

The David Sheldrick WILDLIFE TRUST



Newsletter 2009

damaged tendons etc., another drought victim for whom there was no hope of recovery.

Name of Orphan: Mara (Deceased)

Date of Arrival 16th October

Female

A 6 week old baby found alone near the Sand river area of Masai Mara, and rescued by the Rhino Surveillance team. She arrived in the Nursery with milky eyes that were almost blind, possibly caused by the venom of a Spitting Cobra. She died very unexpectedly from pneumonia on the 4th November.

Name of Orphan: Chaffa

Date of Arrival 20th October

Female

This baby, approximately 1 month old, is from Shaba National Reserve and was simply found wandering alone during the evening of the 19th October by a KWS Officer near the Ngaremara bridge close to the town of Isiolo. There were no other elephants in sight, so the baby was obviously an orphan whose mother had either succumbed to the drought or been poached for her ivory, poaching having escalated sharply in the area ever since the arrival of Chinese road construction workers. Since such a young calf was very much at risk from predators, the KWS Officer rescued her and held her overnight at the KWS Isiolo base, feeding her water, and keeping her warm. We were alerted the next morning, when the rescue plane collected her from Isiolo airstrip to bring her into the Nursery.

OVERVIEW

Nursery Orphans: Lesanju began the year as the main Nursery Matriarch, a rather quiet elephant who felt the weight of responsibility on her shoulders, with Kenia overseeing the very young infants who were too fragile to walk as far afield as their older peers. Suguta, who previously was glued to a Keeper in amongst the Baby Group was becoming stronger and enjoyed upgrading herself to spend time with the older elephants, always very competitive with Kimana at milk feeding times while Taveta, who was the largest Nursery boy, began asserting his dominance over the others and being labeled “the Nursery bully”. Siria, another little bull liked to try his luck mounting on the girls, who had to gang up in order to push him away and keep him in order. Shimba and Mzima, inseparable friends, were never far apart and preferred a quiet time apart from the others rather than becoming embroiled in the daily shenanigans of the more outgoing and active Nursery members.

The main instigator of any shenanigans was always Lempaute, the mischievous member of the Nursery and extremely possessive of Lesanju. Besides wanting Lesanju all to herself, she thoroughly enjoyed playing pranks on the others, deliberately scaring them by racing past as though fearful of an unseen threat, prompting all to retreat rapidly back to their Keepers for protection, Lempaute meanwhile enjoying the mayhem with a smile on her face! (Incidentally elephants do smile!) She could also always be counted upon to entertain the human mudbath visitors during the Trust’s one Open Hour per day, her latest trick being to intercept the football during a game between the other orphans and their Keepers, pick up the ball, holding it firm between her chin and trunk and then parade it along the visitors’ cordon, thoroughly enjoying the laughter this generated amongst the audience. However, during every mudbath hour, it was usually gentle and peace loving Shimba who was most accommodating of the young African school children who turn up daily to enjoy the orphans’ mudbath, and often in such numbers that they have to be relayed in fifty at a time. He would position himself close to the separating rope and present his trunk so that the children could blow down it as well as marvel at the size of his ears, opening and shutting them and all the while chattering away excitedly. Many African children (and adults) have never set eyes on a living elephant before, so it is not unusual for them to view the orphans as already adult, having no concept of anything larger than a cow! Dida and Ndiu were quiet and well behaved members of the Nursery, Dida a somewhat fragile elephant, prone to having off-colour days and adoring of Kenia, whilst little Ndiu was a friend to everyone.

Wasessa, a 2 year old orphan who arrived unconscious and close to death from milk deprivation, remembered her wild life and elephant family clearly, and sank into deep depression when she came round, grieving the loss of her loved ones deeply. Like others who are orphaned older, grieving manifests itself by choosing to spend time alone separated from the others, and also displaying intolerance of the others which is uncharacteristic particularly in a female. Only time can heal what is obviously the equivalent in humans of “post traumatic stress disorder” as the older elephants adjust to the loss of their elephant family and become accustomed to their new strange circumstances.

It is now scientifically proven through a study of the brain that elephants are indeed “human” emotionally, equally as family oriented as humans with a convoluted brain four times the size of ours, capable of sophisticated intelligence and a massive memory capacity far

superior to that of a human, reinforcing the age old saying that “an elephant never forgets”. We can certainly vouch for that through having handled elephant orphans from the day they were born until grown and leading free and normal wild elephant lives!

Unlike the Primates, (the category within which we belong), elephants, like most other animals, are also endowed with a genetic memory that is honed by exposure to a wild situation. This and their intelligence makes them one of the easiest hand-reared mammals to rehabilitate back into a wild situation - that said, only if they grow up psychologically normal by being reared with patience, love and understanding, and never abused or harmed by the human family that replaces their lost elephant one during their formative years. Elephants need space, which is something which is becoming increasingly scarce, especially here in Kenya where there is such population pressure on the land. Tsavo is the only Protected Area that offers elephants the space they need to be able to enjoy a quality of life in wild terms, and that is where, in the fullness of time, all our orphans get a second chance of life when grown.

Nursery days throughout the years are filled with all the above aspects of elephant behaviour, but with a differing cast of players, each elephant an individual in its own right with its own specific character idiosyncrasies. At any age an elephant duplicates its human counterpart in terms of age progression and as the years pass older Nursery inmates graduate to the next stage of their long journey back into the wild system, transferred in large Safari Trucks to either one of the Trust's two Rehabilitation Centres in Tsavo East National Park. The Voi Rehabilitation Centre in Southern Tsavo East incorporates the original Stockades built in the early fifties during the Warden-ship of the late David Sheldrick while the Ithumba Rehabilitation Centre in Northern Tsavo East was established in 2003.

For the human replacement “family”, working with the orphaned elephants in the Nursery, each day becomes an emotional roller-coaster where the joy and the satisfaction of success is tempered by disappointment and depression whenever a treasured inmate becomes unwell or passes away. Elephants possess a magic that ensnares the human heart in a mysterious and inexplicable way, particularly in early infancy. Being “brethren”, they strike a chord deep within the human soul for they are endowed with many of the more noble attributes of the human species such as an enormous capacity for caring and love, stoicism and a touching forgiveness and trust of the specific human individuals who replace their lost elephant family, and whom they

recognize instantly, even after years of separation, endlessly illustrating that incomparable elephant memory. Anxiety over the wellbeing of those in our care and whom we have nurtured and reared from infancy and childhood into adulthood is a stress factor that we live with on a daily basis and from which there is no escape, for an elephant's lifetime duplicates our own and many things can happen over a lifetime.

At the death of each and every orphan, a new grave has to be dug in the forest behind the Trust Headquarters, and although sometimes valuable lessons which aid with the survival of others can be learnt from autopsies, an elephant can be fine one day, and gone the next, and often one never knows why, other than perhaps a deficiency of some vital nutrient due to adverse climatic conditions whilst being formed in the womb, or from their mother's milk. Elephants need to bulk up on fresh green grass after rain during early pregnancy, and immediately after the birth of a baby, and perhaps this has been the missing element during a pregnancy that has spanned the past two very dry years.

This year, we have had to recruit and train additional Keepers to cope with the unusual influx. Existing stables and stockades have had to be partitioned and new accommodation erected, cozy small stables for the very young and larger enclosures for those older (elephants suffer claustrophobia if enclosed in too small a space). Each stable or stockade has to encompass a sleeping platform for the attendant Keeper so that he can at least get some sleep in between the 3 hourly milk feeds, with one of the Keepers assigned to Milk Mixing Duty throughout the night. The Mixer's task is complicated by the fact that the very young have a different milk formula to those older and as the elephant's appetite grows, so the amount mixed for each elephant has to be adjusted, additives added, medication administered, varying for each inmate. The human family of Keepers must become the orphans' new human family, and beloved, so how the Keepers handle the orphans is a crucial ingredient to success involving an all consuming commitment and 24 hour intensive care during the Nursery period which spans up to the first 2 years. Each night a different Keeper sleeps in with a different elephant to circumvent strong personal attachments which can cause psychological problems and in turn impact on the physical health of the elephant whenever that particular person takes time off.

Shuffling sleeping arrangements invariably causes an upset, for like human children, elephant babies thrive best on a regular routine involving a milk feed every 3 hours throughout the day and night

(and also on time!) and bedding down for the night in the same place. Any adjustment that has to be made to the sleeping arrangements involves very close consultation with the Keepers to establish who is friendly with whom and who is competitive with whom etc because psychological stress can depress natural immunity and in turn trigger life threatening conditions. An example of an upset was graphically brought home to us when little Sabachi was moved to a different Stockade, although his usual neighbour, Olare, was also moved in order to remain next door to him. Sabachi, who has always made his wants clear, bellowed incessantly throughout the night, stood on his head, tried to clamber up the Gate standing on his back legs and even took to kicking the Keeper with a back leg! This resulted in a disturbance that upset all the other orphans, as well as the roosting Hidada Ibis, who also protested loudly throughout the night, affording little rest for everyone, whether elephant or human!

To begin with we held out thinking that Sabachi would just have to get used to the new arrangement, but no such luck! In the end, we had to capitulate in the interests of restoring peace and a good night's rest to the entire establishment, so Sabachi was moved back to where he wanted to be, as was Olare so that he would still have her as his neighbour. From that moment on, peace returned during the nights!

Another incident involving Sabachi was more serious. One morning found him with a cloudy eye and a mysterious swelling on a hind leg which puzzled everyone, because his Night Keeper had noticed nothing untoward during the night, apart from the fact that Sabachi had cried and become very restless. At first we thought he must have had a nightmare, but then it suddenly dawned on us that he might possibly have shared his stable with an unwelcome intruder sequestered in his bedding of hay. Sure enough, this proved to be the case for a small black-necked cobra was spotted slithering down a hole at the back of his stable having come out through the sluice hole for waste water. Fortunately, Sabachi soon healed following treatment and the unwelcome intruder was despatched.

Four of the older Nursery elephants (Wasessa, Siria, Shimba and Mzima) were transferred to the Voi Rehabilitation Centre in Southern Tsavo East on the 21st February, welcomed with great delight by the Voi Elephant Keepers, who had remained devoid of elephant inmates for nearly two years. They were joined on the 29th April by Lesanju, Lempaute and Sinya bringing the total at the Voi Stockades to 9 and in August by "bully boy" Taveta and his friend Tassia

which freed up more Nursery space for the plethora of new arrivals. Next to move in early November were Kenia, Shira, Meibai, Enesoit and Naimina, Kenia and Shira destined for the Voi Rehabilitation Centre there to join others they had known at the Nursery, and Meibai, Enesoit and Naimina to Ithumba being Nursery newcomers and therefore strangers to the established Voi Unit group. The new intake at both Centres brought the number of elephants now Keeper Dependent at the Voi Stockades to 11 and at Ithumba to about 8 who returned regularly at night, but who were sometimes joined by others opting for a quieter night who normally were Keeper Independent. 22 of the Ithumba elephants were now more or less permanently independent and fraternizing regularly with the wild herds, but still keeping in close touch with the Stockade youngsters almost daily.

The Rhinos:- In addition to the elephant orphans, this year the Nursery has had to cope with a new tiny orphaned rhino named "Maalim" from the Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary in Tsavo West National Park, abandoned by his mother immediately after birth and believed to have been born premature. He came to us on the 19th December 2008 just 8 inches tall and weighing 24 kilos – a miniature that could have fitted into a lady's handbag! Initially his skin was so dry and flaking that he had to be anointed with milking salve each night, something he relished, since rhinos are extremely sensual animals and rubbing them sends them into a blissful torpor. However, little Maalim also has another great love and that is his mattress, superseding even the love of his bottle of milk! Each evening when he returned to his stable, he flopped down on the mattress with a contented look, waiting to be both anointed with milking salve and fed his bottle of milk actually whilst lying down, but as the months past, and he grew bigger, the anointing became less frequent but his love of the mattress never waned. Now he hoists it aloft all round the stable until it lands on top of him like a blanket, and only then is he content to lie down and sleep!

To begin with Maalim's days were spent doing the rounds of the dung-piles and bush urinals of the resident wild rhino community to add his specific contribution of dung, kick it with his hind legs, and in this way leave his scent trail by way of introducing himself and announcing his presence to all other Nairobi Park rhinos, including the Trust's two large rhino orphans, Shida and blind Maxwell. The Keeper escorting him has to don the special rhino dust-coat (which is never washed) so that Maalim can recognize him through its rather ripe scent since the life of rhinos revolves around chemistry! Within just one month Maalim had doubled his size and put on 5 kilos without any health issues at

all, and this satisfactory progress has continued throughout the year. Today he is a sturdy yearling with a button of a horn on his nose, quite capable of flattening a human during exuberant playfulness, the reason why he no longer puts in an appearance during public viewing. After his mudbath, he always becomes exceedingly playful and even the Keepers have to exercise nimble avoiding tactics!

Shida, Nursery reared from the age of 2 months after his mother died of old age at the Ivory Burn Site in Nairobi National Park in 2003, is now Keeper Independent and fully reintegrated back into the resident rhino community of the Park. However, being a rhino, and as such a creature of habit, he continues to return back to base usually twice a day, putting himself back in his erstwhile stockade to be “wowed” by the mudbath visitors during the daily Open Hour, and again in the evening when foster-parents of the orphans are allowed privileged access. At such times the door to his Stockade is closed and he enjoys a hand-out of Copra to keep him quiet until the last visitor leaves the premises. Then up go the “hot wires” to demarcate rhino “No-Go” areas around the compound, which although often just a piece of innocuous string, are still respected.

One of the attractions for Shida is blind Maxwell in the Stockade adjoining his own. Maxwell was born with defective eyes lacking both the retina and a functional optic nerve, so nothing can be done to restore his sight. Other than this disability, Maxwell is a fine specimen for a three year old rhino, in fact exactly the same size, if not taller than Shida who is rather squat for the ripe old age of 6 years. Only Max’s shorter horn suggests the age differential between the two.

Max was heard by the Keepers one day in December 2006 crying for his mother in the Park forest abutting our premises. He was about 4 months old at the time and there was no sign of his mother anywhere nearby, the Keepers having kept watch for an entire day hoping that she would return. At nightfall when we set about trying to capture him to save him from the lions, we realized that he was, in fact, totally blind. Even so, he gave his captors a real run-around and almost flattened Dame Daphne in the process, who had to dive into a bush at the last moment when he charged the different sound of her voice. Eventually, it took 12 strong men to subdue him and carry him into a stable on the Elephant Rescue tarpaulin.

Since a bull rhino’s life involves having to fight for rank and status, unlike Shida, Max can never enjoy a

wild life, and therefore faces a sheltered and protected existence within the confines of his Stockade, which has been enlarged this year to allow him more space. However, one would never guess that he was blind, for he confidently races around his enclosure without colliding with any obstacle, often hot on the heels of the intruding wild warthogs who slip through the poles to sneak some of his food. Such prowess is the living example of the sophistication and accuracy of both the memory and the sense of smell of a rhino. Max also has other abilities that defy human logic such as being able to detect the approach of Shida long before any humans have an inkling that he is actually on his way back from the bush. Up goes Max’s tail, indicating heightened anticipation and excitement, so the daily visits of Shida are the highlight of his dark world and his rather mundane daily routine. The two enjoy sparring with one another through the poles that separate their enclosures and with such power that the uprights have to be regularly reset in concrete. At such times Shida is denied entry into his usual Stockade until the cement hardens, and this upset to his daily routine leaves him visibly displeased, so everyone has to take extra precautions!

Sadly, like the elephants, rhinos are also again being targeted by poachers for their horns which are believed to have medicinal and mythical properties in the Far and Middle East, despite being comprised of just the keratin of a finger nail! Max can at least be assured of a safe and comfortable life, and still play an important PR role for his highly endangered species. Less than 2,000 Black Rhinos remain alive today, having inhabited the earth for 60 million years unchanged, evolution having found no good reason to modify a creature so perfectly suited for its specific role within the environment.

And Others:- Buzby is a very lucky baby dikdik, discovered by a passing motorist on the Mombasa Highway being dangled by a back leg by a youth who was taking him home for lunch. At first the motorist believed him already dead but then noticed one little eye opening, so she managed to persuade the bushmeat poacher, to part with him in exchange for something else for lunch! It is worrying that this poacher was not even ashamed of being caught red-handed on a public highway and made no attempt whatsoever to hide his spoils. Buzby eventually ended up with us, and what a success story he has been.

Initially, he slept on a little sheepskin at Angela’s feet as she worked on the computer, enjoying the run of the house, and utilizing a box of earth in which to do his