

Elephants For Africa

Conservation through research & education



Charity Number: 1122027

Elephant Tails

Issue 11

April 2010

Welcome from Dr Kate Evans

Special points of interest:

- NYC Marathon
- Nandipa's new baby
- Mthondo is released

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The first quarter of 2010 has been a busy year so far for *Elephants for Africa*. The team attended the International Elephant Foundation conference in Pretoria in January and Simon and I attended the International Flood Symposium held in Maun in February. March saw Simon and I head down to Mokolodi Game Reserve near Botswana's capital, Gaborone to collect data on three female elephants before they joined the Abu herd. Graham is busy finalising his data for his Ph.D. while Mphoeng is still hard at work with his master's degree. The *Elephants for Africa* team has also grown with the addition of Charlie Ellis who joined us as a volunteer research assistant.

In the meantime, Simon in his role as operations manager is enabling the researchers to get out there and spend more valuable time in the field whilst he runs all the 'behind the scenes' details. The research team has grown from just one individual – myself, to six passionate and enthusiastic conservationists. However, this has led to accommodation problems and so it is time we obtain an independent camp for the *Elephants for Africa* team. Simon is thus also busy looking into tents and ecological friendly products to ensure that we have as small an imprint as possible on the delicate environment in which we live.

We are now in the midst of the flood season, which this year is looking to be the highest since the last record flood in 1984. This makes getting

a r o u n d very difficult as many of the roads are now covered in water. As new areas flood and as the water gets higher, we

really only have one choice and that is literally drive the roads to see where we are still able to get through. Unfortunately I managed to get stuck in style the other day, much to the game delight of Charlie (she was really relieved that I was driving and not her!) but thankfully help was at hand and we got ourselves and the vehicle out in one piece. So whilst the delta is a beautiful place, it can also be a very challenging place for researchers. The elephants of course have no such problems. However they do tend to avoid water crossings and are forced into smaller areas of dry land which impacts the vegetation and the environment. It is how elephants utilise the delta and their ecological needs which are central to our research, particularly due to the fluctuations of the seasons unique to the Okavango.

Simon and I will be at the Bristol Festival of Nature this year, and hope to see some of you there. Until our next news letter, stay well and 'tsamaya sentle' from Northern Botswana.



Collecting dung samples

Mafunyane and Thando get new Collars



In September last year both Mafunyane and Thando needed their collars to be replaced. Mafunyane's collar had ceased to give satellite downloads and Thando's was due for renewal. Unfortunately I was away from camp at the time doing some aerial surveys of the area and so Simon, Graham and Mphoeng were in charge of this task. Collaring can be a very stressful activity, not only for the elephants but for me as well. Initially I was rather uncomfortable with leaving this significant responsibility to the others, however they did incredibly well and thankfully both Mafunyane and Thando were successfully re-collared.

Aerial Surveys

As part of our research, we carry out monthly road surveys to count not only the elephants but the other mammals traversing the area in which we work. As we can only cover a small area in a day, the opportunity to take part in an aerial survey was very exciting.

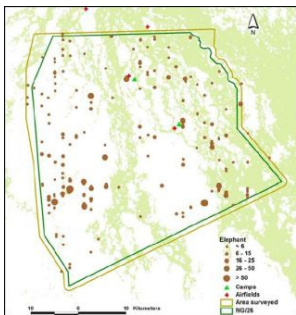
The owners of the concession area NG 26 in which we are located joined forces with the owners of NG 25, the concession north of us, to conduct an aerial survey for both areas. NG 25 kindly offered to accommodate us all and so on 26th September I was picked up at the airstrip and flown the short distance to Jao airstrip, where I met the rest of the survey team of Petri Viljoen, Martin Kays and the pilot, Graham Skinner.

That afternoon we calibrated the plane by flying over the airstrip where white markers have been laid to work out how many items we spotted at a known distance above the ground. Then the next day we were up early and started surveying NG 25. It is always a privilege to fly over the Okavango Delta and so to have three days of observing animals from the air was bliss. Although my stomach at times did not think so, and the rest of the team had to put up with strange noises coming from the back seat!

In NG 26 we saw a total of 20 wildlife species through a total of 651 wildlife observations. These included elephant, zebra, hippopotamus, warthog, giraffe, buffalo, greater kudu, southern reedbuck, lechwe, impala, wildebeest, gemsbok and ostrich. Lions and crocodiles were also seen during the survey. Bird species recorded included the endangered wattled crane and ground hornbill. It was with much delight that Martin spotted a lone gemsbok on the edge of the sandveld tongue in the south-eastern part of the concession. This elegant 'desert species' of antelope usually prefer much drier areas than the annually flooded plains of the Okavango Delta. No sitatunga (a rare, semi-aquatic antelope from the kudu family) or waterbuck were recorded within the actual survey flight strips, although we had two sitatunga sightings during ferry flights.

We saw a total of 1251 elephants, and the largest group totalled 83 individuals. It was really useful to gather this data, understand the process involved and have the results to enable me to understand better how the elephants utilise this concession area. I hope that we will have the opportunity to carry out more aerial surveys in future as this data is invaluable to the elephant research in this specific area.

I am very grateful to Cathy and David Kays for hosting us at their camp and also to Justin and Jackey Stevens and the Tubu Tree Camp staff for their warm hospitality during our stay.



Elephant sightings during the aerial survey of NG26



1st morning of the aerial survey, getting ready for the long days ahead

New York City Marathon success by Dr Kate Evans

On the 1st of November 2009, our founder Dr Kate Evans and our Operations Manager, Simon Buckingham ran the 40th New York City Marathon. This is part of their tri-continent triathlon which saw them successfully summit Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania in December 2000. The reason for all this effort is to raise funds for a new 4x4 vehicle which is much needed by the research team in the Okavango Delta. Below is the piece that Kate



Kate looking nervously at the map

wrote for the local newspaper, the Ngami Times.

We did it..... we RAN the marathon..... and we actually enjoyed it!!! Which was not what I was expecting at all. The day started early with

the alarm going off at 04h30 as we had to get a bus at 05h30. So we ate our porridge and then headed for the Metro station, where we waited with other runners for the train. The nearer we got to the collection point the more runners we saw from all over the world, New Zealand, Australia, UK, Germany, Philippines..... Botswana, it really was an international event. It was an early start as they shut the bridges over to the Staten Island (the start point) at 07h00 hence the buses had to get across beforehand. It was rather frustrating as we only started running at 10h20, so we had a long wait in the cold and damp. We were in the Orange Village (there were different temporary 'villages' to deal with all the runners) and we thankfully managed to squeeze into a tent where we read and tried to get some sleep. Eventually we were making our way to the start line, a last stop off at the loo and then more waiting surrounded by hundreds of people. A lot of people wear old clothes to the start and then take them off and these are donated to the 40,000 plus homeless people in New York. I find it shocking that so many people are homeless in this world, and felt a little better that at least some of them would be a little warmer this winter.

As the start time got closer, I was just desperate to get going. I was a little apprehensive as I had no idea whether I could run this far. We had in our mind to run it and to do so under five hours. The start was very busy and so you could not run that fast but then people started to spread out as we headed from Staten Island into the Borough of Brooklyn, we got carried away with the pace at first but pulled back as we had been advised not to go fast – but to keep the pace throughout the race. Our pace was 11min miles and so we slowed up and let the crowds over take us.

After three miles the water and energy drinks started to be available every mile and this was a great target, soon the miles were slipping past and we had completed a ½ marathon, we were feeling good and kept plodding on. We were wearing elephant hats and had our names on



our shirts, so the crowds were shouting our names or 'go

elephant guys' 'love the elephant hats' it was fantastic and I felt like a star for the day. The crowds were incredible and we would both like to thank all the New Yorkers who came out that day – you really made the event a real experience and helped us through it all. The only time there was no one shouting was the Queensboro Bridge and that was when I felt a little pain, otherwise you were so busy enjoying the experience listening to the bands playing, and the people shouting and taking in the scenery of New York City.

The other inspiration was the people running for various reasons, photos of their relatives pinned to their backs with in memory of mum or dad. There was lots of less able people running, blind people, a lady with MS on crutches, people with one leg, no arms, seeing them power on really made me appreciate my abilities and inspired me in more ways than just running.

Soon we were at the 18 mile mark and we made a mental note that this was the furthest either of us had ever run, and yes we were still running and feeling good. When would we hit the wall? It would appear never as we managed to run all the way and not hit crisis point.

Once back in Manhattan, after running through the Bronx, we longed to get into Central Park and start heading towards the finish. Soon we were in Central Park and I upped the pace, I was feeling good and triumphant, a little early perhaps and Sim got me to slow down. For the second half of the marathon we had been over taking people, as we had managed to keep our 11min mile pace throughout and here we were at the 21 mile mark still feeling good. I was up for a sprint finish.

As we rounded the last corner and we saw the finish mark, I welled up... we were about to complete our first marathon and raise money for the elephants. As we crossed the finish line, a HUGE sense of achievement passed through me, and I left good.

Our goals were to finish, to do so under five hours (we managed 4:53:52) and to raise money and awareness for the elephants of Botswana through Elephants For Africa. We are now ¼ of the way to our target to be able to get a 4x4 for the research based up in NG26.

A HUGE thank you to all who have generously sponsored us. We could not have run it without knowing you were behind us 100%.

You can still donate at www.justgiving.com/KateandSimsMarathonChallenge/

PLEASE SPONSOR US and help us reach our target



Nandipa's Baby



In December 2009, Nadia proudly showed us her second calf, Nima.

On the 22nd December 2009, Thapelo, one of the Seba Camp guides, delivered the news that he had seen Nandipa with a new baby. I gathered my equipment and headed out to see them. I had my suspicions that she was pregnant and this would be wonderful news if it were hers. I tracked her to the Picnic Site and then picked up a signal, indicating that she was to the west of that location. I scanned the horizon, as the signal told me she was close, and then I spotted her on the outskirts of an island together with Pula (the released male) and Ntongeni, her 3 year old calf...and did I see another elephant? The grass was rustling with movement between Ntongeni and Nandipa and as the grass eventually got shorter I spotted him, his ears flapping as he tried to catch up with his older brother - a new baby elephant! I was overcome with joy and close to tears. Nandipa was unable to conceive when she was part of the Abu herd and here she was seven years after her release with two babies of her own and looking after Pula. I am so proud of her.

Now I had to get across the water that separated me from them. Thapelo had told me that it was crossable just to the northwest of where I was. So I put my faith in his words and drove across the

deep water and made it safely to the other side. Once I was up on the island, the going was easy and a whole new world of islands and floodplains opened up to me. I tracked the elephants down to a small island and approached carefully so not to spook them. I sat on top of the vehicle and waited for them to get out of the dense vegetation and into the open in the centre of the island. I did not have to wait long and in the fading light of day I was rewarded with a good sighting of a new male calf. He was a confident little chap even then, as he bounded after his brother leaving Nandipa in the dust behind him.

I have since enjoyed watching him grow and as every day goes by and I see him I am relieved. He, like Ntongeni, does not have the protection of a large herd and so is more vulnerable than other elephant calves. However, Nandipa, Ntongeni and Pula are doing an admirable job of looking after him and keeping him safe.

The next challenge we faced was naming him as his name had to start with the letter 'N'. Like Cynthia Moss and her team, we have adopted the naming system of elephants in the same herd, being named with the same letter to make origins easier to remember. I posted the arrival on Facebook and asked for suggestions and thanks to Rob Barber he has been christened 'Nima', which is Arabic for blessing.

I have my fingers crossed that Nandipa's next baby would be a female because when Pula, Ntongeni and now Nima - who are all male elephants, grow up they will leave her and Nandipa will be alone once more. However, she still has a number of years to go before she goes through menopause, so there is still hope!



Mthondo is released in the wild

Mthondo, the only remaining adult bull of the Abu herd was released in January. He has an interesting history, as he originated in Zimbabwe and then was moved to the Pilansberg National Park in South Africa when they were reintroducing elephants. It was here that he paired up with another male elephant and took to raiding the nearby tourist camps. The Parks board decided that they would have to shoot these elephants as they were causing much damage in the area. Randall Moore heard of this and decided that he would take them on and train them to be 'ride elephants' rather than them meeting their fate by a bullet. And so Mthondo found his way up to the Okavango Delta and was integrated into the Abu herd. He has always been a wonderful elephant and an amazingly placid adult bull. However, as often happens with captive male elephants, his behaviour changed when he started coming into musth. Initially these were only slight changes, with him being a little unsure of what was going on. However, as he got older and his musth periods became more powerful he started getting harder to handle and far more aggressive. Thus it was decided it was time for Mthondo to leave the Abu herd and make his way in the wild.

His transition to life as a wild bull was long and involved. At first he was moved some distance away from the Abu herd, so he could hear them but not see them or interact with them. After some time, he was moved again to an area south of the research camp where he could - through sight, smell and sound, get used to not being part of the Abu herd anymore. As he is in his prime - and therefore different from all the other male elephants we've released, we were concerned about him travelling back to camp at speed to see the ladies once he came into musth. In order to have an early warning system as to any abrupt changes in his movement patterns we ordered a special collar from Televilt in Sweden. This satellite collar enables us to program it to different download schedules. So for the first three months post-release we received a GPS location every half an hour. We were then able to monitor any swift movements and warn Abu camp as well as any other tourist camps in the area that he may decide to go and visit. Thankfully we have not needed to do this yet and he seems to have settled in and adjusted really well to his new life. Until recently he spent a lot of time around the area in which he was released, however recently he has moved to the west of camp.

On the day of his release, I went down to see how the process was going and to bid him a fond farewell. Once he is free, we view and treat all released animals as wild animals. The mahouts who had been looking after Mthondo were quite emotional as the time for us to say goodbye crept closer. Whilst this was the right thing to do for both Mthondo and the mahouts, it did not make it any easier. The mahouts gave him lots of his favourite horse nuts and then walked him into some thick bush under a sausage tree. As we all eventually walked away, having said our goodbyes, he rumbled intensely until we could no longer hear him. I asked Big Joe, who has been working with elephants for over 12 years how he felt and he replied that he was sad that he would no longer see him as much, but happy that Mthondo was free.

Due to the regular collar downloads we are able to monitor his whereabouts, but as he is so far away from camp we cannot visit him regularly. I managed to spot him twice from the air and he was looking to be in good health. Whilst he was a not with other elephants at the time I saw him, there were elephants in his general vicinity which I'm sure he was communicating with. So far so good, and we wish Mthondo well and look forward to learning from him how an adult male in his prime settles back into bull society in the wild.



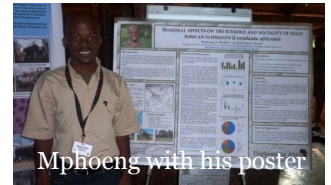
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International Elephant Foundation (IEF) conference, Kwalata Game Lodge 25th-29th January *By Kate Evans*

In January, our research was temporarily abandoned as we all headed to South Africa for the International Elephant Foundation Conference. Graham and Mphoeng had made posters about their work which attracted much interest during the poster session. During a morning session, I gave a talk about seasonal variation in habitat use of male elephant

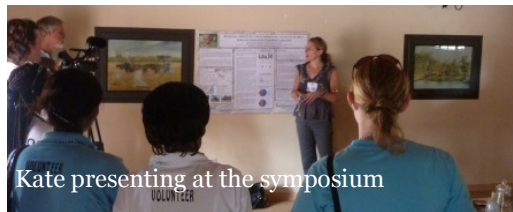
alongside Dr Iain Douglas Hamilton and Prof Rudi Van Aarde. It was a real honour to be included with such well-known elephant biologists and the talk was very well received. I was also asked to contribute and partake in panel discussions about the captive elephant industry and another about various conservation issues

in the wild. It was a fascinating meeting, which gave us all the opportunity to meet other researchers out on the field and exchange ideas and discuss possible future collaborations.



Mphoeng with his poster

Flood Pulse Symposium, Maun, Botswana



Kate presenting at the symposium

In February, Simon and I attended the Flood Pulse Symposium in Maun. The event proved to be a very well attended international meeting highlighting the importance of wetlands

and the protection of biodiversity. Mphoeng's poster, which was shown at the IEF conference, was presented during the poster session. There was significant interest in the findings and unfortunately questions had to be cut short

due to time constraints.

The symposium highlighted the extent of the Okavango Delta with relation to the economic stability of Botswana as well as the future health of our planet and reiterated the importance of our research both nationally and internationally.

In March, Sim and I went to meet three female elephants living near Gaborone. We collecting dung samples and recorded their vocalizations.

Mokolodi Elephants



Seeni enjoys some water.

Thandi, Seeni and Sukiri are three female elephants that have recently joined the Abu herd.

The three lady elephants have been living at Mokolodi Game Reserve near Gaborone until the owner decided they should be moved to have the opportunity to mate and bring up calves of their own. Prior to their arrival, Simon and I went

to Mokolodi to meet them and collect valuable data in the three weeks that we spent getting to know them. Amongst things we collected daily dung samples and utilised Graham's recording collars to learn more about the intricacies and complexities of their 'conversations'. The elephants were successfully relocated and monitoring and recordings are still ongoing. In time we will be able to compare whether their hormone

and communication levels have changed with the move. At the moment they are living in the same boma as the Abu herd but have yet to physically meet them. They can see and hear each other and in the next couple weeks they will be formally introduced. It will be very interesting to see how the Abu herd and the new females react and settle into their various roles within heard life.

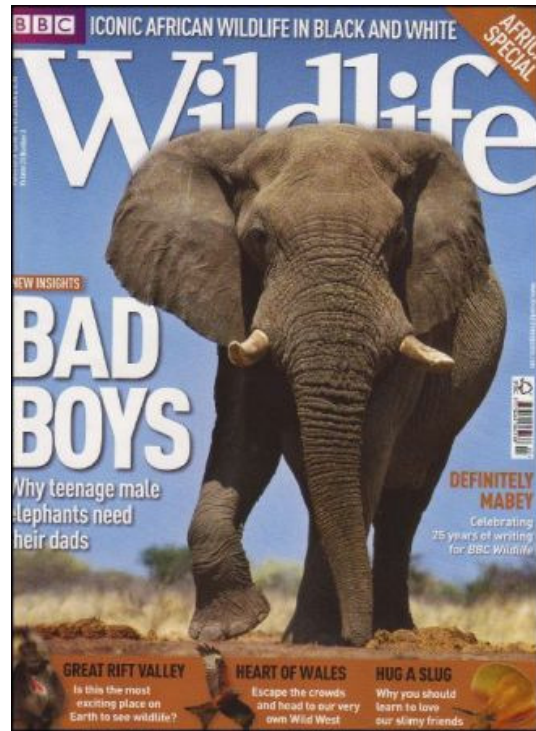
EVENTS

BBC Wildlife Magazine

I'm also proud to announce that my cover story 'Bad Boys' featured in the March edition of BBC Wildlife magazine. This article covers my work on male sociality and the importance of old bulls in the upbringing of young males - particularly during adolescence. Until recently old bulls were often seen as surplus to needs, now we know that they are really important to bull society and therefore should be

considered when management and conservation decisions are made. If you would like to read the article, feel free to e-mail us and we will gladly forward it to you.

I was also invited to sit in on a large 'Question and Answer' feature for January's BBC Wildlife magazine which abolished many of the myths associated with elephants and other creatures.



Saving Species - BBC Radio 4

Elephants For Africa will feature in a new, yearlong BBC Radio 4 series called 'Saving Species'. The charity will be used to highlight conservation issues that the African elephant face through a series of recorded broadcasts from us here in the Okavango Delta. The series will be re-broadcast on the BBC World Service, so keep your ears open for broadcast times.



Wet Nose Award

In March, *Elephants For Africa* won the award for the Best Research Project by the UK charity Wet-Nose. The awards ceremony was held at the Houses of Parliament in London. An acceptance video was filmed in camp and one of the charity's patrons, Nick Knowles, accepted the award in person on our behalf. A short film has been recorded and can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h70EmY0-4m0>.

Elephants for Africa wins best research award

Bristol Festival of Nature 12-13th June

Elephants For Africa will once more have a stall at the Bristol Festival of Nature. This year it is being held the weekend of the 12th to 13th of June. We look forward to seeing some of you there and believe that this year will be as successful as others in fund raising and spreading the word about our research activities.



Our Patron, Nick Knowles, receives our award from Caroline Langrishe