



Photograph by Laura M. Brown, Desert Elephant Conservation

Remarkable Beings

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Among elephants, it's a family affair

BENEATH THE ARID SURFACE OF NORTHERN NAMIBIA run hidden veins of water that rise through a network of dry river beds during brief periods of rain. This austere landscape, the most ancient of all the world's deserts, is home to a small number of elephant families, who have learned to survive on its sparse resources. They bring the underground water sources seeping to the surface by digging in the sand river beds with their tusks and trunk, and feed on the trees and bushes that grow along the banks. Despite human persecution and the increasing fragmentation of their habitat, these elephants endure through their steadfast love and support for each other, and transmit their cultural knowledge of survival in parched places to their young.

The first desert elephants I ever met were sheltering from the afternoon sun in a grove of *Mopane* trees. Four mothers stood together in the shade, each one with her youngster by her side. Swishing their ears to dispel the heat, they tossed trunkfuls of cooling red dust over head and shoulders in a constant rhythm that steadied my own heartbeat and breathing. After a time, the youngsters lay on their sides and went peacefully to sleep. All creatures become vulnerable in sleep. I have never forgotten the trust those elephants showed that day, the soft fall of dust on skin, the slow fanning of the adults' ears, the youngsters' ruffled breathing. The matriarch, their much-loved and respected elder, knew our vehicle and her calm acceptance of our presence had assured them it was safe to let their young ones sleep.

I realized that I was in the presence of a remarkable being, a true elder whose knowledge was born out of lived experience.

Later that day, we came upon the male who had probably fathered them. He was grazing alone on a plain of yellow flowers that had sprung up after rain. He stood, poised and majestic, before a *kopje*, a rough pyramid of russet stone, and plucked the flowers in bunches with his trunk-tip, tapping them neatly against one tusk to shake off dust and grit before tucking them in his mouth.

Red dust ignited in the sunlight as he tossed trunkfuls across his head and shoulders; the air smelt of jasmine, dust, and fresh elephant dung. He draped his trunk across one tusk, turned his face towards us, and I realized that I was in the presence of a remarkable being, a true elder whose knowledge was born out of lived experience.

A *person* in elephant form.

He is known as Voortrekker, which means “the pioneer” or “the one who shows the way” in Afrikaans. Decades ago, the elephants in this part of the Namib desert had been killed by poachers for their ivory or driven away by conflict with farmers over water. Then Voortrekker appeared alone, having walked across arid scrub and waterless gravel from a region further north. He explored the area’s dry river beds, located water sources and fed on the pods of the *Ana* trees and the leaves of aromatic *Commifora* plants. Then he vanished—returning some weeks later with a group of females and young

adults. He had communicated his experience to them, and inspired them with the confidence to follow his lead into the new habitat he had discovered.

Over the last decades, researchers including Cynthia Moss, Joyce Poole, Katie Payne, Dame Daphne Sheldrick, Ian Douglas-Hamilton, and others have devoted their lives to greater understanding of the depth, complexity, and richness of relationship among African savannah elephants. They have witnessed their love and attachment for each other, the devoted care they give their babies, and the intensity of their grief for the individuals they lose in death. Elephants have a way of being in this world which transcends what we humans label instinct and survival: they live according to patterns of belonging which are ancient, beautiful, and deeply meaningful.

Dr. Laura Brown and her husband, Dr. Rob Ramey, are among these researchers. For the last twelve years, Laura and Rob have spent long periods among the desert elephants of the Northern Kunene region of Namibia, monitoring their movements, feeding patterns, and family relationships.

“I always feel I am going to visit some of my relatives.” Laura says. “We’ve come to know these individual elephants and we’ve watched them through the different stages of their life. It’s just like getting to know a person, because you see how they change and develop. Family is the most important



Old bull of the desert who survived many decades and undoubtedly fathered numerous calves until he was brought down by poachers' bullets. Photograph by Laura M. Brown, Desert Elephant Conservation

thing to them, especially to the females. And seeing the way they confront so many difficulties, and still manage to live their elephant lives, is very touching.”

Young elephants are born, nurtured, and loved within close female communities. Mothers, sisters, and daughters may spend their entire lives together, led by their matriarch, who is respected for her wisdom, experience and ecological knowledge.

A newborn elephant’s primary bond is with the mother, and for the first few years, the baby will not stray far from her sheltering side. But the elephant mother also depends on the others in her family to help raise the young.

“In the desert especially, it is critical to have this community. We always say that nobody loves a baby elephant better

than another elephant, because they just adore their babies. The young females get so excited when a baby is born. They love touching it, they want to be near it, and pretend to be mothers. Some will even let the calves try to suckle, even though they don’t have any milk yet. The scientific term is allo-mothering, which basically means baby-sitting. So when you have several young females in a family, there is always somebody to watch over the sleeping babies, who need to nap a lot, and this really helps.”

Elephants develop into this level of care and responsibility for others. As with us, their early experiences of attachment and emotional security are crucial if they are to grow into balanced adults. Their life span closely mirrors

our own: they mature slowly and in stages, passing from childhood through adolescence to young adulthood, and both sexes need continued support and mentoring from their elders as they make these transitions.

The first time a young female comes into oestrus, her life changes. She must learn how to behave with courting males and choose the right partner for mating. This must be quite daunting for her at first as males can be twice as large as the females. Mothers mentor their adolescent daughters by demonstrating the right body language and posture to attract a suitable partner, one with the experience and authority to protect her during several days of mating and to keep competing males away.

And when the time comes, her family won't let the young female mate alone.

"Oh, the whole family gets involved." Laura says. "They make a big deal of it. Once we saw a young female, probably in her early teens, mate with a male who was probably in his twenties. When they started mating, the mother and her friend and the younger siblings were trumpeting all around them. They were so excited, their temporal glands were streaming, because that's what happens when they get emotional, their tails were up, and they were defecating and urinating. A few hours later, the couple and the family were calmly drinking and eating together."

"Enjoying the afterglow," I say to Laura, and we smile.

Young males have a different transition to make. From puberty, when they first experience the sexual state, or musth, the ties to their female family begin to

loosen, and they increasingly seek out the company of other males. This transition from female to male society happens gradually, over a period of years.

"Males leave the female family and gradually become more independent. They hang out with the females from time to time, but spend more time on their own. In the desert, where males are few, you don't get the big bachelor groups which you find in the savannah populations. Bachelor grouping is very important though, because young males need mentors. They rely on older males to guide and teach them, in the same way that young females rely on their mothers to guide and teach them."

A young male's bond with his mother and family sometimes endures for longer. One female Laura called Left Fang had only sons, never daughters.

"She had a calf the year before last, and one of her sons is helping her take care of it, because she doesn't have any daughters to help her. He's in his late teens now, and would normally be completely independent, but he's been with his mom ever since we've known him. At times we saw him off on his own, but ever since she's had this little calf, he's taken on the role of babysitter. That really touches the heart. Because these elephants are so few, they really depend on each other."

Teenage males need mentoring from their elders, who give them firm boundaries and educate them in courtesy, clear communication, and mutual respect within the male hierarchy. Young males learn the rituals of sex by watching how older males behave with fertile females. Even dominant males in full musth may display a touching tolerance and

understanding towards curious youngsters. In Kenya, Joyce Poole has seen musth males allow young companions to remain close beside them as they mate, while firmly keeping older males away.

Physical contact with older males also helps adolescents through the hormonal shifts of puberty. The firm touch of an elder, the nudge of a shoulder or head, help to balance their sudden hormone surges, and curb outbreaks of adolescent aggression.

These bonds between male elephants can be amazingly tactile and affectionate. I once saw two desert elephants in their early

twenties break off a bout of friendly sparring to greet a larger, older male. They caressed his forehead, his jaw, and the top of his head with their trunks, and leaned into his shoulder to lay their trunks across his back. It was one of the most tender and devoted greetings I have witnessed among wild creatures.

Long-lived relationships and the passing of knowledge and experience from one generation to another are so essential that many elephants struggle to recover from the loss of a beloved elder.

"The death of an elder is really disturbing to the family." Laura says. "The matriarchs hold all this knowledge of where to get food in a certain season, where to get water, and

they lead their daughters and youngsters along these routes. When they lose a matriarch, the family may no longer be able to follow these routes unless they've learned them."

Lucy was such a matriarch.

"Lucy had these huge tusks, and she had real presence, real calmness and such a sense of being the matriarch. She used to lead her family on this long seventy kilometer trek across waterless desert to another river where they could

find food and water. That's a long way to walk in the desert, across a plateau without a blade of grass or a drop of water to drink. The family would load up

beforehand with food and water, then make the

whole trek in a single night, with their little calves in tow."

After Lucy died, her daughter Sophia became the eldest female in the family. Born without tusks, Sophia is a more anxious elephant, who can sometimes be irritable with her sisters. Shaken perhaps by her mother's death, mourning the loss of her confident calm presence, Sophia has never led her family on that demanding trek, and they restrict themselves now to a single river drainage.

When a family member dies, the others mourn deeply and they may conduct vigils for days over the body, and cover it with earth and brush. They often revisit the bones for years afterward, like human mourners coming



Desert survivors: "Left Fang" and her five-month-old calf. Photograph by Laura M. Brown, Desert Elephant Conservation

in pilgrimage to the graveside of a beloved ancestor, and caress the bones of the skull and the teeth with their trunks, as they once touched the living elephant in greeting.

Consider, then, the intensity of the emotional suffering of young elephants who have seen their families massacred in the poaching epidemic that is currently sweeping across Africa. The loss of those they love leaves them profoundly wounded. They may physically survive the massacre of mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, sisters, and aunts, but shock and grief remain, burned into their bodies and minds. Like humans fleeing from a war zone, elephant survivors display the symptoms of severe post-traumatic stress. They suffer as a result of violence in ways that we recognize in ourselves. They may become depressed, withdrawn, and lethargic, or break out from their despair in sudden bursts of grief-stricken rage.

Those who love elephants and work with them are witnesses to their suffering. Laura and Rob have seen life become harder for the desert elephants as human settlement prevents them from moving freely, and confines them to arid areas where food is scarce. “Some years we see these elephants and they are skin and bones. As their food sources become fewer and farther apart, the little ones can’t keep up and the mothers don’t get enough food and water to make milk. We’ve actually seen cases where newborn calves have died of exhaustion because the mothers must force them to walk such long distances between water and food. It’s heartbreaking to see.”

There was a time when Laura felt she could no longer bear to lose elephants to conflict at human hands and see babies waste and die from exhaustion and lack of food. She was considering giving up when something extraordinary happened. One of the females gave birth in daylight before her and Rob, as though they had been accepted as members of their extended family.

“It was just amazing, that birth we saw. That little calf, within her first forty-eight hours of life, she walked twenty-four kilometers with her family, and as far as I know she’s still alive and well.”

I thought of Laura’s experience when I read the following account from the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya, where orphaned elephants are raised within a human-elephant community until they can return to the wild.

A tiny orphan named Wendi was brought to the orphanage when she was a few days old. Wendi had scarcely known her birth mother or her original family. She was loved and raised by a group of human care-takers and her community of fellow orphans. At the age of ten, Wendi returned with some fellow orphans to the wild. When her first baby, a little female, was born, Wendi immediately led her to meet the human family, so they could admire and caress her baby, and share the joy in a newborn’s safe arrival that melts away the boundaries between species.

When I was with the desert elephants, I used to sleep outdoors on the ground. As daylight faded, the entire edge of the galaxy appeared, a great arc of stars burning from horizon to horizon across the night. Looking up, I would feel my

everyday human smallness begin to dissolve into that immensity.

Under the depths of the cosmos, questions rose in my mind: Who are my mother and my father, my sister and my brother? Who are my ancestors?

The presence of the stars felt like an imperative demand: consider, now, the true nature of your belonging. Reflect deeply upon your source and origin, and know that each one is the child of more than humankind.

Certain animals have shared with me this sense of expanded belonging that dissolves the boundaries of human specialness and separation. I remember the gray whale who lifted her baby onto her back so that I could reach down from the boat to caress it. I remember the silken touch of the young whale’s skin, and the depth in the mother’s eye. When she turned on her side and I met her lucid, tranquil gaze, I knew her as one of the ancient ones of the earth, and my ancestor.

And I remember the elephants who came deliberately to meet us, as we were

walking in the Okavango Delta: a mother and her two youngsters, with a courting male beside them.

A family, I thought, as I watched them approach.

They came so near to where I was standing that I could have reached out my hand and touched the male on the trunk. Their closeness wiped away all thought. They enfolded me with the immediacy of their presence. In their eyes was knowledge, borne through the generations of their ancestors, of how to live and walk in beauty and harmlessness on the Earth.

I bowed my head to them. I bowed to the depth of the life they allowed me to feel. In silent gratitude that we had met at this sharp and urgent edge of time: humans and elephants, male and female, adults and young, standing in peace together on the same ground. ■

Please visit <http://desertelephantconservation.org/> to learn more about Dr. Laura Brown and Dr. Rob Ramey’s work with elephants.



Laura M. Brown (r.) and Rob Ramey (l.)
Photograph by Fabian von Poser