles ensure the dung is broken down rapidly and recycled into soil nutrients.

The Scarabs lay their eggs in the dung they are feeding on, burying, or otherwise disposing of. Strategies vary. Most celebrated are the ‘dung rollers’, which sculpt the dung into neat balls that are rolled away. Other species excavate tunnels under or beside fresh pats, for stashing dung. Yet others, the tiny and often overlooked Dung Chafers, operate within dung piles, or even in the balls of other Dung Beetles. All groups are represented in Laikipia, which is recognised as a major centre of Dung Beetle diversity.

Bees everywhere are indispensable, as Nature’s prime instruments of pollination – the process essential to all life. Laikipia is fortunate in harbouring an especially rich and diverse bee fauna, numbering several hundreds of species. The well-known Honeybee, Apis mellifera, is widely managed and exploited. There are also Stingless Bees of many species, which in seeking moisture on hot days are drawn to human sweat. Carpenter Bees (Xylocopa spp.), large and shiny black with white or yellow markings, are important pollinators that nest in neatly excavated tunnels in wooden structures.

Wasps too are abundant in Laikipia. The nests of Paper Wasps, Belonogaster and Polistes spp., made from pulped wood and saliva, hang from the eaves of many buildings. Potter Wasps (Eumenidae) build small, urn-like nests of mud on walls and beams. And Mud Daubers (Sphecidae) may be seen constructing caked-mud cells in which to lay eggs. As a food reserve for the developing larvae, these and many other wasps provision their nests with paralyzed live caterpillars and spiders.

Cuckoo Wasps (Chrysididae), sporting iridescent blue-green or black-and-white markings, also lurk around buildings. These wasps parasitize certain bee species, entering nests and laying eggs on the host’s stored food. A solitary flightless wasp, the ‘Velvet Ant’, bites its way into the cells of other wasps to lay eggs on their larvae. Velvet Ants are black, with a red-brown thorax and a red- and white-spotted abdomen – warning colours worth heeding, for they deliver a very painful sting.
Impossible to overlook are the ubiquitous Ants (Formicidae) hard at work all over Laikipia. Ants play a vital role in shaping the region’s ecology through recycling nutrients, dispersing seeds and keeping populations of other insects in check.

Some ants are responsible for safeguarding entire habitats. The Whistling Thorn grassland covering much of Laikipia depends for its security on the ant species that in turn depend on it. Red-headed and Black-headed Crematogaster Cocktail Ants, along with a species of Skinny Black Ant, Tetraponera penzigi, live in the swollen thorns (galls) of the Acacia drepanolobium trees, relying for their nourishment on sugary secretions from special leaf glands called extra-floral nectaries. In return, the ants defend the foliage of host trees by swarming over, biting and seeing off browsing mammals and other destructive would-be nibblers, such as locusts and caterpillars.

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Harvester Ants, Messor spp., are important dispersers of grass seeds on the plains. From the distinctive cleared circles around the entrances to their subterranean nests, orderly lines of the foraging ants fan out on well-worn paths through the grassland. Harvested seeds dropped during their return to the nest go on to germinate and take root, effectively re-seeding the grassland.

Wafts of a fetid odour that might assail you while hiking in the bush can often be traced back to the African Stink Ant, Pachycondyla tarsata. When alarmed, the mandibular glands of this large black ant – which scavenges and hunts alone, often preying on termites – release the foul-smelling chemicals. Related to the Stink Ant are various Singing Ants, Plectrotena spp., ruthless nomadic hunters of termites.

Termites (Isoptera) are not just food for marauding ants, however. They are hard at work around the clock digesting vegetable matter and recycling this into enriching soil nutrients. Few termite species in Laikipia build obvious mounds; most operate largely unseen below the ground.

Fine sandy soils on the dusty plains can be hazardous for ants. Such terrain is often riddled with tiny craters, easily fallen into. These perfectly formed inverted cones are the work of the larvae of Antlions (Myrmeleontidae), which lie in wait, hidden within their pit traps, ready to spring the avalanches that will engulf their prey. Trapped ants, seized in the Antlions’ pincers and dispatched with a lethal dose of venom, are quickly sucked dry. The predatory larvae metamorphose into beautiful gossamer-winged adults that superficially resemble dragonflies, but which have a haphazard, flapping flight.

Grasshoppers and Locusts, including the striking Rainbow Locust, Phymateus sp., found on Milkweeds, are abundant in Laikipia. Evenings are the cue for the Crickets and Katydid of the bush to launch into their nightly symphony.

– DJM
The vast majority of arthropods – invertebrates, that is, with segmented bodies, paired jointed limbs and chitin exoskeletons – are insects. Their predominance tends to overshadow other arthropods, which in Laikipia include various arachnids (spiders), as well as millipedes, centipedes, scorpions and crustaceans.

The arachnids include solitary Wolf Spiders (Lycosidae), whose glinting green eyes may be seen at night in a torch beam, as they scurry across paths while hunting crickets and other insects. The females are often carrying a glistening white egg sac, which they will defend fiercely if challenged.

Orb-weavers (Araneidae) are spiders that build large, symmetrical webs in which to capture insect prey. The Banded Garden Spider, Argiope sp., is a big yellow, striped species whose beautiful orb-webs are usually strung between low bushes. Webs of the related Golden Orb-weavers (Nephila spp.), commonly seen during the rains, may exceed one metre in diameter. Sexual dimorphism in these, and many other spider types, is extreme.

Females are huge and occupy the centres of their webs. The males are tiny by comparison, and tend to lurk warily on web peripheries. The males of some species are short-lived, being eaten after mating.

Other common web-weavers include the Kite or Buffalo Spiders (Gasteracantha). These small arachnids, with sharp, angular chitinous projections and red or yellow markings, typically operate close to the ground. Some Bark Spiders (Caerostris spp.) have thorn-like protuberances, which camouflage them perfectly among the galls of Whistling Thorns. These spiders are active at night, stringing up webs at dusk, and dismantling or consuming them before dawn.

Jumping Spiders (Salticidae), unusual among arachnids in having good eyesight, craftily stalk their prey, before pouncing. ‘Camel Spiders’ (Solifugidae), while not true arachnids, are another group of nimble insect predators that stalk and chase down prey.

Both Centipedes (Chilopoda) and Millipedes (Diplopoda) are common after rain. Millipedes are slow-moving denizens of leaf litter and deadwood, and coil into a tight spiral when disturbed. They feed mainly on decaying plant matter, but also eat their own droppings, which they re-digest with the help of fungi and bacteria. Centipedes, by contrast, are agile predators equipped with fangs and a venomous bite. Their prey includes insects, slugs, earthworms and even other centipedes.

Laikipia’s other venomous arthropods are Scorpions, which are active only at night. Most are small species that hide by day underneath stones or logs, or in cracks in rocks or tree-bark. Some Emperor Scorpions, Pandinus sp., may be seen in hotter, drier areas. All scorpions glow in the dark under ultraviolet light.

Laikipia’s most obvious native crustacean is the Freshwater Crab, Potamonautes neumanii. The remains of these crabs may be seen on stream-side rocks, in the droppings of African Clawless Otters. An invasive alien crustacean, the Louisiana Red Swamp Crayfish, Procambarus clarkii, has colonized some Laikipia rivers.

– DJM
The combination of a moderate climate (neither too hot and dry nor too cold and wet) with a diverse array of habitats ensures that Laikipia supports many species of reptiles and amphibians. All depend for their body temperature on that of their surroundings. Most of the reptiles are active by day. The amphibians are nearly all nocturnal. Lizards — typically seen basking on rocks or mounds, or in trees and bushes — are by far the most conspicuous reptiles. Snakes, while abundant, are much more secretive, usually moving off before they can be seen.

In the open grasslands, you can expect to see several terrestrial lizards, including the Variable Skink, *Mabuya varia*, typically brownish and speckled with a pale flank stripe. The Grass-top Skink, *M. megalura*, slender and brown with a dark lateral stripe, has tiny limbs and an extraordinarily long tail (accounting for as much as two-thirds of its length), allowing it to slide swiftly through and over clumps of grass. The Yellow-throated Plated Lizard, *Gerrhosaurus flavigularis*, a large, long-tailed brown lizard with paired yellow dorso-lateral stripes, may be seen emerging from holes, while Speke’s Sand Lizard, *Heliobolus spekii*, a small, mottled brown species with black-barred pale dorsal stripes, typically darts about on more open ground.

Fast-moving Sand Snakes, *Psammophis* spp., often startled on grassland tracks into making off in haste, may include the sleek Northern Stripe-bellied Sand Snake, *P. sudanensis*, which has a brown back and two prominent yellow dorso-lateral stripes. Larger species found on Laikipia’s grasslands are the Olive Sand Snake, *P. mossambicus*, which is uniformly olive-brown, and the Speckled Sand Snake, *P. punctulatus*, often more than 1.5 m long, with black-and-yellow dorsal stripes and a striking orange head. Common in grasslands around Nanyuki are the dark-striped, pale grey-brown Kenya Striped Skaapsteker, *Psammophylax multisquamis*, and the pale olive-grey-brown *Pseudaspis cana*, a stout burrowing species with a short, pointed head.

Laikipia’s woodlands and bushlands are home to various geckos, including the familiar Tropical House Gecko, *Hemidactylus mabouia*, which hides by day in cracks and recesses among rocks or tree bark, as does Brook’s Gecko, *H. brooki*, which has granulated, patterned skin and a chunky tail. The Kenya Dwarf Gecko, *Lygodactylus keniensis*, numerous on some trees, is a small, well-camouflaged diurnal species with greyish scales and a strikingly marked creamy-yellow-and-black head. Along with the ubiquitous Striped Skink, *Mabuya striata*, familiar on walls and rooftops throughout East Africa, these lizards all occur in and around lodges and other buildings. On low bushes or clumps of tall grass, you may also find the Striped Chameleon, *Chamaeleo bitaeniatus*, a small grey-brown species with two side stripes.

Conspicuous when basking is the Red-headed Rock Agama, *Agama lionotus*, whose blue-bodied breeding males have brilliant orange heads. The Rainbow or Five-lined Skink, *Mabuya quinquetaeniata*, dark with blue-and-yellow speckling around the neck in males (females have stripes and a flashy blue tail), is usually also present. On phonolitic scarps, the secretive, fast-moving Spiny-tailed Rock Agama, *A. caudospinosa*, is prominent.
THE FAUNA

A snake often seen on lodge compounds in Laikipia, as indeed elsewhere, is the Brown House Snake, *Lamprophis fuliginosus*, a harmless nocturnal species that feeds mainly on mice. Another harmless nocturnal snake that is quite often seen is the splendidly patterned Rhombic Egg-eater, *Dasypeltis scabra*, which is partly arboreal and feeds exclusively on birds’ eggs. The relatively plain Brown Egg-eater, *D. atra*, may also be encountered. The White-lipped Snake, *Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia*, which preys mainly on frogs, favours damper areas, while the Cape Wolf Snake, *Lycophidion capense*, a long-toothed, grey-brown species with a flat head, emerges after dark to hunt geckos. Also present, but rarely seen, are the burrowing lead-coloured Plumbeous Centipede-eater, *Aparallactus lunulatus*, and the little known Two-coloured Snake, *Micrelaps bicoloratus*, which is thought to prey on other snakes.

Dangerous snakes that typically seek refuge in rock crevices and on kopjes in Laikipia include the Puff Adder, *Bitis arietans*, Africa’s most dangerous snake, and the Black-necked Spitting Cobra, *Naja nigricollis*. The large, unmistakable African Rock Python, *Python sebae*, is most often seen near water. The Leopard Tortoise, *Geochelone pardalis*, is found in most habitat types.

Burrowing reptiles found in loose soils and decomposing logs, or under rocks, may include Sundevall’s Writhing Skink, *Lygosoma sundevalli*, which has tiny limbs, shiny brown-grey scales, a small, pointed head and a long, thick tail; the Lineolate Blind Snake, *Typhlops lineolatus*, dark with lightly spotted scales, and Peter’s Worm Snake, *Leptotyphlops scutifrons*, small, black and very thin.

In forested areas, such as Ngare Ndare, expect to see Jackson’s Forest Lizard, *Adolfus jacksoni*, an arboreal species that on hot days basks high on tree trunks and branches. From afar, these lizards look olive-brown, but their flanks – seen up close – are speckled with fine yellow and blue spots. Another tree-dweller to look out for is Dickerson’s Forest Gecko, *Cnemaspis dickersoni*, an olive-grey diurnal and crepuscular species with light chevron markings down its back. Jackson’s Chameleon, *Chamaeleo jacksoni*, inhabits bushed glades and forest edges. The males have three long horns, put to telling effect when jousting, while on females the horns are small,
single, or absent. The range of this large, striking chameleon is confined mainly to Kenya’s central highlands. Also present is the smaller Von Höhnel’s Chameleon, *C. hohnelii*, whose males have a helmet-like casque and beard-like chin and throat projections.

Denizens of leaf litter on the forest floor include the Kilimanjaro Five-toed Skink, *Leptosiaphos kilimensis*, a speckled brown species with short limbs and a long tail, and Loveridge’s Garter Snake, *Elapsoidea loveridgei* – a small, blackish and mildly venomous snake with paired white bands along the length of its body.

Along streams and in other wetlands, the Nile Monitor, *Varanus niloticus*, a very large, mottled grey-green lizard, often more than two metres long, comes into its own. This species may be seen hunting in trees, on land, or in the water, or just basking on poolside rocks. In swamps and reservoirs, the Marsh or Helmeted Terrapin, *Pelomedusa subrufa*, which will eat any living thing it can catch, may be found basking on mud banks or partially submerged in the shallows. On fringing bushes, look for the Common Green Bush-Snake, *Philothamnus battersbyi*, which feeds mainly on frogs.

Amphibians are best observed at night and during the rains, when males gather at breeding sites to make advertisement calls to prospective mates. Most can be identified from their calls alone. At such times, entire reed beds may reverberate with the chorus of the Leopard Reed Frog, *Hyperolius viridiflavus pantherinus*, tiny and of variable hue (usually yellowish with black spotting), whose distended vocal sacs are conspicuous when calling.

A loud *gwaaak* emanating from the edge of a swamp or reservoir may betray the presence of Garman’s Toad, *Bufo garmani* – a large yellowish species with dark skin blotches. Warty and stoutly built, the well-camouflaged, mottled brown-and-tan Cryptic Sand Frog, *Tomopterna cryptotis*, which spends much of its time underground, is easily mistaken for a toad. Abundant at times, the Natal Puddle Frog, *Phrynobatrachus natalensis*, small, compact and warty, is active day and night, having a rapid ‘snoring’ call. Two Ridge Frogs, *Ptychadena* spp., named for their ‘ridged’ dorsal skin folds, may be seen: the brownish Savanna Ridged Frog, *P. anchietae*, and the Mascarene Ridged Frog, *P. mascarenensis*, generally greenish yellow with a creamy vertebral stripe amid some darker patterning. Both have pointed snouts and well developed hind limbs capable of powering lengthy jumps, and both venture into open woodland, far from water.

A small frog that may suddenly emerge in numbers on seasonal floodplains after rain is the Caco or Common Dainty Frog, *Cacosternum boettgeri*, usually either greenish or brown, with a distinctive dark-spotted chest. The attractively patterned Bubbling Senegal Kassina, *K. senegalensis*, a brown-grey frog with a dark vertebral band and a pair of para-vertebral bands or blotches, can be difficult to locate, even with the help of the delightful, liquid *boink, boink* calls of hiding males on a stream bank. Much easier to find is the Angolan River Frog, *Rana angolensis*, a large, robust, pale brown species that is active day and night, year round, either lurking in the shallows or resting on banks. The Northern Clawed Frog, *Xenopus borealis*, by contrast, is wholly aquatic, having fully webbed hind limbs with conspicuous claws. Flat-bodied and dark in colour, it has small, beady eyes on the top of its head.

– PKM
Slate-coloured Boubou (Laniarius funebris)

Strips of bark lined with roots

This nest about 5' from ground on bougainvillea.
BIRDS

Birds often take a back seat to mammals when it comes to popularity. Yet in many ways they can be just as impressive – for their size, beauty, speed and power. As home to some 450 of Kenya’s estimated 1,100 bird species, Laikipia is a birder’s paradise. The region’s avifauna, though, has not received as much ornithological attention as that in many other parts of Kenya. So 450 species is almost certainly an underestimate. As more birders with binoculars and spotting scopes spend time searching Laikipia’s diverse habitats, the number is sure to rise.

Dawn in Laikipia is a noisy affair. Before the sun emerges, Crested Francolins launch into rounds of strident, repetitive cackles. The force and timing of their daily chorus has earned them the soubriquet ‘East Africa’s alarm clock’. The loud, fluid whistles of White-browed Sparrow Weavers often punctuate the early mornings, especially where colonies are fussing over nests perched precariously at the tips of Acacia branches. A complex, melodious early morning call comes from the Spotted Palm Thrush. This bold, robin-sized bird often amplifies its rich notes by performing under the shelter of a tent fly or porch. As morning deepens, skulking Slate-coloured Boubous begin loud duets. The male’s flute-like ko-ko-wheet elicits a well-syncopated chuerrr from his female partner.

During the rainy seasons, you are likely to awaken to the descending call of the Red-chested Cuckoo: a plaintive three-note claim that ‘It will rain’. If camping in or near the Ngare Ndare or Mukogodo Forests, the guttural barks of Hartlaub’s Turaco will make a telling contribution to the morning chorus. Dawn’s end is often heralded by another closely related turaco, the White-bellied Go-away-bird – presumably named by frustrated hunters for its piercing alarm calls that alert wildlife to the presence of humans and other predators.

Once the sun has crested the horizon and morning unfolds, Laikipia’s ubiquitous Doves – African Mourning, Red-eyed and Ring-necked, as well as the smaller, more delicate Dusky Turtle and Laughing – begin their various rolling purrs. The stocky Speckled Pigeon with red eye-rings brings the morning chorus to a close with its throaty hum, enquiring ‘Whooo are youuuuu?’

An early morning ride through Laikipia’s grasslands will yield sightings of one of Africa’s iconic birds: the Common Ostrich. Nearly three metres tall and capable of reaching speeds of 70 km/h, ostriches are the largest living birds and the world’s fastest two-legged animal. Their mating ritual is an elegant ballet of fluid, rhythmic wing flapping. Multiple females lay eggs in the same nest, but only one bird incubates, making sure her eggs are given pride of place. Weighing 1.5 kg, ostrich eggs are the largest of all eggs, offering an attractive meal for hyenas, mongooses and humans.

Other large terrestrial birds that are hard to miss during
Laikipia’s grass and bush lands include five species of Bustard: Black-bellied, White-bellied, Hartlaub’s, Buff-crested and Kori. These stout birds are generally seen striding purposefully through the grasses foraging for seeds, insects and lizards. Bustards are ponderous flyers, making them easy prey for raptors, such as the Tawny and Crowned Eagles that share their habitat. The Kori Bustard is the heaviest flying bird in tropical Africa. The males may weigh as much as 18 kg. Male Kori Bustards undergo an extraordinary physical transformation during breeding displays. By lifting feathers and inflating air sacs, they expand their necks to as much as four times their normal size. They add to this spectacle by flipping their tails upward, exposing a large white puff of feathers visible from more than one kilometre away.

Two common and conspicuous birds of the Laikipia grass and scrublands are Helmeted and Vulturine Guineafowl. Both are big-bodied birds with incongruously small, bare heads that forage in flocks of 50–60 individuals. On the run, Helmeted Guineafowl present a frying-pan profile of white-spangled black and grey feathers. Vulturine Guineafowl are more pear-like in profile, with necks and chests clothed in stunning cobalt blue, offset by white pinstripes. While Helmeted Guineafowl are long-term Laikipia residents, Vulturines have arrived only in the past three decades, during which time populations have grown rapidly. Vulturine Guineafowl tend to be denizens of arid lands, so this range extension could herald a changing climate.

There are at least six hornbill species in Laikipia. Von der Decken’s, Red-billed, Eastern Yellow-Billed, African Grey and Crowned Hornbills are denizens of the dry bush lands. The larger Silvery-cheeked Hornbill inhabits Ngare Ndare and other forests, where it plays an important role in dispersing the seeds of fruiting trees. Hornbills are known for their unique nesting behaviour. The female uses mud and excrement to seal herself into a tree hole, leaving only a small slit through which her mate feeds her and her growing chicks. Male hornbills work hard to feed themselves and their demanding families, and have little time
Laikipia’s abundant mammal fauna attracts avian predators whose feeding habits depend on fresh or rotting meat. Martial and Verreaux’s Eagles are among the largest raptors that rely on live kills. Martial Eagles, easily distinguished by their black-speckled white underparts and pantaloons, are seen in open areas where they forage for hares, dikdik and guineafowl. Verreaux’s Eagles, black with a crisply contrasting white V on their backs, tend to forage around rock outcrops where they can pick off their preferred prey – hyraxes. The Bateleur is easily recognised in the air by its white wings, extremely short tail, protruding red feet and matching red bill. But it is the Bateleur’s graceful flight that sets it apart. The name, meaning ‘acrobat’ in French, was inspired by the species’ characteristic ‘tipping’ while flying, as if balancing on a tightrope.

Various raptors visit Laikipia seasonally, as they migrate to and from summer breeding grounds in Eastern Europe and western Asia. Commonly seen visitors include Pallid Harriers, Sooty and Red-footed Falcons and Lesser Kestrels. While these raptors find safe, healthy wintering grounds in Laikipia, many of their northern breeding habitats have been disturbed and fragmented. The International Convention for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) considers the Lesser Kestrel ‘Vulnerable’ to extinction, while the other species are listed as ‘Near-threatened’.

The oddest raptor of the grasslands is the Secretary Bird. This long-legged hunter spends its day striding across the landscape, scanning the ground for snakes, lizards and large grasshoppers. The Secretary Bird’s grey and black plumage is offset by startling orange-red skin around the eyes, trailing tail feathers and a crown of spiky feathers, said to resemble the quill pens of a perfectly attired olden-day secretary. Yet anyone who has seen a Secretary Bird attack a snake might link the name instead to its technique of jumping up and down on prey like a modern typist pounding away on keys.

Whereas eagles use keen eyes and hunting skills to take live prey, vultures rely on olfactory senses to locate the rotting flesh of dead prey. Visitors to Laikipia have the chance to see at least five species of Vulture – White-faced, White-backed, Lappet-faced, Rüppell’s and Egyptian. Over the past decade, vulture numbers have declined by more than 50%, due mainly to consumption of poisons injected...
into carcasses intended for leopards and lions targeted for killing livestock. The IUCN classifies the Egyptian Vulture as ‘Endangered’, and the other four species as ‘Vulnerable’. When these avian janitors are removed from the landscape, the scavenging mammals that replace them take far longer to clean up kills and are thus more likely to pick up and transmit diseases.

Early afternoon is the perfect time to explore the Ewaso Ng’iro, Ewaso Narok, Naro Moru, or Nanyuki Rivers. All these watercourses are prime habitat for the African Fish Eagle, often seen swooping to the water’s surface to snag fish. Grey and Black-headed Herons stand patiently at the water’s edge, waiting to spear unwary frogs or other prey animals. Kingfishers – Giant, Pied and the small, jewel-like Malachite – streak back and forth between riverbanks, or perch motionless on reeds, scanning the shallows for prey.

Two of Laikipia’s strangest birds are associated with rivers. The Hamerkop is a drab brown bird with an anvil-shaped head so unusual that ornithologists have placed it in its own family and genus. Hamerkops are noted for their enormous stick nests, often more than 1.5 m across. The African Finfoot is an underwater specialist that feeds on dragonflies, crustaceans and tiny fish. Oddly, the species retains a primitive claw on each wing. Finfoots tend to be secretive, so sightings are rare and highly prized. The best places to look for them are the bridges over the Ewaso Ng’iro, or Mpala’s hippo pools.

As dusk approaches, various Sandgrouse – Black-faced, Four-banded and Lichtenstein’s – can be seen gathering near water. These beautifully patterned birds are known for the long flights they make during the breeding season, over distances as great as 40 km, to water holes, where males saturate specially modified breast feathers to carry water back to their waiting chicks.

When darkness has set in, nightjars begin their hunt for nocturnal insects. They are best seen when startled by a vehicle’s headlamps. Although hard to tell apart, Nightjars commonly seen in Laikipia are Donaldson-Smith’s, Freckled, Dusky and Slender-tailed. The Montane Nightjar is less common, being more easily found on the slopes of Mount Kenya.

Darkness is also the time to scan trees for owls. Verreaux’s Eagle Owl is Africa’s largest owl and is frequently seen in tall Fever Trees by waterways. It is distinguished by its two-metre wingspan, pink eyelids and tufted ears. Northern White-faced Scops Owls, with their exquisite orange eyes, prefer savannah habitats. When faced with larger competitors or predators, they flatten their feathers and stretch out their bodies in an attempt to mimic tree branches. The Pearl-spotted Owlet is a mug-sized speckled owl that nests in open woodlands, often in abandoned barbet nest holes. It frequents human dwellings and may be seen foraging around tented camps and lodges, providing a perfect ending to a day’s birding in Laikipia.

– MFK
Laikipia’s setting, between the eastern African savannahs and the dry lands of the Horn of Africa, gives it a unique mix of mammal species from both zones. The larger mammals – elephants, predators, antelopes – are easiest to see, but there are many smaller mammals, including bats, rodents and lesser predators, that also have important roles to play in the area’s ecology.

After humankind, the mammal having most impact on the area is the African Elephant. One hundred years ago, Laikipia had almost no elephants, and none at all outside the few forests in the north and west of the region. This may have been because the then resident Maasai burned the grasslands regularly, leaving little of the woody vegetation that elephants like. Laikipia’s proximity to former ivory trade routes is another possible reason. There were, however, many elephants further north in Samburu, which became a magnet for early European elephant hunters.

In Colonial times, grass burning was reduced and woody vegetation increased in extent. New water sources were also built, making Laikipia more attractive to elephants, which began arriving in small groups from the north. Ivory poaching in the 1970s and ‘80s saw elephant numbers in Samburu plummet. Much larger groups moved to Laikipia, many becoming resident. Since 1990, following the ivory trade ban and setting up of the Kenya Wildlife Service, elephant numbers in Laikipia have continued to increase, while Samburu’s herds have also gradually recovered, making this Kenya’s second largest elephant population after that in Tsavo National Park.

Much of this population makes a twice-yearly migration, moving north into Samburu in the rainy seasons and returning to Laikipia when water sources in the north dry up. While having the semblance of a traditional migration, this pattern has emerged only in the past 40 or 50 years – within the lifetime of some of the population’s oldest living matriarchs.

The surge in elephant numbers is affecting the vegetation, as herds feed on, strip and push over trees. Their most obvious impact is on the Fever Tree Acacia woodlands lining watercourses. Some elephant exclusion zones have been created, using strands of electrified wire to protect the trees and allow them to regenerate.

In southern Laikipia, where open rangeland borders on small-scale farms, crop-raiding elephants have become a major problem, on occasion even killing people who have been trying to defend their crops. The Laikipia Wildlife Forum has erected an elephant-proof fence separating conservation and farming areas.

The African Elephant belongs to a bizarre group of related species called the Afrotheria that evolved together in Africa, but whose members appear at first glance to have little in common. The elephant’s closest relative is the small hyrax, of which three genera occur in Laikipia: the Procavia and the slightly smaller Heterohyrax (distinguished by its white eyebrows), which live among rocks, and the arboreal Dendrohyrax, a mainly nocturnal genus known for its terrifying screams. Other members of the Afrotheria include the Aardvark, which is not often seen, but whose large holes are...
prominent features of the landscape, and the seldom-seen elephant shrews, or sengis.

Laikipia is a stronghold of the globally endangered Black Rhinoceros. In the 1980s, as a wave of rhino poaching swept across Africa, the Black Rhino was, from abundance, brought to the verge of extinction. To save the species, Kenya adopted a policy of creating fortress reserves with strong fences and well-armed guards. The north’s last remaining rhinos, once located and captured, were placed in sanctuaries such as those on Lewa, Solio and Ol Pejeta, where – under intensive protection – numbers have built up, enough in some cases for there to be surplus animals available to repopulate other areas. The poaching threat has since eased slightly and some sanctuaries have removed sections of their massive fences, allowing the rhinos to disperse more widely. Yet poaching remains a constant threat, obliging conservation areas with rhinos to maintain high levels of security.

Laikipia is home to various antelopes and grazing mammals that also occur in the Masai Mara and other parts of southern Kenya. Examples are Waterbuck, Impala, Eland, African Buffalo, Plains Zebra, Bushbuck, and both Grant’s and Thomson’s Gazelles. There are no wildebeest, however, or Topi. One small antelope species of the open grasslands is the red-brown Steinbuck, widespread in southern Africa but in Kenya seldom seen outside Laikipia. The region also supports species that are typical of the dry country to the north, including Beisa Oryx, Grevy’s Zebra, the Reticulated Giraffe and Günther’s Dikdik. Kirk’s Dikdik may occur in eastern Laikipia, but this species and Günther’s Dikdik are hard to tell apart in the field.

In conservation terms, Laikipia’s most important mammal species is Grevy’s Zebra, which differs from the Plains Zebra in having narrower stripes and much larger, more rounded ears. The species occurs only in northern Kenya and in parts of Ethiopia. Everywhere but in Laikipia its populations have been devastated by illegal hunting and by competition with domestic livestock. Whereas in the 1970s there were an estimated 15,000 Grevy’s Zebras in all, today there are fewer than 3,000 – of which nearly 40% are in Laikipia. In parts of southern Laikipia where the ranges of Grevy’s and Plains Zebras overlap, there have been cases of hybridisation, as solitary Grevy’s stallions mate with Plains Zebra mares.

Jackson’s Hartebeest – an intermediate form between the

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**THE FAUNA**

Top: Yellow-winged Bat
Above: Leopard
Coke’s Hartebeest of southern Kenya and the Lelwel of central Africa (and NW Kenya) – is unique to Laikipia. While not globally threatened, the Laikipia form has declined by more than 80% in the past 15 years, despite increases over the same period in other Laikipia antelope populations. The causes of this steep decline are disputed, but hartebeest seem especially vulnerable to lion predation and may be victims of rising lion numbers.

The Reticulated Giraffe, found only in northern Kenya and in parts of Somalia and Ethiopia, is one of the most endangered giraffe subspecies. Regarded by some as a full species, its numbers are thought to have declined in the past 20 years from about 27,000 to no more than 3,000. Nearly half of these animals are in Laikipia.

Until about 20 years ago, most ranchers in Laikipia viewed predators in a very negative light, as they killed livestock. More recently, as tourism has gained in importance, new ways of protecting domestic animals, including lion-proof ‘bomas’, have been developed. A more tolerant attitude has seen predator numbers rise markedly. Traditional ‘bomas’ – enclosures where cattle are secured at night – are made from thorn branches. When lions jumped into these bomas, the frightened cattle would break out into the surrounding bush, where the lions could kill them at will. Lion-proof bomas are made from steel tubing to prevent such breakouts, while the lions, for their part, dislike confinement in a small space with a herd of terrified cattle. Widely in use on commercial ranches, the new bomas are being introduced to communal areas as well.

The status of Africa’s lions, now increasingly restricted to National Parks and Reserves, is the subject of pressing global concern. So Laikipia, as one of only a few unprotected areas where lion numbers are increasing, is seen as especially important. There may now be as many as 250 lions in the ecosystem.

Another conservation success story has been that of the African Wild Dog, a globally endangered species that wanders extensively, often coming into conflict with humans. In the 1980s, the species was exterminated from Laikipia, where packs had been killing sheep and goats, although rabies and other diseases may also have played a part. A few packs survived further north, however, and in 1999 some of these animals wandered south. Numbers built up quickly, and Laikipia now supports roughly 200 adult Wild Dogs in about 17 packs.

Other large and medium-sized predators in Laikipia include the Leopard, the Cheetah, the Serval, the Caracal, the African Wild Cat, the Striped Hyaena and the Spotted Hyaena. While related to the hyaenas, the Aardwolf differs in that it feeds on termites. Present too but seldom seen are the Honey...

Above: Waterbuck calf
Below: Young Aardwolves
Badger, a voracious predator of beehives, and the omnivorous African Civet, which at night sometimes finds its way into chicken coops.

Most frequently seen of Laikipia’s smaller predators are the Slender Mongoose and the White-tailed Mongoose. The Common Dwarf Mongoose is also present, and the Marsh Mongoose is sometimes encountered near water. African Clawless Otters are rarely ever seen, but signs of their presence – scats, mainly, containing thecrunched shells of Freshwater Crabs – abound along most Laikipia streams and rivers.

There are few primate species in Laikipia. Though widespread across the Sahel, the Patas Monkey – an attractive orange-brown inhabitant of the open savannah, where it feeds on insects and the gum of Whistling Thorns – is rare in Kenya. Laikipia is the only place where it is readily seen. Olive Baboons, often seen roosting on rock outcrops or in tall Fever Trees, are common near water. Vervet Monkeys favour wooded areas, while the striking Guereza, or Black-and-White Colobus, occurs in riverine forest. Northern Lesser Galagos are the Bushbabies commonly seen leaping between Acacia branches in the late evenings.

The largest rodent found in Laikipia is the Crested Porcupine, which rests in holes during the day and is a notorious crop pest at night. The South American Coypu, introduced for its fur in the 1920s, escaped from local fur farms and has dispersed through wetlands in the region. In drier, sandier areas of northern Laikipia, you may see the mounds of the Naked Mole Rat, which has a social system more like that of ants than of any mammal, having a single ‘queen’ and a sterile ‘worker caste’. As these creatures live underground, all you can expect to see are puffs of sand erupting from a mound, as the last in a chain of workers kicks debris out of a burrow.

The seldom-seen Crested Rat, a furry grey beast with black and white markings, thought to be distantly related to the Eurasian hamsters, must rank as one of Laikipia’s most unusual mammals. It fluffs up its coat when disturbed to reveal a flank stripe of dark brown fur. Dogs have reputedly died after biting these rats, whose brown hairs are believed to contain toxins. This would make the species one of only a few poisonous mammals.

What follows is a Checklist of 127 mammal species that are known to occur in Laikipia. This list is not complete, for there are several other species that are said to occur, but for which, as yet, there are no confirmed records. Such species include: the African Golden Cat; the Ethiopian Dwarf mongoose; the Spring Hare; the East African Mole Rat, and the Short-snouted Sengi.
# Mammals Checklist

[EN – Endangered; VU – Vulnerable]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Macroselididae</strong> (elephant-shrews)</th>
<th><strong>Orycteropodidae</strong></th>
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</table>
| **Rufous Sengi**, *Elephantulus rufescens*  
– Recorded on Mpala Ranch, on El Karama and in Laikipia Nature Conservancy | **Aardvark**, *Orycteropus afer* |

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<tr>
<th><strong>Manidae</strong> (pangolins)</th>
<th><strong>Procaviidae</strong> (hyraxes)</th>
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| **Temminck’s Ground Pangolin**, *Smutsia temminckii*  
– Very seldom seen; status unknown | **Southern Tree Hyrax**, *Dendrohyrax arboreus*  
– Common in forests |
| **Cape (Rock) Hyrax**, *Procavia capensis*  
– Common on rock outcrops | **Cape (Rock) Hyrax**, *Procavia capensis*  
– Common on rock outcrops |
| **Yellow-spotted Rock (Bush) Hyrax**,  
*Heterohyrax brucei*  
– Prefers drier areas than Cape (Rock) Hyrax | **Yellow-spotted Rock (Bush) Hyrax**,  
*Heterohyrax brucei*  
– Prefers drier areas than Cape (Rock) Hyrax |

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<tr>
<th><strong>Elephantidae</strong> (elephants)</th>
<th><strong>Cercopithecidae</strong> (Old World monkeys)</th>
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</table>
| **African Bush Elephant**, *Loxodonta africana*  
– Abundant and widespread | **Patas Monkey**, *Erythrocebus patas*  
– Uncommon but widespread in Whistling Thorn grassland |
| **Vervet Monkey**, *Chlorocebus pygerythrus*  
**Sykes’s Monkey**, *Cercopithecus mitis* ssp. *albogularis*  
– Common in forested areas | **Olive Baboon**, *Papio anubis*  
**Guereza (Black-and-White Colobus)**,  
*Colobus guereza*  
– Common in riverine forests |

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<tr>
<th><strong>Bathyergidae</strong></th>
<th><strong>Hystricidae</strong> (Old World porcupines)</th>
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</table>
| **Naked Mole Rat**, *Heterocephalus glaber*  
– Found only in very dry areas | **Crested Porcupine**, *Hystrix cristata*  
– Common, widespread |

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Sciuridae</strong> (squirrels)</th>
<th><strong>Lorisidae</strong> (lorises, bushbabies)</th>
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</table>
| **Striped Ground Squirrel**, *Xerus erythropus*  
– Uncommon, prefers wetter areas than following species | **Northern Lesser Galago**, *Galago senegalensis* |
| **Unstriped Ground Squirrel**, *Xerus rutilus* | **Northern Lesser Galago**, *Galago senegalensis* |
Laikipia – A Natural History Guide

**THE FAUNA**

- **Ochre Bush Squirrel**, *Paraxerus ochraceus*
- **Woodland Dormouse**, *Graphiurus murinus*
- **Savanna Dormouse**, *Graphiurus kelleni*
- **Mearns’s Pouched Mouse**, *Saccostomus mearnsi* – One of Laikipia’s most common small mammals
- **Crested (Maned) Rat**, *Lophiomys imhausi* – Seldom seen; may be common in forests
- **Giant Pouched Rat**, *Cricetomys gambianus*
- **Groove-toothed Rat**, *Otomys typus*
- **Black-tailed Gerbil**, *Tatera nigricauda*
- **Fringe-tailed Gerbil**, *Tatera robusta*
- **Vicina Gerbil**, *Tatera vicina*
- **African Climbing Mouse**, *Dendromus insignis*
- **Percival’s Spiny Mouse**, *Acomys percivali*
- **Wilson’s Spiny Mouse**, *Acomys wilsoni*
- **Spiny Mouse**, *Acomys ignitus*
- **African Meadow Rat**, *Myomys fumatus*
- **Hinde’s Rock Rat**, *Aethomys hindei*
- **Kaiser’s Bush Rat**, *Aethomys kaiseri*
- **Unstriped Grass Rat**, *Arvicanthis nairobae*
- **Common Swamp Rat**, *Dasymys incomtus*
- **Woodland Thicket Rat**, *Grammomys dolichurus*
- **Striped Grass Mouse**, *Lemniscomys striatus*
- **Multimammate Mouse**, *Mastomys natalensis*
- **African Pygmy Mouse**, *Mus minutoides*
- **Common Mouse**, *Mus triton*

**Myocastoridae**

- **Coypu**, *Myocastor coypus* – Escaped exotic found in rivers and marshes

**Leporidae** (rabbits, hares)

- **Cape Hare**, *Lepus capensis* – Hard to distinguish from following species
- **African Savanna Hare**, *Lepus microtis* – Prefers scrubbier, more elevated terrain

**Erinaceidae** (hedgehogs)

- **Four-toed Hedgehog**, *Atelerix albiventris* – Occasional records; seldom seen

**Soricidae** (shrews)

- **Hildegarde’s Shrew**, *Crocidura hildegardeae*
- **Jackson’s Shrew**, *Crocidura jacksoni*
- **Tiny Musk Shrew**, *Crocidura fuscomurina*

**Pteropodidae** (flying foxes, Old World fruit bats)

- **Epauletted Fruit Bat**, *Epomorphus wahlbergi*
- **Egyptian Fruit Bat (Rousette Bat)**, *Rousettus aegyptiacus*
**Emballonuridae** (sheath-tailed bats)

- African Sheath-tailed Bat, *Coleura afra*
- Tomb Bat, *Taphozous hildegardae*

**Nycteridae** (slit-faced bats)

- Egyptian Slit-Faced Bat, *Nycteris thebaica*

**Megadermatidae** (large-winged bats)

- Heart-nosed Bat, *Cardioderma cor*
- Yellow-winged Bat, *Lavia frons*

**Rhinolophinae** (horseshoe bats)

- Hildebrandt's Horseshoe Bat, *Rhinolophus hildebrandti*
- Lander's Horseshoe Bat, *Rhinolophus landersi*
- Smoky Horseshoe Bat, *Rhinolophus fumigatus*

**Hipposiderinae** (leaf-nosed bats)

- Leaf-nosed Bat, *Hipposideros caffer*

**Vespertilionidae** (vesper bats)

- House Bat, *Scotophilus nigrita*
- African Yellow Bat, *Scotophilus dinganii*
- Banana Bat, *Pipistrellus nanus*
- Pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus khuli*
- Evening Bat, *Scotoecus hirundo*
- Serotine Bat, *Eptesicus capensis*
- Long-fingered Bat, *Miniopterus schreibersi*
- Tropical Long-eared Bat, *Laephotis wintoni*

**Molossidae** (free-tailed bats)

- Wrinkle-lipped Bat, *Chaerophon pumila*
- Guano Bat, *Tadarida ventralis*

**Felidae** (cats)

- Cheetah, *Acinonyx jubatus* VU
- Caracal, *Caracal caracal*
- African Wild Cat, *Felis silvestris*
- Serval, *Leptailurus serval*
- Lion, *Panthera leo* VU
- Leopard, *Panthera pardus*

**Viverridae** (civets, mongooses, etc)

- African Civet, *Civettictis civetta*
- Common Genet, *Genetta genetta*
- Blotched Genet, *Genetta tigrina*

**Herpestidae** (mongooses)

- Jackson's Mongoose, *Bdeogale jacksoni* VU
- Slender Mongoose, *Galerella sanguinea*
- Common Dwarf Mongoose, *Helogale parvula*
- White-tailed Mongoose, *Ichneumia albicauda*
- Egyptian Mongoose, *Herpestes ichneumon*
- Marsh Mongoose, *Atilax paludinosus*

**Hyaenidae** (hyaenas)

- Spotted Hyaena, *Crocuta crocuta*
- Striped Hyaena, *Hyaena hyaena*
- Aardwolf, *Proteles cristatus*

**Canidae** (dogs, foxes)

- Side-striped Jackal, *Canis adustus*
- Golden Jackal, *Canis aureus* – Uncommon in southern Laikipia
- Black-backed Jackal, *Canis mesomelas*
- Bat-eared Fox, *Otocyon megalotis* – Present but widely scattered
- African Wild Dog, *Lycaon pictus* EN

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**Laikipia – A Natural History Guide**
**THE FAUNA**

### Mustelidae (mustelids)
- Striped Polecat (Zorilla), *Ictonyx striatus*
- African Striped Weasel, *Poecilogale albinucha*
- Ratel (Honey Badger), *Mellivora capensis*
- African Clawless Otter, *Aonyx capensis*

### Equidae (horses)
- Burchell’s (Plains) Zebra, *Equus burchellii*
- Grevy’s Zebra, *Equus grevyi* EN

### Rhinocerotidae
- Black Rhinoceros, *Diceros bicornis* EN
- White Rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium simum* – Introduced into rhino sanctuaries

### Suidae (pigs)
- Common Warthog, *Phacochoerus africanus*
- Bush Pig, *Potamochoerus larvatus* – Present in forests, but seldom seen

### Hippopotamidae
- *Hippopotamus*, *Hippopotamus amphibius* VU – Uncommon in permanent water

### Giraffidae
- *Giraffe*, *Giraffa camelopardalis* – ssp. *reticulata*, the *Reticulated Giraffe*, is treated by some as a distinct species

### Bovidae
- *Hartebeest*, *Alcelaphus buselaphus* – Uncommon and declining; ssp. *jacksoni*, Jackson’s Hartebeest, occurs only in Laikipia

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**Note** – Not included on this Checklist are several species for which there are unconfirmed or anecdotal records only. The Laikipia Wildlife Forum welcomes records (complete with photographic or other evidence) of mammal species seen in Laikipia that do not appear on this list. For his input on the bats and smaller mammals, the Forum is grateful to Bernard Risky Agwanda, Head of the Mammalogy Section at the National Museums of Kenya.

– CT
Bush duiker (Sylvicapra grimmia)

1  2  3

4  5

Bush duiker movement:
and it hurries for cover.

Fireball lily (Scadoxus sp.)
Left and below: *Aloe nyeriensis*
Right: *Aloe powysiorum*
Below right: *Aloe lateritia var. graminicola*
Facing page: *Aloe secundiflora*
Laikipia’s Aloes

Conspicuous when flowering, Aloes are a striking feature of some of Laikipia’s drier landscapes. Most Aloe species have orange or pink-red flowers, in simple or branched inflorescences. Most have thick fleshy leaves, arranged in tight, spiral rosettes. The leaves often have toothed margins, tapering to sharp, pointed tips. They contain water-storing tissue, capable of withstanding long droughts.

Roughly 500 Aloe species are known, over a range extending across sub-Saharan Africa from the Arabian Peninsula. Aloes also occur on Madagascar and some smaller Indian Ocean islands. A few species are widely distributed. Most are restricted to small, fast-diminishing natural habitats. Aloe leaf-sap is harvested extensively for use as an ingredient in medicines and cosmetics. Unregulated trade in the sap is a major threat, and some species are now listed on CITES Appendix I. In East Africa, more than 80 Aloe species have been described. Of these, ten species occur in Laikipia.

Aloe flowers possess no fragrance, relying instead on their brilliant colours to attract pollinating agents – mainly sunbirds – that, along with bees of many species, feast on the abundant nectar. Kudus relish the fleshy leaves, and will go to great lengths to get at the plants, raiding garden rockeries if given the chance. Elephants are partial to the roots of some Aloes, uprooting whole plants with their feet and leaving behind trails of discarded leaves.

People use Aloe sap, or gel, to treat a wide range of ailments, including malaria and influenza. The juice is applied to skin conditions, such as eczema, as well as to burns, insect bites and other superficial injuries.

Laikipia’s most common Aloe species, *A. secundiflora*, is found in a variety of habitats, from flat terrain to rocky hillsides. In places it forms dense clusters that look spectacular when the plants are in flower. The flowers, on side-branchlets arising from a tall, thick flower stem, are coral-red. The leaves – glossy and dark green with slightly recurving tips – form compact rosettes, often as much as one metre across. Tough, dark brown recurved teeth line the leaf margins.

Common on higher ground is the Guineafowl Aloe, *A. latерitia* var. *graminicola*, whose white-spotted leaves form tight rosettes about 50 cm wide. The lime-green leaves may turn purplish in the sun. Teeth on the leaf margins are creamy white. Flowers are orange-red, hanging bell-like from flower stems, single or branched, standing about one metre tall.

*A. nyeriensis* is a widespread shrubby Aloe whose stems, up to three metres tall, branch from the base, having bluish-grey leaves bunched near their tips. Hanging dry leaves form a protective ‘lagging’ around the stems. The young leaves are often spotted white. Small, forward-pointing brown-tipped teeth line the leaf margins. The flower stems have three to six branches, tipped with clusters of orange flowers.
Sparsely distributed in very dry parts of Laikipia is *A. vituen­sis* – an attractive small Aloe whose narrow, finely spotted greyish leaves (usually about 4 cm wide by 35 cm long) have fibrous bases. Flower stems, are usually single, but may be branched. The flowers are coral pink to orange.

One of Laikipia’s – and Kenya’s – most spectacular Aloes is *A. powysiorum*, an uncommon shrubby species found hanging, either singly or in cascading clumps, from steep rock faces of granitic gneiss. The inflorescence differs from most other East African Aloes in that the flowers, which are orange-red, are tightly crowded along a single flower stem. This and the species’ growth habit are more typical of southern African Aloes. The leaves, which are pale lime-green and edged with brown-tipped teeth, are about 12 cm long, forming compact rosettes.

The small ‘grass Aloe’, *A. myriacantha*, found only in grasslands associated with *Acacia drepanolobium*, is very hard to find when not in bloom. The flowers – pale greenish yellow and bell-like – appear in dense clusters on a single flower stem. Narrow upright leaves (4–10 mm wide, up to 40 cm long), rise close to the stem from the plants’ thick, fleshy roots. Fine teeth on the leaf margins are regularly spaced and prickly to the touch.

*A. francombei* is endemic to the region, being found in the Laikipia Nature Conservancy and along the Rift Valley’s eastern wall – often on sharp ridges and sheer cliff faces. From small, single rosettes, plants send out suckers to form larger clumps. The leaves are rough, having white-spotted undersides and margins bearing sharp, spiny teeth. In dry conditions, the leaves turn reddish bronze. The flowers are pastel pink, on multi-branched inflorescences.

Also found in Laikipia is *A. scabrifolia*, a species known mainly from northern Kenya’s arid semi-deserts. Laikipia’s are the southernmost wild plants on record. The species is a sprawling perennial branching from the base to form attractive clumps of loose rosettes. The leaves, rough and sandpapery with slightly recurved tips, are greyish green, becoming purplish and flecked with whitish spots on long exposure to the sun. The flowering stems have loose, spreading branchlets bearing dull reddish flowers with pale yellow tips.

*A. archeri* is another shrubby perennial Aloe that occurs in Laikipia, but which is more commonly associated with arid northern Kenya. The plants branch from the base to form loose clumps. The leaves – dark green and rough with recurved points and brown-tipped teeth – are crowded at the tips of outspread branches. The tall flower stems are more upright. The flowers are pastel pink with yellow tips.

Hard to find when not in bloom is *A. ellenbeckii* (Syn: *A. dumatorum*), a small plant that suckers to form large clumps. First collected near the Juba River in Somalia, this species occurs in the dry, NE parts of Laikipia. Its flowers, orange-red with yellow tips, hang bell-like, usually from one flower stem, occasionally two stems. At first glance, this plant looks like a miniature version of *A. lateritia* var. *graminicola*. Plants are typically swollen at the base. The leaves are usually flecked with whitish spots. The leaf-tips characteristically dry off.

– AP
Left: Aloe ellenbeckii
Right: Aloe scabrifolia
Below: Aloe francombei
Bottom right: Aloe vituensis
Facing page: Aloe myriacantha
WHERE IT IS
Laikipia is a County within Kenya’s Rift Valley Province. Its five districts together cover an area of 9,500 km², beginning 190 km north of the Kenyan capital Nairobi and extending from the Great Rift Valley in the west to the NW slopes of Mount Kenya in the east. The high plains of Laikipia’s southern reaches lie between the Aberdare Mountains and Mount Kenya, on the Equator. To the north and NE, the region’s central plains drop away over the Laikipia Escarpment to the arid lowlands of northern Kenya.

WHY IT’S SPECIAL
Laikipia is one of Africa’s – and the world’s – most exciting wilderness safari and wildlife tourism destinations. After Tsavo, it is Kenya’s largest wildlife haven, forming part of the much broader 56,000-km² Ewasso Ecosystem. Amid spectacular scenery, visitors to the region’s wildlife conservancies and wilderness areas can experience the thrill of a classic African safari among wild animals (all ‘Big Five’ mammals included) and landscapes, largely free of the constraints that apply in National Parks and Reserves. Night game drives, guided nature walks, riding and cycling tours and camel treks – all prohibited in parks – are just some the exhilarating activities Laikipia offers visitors.

People are an integral part of Laikipia’s diverse landscapes. A well-developed tourism infrastructure complete with high levels of community involvement and participation gives visitors privileged access to the cultures and customs of the region’s Mukogodo Maasai, Samburu, Pokot and other peoples. The combination of abundant wildlife, stunning scenery and cultural diversity in a setting dominated by the iconic backdrop of Mount Kenya makes for an altogether unforgettable experience.

HOW TO GET HERE
By road: Nanyuki, 225 km north of Nairobi on the A2 motorway, is the gateway to Laikipia for visitors travelling from the Kenyan capital. The drive, on good tar all the way, takes roughly three hours. Laikipia can also be reached via Nyahururu, either from Nakuru in the Rift Valley or from Gilgil. Note: Most roads in conservation areas of Laikipia are gravel or earth; so, in view of the region’s erratic rainfall, four-wheel-drive vehicles are recommended year-round.
By air: Air Kenya, Safarilink and Fly540 operate scheduled daily flights between Nairobi and Nanyuki, Lewa, Loisaba and Samburu. Both Air Kenya and Safarilink also operate flights to the Masai Mara National Reserve from Nanyuki, Loisaba and Samburu. Tropic Air, based in Nanyuki, operates private air charters within Laikipia and between Laikipia and other destinations.

WHERE TO STAY
Visitors to Laikipia can choose from more than 40 accommodation facilities. Catering for all tastes and budgets, these facilities range from some of Africa’s most luxurious and beautifully appointed safari lodges, tented camps and community lodges to ranch houses, cottages and hotels. For self-catering parties, there are several campsites to choose from. Mobile bush camps are the stock-in-trade of adventure safaris in Laikipia.

Information: Full details on accommodation and rates are available from the Laikipia Wildlife Forum – Tel +254 (0)20 216 6626; email <tourism@laikipia.org>, website: <www.laikipiatourism.com>. The Forum also coordinates bookings within the community camping areas.

Conservation fees: These fees vary from one conservancy to another, generally ranging from US$ 40 to US$ 100 per adult per day. The fees go
towards wildlife security and road infrastructure and upkeep, while funding some key aspects of community development – including education, infrastructure projects and access to clean water.

**PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

**Timing your visit:** Most tourism operations in Laikipia are open throughout the year. In wet months (usually April and November), sections of road in some conservancies – those on ‘black cotton’ soils – may be closed temporarily, preventing access to certain areas. Major circuits in most conservancies are gravel-surfaced, however, and remain passable year-round for four-wheel-drive vehicles.

**Hot days, cold nights:** Laikipia is warm during the day over most of the year. Visitors may need hats and sun block, and should drink plenty of water. Temperatures may drop in the evenings (in July–September especially), when cold winds often blow. It is advisable to pack warm clothing and a windbreaker jacket, and to carry some warm gear on afternoon game drives, in anticipation of the evening chill. Nights too can be cold, with temperatures that in the coldest months (July–August) may dip below 10 °C.

**Malaria:** Laikipia is largely malaria-free. Yet, despite the low risk, it is advisable to sleep under a net, to cover up in the evenings and to apply insect repellant, while also taking malaria prophylactics.

**Communications:** The network coverage of mobile telephone service providers is improving all the time. At present (2011), Telkom Wireless provides the most wide-ranging coverage in Laikipia. The networks of both Safaricom and Airtel cover the main towns and their immediate environs, but access does not extend yet to other, more remote parts of the region.

**Route maps:** Road maps are posted on the websites of most conservancies. Printed maps can be purchased at the gates to some conservancies.

**Guides:** All Laikipia tourism operations offer the services of experienced, well-trained guides. The hire of a local guide is recommended on games drives undertaken by visiting parties travelling independently. Walking parties, in particular, are advised to enlist the services of a guide. Safari guides can impart a wealth of local knowledge, providing for an altogether richer, more rewarding ‘Laikipia experience’.

**SAFETY**

Effective security measures are in place within conservation areas throughout Laikipia, making conservancies and wilderness environments as safe as possible for wild animals and people alike. Codes of Conduct and safety regulations within conservancies must be adhered to. Most conservancies will ask visitors to sign a disclaimer form either on arrival or prior to embarking on certain activities, such as hiking or horse-riding. Visitors must remain conscious at all times of the potential dangers posed by wild animals.
OTHER ACTIVITIES

Mount Kenya: Laikipia is the perfect staging post for climbing Mount Kenya, Africa’s second highest mountain (after Kilimanjaro). Ascents of Mount Kenya’s two highest peaks, Batian and Nelon, standing 5,199 m (17,058 ft) and 5,188 m (17,022 ft) above sea level respectively, are technical climbs. Specialised adventure safari operators based in Laikipia offer visiting walking parties the chance to scale Point Lenana, 4,985 m (16,355 ft) above sea level. Timing your climb: January, February and August are the best months in which to climb Mount Kenya. Climbing conditions are generally least favourable in April–May and November.

Mount Kenya National Park and Forest Reserve: From Laikipia, visitors can enjoy scenic drives in the 2,100-km² Protected Area skirting Mount Kenya. A drive to any of the Park road-heads will take you through successive belts of tropical Afro-montane vegetation, from montane forest above 2,000 m through the bamboo and sub-alpine heather zones to the Afro-alpine moorland zone complete with tussock grasses and scatterings of giant Lobelias and Groundsels. Forest-dwelling mammals not found in Laikipia include the Mountain Bongo and the Giant Forest Hog. Birds include the regionally threatened Olive Ibis and – at higher elevations – Jackson’s Francolin, a Kenya endemic. – PB

USEFUL CONTACTS

Nanyuki Cottage Hospital: for general and emergency medical needs, Tel (062) 32666 / 32500, 0722 457173, email < info@nanyukicotthosp.org >.

The Flying Doctors Service: a 24-hour air ambulance specialising in the medical evacuation of critically ill patients from remote areas, Tel 020 6000090, 0733 639088, 0722 314239; email < emergency@flydoc.org >.

African Air Rescue (AAR) Health Services: offers road and air rescue within Africa, as well as international insurance cover for overseas evacuations (for members and non-members), Tel 020 2895000.

Tropic Air: for air charters, scenic flights, or emergency evacuation by helicopter or fixed-wing aircraft; Tel 0722 207300, 020 2033032; email < info@tropicairkenya.com >; website < www.tropicairkenya.com >.

Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS): Mountain Rescue, Tel 0721 294084; Laikipia Hotline, Tel 0717 641900.

Air Kenya: Tel 020 3916000 / 606539; email < resvns@airkenya.com >; website < www.airkenya.com >.

Safarilink: Tel 020 6000777 / 0720 572208; email < res@flysafarilink.com >; website < www.flysafarilink.com >.

Fly540: Tel 0722 540540 / 0733 540540; email < info@fly540.com >; website < www.fly540.com >.

Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (Nairobi): Tel 020 6612000 / 822111.

Kenya Police – HQ: Tel 020 240000 / 0721 122899.

Tourist Police: Hotline, Tel 020 2507802/272401. Email < touristpolicehqrs@gmail.com >.

Car Hire: Cruising Cruisers, based in Nairobi, delivers 4x4 vehicles for self-drive hire in Nanyuki; Tel 0736 219639; email < info@cruisingcruisers.com >; website < www.cruisingcruisers.com >.
Further Reading

On Laikipia


On peoples and cultures


Background and field guides


Noad, Tim, and Birnie, Ann: *Trees of Kenya*; T C Noad & A Birnie (Nairobi), 1989.

Picker, Mike; Griffiths, Charles, and Weaving, Alan: *Field Guide to Insects of South Africa*; Struik (Cape Town), 2002.

Powys, Anne, and Duckworth, Leslie: *Miti Ni Mali – A Handbook of Useful East African Medicinal Plants*; Mediae Trust (Nairobi), 2006.


Walker, Clive: *Signs of the Wild – A field guide to the spoor & signs of the mammals of southern Africa*; Struik (Cape Town), 1996.


On Mount Kenya


Apocynaceae  Carissa spinosa

Fruit edible and good when ripe. Arrow Sphinx moth caterpillars feed on this plant.

Flowers strongly Jasmine scented.
Credits and Acknowledgements

The Laikipia Wildlife Forum gratefully acknowledges the contribution the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Nairobi, Kenya has made towards developing this guide. The Forum is grateful too for the continued support of its many dedicated members and donors in Laikipia and elsewhere, for whom the production of a comprehensive guide to the region has long been a cherished aim.

In compiling this guide, the Forum has been fortunate in being able to elicit inputs from prominent scientists and writers (profiled below), all with a thorough knowledge of the Laikipia region. Being able to draw on the work of Laikipia artist Lavinia Grant has been a particular bonus. Other artists, including Jonathan Kingdon, Stephen D Nash and Dino J Martins have been kind enough to weigh in, where additional illustrations have been called for.

About the Artist

Lavinia Grant has lived in Laikipia since 1970. Her love for the area and its natural history is reflected in her books, Nyamuluki – A Small Piece of Africa (1995) and On A Kenya Ranch (2001), which record – in enchanting watercolours and ink sketches, as well as in words – many of the life forms she has lived among on just one Laikipia ranch.

Contributing Writers

AK Dr Anthony King is Executive Director of the Laikipia Wildlife Forum. Born in Kenya, he is a natural resource management specialist with expertise in socioeconomics and community-based natural resource management.

CT Dr Chris Thouless is an Oxford- and Cambidge-trained zoologist who has been based in Laikipia since 1990, when he came to study the region’s elephants. He now works for the WWF in Namibia.

PKM Dr Patrick Kinyatta Malonza is a Senior Research Scientist with the Herpetology Section of the National Museums of Kenya in Nairobi.

DJM Dr Dino J Martins is a Kenyan naturalist, writer and artist specialising in the field of entomology. He completed his PhD at Harvard University in 2011. He currently chairs the Insect Committee of Nature Kenya.

MFK Dr Margaret F Kinnaird is the Executive Director of the Mpala Research Centre and Conservancy in Laikipia, as well as a Senior Conservation Scientist with the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society.

AP Anne Powys is Laikipia-born and bred. An authority on African succulent plants, she is co-author (with Rudolf Schulz) of Pinguone, Kenya: Succulents and their Environment (1998).

PB Phillipa Bengough was for several years the Coordinator of the Laikipia Wildlife Forum’s Tourism Sector Support Programme.

GB Gordon Boy is a freelance writer and editor specialising in conservation-, wildlife- and environment-related topics.
Apocynaceae

Acokanthera schimperi

Arrow-poison tree

All parts very poisonous indeed when processed into arrow poison.
The Laikipia Wildlife Forum (LWF) is a broad-based conservation organisation dedicated to preserving and managing wildlife populations and wilderness habitats in Kenya’s Laikipia region. At the same time, the Forum is committed to bettering the lives of people in the area through supporting and generating livelihoods, while securing dependable, sustained access to essential natural resources.

Formed in 1992, the Forum is membership driven, bringing together and representing a cross section of land owners and land users, including local community groups, private ranchers, pastoralists, small-scale farmers and tourism operations.

The welfare of people in Laikipia is inextricably bound up with the health and productivity of natural environments. Water, forests, rangelands for grazing and other key resources are all at a premium. And wildlife, in forming the basis of an expanding and economically important tourism industry, has become a critical resource. The LWF is holistic in its approach to conservation – recognising the inter-dependence of people and wildlife, and pursuing an integrated strategy of benefit to both the people and the wildlife, while safeguarding the precious natural resources on which both depend.

To this end, the Forum has been instrumental in forging working partnerships with local communities on conservation initiatives ranging from environmental education and rangeland management to sustainable river water use and reforestation. With community stakeholders, the Forum has pioneered some of the most innovative and successful community-run eco-tourism and conservation enterprises in the world. Proceeds from tourism have enabled entire communities to benefit directly from conservation, while being able to depend on the Forum for advisory support and marketing. Today, more than 300,000 people in Laikipia are benefiting from LWF-initiated programmes.

The Forum also acts as a regional facilitator in coordinating donor support for community-based conservation and development projects, while lobbying stakeholders and Government on matters pertaining to national wildlife and environment policy and legislation.

Operating from offices at the Nanyuki Airstrip, the Forum has a core Secretariat of 11 full-time staff – office and field-based. LWF programme areas, complete with action plans, support strategies, funding, and expertise, are: Wildlife Conservation and Management, Environmental Education and Literacy, Management of River Water Resources, Management of Rangeland Resources, Management of Forests, Tourism Sector Support, Conservation Enterprise, Peace and Security, and Communications.

Examples of the Forum’s projects and activities are posted, along with information on how YOU can get involved, on the LWF website:

www.laikipia.org
The Laikipia region of Kenya is one of Africa’s most exhilarating wilderness safari and wildlife tourism destinations. The combination of abundant wildlife, stunning scenery and extraordinary cultural diversity in a setting dominated by the iconic backdrop of Mount Kenya makes for a wholly unforgettable experience.

This comprehensive and beautifully illustrated 84-page guide is the perfect companion for a visit to Laikipia, covering all the major habitats and their flora, as well as the fauna, the history and the people, while shedding light on what is universally hailed as one of Africa’s – and the world’s – most remarkable conservation success stories.

A publication of the LAIKIPIA WILDLIFE FORUM

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