

FROM THE BIG CITY TO THE BUSH

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Columbia University is in the heart of New York City, and for many students, the squirrels in Central Park or the pigeons on campus are the closest they get to wildlife. This past May, however, 16 Columbia students got more wildlife than they could handle as part of a three week field course in Tropical Biology. The course was similar to one that I developed in 2005 with Irby Lovette of Cornell University, while I was still a Ph.D. student. Although we have brought nearly 150 students to Mpala over the past few years, this is the first year I taught the class as a Columbia professor.

Life at Mpala is very different from life on campus. Whereas typical students do not go to bed until the early morning hours, here they rise at sunrise and are active until late in the night. Daily activities include listening to field lectures, discussing scientific papers, conducting field projects, and writing up project results. During the two-week course, students complete four group projects. The first two projects are learning exercises, whereas the last two are independently led and designed. For the first project, students collected ecological data on elephant damage on acacia trees along the Ewaso Ng'iro River. For the second project, they collected behavioral data on foraging and vigilance as a function of group size in plains zebra. For the third project, the students developed their own questions about the relationship between ants and acacias. This year's student-designed final projects included studies of the invasive prickly pear cactus, drongo foraging behavior, and optimal foraging in harvester ants.

Although the students work long days, the highlight of any field course on Mpala is the wildlife. This year, Mpala

did not disappoint. The afternoon we arrived, we saw three male lions stalking a herd of Grevy's zebra. The next morning, we saw four female lions eating a warthog. And the following night, we saw a leopard and two African wild cats. By this point, the students thought daily cat sightings were par for the course. Over the next two weeks, we saw a pack of 40 wild dogs on three occasions (once on an impala kill less than a foot from the road), more leopards and lions, two cheetahs, a few aardwolves, an aardvark, a family of zorillas, and many spotted and striped hyenas. The highlight, at least for me, was a pair of honey badgers seen at dusk, right near the campsite.

No one at the Centre ever believes how much wildlife we see on a field course. When I visit Mpala for my own research, I rarely see so many cats or other rare animals. So I guess the moral of the story is - if you want to see more wildlife, bring a student group to Mpala. Oh, and don't forget your camera to show off your sightings to all the misbelievers! ■



The Columbia group on Lookout Rock. Photo courtesy of Dustin Rubenstein.