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My Trip to Lewa

by Laura McGlothlin

In May of 2014 we opened our newest exhibit at the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, "Heart of Africa". According to Jack Hanna, we were able to capture the essence of the African savannah with the landscape and animals. I stood there gazing at the giraffes and lions in our "Africa" and, although it was beautiful, my heart was heavy because at that moment I realized that was as close to Africa as I was ever going to get, an actual trip to Africa was nowhere in my future. Oh, isn't life full of surprises! Not even 24 hours later, I sat and read an e-mail from Patty Pearthree with the subject "Honorary winner." Naturally I assumed she was just announcing to all who the Honorary BFR winner was. As I read the letter, however, tears began to well up in my eyes as I came to understand that I was the winner, and that I was going to get to go to the land I had dreamed of for over a decade, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya.

When I was first hired in the Pachyderm Department of the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium I was infatuated with elephants, that was until I met the rhinos and I discovered my new favorite animal. My first order of business once hired was to hold a Bowling For Rhinos event; we hadn't had one in years and I was becoming increasingly more aware of the need for rhino conservation. My first event was in 2001 and I was just beginning to learn about what BFR funds provide to different regions of the world. I was fortunate to meet Anna Merz that year at the AAZK conference and receive a signed copy of her book, *Rhino at the Brink of Extinction*. It was then that I fell in love with the idea of going to Lewa and it became one of my favorite, although seemingly unattainable, dreams.

The news of the e-mail I received in May of 2014 actually took a few months to sink in, but once I started receiving e-mails from the travel agent arranging our trip, it all became very real. My husband and I had never travelled internationally together, and we both were a little anxious, especially about leaving our three young children at home. Patty was a valuable resource, without her I don't feel as though we would have been as prepared and I am sure we would have been much more anxious. Up until the moment our plane left from Columbus we exchanged e-mails with Patty covering every little detail that we could think of.

After a brief layover in Amsterdam, we arrived in Nairobi under night fall and quickly made it through customs and to our overnight accommodations. Although the smell of the air was different, the complete realization that we were in Africa did not come full force until the morning when we were able to see the trees and landscape. So many things were similar, but several were different. I took pictures of the trampoline and other toys that my own children enjoy, as well as the coffee pot that I had never seen one like in my life. After breakfast, we headed to the airport to board by far the tiniest plane I have ever been on. The flight was bumpy, but thankfully we did not fall from the sky like I felt that we might. We made it to the Lewa airstrip in a little over an hour. Words cannot describe the emotions I felt as we were met by Ruwaydah and Benjamin under the hot African sun. Ruwaydah was our host from Lewa, she was very personable and we immediately took a liking to her. Soon we were off to start our adventure. At this point I

had still not seen any animals. I was too focused on landing safely to see them from the plane during our descent, although I heard the other five people on the plane exclaim over the elephants and other animals. Now being safely on the ground I was free to watch for the animals and just take in the beauty that surrounded us.

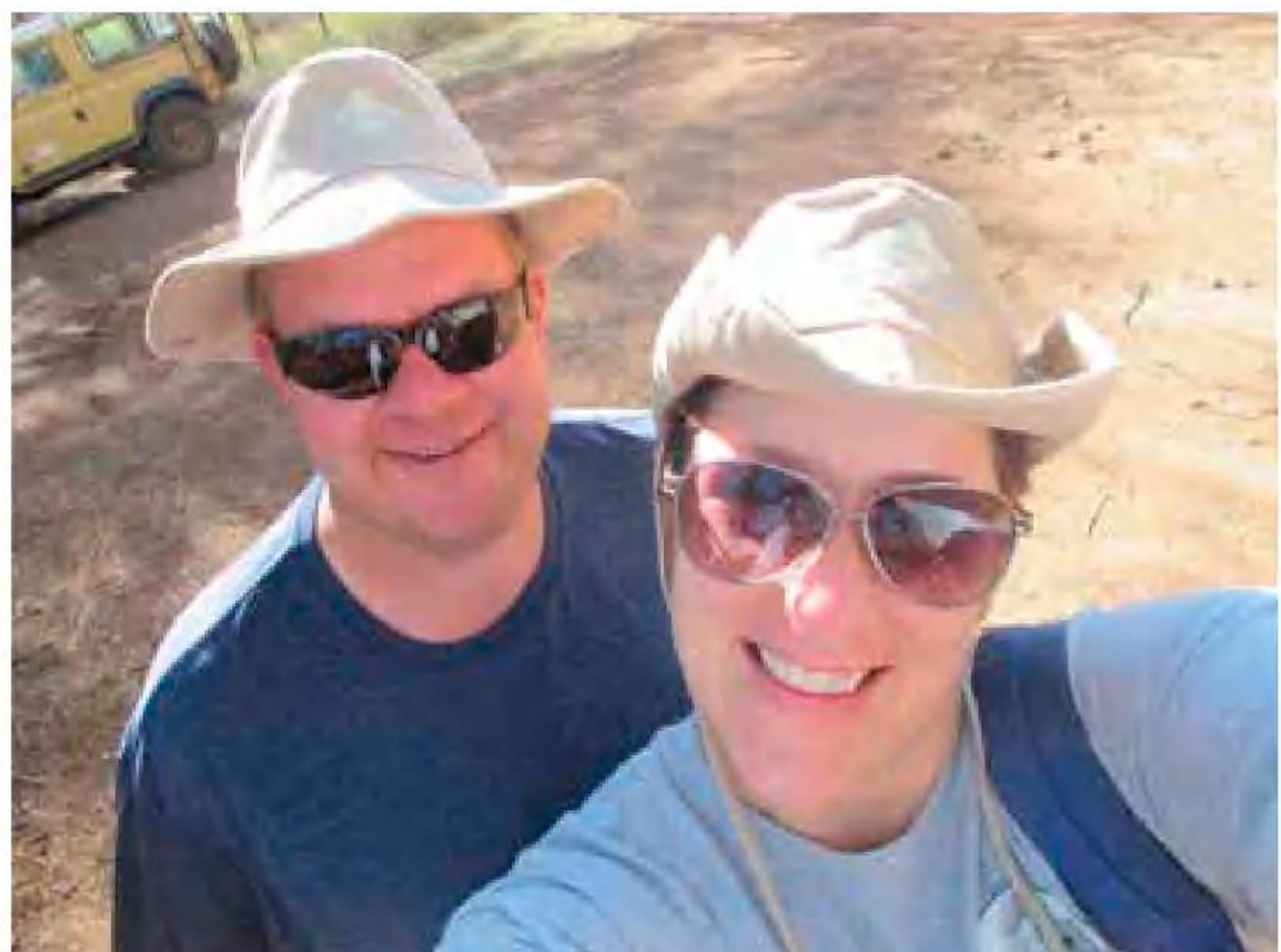
After all my years of dreaming of actually going to Kenya, I am pleased to say that Lewa surpassed my expectations. It was spectacular! We drove to the Ngiri house, where we would be staying during our time on Lewa. When we arrived at the house we were introduced to the staff and shown our accommodations for the week, an adorable cottage out by the pool. Although we were advised to go and rest since we must be jet lagged, it was our first day in Africa so of course we sat outside and took about 100 pictures of the first animals we saw. That first afternoon right from the chairs outside our room we saw a giraffe, a warthog, some antelope, and a herd of elephants! Our lunch was served outside, and we got to see the vervet monkeys in action. I had always heard that they were pesky little monkeys, and they were. As soon as the table was left unattended, they were on the table getting into the water pitcher and eating the fruit. We were warned to make sure we always shut the door to our room because the monkeys have been known to eat toothpaste, medications, you name it.

After lunch we went on our first game drive which, unbeknownst to me at the time, was also going to be a sundowner. On that first game drive we saw it all, or so it seemed; rhinos with calves, herds of elephants, and water buffalo, to name a few. We were fortunate to see a young white rhino calf romping in the grass by the road with his mom. Around 5:30, we parked at an overlook and got out of our vehicle, and just looked out for miles until the sun went down. Watching the sun set on Lewa was surreal, the perfect ending to our first day.

Our week was packed with opportunities to see many of the different areas of Lewa. My mind was blown! All these years of telling people where the money goes and giving a small description of what the money will provide, it turns out I had no idea how far it really went. The number of lives in the community that are affected by Lewa is amazing. Our first stop was at a medical clinic, one of four medical clinics that Lewa operates. They offer vaccines, family planning, pre-natal care, and much more. The medical clinics are able to provide care for over 50,000 people in the community. As I was walking around this facility, I was impressed with the cleanliness. This was not what I envisioned when picturing a medical clinic in the bush. I actually ended up getting a tetanus shot after stepping on a thorn and I had no concerns, whereas if you had told me prior to my trip that I would receive an injection while on safari in Africa, I probably would have been a little concerned.

The security on Lewa was extraordinary. We were able to meet members of the anti-poaching unit, including the dogs, and see the operations room where they keep track of everything. The dogs were well trained and we were treated to a demonstration where they tracked the "poacher" from a great distance, just using the scent from a footprint. The dedication of those that work in this unit was admirable. Our trip to the operations room where they keep track of the rhinos and work to ensure their safety, was rather enlightening as well. I was able to look at the list of every rhino on Lewa. They have someone find each rhino every day, and if they don't see one after two days, on the third day they intensify the search until the animal is found. The guards risk their lives daily for the lives of the rhinos.

The education center and the school were some of my favorite places to visit. This was partially because they were amazing and partially because this mom was getting a little homesick for the sound of children's voices. The education center was phenomenal. Children from Kenya that may have not had a chance to see the native wild animals, have the



Laura was a BFR Ho



opportunity to come to the center to go on a safari. In addition, they are taught about recycling, ecology, sustainability, and conservation. There is also a dorm for them to stay overnight, and the children help cook the food that they eat and clean the dorm in the morning. We also learned about the struggle that many face to get an education, especially the women. The opportunity for education that we receive in the U.S. is often taken for granted; I know that I never thought of myself as lucky to be able to attend school.

After seeing much of Lewa, we loaded ourselves and our luggage into a Land Rover and drove for a very bumpy hour to Il Ngwesi. It was outstanding! We were greeted by the Maasai singing. Afterward they carried our bags up the seemingly never-ending stairs. The rooms were built into the side of a mountain and had no outer walls; they just opened up right into the African savannah. Our room overlooked the watering hole, and we spent a majority of the next two days watching the animals come and go. When we first arrived in our room, a herd of elephants was sleeping under a tree, as we watched they all made their way over to the watering hole and stayed there for most of the afternoon. The joy that comes from watching a baby elephant play in a watering hole in Kenya is indescribable! We saw so many animals; hyenas, jackals, guineas, zebra, kudu, warthogs; all right from our balcony. It felt like we were the only people there. When it got dark, bats flew in by our bed, and we were able to sit and watch the stars for hours. All through that first night we could hear elephants rumble and move through the trees below. It was an unforgettable experience, and I imagine I will dream of going back there the rest of my life. On our last night at this magical place we went to a Maasai village and learned about their culture. The highlight for me was again the children, they were so curious; I spent half an hour looking through pictures on my camera with them.

The last few days at Lewa were bittersweet. We were still enjoying the beauty and serenity, but also missing our little ones back home. We spent those remaining game drives focused on finding lions, the one animal we had wanted to see but hadn't. There were several nights when we heard them roaring but by the time of our morning game drive they were once again hidden away. However, through the search for the elusive lions we got to see some pretty incredible sights and went to some new places on Lewa. On the last morning, we awoke to the sound of a lion roaring and my husband was able to spot a male lion through his binoculars. We went on a last minute game drive to get closer to the lion but once again it had moved away.

When people ask about our trip to Africa, they expect to hear about the animals we saw and different food that we ate. They get some of that, but what I share the most is how many people that Lewa Wildlife Conservancy helps. The money we raise for Bowling For Rhinos is not only protecting the rhinos and other animals, but it is helping the entire community. Animal lives are being protected and human lives are being changed.

I am so thankful to the AAZK Board of Directors for awarding me this trip. I am forever thankful to Patty Pearthree for all of her help and to Ruwaydah for making our trip to Africa exceed any expectations that I had. I cannot put into words my gratitude for Lewa, for their tremendous hospitality and for all the work that they do for conservation. I thought this would be a once in a lifetime trip but now I feel that I will forever be finding my way back to Lewa and striving to do more to raise money for Bowling For Rhinos. Thank you to the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium for first allowing me the opportunity to fall in love with rhinos, which is where this all began. 

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