

Bringing

Text & photographs by Mark Eveleigh

The David



up baby

Sheldrick Wildlife Trust



It is well established that elephants have remarkably close family bonds, and the trauma of being orphaned at an early age is often a death knell for young elephants. If they should be lucky enough to find their way into the care of the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya, however, chances are that they will find a human family to bond with and in due course they will be reunited with a wild herd of elephants. Mark Eveleigh visited the trust at its headquarters in Nairobi National Park and saw rehabilitation in action at Tsavo.

The elephant's trunk hit me so fast, I didn't see it coming. The next thing I knew, I was lying in the grass and couldn't move my arm. Then I saw she was coming for me again and I was sure it was all over.'

You get used to hearing such narrow-escape stories from hardened bush guides, but it was difficult to imagine this sweet, white-haired woman on the receiving end of an elephant charge. She wore a long powder-blue dress and fiddled with a pair of reading glasses as she recounted a story that has obviously been retold more than once. Yet there are few guides in Africa who have spent so many difficult hours with elephants, or who understand their temperament

as well as 70-year-old Daphne Sheldrick MBE does.

'It was my own stupid fault,' she continued, with a magnanimity born only of having worked closely with elephants for 30 years. 'I thought I recognised her as one of our released orphans, but she was quick to remind me that she was a wild elephant and that I was being extremely presumptuous in fondling her trunk.'

Daphne's husband David was the founder warden of Tsavo East National Park, and when he died in 1977 she set up the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. Since then, working at the trust, she has dedicated her life to orphaned elephants, rhinos and buffaloes. She was the first person to hand-rear ►



hands of poachers or in human conflict situations, or having been separated from the herd during the panic of a stampede. Some grieve so painfully for their lost family that they just give up the will to live. Others can be nurtured into a new life only if they can be convinced that there is a loving new family for them.'

When Daphne disappeared to welcome the hordes of visitors who would be arriving to watch the elephants' afternoon bath, I accompanied one of the keepers to find the orphans. Felix Micheni had been with the herd that morning and had a good idea of where they would be feeding, but even so I felt more than a little vulnerable as we sauntered off into the thick bush of Nairobi National Park.

'Don't worry, the elephants are also very nervous about lions,' laughed Felix. 'We'd probably hear them trumpeting a warning well before we saw any cats. Probably.'

Eventually we stepped into a clearing to see a herd of the smallest elephants that I had ever seen in one place. Three-month-old Nalitu was the baby of the group, while four-month-old Lauleni was just beginning to stand up to her boisterous older brothers. The youngest were covered with blankets (tied on with belts made of pantyhose) so that they wouldn't catch pneumonia, which is the greatest danger to a young elephant deprived of the body heat and sheltering bulk of its mother.

'Elephants can't sneeze or cough,' Daphne had explained to me, 'so we don't get any warning until mucus starts streaming from the trunk. Then we might only have two hours at best. Imagine if you had a metre-long nose – you'd have to be pretty far gone before it started running.'

While Felix laughingly fended off the probing trunks of two of the youngsters which immediately rushed up to greet him, I held back to give them time to get used to my scent. I need not have worried; these remarkably gentle creatures – some already as tall as ponies – were soon nuzzling my camera bag, sucking my fingers and pulling my ears with the sensitive tip of their trunks. There were eight baby elephants here and eight keepers who wander with them all day and sleep in their stables at night (on rotation, so that the elephants do not become too attached to a particular human). Affection and constant caresses are facets



newborn elephants successfully and she has subsequently released a dozen black rhinos and almost 40 elephants into the wild. But the job of caring for them can be as heartbreaking as it is fulfilling.

'Last week we lost eight-week-old Jipe,' she told me as we stood on the verandah of the trust's headquarters in Nairobi National Park. 'He seemed to be a perfectly strong, healthy young elephant then suddenly he just died, for no apparent reason. Baby elephants are exceedingly fragile; they can be fine one day and dead the next. We lost three others last year, but when they arrived they were all too far gone really – from spear wounds and malnutrition. It's particularly hard on the keepers when we lose an elephant that seems to be getting stronger.'

Sensitive human keepers are the key to the Sheldrick Trust's elephant survival strategy. 'To a baby elephant, the family is all important,' Daphne explained. 'The babies are always severely traumatised on arrival, having witnessed the violent massacre of their elephant family at the



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of herd life that must be duplicated if these elephants are to grow to be well-balanced members of a wild herd.

It is no cliché that an elephant never forgets. 'They form strong bonds that last throughout their lives,' Daphne had told me. 'Eleanor was one of our first orphans. Shortly after she was born in 1958, her mother was killed by poachers in Samburu National Reserve. She is now the matriarch of a Tsavo herd, yet when one of our old keepers went to the park two years ago she rushed up to greet him without a moment's hesitation. It was 37 years since she had last seen him!'

Nairobi National Park is not large enough to sustain a herd of wild elephants so the older orphans (together with their human family) are eventually moved 240 kilometres to the Sheldrick Trust's centre in Tsavo National Park.

Joseph Sauni, the trust's manager at Tsavo, took me to meet the orphaned elephants at a waterhole. The brash adolescents that stampeded towards us in a cloud of red dust were a far cry from the infants that I had seen at Nairobi. At five years old, these elephants were already big enough to run over me without noticing, and with 26 of them splashing and play-fighting in and around the waterhole it was important to keep a line of retreat open as I tried to get close with my camera.

Joseph pointed to one four-year-old with a strangely misshapen ear. 'That's Burra,' he said. 'The members of his herd were notorious crop raiders and the Sheldrick Trust hired a helicopter to drive them away from Bura village and into the park. But this little elephant was left behind. We realised that he had almost severed his right ear while trying to escape from a snare.' ▶

ABOVE While a young elephant feeds, its trunk searches for reassurance. In the wild, the sheltering bulk of its mother would provide comfort; at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, the comfort is provided by the neck and face of a trusted keeper.

OPPOSITE Daphne Sheldrick MBE has been highly acclaimed for her dedication to the care of orphaned elephants. She has been elevated to the Global 500 Roll of Honour by UNEP, has won the BBC's Lifetime Achievement Award (2002) and was proclaimed a 'Moran of the Burning Spear' by the Kenyan government.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Three-month-old Nalitu entwines 'trunks' with a member of her new human 'family'.



ABOVE Like a bunch of schoolboys racing each other to the swimming pool, a herd of brash adolescent elephants stampede through the red Tsavo dust on their way to the waterhole.

BELOW During the course of the past year, the Sheldrick Trust's five anti-snaring patrols in Tsavo have collected 8 000 snares, ranging from flimsy guineafowl traps made from reeds to heavy-duty elephant and giraffe snares.

Snares are a huge problem in Tsavo. The usual victims are dik-dik and impala, but bigger game often finds its way into the butcheries of nearby Voi or Nairobi. Some estimates say that a million wild animals may have ended up in the pot last year alone, and a recent study by the Born Free Foundation revealed that up to 51 per cent of Nairobi butcheries are illegally selling bushmeat.

Isaac Maina is the leader of the Burra Team (named after the maimed elephant), the first of the Sheldrick Trust's five anti-snaring patrols. In a storeroom at the Tsavo compound lies a steadily growing heap of snares:

thousands of treacherous little 'cheese-wire' dik-dik loops and larger snares, made from telephone wire, capable of bringing down zebra, wildebeest and eland. Biggest of all, and somehow most horrifying, are the snares (from vehicle winch-cables) that kill giraffe and elephant. In the past four years the Sheldrick Trust has collected almost 50 000 snares throughout Tsavo.

'We've sometimes found over a hundred snares in one four-hour patrol,' Isaac told me the next morning as we struggled through the bush with his team and two armed guards from the Kenya Wildlife Service. We peered into bolt holes and along game paths and within minutes found a shred of grey-brown fur that was all that remained of a dik-dik. Larger game presents more complex, but not insurmountable, distribution problems. Isaac's team once came across a poaching camp where an adult giraffe had recently been butchered. The meat had been hung up to dry on the trees until it was ready to be transported down to the highway on bicycles.

The Trans-Africa Highway linking Nairobi and Mombasa cuts right across the migratory route between the eastern and western sectors of Tsavo National Park. Wildebeest graze on the roadside and 'zebra crossings' here take an



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unusual – and highly unpredictable – form. Presumably these animals would rather take their chances with the heavy trucks than with the voracious lions of Tsavo. Many of them fall victim to the gangs of commercial poachers for whom the Trans-Africa acts as an ideal conveyor belt to the capital.

'Bushmeat is going to be Kenya's next big natural disaster,' said the quietly-spoken Isaac. 'A busy team of poachers can take as many as a hundred antelope in a night. We managed to fight back from the massive elephant and rhino slaughters of the 1970s and '80s, but even Kenya's great natural wealth won't be able to stand the sort of exploitation that we're seeing now.' What is happening in Tsavo is being repeated at every park and reserve in the country. Daphne Sheldrick believes that unless the poachers are stopped, 'East Africa could follow West Africa in becoming a faunal vacuum'.

The 20 900-square-kilometre Tsavo National Park was founded in 1948 not because it was a phenomenally rich wildlife habitat (although this became clear in time), but because it was of little use to man, being an arid thirland devoid of grazing and infested with tsetse flies, malaria and periodic rinderpest. In the 1960s there were some 45 000 elephants in the park, but huge numbers were massacred over the next two decades, when images of machete-hacked elephant faces covered in flies shocked the world. The surviving animals were intelligent enough to look for security close to the expanding villages, where the AK47s could not reach them so easily – and many were



subsequently destroyed as crop raiders and 'problem animals'.

Only now are the elephants beginning to return to the centre of the park, but the current population of 10 000 is insufficient to re-open the grasslands that are the lifeblood of grazing species. Far from being a purely destructive influence on the habitat, elephants are necessary to combat the impenetrable thorn scrub that would soon cover the landscape in their absence. Tsavo *needs* elephants and is the only national park in Kenya large enough to offer sufficient space for growing herds. As such, it is the ideal location for the Sheldrick Trust's orphan release programme. ▶

Sixteen-month-old Shida ('Problem' in Swahili) lives under 24-hour guard in Nairobi National Park. To add to his insecurities as an orphan, he is now beginning to sense that there are mature rhino bulls around which might resent his presence in their territory.



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The stockade at Tsavo is built to withstand not only attack by predators but also a possible panicked stampede by 26 carefully nurtured 'inmates'. In its own time, each young elephant will simply decide one evening not to return to its night's lodging, and from that day onward it will be a wild elephant once again.

The team of keepers who accompanied Burra's group of orphans from Nairobi have the advantage of assistance from two experienced 'overseers'. Emily and Aitong are two now-independent orphans which have taken on the roles of matriarch and nanny to the youngsters. They escort the herd between foraging areas and the great iron Jurassic Park-style stockade which protects them from predators at night.

When Joseph and I arrived at the stockade an English couple were waiting for the arrival of the herd. The Tsavo orphanage is not open to the public but Janet Wilkinson and Kevin Griffiths were privileged guests who had travelled from the Isle of Wight to meet the young elephant that they had adopted through the Sheldrick Trust's website. By coincidence they were Burra's 'foster parents' and Janet, already visibly emotional when we arrived, was moved to

tears when Joseph told them the story of how he had been abandoned.

Now, however, the young elephant is strong and feisty, going out with the herd every day. He and the other orphans, under the guidance of Emily and Aitong, often mingle with wild elephants. He will never be turned out of the stockade, but one day he will simply decide not to return to it. I imagined that this must be a sad moment for the human keepers, but Joseph corrected me: 'No, it makes us very happy. When a young elephant decides he doesn't need us any more and that he's happy to go back to the wild, then we know that we've done our job well.' ■

For information on how you can help The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust – from US\$50 you can become a foster parent to an orphaned elephant – visit www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org or tel. (+254-2) 089 1996.