



LISA HOFFNER (2)

orphans unlimited

The 2009 drought in Kenya, the worst recorded in many decades, was devastating for people and wildlife, and its far-reaching effects are still being felt. Together with an attendant surge in poaching, it has led to a ninefold increase in the number of elephant orphans rescued at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, as **Lisa Hoffner** reports.

A LONG SPEAR WAS LODGED deep in her skull and protruded from her head, midway between the eyes. There were wounds on her body too, probably caused by an axe.' These gruesome words describe the plight of an elephant – later named Murka – that narrowly escaped death last year and is now one of a growing number of residents at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. Stories like hers have become more common as a result of drought and poaching.

Tucked within Nairobi National Park, the trust is run by David Sheldrick's widow, Daphne, as a safe haven for young elephants and rhinos. The elephants, whose development shares certain parallels with that of humans, are raised in hybrid human-animal herds, with male keepers taking the place of matriarchs in the surrogate setups. These men shadow the elephant calves, feeding them milk every three hours and even sleeping with them at night. In time, the orphans, along with their keepers, are transported to Kenya's Tsavo National Park to make the transition into the wild. The calves remain in their makeshift family until they have the emotional maturity and skills set they need to survive without human help – a process that can take up to 10 years. 'Elephants have identical emotions to us, plus many additional attributes that we lack,' explains Sheldrick, the grand architect of this unique blend of elephant and human life.

More than 50 years of living and learning in the bush, as well as the number of orphans in her care, give her an insight into the health of elephant populations in Kenya. But she was not prepared for the astronomical influx of newcomers to the orphanage last year. The

2009 drought was the worst in decades and its toll on wildlife was enormous. Coupled with a rise in human-wildlife conflict and poaching for ivory, it was especially devastating to young elephants. 'Milk-dependent young died in droves throughout Laikipia and in Tsavo,' recalls Sheldrick. The trust rescued 53 elephant and two black rhino orphans last year, compared to a typical annual intake of about six calves. Elephant-sized baby bottles – and the keepers – worked overtime at the Nairobi nursery, caring for a record number of residents.

'The 2009 drought was unique,' Sheldrick explains. 'All the protected areas were invaded by cattle, some trucked in from far afield. They monopolised the few remaining waterholes and consumed what little fodder was left, resulting in the loss of more herbivores than in any drought in living memory.' Mystery ailments added another layer of complexity, as many rescued orphans succumbed to gut parasites transmitted by the cattle.

Where there is weakness there is opportunity and, with desperation at a peak, the opportunists took their best shot at wildlife – literally. Elephants and rhinos became the targets of trigger-ready fingers, and poaching reached an all-time high in Kenya. 'While lack of water was the main cause of [elephant] deaths,' reports Yusuf Adan, the senior warden of Tsavo East, '90 per cent of the elephants killed were slain for their ivory.'

Luckier than many to survive at all, Murka bears the wounds that underscore the region's problems. She can't use her trunk for drinking as a healthy elephant would and

is extremely wary of humans, but is healing nonetheless and gradually accepting her new family.

At 76 years of age, Sheldrick continues to be intimately involved with the trust and, with the help of her daughter Angela and son-in-law Robert Carr-Hartley, will continue to care for the likes of Murka. The orphanage has notched up 130 successful elephant and 14 rhino rescues to date and, says Angela, '[Its] future is assured as long as there are wildlife and habitats to be saved.' This is good news, as early reports of a La Niña weather system have analysts predicting another drought in the months ahead. **AG**

Read more about the work of the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in the September 2005 issue of Africa Geographic.

ABOVE Perhaps surprisingly, men rather than women take over the role of matriarch in the orphan herds.

BELOW Daphne Sheldrick has passed her invaluable and hard-won experience of nurturing young elephants – the most difficult species to raise from infancy – to a devoted team of keepers.

