

# Extremely Rare Bongo Group Found in Kenya Forest

Nick Wadhams in Eburu Forest, Kenya  
for [National Geographic News](#)  
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Kenya's Eburu Forest was once considered inaccessible, thanks to its deep ravines and thick undergrowth. But a hike through its outer fringes these days feels positively crowded.

The sound of axes echoes across the forest constantly, and the forest floor is scarred by dark mounds where wood once smoldered into charcoal.

Yet here scientists and trackers have found what they believe is a new population of the extremely rare mountain bongo. (See a [picture of a bongo](#).)

Based on data from human trackers and a rare camera-trap photograph captured in September 2008, researchers estimate the newfound group includes about 20 members—a surprisingly large count for a subspecies thought to number only 75 to 140 altogether in the wild, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Such small numbers put the bongo, already so close to extinction, at risk for hereditary diseases caused by inbreeding.

Feared extinct as recently as the mid-1990s, the mountain bongo is limited to the forests of a few rugged Kenyan mountains: Eburu and Mount Kenya, as well as peaks in the Aberdare and Mau ranges.

The bongo is an extremely shy creature, with a dozen or so thin white stripes running up and down its chestnut-colored flanks. Larger than any other forest-dwelling antelope, a male can grow to nearly 900 pounds (408 kilograms).

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## Shy and Stealthy

The find brings new hope for conservationists trying to save an animal that has been under continual pressure from poaching and dwindling habitat for 40 years—without much help from the skittish bongo themselves.

"The animal knows how to hide," Solomon Kirayu, a relentless local bongo tracker, said on a recent hike through Eburu's outer fringes. "Before you get a glimpse, you really have to track it."

The forest's remoteness and the animal's lifestyle add to the difficulty of counting Eburu's bongo.

Groups of female and baby bongo, for example, often live for weeks on less than an acre (0.4 hectare) of land, while males roam from group to group, said Nigel Carnelley, a local conservationist who has worked with Kenya's Bongo Surveillance Project.

Carnelley said he had learned that bongo still lived in Eburu only in 2003, and pictures from a camera trap suggest the presence of another 20 to 30—in addition to the 20 or so just found—for a total of about 50 in Eburu Forest.

Some experts suggest that that estimate is too high. So the next step, if funding can be obtained, will be to confirm those numbers with more camera traps, dung samples, and tracking on foot.

### **Bringing Back the Bongo**

Carnelley's efforts are part of wider work in Kenya to restore the bongo.

Mount Kenya is the location of a planned program to release bongo that were born and raised in captivity in the United States. Eighteen bongo were returned to the Mount Kenya Wildlife Conservancy in 2004, but the descendants have yet to be released into the wild.

Mike Prettejohn, who was born in Kenya and hunted bongo in his youth, now leads the Bongo Surveillance Project. He's trying to cement a deal with the Kenya Wildlife Service that would start a patrol group to stop poachers from attacking the bongo.

Already the wildlife service has launched the National Bongo Conservation Task Force to devote a plan for protecting the bongo from its chief threats: habitat destruction and poachers, who hunt with guns and dogs.

"They are quite clever at keeping alive but nevertheless with dogs and the amount of pressure they are under, the mountain bongo in the wild will be finished within 50 years at the most," Prettejohn said.

Yet such steep, inaccessible forest—which generally works in the bongos favor by keeping humans away—is hard to monitor. Determined poachers can operate with little fear of being caught.

"The terrain in question is difficult for any force to adequately control," said Lyndon Estes, a research associate with the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation, who has studied the bongo.

"You can be 100 meters [110 yards] away from somebody up in those forests and possibly not even be aware of them."

### **The Wild vs. Woodcutting**

In many ways, the plight of the bongo represents the conflicts wracking Kenya today.

Massive population growth is putting pressure on some of Kenya's most precious wild spaces, as people come looking for food and fuel for Kenya's ubiquitous charcoal-burning cooking stoves.

In particular, the woodcutters are destroying the forest habitat in Eburu.

Approached by strangers in the woods late last year, some cutters scattered, while others continued chopping trees nonchalantly.

"I'm here because I'm poor and I have no other way to make money," said woodcutter Stephen Njoroge, standing over a massive tree trunk he had felled and was cutting into smaller logs.

That conflict—poverty versus conservation—has community leaders struggling to find ways for the cookers to work without destroying the forest for fuel.

"If we pull you out of the forest, what alternative do you have?" said John Kimani, a local leader.

"We are not trying to remove these people from the forest," he continued. "But we are trying to turn away from destroying to cooperating and saving something."