



# AFRICAN WILDLIFE

## News

SPRING 2021

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YOUR SUPPORT AT WORK ACROSS AFRICA'S LANDSCAPES

Our mission is to ensure wildlife and wild lands thrive in modern Africa.

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Senior Vice President

**Eric Coppenger**  
Vice President, International  
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& Public Engagement

**Frederick Kwame Kumah**  
Vice President, External Affairs

**Philip Muruthi**  
Vice President, Conservation  
Science & Planning

**EDITORIAL STAFF**

**Jacqueline Conciatore**  
Writer & Editorial Manager

**Laurie Channer**  
Print Marketing Manager

**Jim Loudon**  
Design & Digital Development Manager

**Sonia Ebong**  
Design Assistant

**Rebecca Wesloh**  
Print Marketing Associate

**Contributors**  
Peter Chira, Harleen Sehmi,  
Jacqueline Kubania

**KENYA - HEADQUARTERS**

Ngong Road, Karen  
P.O. Box 310, 00502  
Nairobi  
Phone +254 (0) 711 063000  
Fax +254 20 2765030

**UNITED STATES**

1100 New Jersey Avenue SE, Suite 900  
Washington, DC 20003  
Toll Free +1 888 494 5354  
Phone +1 202 939 3333  
Fax +1 202 939 3332

africanwildlife@awf.org

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# TIME FOR RENEWAL



Dear AWF Friends,

After a painful shutdown, Africa's tourism sector is re-emerging, with a welcome new emphasis on domestic travel even as it prepares for renewed global travel in 2021.

African governments have handled the COVID-19 crisis with an efficiency born of pandemic experience. Their timely, targeted public-health measures have helped the continent avoid worst-case scenarios. This is not to diminish the suffering of those who became ill, lost loved ones, or lost livelihoods in the wake of lockdowns and travel restrictions, and indeed we all must remain vigilant.

In September, my family and I traveled to the Serengeti to see the annual Great Migration. It was a once-in-a-lifetime adventure, and I'm happy to report that wildlife is thriving in and around Serengeti National Park. We'll never forget the wondrous sight — and sound — of thousands of wildebeest moving across the land, answering the call of ancient rhythms.

But on the human side, things were not so rosy. Communities and park services were struggling in the absence of tourism revenues. Protected-area authorities had to tap into their reserves and use other supplementary support to avoid collapse.

Governments, the private sector, and donor organizations have rallied to help parks and other tourism-dependent entities navigate the COVID-19 crisis. They recognize the importance of Africa's wildlife and wild lands, not just as tourist meccas but also for their invaluable ecosystem services.

The stewards of these vital resources — community members, park managers, rangers, and tour-guide operators — all expressed optimism about the future, despite the challenges they face. I was deeply moved, and I left Tanzania with a stronger appreciation for human resilience. Today, I'm here to say that tourism in Africa will recover its former glory.

AWF will continue to respond to the COVID-19 crisis with strategic, targeted support to communities and protected-area authorities — activities you can read about on page 4 and throughout this issue. We've also begun re-purposing several of our programs to reflect lessons learned from the crisis.

Thankfully, our staff has remained well, and we began re-opening offices in late 2020. Since last spring, I've watched with pride as our team adjusted course to accommodate new workloads and shifting conservation realities without ever losing sight of our mission.

As always, thank you for supporting our efforts. We aim to make you proud in 2021.

Sincerely,

Kaddu Sebunya  
Chief Executive Officer



## Tracker-dog units step up during COVID-19 to help deter poaching in protected areas

In response to an increased threat of poaching during the pandemic, authorities are relying on Canines for Conservation tracker dogs to help protect wildlife in parks and other protected areas.

The dog-and-handler teams in Manyara/Tarangire and Serengeti ecosystems (Tanzania) as well as Lake Nakuru National Park and Ol Pejeta Conservancy (Kenya) are conducting frequent security patrols to monitor wildlife and prevent incursions. Merely by being present, the canine units act as a deterrent; at press time there'd been no poaching incidents reported in their working zones since travel restrictions began last spring.

When not on duty, Canines for Conservation handlers have been

honing their detection, tracking, and law enforcement skills at AWF's training facility in eastern Africa. Since the launch of AWF's Canines for Conservation Program in 2014, dog-and-handler teams have made hundreds of busts in airports, seaports, and borders. Given that even one ivory bangle bracelet can represent two elephants killed, even a single confiscation and arrest is highly significant.

Canines for Conservation currently operates out of multiple bases in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Botswana, and Mozambique — and new teams are ready to be deployed to Cameroon once travel restrictions are lifted.

## BABY BAMBOO PLANTS HELP RESTORE GORILLA HABITAT IN RWANDA

Before African alpine bamboo grows into the tall, verdant stands clustered across high mountain forests, providing food for gorillas, golden monkeys, and other species, it is a fragile shoot from a seed so tiny it's invisible to the naked eye.

The young plants of *Yushania alpina*, ranging from 2-10 centimeters tall, are called "wildings." More than 20,000 of these shoots were collected from Kenya's Aberdare Range and raised in a holding nursery until strong enough to be flown to a bamboo nursery in Kinigi, Rwanda.

Their ultimate destination is Volcanoes National Park, where AWF and partners will plant the young bamboo trees to restore 27 hectares at the protected area's edge. AWF donated this parcel of land to the Rwanda Development Board in 2018 to expand habitat for the world's largest

population of mountain gorillas — the backbone of Rwanda's wildlife-tourism industry.

Working with the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), AWF partnered with EcoPlanet Bamboo Rwanda to implement the ecological restoration plans. Bamboo is not only an excellent defense against soil erosion, but it also provides communities an eco-friendly material for use in construction, furniture, smaller crafts, and more. RDB is establishing bamboo-cultivation projects for communities because such investments — from nurseries to processing plants — create opportunities for Rwandans to develop sustainable business models.



## During pandemic, a lifeline for communities that rely on tourism

When AWF designed its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we knew that if we focused on wildlife and wild lands only, we would fall short of our goal to mitigate the crisis. Our decades of experience in Africa show that even the best-designed conservation programs do not succeed when the needs of communities living near wildlife go unaddressed.

AWF made an important decision: On top of providing support for protected-area management, we would also focus interventions on local communities. We would work to meet the needs of people living adjacent to protected areas as the pandemic swept through the continent, flattening rural economies and leaving scores hungry.

Between April and December last year, AWF's field teams were busier than usual, distributing health and safety resources to communities and government bodies fighting to limit the spread of COVID-19. In Ethiopia's Simien Mountains landscape, AWF's ecologist Tibebe Simegn and his team distributed food rations to the vulnerable Gich community living at the periphery of the Simien Mountains National Park. Simegn's team also organized a cash-for-work program that paid hundreds of community members to maintain the park by picking up trash, clearing invasive weeds, repairing fences and other park infrastructure, and preparing tree nurseries.

### TARGETED SUPPORT

In rural Africa, wildlife economies have come undone since the pandemic unfolded, digging tourism-dependent communities deep into poverty and food insecurity.

In Kenya's Tsavo region, the ecolodge in the LUMO Community Wildlife Sanctuary has been shut since last March,



when the country announced its first COVID-19 case. With no revenues from tourism, conservation activities in the community-owned conservancy were either scaled down or suspended, leading to more poaching.

"Operations at the conservancy are at a standstill as a result of zero cashflows. Due to losses in tourist revenues, security patrols have been suspended, and some rangers have been sent home, leading to a spike in poaching incidents," says Fredrick Thuva, the manager at LUMO Community Wildlife Sanctuary.

Situations such as these sparked AWF's COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan. We designed our activities to protect conservation gains and cushion communities against the worst effects of the pandemic.

Working with government authorities in eastern, central, and southern Africa, AWF provided support for protected areas through the provision of food, personal protective equipment, and allowances for park rangers and community wildlife scouts to keep security patrols going. Protected-area authorities have also received fuel for patrol vehicles, handwashing stations, temperature guns, and hand sanitizers to keep their staff and visitors safe. At the community level, AWF worked to improve food security, access to information about the disease, and access to life-saving gloves, masks, and handwashing stations.



As African countries begin to ease travel restrictions, AWF remains committed to supporting African governments and filling the gaps to ensure the prosperity of the continent, its people, and its natural resources.

— Jacqueline Kubania,  
Manager, Field Communications

## AMBOSELI BABY BOOM

For elephants, pregnancy lasts nearly two years and ends with the birth of a calf three feet tall and 200 pounds. In Kenya's Amboseli National Park, 2020 was a big year for these babies.

Amboseli Trust for Elephants announced in August that at least 170 calves had been born thus far in the year, including two rare sets of twins. Compare this to 2018, when only 113 calves were born in the entire year.

One of the main reasons for this surge in births was the weather — 2019 dealt a surplus of rain to Eastern Africa. And that rain meant there was more vegetation for elephants to graze on and fewer deaths from starvation and dehydration.

There's more good news for elephants in Kenya: The Kenya Wildlife Service says the country's elephant population had grown from 16,000 elephants in 1989 to 34,800 by the end of 2019.

But despite the good news from Amboseli, elephants remain vulnerable to growing threats of habitat loss and fragmentation and the continued threat of poaching. Which is why AWF helps to protect elephants throughout Kenya, as well as in other countries across the continent, preserving wildlife corridors, expanding community conservation areas, and providing farmers with strategies to mitigate human-elephant conflict.



## Wildlife Watch: FLAMINGO

Their signature hot pink hue and one-legged stance has earned flamingos recognition around the globe, but there is far more about the bird to love. Africa is home to two of the six flamingo species: the greater flamingo, the largest and most widespread, and the lesser flamingo, the smallest and most numerous.

Flamingos lay a single egg each year. The nest, a humble mound of mud with a concave hilltop, is formed by the parents. Mother and father draw their bills through the mud, dragging it to form their hollowed dome. The young, born with fluffy white down and a straight bill that curves with age, stay in their nest for five days before they join a nursery group of other young. Though they gather in groups of over a million, parent and child can recognize each other through their distinctive calls.

And with flocks this large, fittingly called a flamboyance, flamingos have rich social lives. They spend most of their time in smaller social groups of four to five others. And though some flamingos travel between groups to socialize, there are those that will specifically avoid other individuals or groups.

But despite their large gatherings and extensive range, flamingos are not free from danger. The lesser flamingo is categorized by the IUCN as near-threatened with population numbers decreasing. Habitat loss and water



pollution are infecting feeding sites and breeding grounds, endangering the future of the beloved bird.

AWF works with communities to ensure the quality of rivers, streams, and other sources of water remain healthy for the wildlife and people who depend on them. In Tanzania, for example, we helped communities form water-user associations and provided training in water analysis and monitoring to help protect a critical water source for people and wildlife.

# THE MYSTERY OF GIRAFFES



India Bulkeley

Consider the giraffe. From afar they can be difficult to fathom. But take some time to think about them, about their size. A giraffe's heart weighs 25 pounds and is two feet long. Their lungs hold 12 gallons of air. Their legs and neck are each six feet long. Their feet are six inches across, the size of dinner plates. A mature adult can weigh 3,000 pounds. They are 18 feet tall — the tallest land animal. Which makes their ongoing disappearance all the more startling. In just 30 years the number of

giraffes has decreased by 40 percent. It's estimated that for every four elephants left in Africa, there is one giraffe.

The animal is undergoing a multitude of threats pushing its population numbers lower in what scientists are calling a "silent extinction." Some of the threats are those common to the plight of many species: habitat destruction and fragmentation, civil unrest and violence, drought and climate change, unsustainable bushmeat hunting and poaching.

But one of the biggest dangers to giraffes is how poorly the threats against them are understood. When it comes to the tallest member of the Big Five, there's surprisingly little research and a large amount of mystery. And while mystery may seem fitting for a creature of such unusual proportions, AWF is studying the research and unraveling the mystery to better understand and protect giraffes.



Christophorus

## NEW SPOTS IN GIRAFFE RESEARCH

### *What's going on with giraffes' skin?*

Fifteen years ago, scientists recorded a skin disease causing lesions across the necks and legs of giraffes in a single population in Uganda. The disease has now been recorded in 13 populations in seven countries, according to a 2019 study published in *The Journal of Wildlife Diseases*. Using camera traps, researchers diagnosed the severity of the infections and noted that most of the cases were only mild to moderate. But they did find serious infections and observed that affected giraffes moved with difficulty, raising concerns the giraffes would be more vulnerable to predators. Not much more is known about the disease, leaving important questions unanswered about how it spreads or what the long-term effects might be.

### *Do giraffes and people get along?*

Giraffes and humans frequently share spaces, especially as the growing human population pushes people further out into wild lands. Typically the relationships between the two are peaceful; giraffes are genial creatures and aren't prone to wreaking havoc with farms or livestock.



Billy Dodson

But a study published in the *Journal of Animal Ecology* in 2020 found that humans do impact giraffes. Close proximity to human populations has led to weaker relationships and increased isolation among giraffes. These relationships affect how animals feed, defend themselves, raise their young, and respond to environmental changes — all vital factors for species survival and sustaining genetic diversity.

### *How many species are there?*

In 2016, a study was published in the journal *Current Biology*, arguing that there wasn't just one species of giraffe, as had been the long-held belief. Rather, there were four distinct species. The study gained some notoriety, but it was hardly the first entry in the debate. Over the years, giraffes have been grouped into one, two, three, four, or six species depending on the accounting of genetic markers and geographic regions. It may all seem pedantic, but the particulars matter when it comes to protective efforts designed to conserve individual species.

## STICKING OUR NECK OUT FOR GIRAFFES

There's a lot still left to learn about giraffes — their level of cognition, their means of communication, even their propensity to attract lightning — but identifying these mysteries is only part of the equation. These discoveries illuminate the unique conservation needs that must be met to sustain giraffe populations,

and that's where we come in. By studying research developments and doing our own groundwork, AWF can implement the best possible conservation plans and identify any gaps in existing measures.

On the ground in Kenya's Tsavo landscape, AWF's Species Conservation Assistant Amos Muthiuri monitors giraffe populations. "When we started the giraffe project in Tsavo, our two main objectives were to identify the distribution of giraffes within the parks and ranches and to map out the threats in order to propose measures to secure populations and their habitats," Muthiuri says.

And that's what we're doing, in the Tsavo landscape and across the continent, we're mapping threats like poaching, habitat loss, and blocked movement corridors. Once the threats are mapped, we can implement solutions: securing habitats, improving management of protected areas, and inspiring community support of giraffe conservation.

A giraffe is a magnificent creature. At birth they drop six feet to the earth, but they can stand in half an hour and run in 10 hours. They assist in pollination, transferring pollen that adheres to their necks and heads between the treetops of the savanna. Their spots act not only as camouflage but help to dissipate the heat of the savanna sun. The more we learn about giraffes, the better able we are to protect them. With your help, AWF is ensuring the statuesque figure of the giraffe never disappears.

# Help tackle the illegal ivory trade with your smartphone

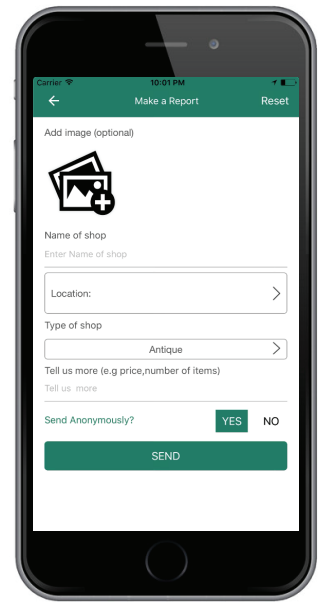
Sue Orloff, a retired wildlife biologist and long-time AWF supporter, has created an app called **i of the Elephant**, via which users in the US can report the sale of ivory.

The app allows users to take a picture of the ivory piece and report the store's name and address. Orloff then takes this information and submits the reports and merchant information to both state and federal wildlife authorities.

The app, which is free to download, offers a \$2,500 reward for tips that lead to prosecutions.

As a result of her intel, so far there have been six successful prosecutions of illegal ivory sales in the US. In the most recent bust, the seller ranked fourth in the US for online ivory items for sale. Orloff plans to expand her reach into England soon, which recently banned the domestic sale of ivory.

To join the effort and download the app, visit: [biologistswithoutborders.org/saving-elephants](http://biologistswithoutborders.org/saving-elephants)



## GATHER YOUR COMMUNITY TO HELP AFRICA'S WILDLIFE

Did you know that you can dedicate your birthday, anniversary, or any special day to wildlife by using AWF's online fundraising platform? To benefit elephants, lions, giraffes, rhinos, and other at-risk and endangered wildlife, consider doing a peer-to-peer fundraiser — essentially starting your own movement for wildlife!

Kick-off your campaign today, and share it with your friends: [fundraise.awf.org](http://fundraise.awf.org)

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### AWF community thanks wildlife heroes: Rangers

From fighting ruthless poachers to enduring harsh climate conditions, wildlife rangers' duties are dangerous and demanding. But rangers show up, day in and day out, to safeguard elephants, rhinos, gorillas, lions, and other endangered species. Even now, during slow-downs and other COVID-19

impacts, and as park authorities are struggling financially, rangers are on the front lines, making sure wildlife is never left unprotected.

To recognize these dedicated men and women as the heroes they are, AWF asked our friends and followers to send thank you messages and notes of appreciation on World Ranger Day. More than 23,000 of you did!

We're working with partners to figure out the best way to get your written notes to the rangers. In the meantime, there is still time to join the party.

Express your appreciation for rangers at:  
[awf.org/ranger](http://awf.org/ranger)