

Kenya Travel Report

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This summer I travelled to Kenya with three other UK students, one from Oxford and two from Durham University, to lay the groundwork for a 2024 biodiversity surveying project at the Maasai-run Il Ngwesi Community Conservancy. The full team is made up of eight members – four from the local area in and around Il Ngwesi and four from the UK. Our aim is to systematically categorise Il Ngwesi's biodiversity, quantifying the differences between Il Ngwesi's core conservation area, grazing blocks and settlements. This will provide information useful to land management plans, contributing to the conservancy's vision of fostering biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and the flourishing of Maasai culture hand-in-hand. Our vision is for this survey to be an initial thrust towards creating Il Ngwesi's own long-term science programme and a research camp where scientists from the local community and the world over can come to learn from and study Il Ngwesi's stunning biodiversity.



Looking out over Il Ngwesi



Rain clouds over Lewa

Il Ngwesi Community Conservancy claims the title of Africa's first-ever community-owned lodge, founded in 1995 and well-ahead of its game in the conservation scene. Spanning 22,000 acres of rocky scarps and wooded valleys dropping from the iconic Laikipia plateau to the rolling savanna plains along the Ngare Ndare river, Il Ngwesi is an entirely indigenous owned and managed entity run by the local Laikipiak Maasai community. In the Laikipiak Maa language, Il Ngwesi means "People of Wildlife". The lodge has stimulated the development of many other conservation enterprises including cultural villages, artisanal handicraft production based on the Maasai's famous saen (beads), and community-run campsites. The revenues generated by these initiatives have been reinvested in infrastructure projects prioritised by the Maasai community at annual general meetings. These include water infrastructure projects, schools, educational scholarships, and extensive health outreach services. Il Ngwesi is a role



The team

model in the community conservancy model, with neighbouring conservancies visiting and learning from their actions. Our hope is to extend this learning to the scientific and conservation realm, contributing to a vision of a flourishing Northern Rangelands.

Our aims for this year were for the team to meet all together face to face, to settle on a final research question for next year which will address the conservation and social needs of Il Ngwesi, to test out surveying methods, to familiarise ourselves with Il Ngwesi's habitats, and to begin compiling a language glossary. We managed to achieve all of these aims.



A moth trap



Mantis found during sweep netting

As a team, we tested out the methods we intend to use for the main biodiversity survey. For insects, these included pitfall traps, sweep-netting and a moth trap, amongst others. For mammals and birds, we ran transects and point counts. We also undertook the infamously challenging task of identifying grasses, made more complicated by the fact that most of the specimens we found were dry, due to the season. Testing these methods was an extremely rewarding exercise as it allowed us to observe many of the smaller, often overlooked members of Kenya's flora and fauna, which are often just as fascinating as the charismatic large mammals. These less obvious species are key indicators of overall biodiversity and are fundamental to assessing habitat health. Highlights included stick insects, mantises and scorpions. There was also a huge variety of birds, with some of the most common species also being some of the most colourful. Of course, the mammals were also incredible. One of the most memorable sightings was a Spotted hyena stalking (unsuccessfully) a Gazelle, which sprang away across the open grassland.

One of the best and most valuable parts of this trip was learning from the local team about the wildlife at Il Ngwesi. We were introduced to many medicinal plants, tree euphorbias which contain within them a highly toxic milky substance, and trees whose branches can be made into an effective toothbrush. The joint team leader from the Kenyan side, Cyrus, is a ranger and guide with an immense knowledge of local wildlife and the signs of their activity. Many of Il Ngwesi's mammals

are small, secretive and nocturnal, yet their presence is made clear by their prints. Some of the species we identified through their tracks included genets, civets and a leopard, which we also heard calling frequently in the night. It was fascinating to hear about how certain species shape the landscape and how their behaviour can pose challenges for their conservation and the protection of other species. For example, elephants, one of the flagship species for African conservation, can pose significant challenges for landscape conservation if they do not have enough space to roam freely and are concentrated in small areas. Unlike other grazers, which tend to take just the leaves of acacia trees, elephants will frequently debark the tree or topple it to reach food. This kills the tree and in several areas around Il Ngwesi and neighbouring conservancies this has led to areas of bare, degraded soil which is highly prone to erosion. Elephants can also be a real and lethal threat to people, especially since some have learned to raid crops and use water troughs meant for cattle,



Superb starling, one of several common species of iridescent blue starlings at Il Ngwesi.



Red-billed hornbills



Elephants (photo by Jamie Bolam, the other Oxford team member)



Vervet monkey – these were common both in Nairobi and Il Ngwesi

which drives them closer to human settlements. The trip was extremely valuable in that we learned about the many complex issues and nuances involved in conservation, and peaceful human-wildlife coexistence.

Besides testing methods, we also took time to learn about and familiarise ourselves with Il Ngwesi's varied habitats and land uses. Approximately 80% of Il Ngwesi's land area is dedicated to conservation, split between a core conservation area and a network of grazing blocks used for rotational livestock grazing in the dry season, ensuring the survival of Maasai pastoralist culture. During the wet season, livestock are kept within the two settlement zones on the outskirts of the conservancy where the local communities live. The conservancy also has a core conservation area, which is never grazed, and an escarpment which overlaps with some of the other zones. We visited all of these main land-use and landscape types. A significant part of our 2024 study will be the comparison of biodiversity across these different areas, particularly focusing on the differences between grazed and ungrazed blocks. Thus, it was very useful to see how these areas differ on a broad scale before diving deeper next year.

During our ten days in Kenya, we also visited many organisations and people beyond Il Ngwesi in order to start building up support for the project and form collaborations with local projects and institutions. One of the most helpful individuals we met was Steve Collins, an entomologist and world expert on African lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) who hosted us in Nairobi when we arrived and shared with us his incredible butterfly collection. Once we got to Il Ngwesi, we visited several organisations based in the surrounding area. For example, we visited Lewa, a neighbouring conservancy and a leading research establishment on a continental scale. We learned about their conservation programs, which include rhino reintroduction, as well as their wildlife and vegetation monitoring initiatives. We also spoke to representatives of the Northern Rangelands Trust, which brings together conservancies in Northern Kenya, about their carbon monitoring project, something which could potentially be a useful future direction for Il Ngwesi to pursue. Some of the other organisations we had the privilege of discussing collaboration with included Mpala, Natural State and the World Agroforestry Institute in Nairobi.



White rhinos



Spotted hyena



Giant millipede



Scorpion caught in a pitfall trap

Besides learning about Il Ngwesi's wildlife, we also learned a huge amount about the culture of the Laikipiak Maasai who own and run the conservancy and who live in and around it. We enjoyed traditional food such as ugali (a thick cornmeal made from maize flour) and meat stew. Benjamin, our team artist, shared with us his beading skills and showed us how to make traditional Maasai beaded bracelets. After much patient demonstrating on Benjamin's part, we eventually learned how to make them ourselves. One of the highlights was an evening of dancing, with Maasai music and moves. Salsa eventually entered the mix too. Throughout the trip, we also worked on both our Swahili (the official language in Kenya, besides English) and Maa (Maasai language) skills. There are not many existing resources on the Laikipiak Maa dialect, so it was great to learn some of it this year and start working on a glossary of useful words and phrases.

Overall, the trip was a huge success. The team is amazing and extremely enthusiastic. Everyone at Il Ngwesi was beyond welcoming. The work we carried out this year - testing methods, learning about the landscape and building collaborations - will set a solid foundation for the 2024 surveys and hopefully for the continuation of this project by Il Ngwesi well into the future. Learning and engaging with Maasai culture was one of the most rewarding parts of the trip, and it has been a great privilege to be able to explore this part of Kenya and get to know the people who live there.