

# Mountain Bongo Antelope:

Mountain Bongo Recovery Programme

The mountain bongo (*Tragelaphus eurycerus isaaci*), also known as the eastern bongo, is a Critically Endangered endemic antelope species only found in Kenya (IUCN, 2022). Fewer than 80 individuals are believed to survive in the wild. Population estimates have been determined through camera trapping efforts carried out initially by the Kenyan NGO known as the Bongo Surveillance Project (BSP).

Rhino Ark, in partnership with the Wilder Institute / Calgary Zoo, joined this effort in 2018 using a substantially increased number of cameras, with the goal of obtaining a more exhaustive answer to the question of: "Where are mountain bongo populations surviving?"

Their historical distribution once comprised healthy populations in several of Kenya's mountain forests including the Aberdare, Mt. Kenya, SW Mau, Maasai Mau, Mau Eburu Forests and the Cherengani Hills. At present, only the Salient Region of the Aberdare remains a bongo stronghold, with the bulk of Kenya's wild bongo ranging there in two or three herds (an estimated 50 to 60 animals). Also, a smaller group is surviving in the Maasai Mau Forest, and possibly a small number in the SW Mau as well.

This majestic forest antelope is one of two bongo sub-species, with the lowland, or western, bongo (*Tragelaphus eurycerus eurycerus*) found outside of Kenya in the low-lying forests of West and Central Africa. The lowland bongo is considered Near Threatened by the IUCN Antelope Specialist Group. This sub-species is not found in Kenya.

## Conservation efforts

In the 1960s and 1970s, dozens of mountain bongo were live-trapped and exported from Kenya to zoos around the world. For these translocations to be successful, they were initially housed at the Mt. Kenya Wildlife Conservancy (MKWC) (then known as the Mt. Kenya Game Ranch) in Nanyuki, and then forwarded onwards to overseas destinations. Bongo not exported during this period were established as a captive domestic population in a breeding facility at Mt. Kenya Wildlife Conservancy.

### Mountain bongo characteristics

- **Colour:** bright chestnut; males become black with age; 12 to 15 thick vertical paintbrush-style white stripes along the flanks
- **Horns:** carried by both male and female; spot the difference! - male horns angle outward and female horns angle inwards
- **Size:** cow-sized; height of 1 to 3 meters
- **Status:** endemic to Kenya; Critically Endangered on IUCN Red List
- **Behaviour:** nocturnal / crepuscular in the wild; prefer densely wooded areas; browsers

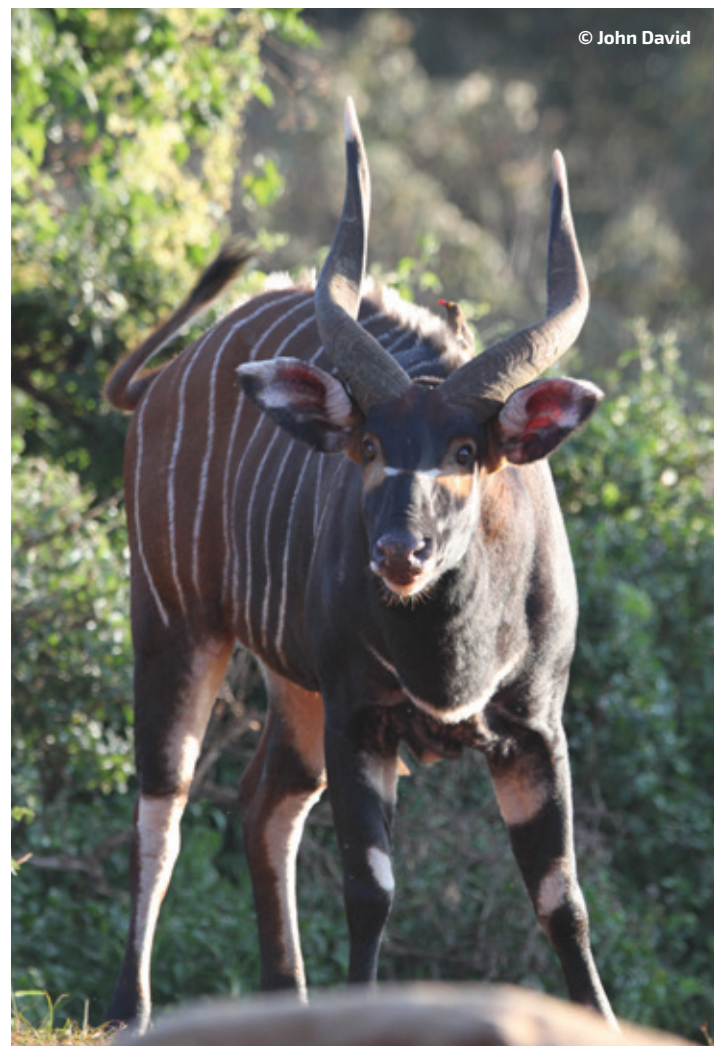
Over time, it became clear that the species breeds well in captivity. Current records (October 2023) indicate that more than 400 mountain bongo can be found in accredited zoos worldwide, with an additional unknown number in unofficial breeding facilities. Here in Kenya, the Mt. Kenya Wildlife Conservancy houses somewhere between 40 and 60 individuals at any given time in their breeding programme.

These domestic and international captive-bred bongo offer hope to the recovery of severely depleted wild bongo populations and Rhino Ark is an active participant in a massive endeavor to re-wild mountain bongo into Mt. Kenya (Ragati and Chehe Forest Blocks) and Eburu Forest.

## Bongo Recovery Preparation Programmes

To give wild mountain bongo an opportunity to successfully recover into their former mountain forest ranges in healthy numbers and in relative safety, Rhino Ark in partnership with the Wilder Institute/Calgary Zoo, has put in place a number of essential foundational programmes.

**Monitoring and Surveillance** - As with other mountain forests where Rhino Ark works, Joint Security Units (JSUs) have been set up in Eburu Forest and in Ragati / Chehe forests, Mt. Kenya National/Forest Reserve. These units are comprised of community rangers who work together with Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and Kenya Forest Service (KFS) to conduct de-snaring foot patrols and other forest security activities.



As well, these JSUs are responsible for establishing, monitoring and maintaining fleets of camera traps. Cameras are installed onto trees at natural salt licks, game trail intersections, and at other natural features where wildlife gather. The cameras use infrared technology to record the image of anything that moves in front of the viewfinder.

Species records for mountain bongo and the full mammal assemblage are kept to determine species presence and prevalence by providing relative population estimates. Information about seasonality and activity patterns is also gathered through our camera trapping programmes.



**Community Engagement, Education and Awareness** - In a 2021 household survey in Ragati / Chehe, Mt. Kenya, 92% of 202 forest-adjacent households (103 male; 99 female) across five Locations support the idea of a mountain bongo translocation.

In a similar survey conducted in 2018 in Eburu Forest, 94.5% of 200 local people in forest-adjacent households (107 male; 93 female) were in favour of a mountain bongo translocation.

Annual large-scale community meetings are held to keep citizens abreast of programme milestones & developing activities, including opportunities for their increased involvement.

We work together with the community organizations interested in their area forests through collaboration with the local Community Forest Associations.

With the awareness that successful bongo population recovery will require the future support from the next generation, we assessed conservation knowledge in 300-respondent student surveys at both Mt. Kenya and Eburu Forest and have established Nature Conservation Clubs in dozens of forest-adjacent beneficiary schools.



**Collaboration and Partnership** - Knowing how considerable the task is to return mountain bongo to their former ranges, Rhino Ark works closely with government, community, fellow NGO and private bongo stakeholders to succeed with mountain bongo recovery goals. For further reference, see the National Recovery and Action Plan for the Mountain Bongo (*Tragelaphus eurycerus isaaci*) in Kenya (2019-2023) (KWS, 2019), detailing the mountain bongo recovery mandate for Kenya.

### References Cited

IUCN (2022). *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2021-1: Summary Statistics* [Online]. Retrieved August 12, 2022, from <https://www.iucnredlist.org/resources/summary-statistics>

Kenya Wildlife Service. (2019). *National Recovery and Action Plan for the Mountain Bongo (Tragelaphus eurycerus isaaci) in Kenya (2019-2023)*. Nairobi, Kenya: Kenya Wildlife Service.



Historical Bongo Range Kenya-wide

