

# Daphne Sheldrick

When feelings of kinship transcend the species boundary / BY DOUGLAS CHADWICK

**M**ANY OF THE PEOPLE Americans most admire are those who care selflessly for others. We sometimes wonder where their reserves of compassion come from. But truly devoted caregivers have learned a great secret, which is that kindness is replenished by the act of practicing it. Daphne Sheldrick extends her kindness toward the wild animals of Africa, particularly orphans, the most helpless of all.

From 1948, when Kenya's largest national park, Tsavo, was founded, until 1976, the head warden of the main section was David Sheldrick, a former safari guide and the son of a British Army officer. David and Daphne married in 1955, when she was 21. She was soon taking in Tsavo's orphaned and injured animals, from wart hogs to house-cat-size antelopes called dik-diks. In the early 1960s, she devised the first milk formula that kept rhino infants alive. Following years of trial and error, she also perfected a baby formula for elephants, whose capacities for sorrow, joy and tenderness inspired her more with each passing year.

Like human beings, elephants develop under the constant care of their mothers, reach sexual maturity as teenagers and live to be 70 or 80 years old. Females almost never leave their tightly knit matriarchal families. Elephants will physically support a sick or hurt relative trying to walk. If it can't move, they bring it food and water in their trunks. They may linger near a dead body for days and partially bury it. Elephants appear to suffer serious depression after losing companions; some say elephants have even died of grief.

After David Sheldrick died in 1977, Daphne, with other wardens and conservationists, established the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, which funds her work. That same year, the Kenyan government granted her permission to



Got milk? Sheldrick (in 2001 at her animal orphanage in Kenya) developed a formula for feeding baby elephants.

National Park population, which had been poached out of existence for its long horns.

Daphne Jenkins grew up on a Kenyan dairy farm. At the age of 3, she was given a young bushbuck to nurture. When it was older and the time came to let it go, she "wept buckets," she told me, but she learned that the truest kindness you can show a wild creature is to help it be free. In her 70s today, she teaches people how to tend to baby elephants and eventually reunite them with wild herds. The trust has also restocked reserves with rhinos, zebras and buffaloes.

Daphne Sheldrick received both an MBE (Member of the British Empire, an honor given by the queen) and an MBS (Moran of the Burning Spear, a Masai warrior title bestowed by Kenya's government). The United Nations Environmental Programme placed her on its Global 500 Roll of Honour. Yet long before the accolades, she was simply a woman who took in wild animals because they needed help. Elephants don't forget. Her face and voice will live in the memory of many a hand-reared orphan for decades as they roam the parklands of East Africa, trumpeting their freedom. ○

Once under Sheldrick's care Zoe thrived, earning a reputation as a confident, naughty and mischievous youngster.

—SMITHSONIAN, MARCH 1997

build a home within Nairobi National Park. When I met Sheldrick there, in 1989, she was soothing a baby elephant so traumatized after ivory poachers killed its family that it screamed in its sleep, apparently suffering nightmares. Another young elephant had made friends with an orphaned black rhinoceros, one of the last females from the Amboseli

DOUGLAS CHADWICK, a self-described "mush-bearded elephant groupie," authored *True Grizz* and *The Fate of the Elephant*.