

MORE *PACHYDERM* MEMORIES

Elephant memories

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Using radio-collars on large bull elephants is helpful in gathering research data but deploying them onto the massive beasts presents a logistical challenge. In thickly wooded terrain it is easiest and safest for the veterinary team on the ground to be guided by radio contact with an aircraft crew circling overhead. Once these operations are well practiced and running smoothly, several animals can be immobilized and collared in one day.

On one occasion in Zimbabwe we found ourselves duly ‘processing’ such a recumbent elephant. Being magnificent in both body and tusk-size we were feeling rather proud of ourselves as we approached his large bulk, lying on his side and snoring peacefully, to get to work attaching a radio-collar. And with confidence in our now-established routine, we sent the aircraft back to base to save expense.

However, what we had overlooked was the fact that in soft, wet ground the enormous weight of a bull elephant’s head makes it sink slowly but inexorably into the inundated soil. Thus it is very difficult to get underneath the neck to thread the collar belt around it. We tried the usual method of threading through a strong metal wire, but that didn’t work; then with a large wooden pole we tried to lever and partially lift the head with very feeble muscle power; we even tried a vehicle jack with planks under the animal’s head, but this ‘Heath Robinson’ apparatus was merely pressed back into the soggy earth. Unbeknown to the rest of the team, all this futile effort was being captured by a video camera that Loki had set up to run by itself on a tripod nearby.

When everyone is out of ideas in such situations, the vet is expected to suggest something. Trying to

sound authoritative—but actually with great trepidation—I suggested that a tiny amount of injected antidote drug (a fraction of the normal dose) might cause just enough awakening for the elephant to move its head slightly—upwards of course—whereupon the collar could be slipped through unhindered. Everyone got into position for the big moment. The bull duly stirred and a lot of supposedly co-ordinated activity ensued in a last ditch effort. But... the animal kept rising and rising, first onto its brisket and then slowly and steadily to its feet. In disbelief we all fell away from his body and had to start retreating. Once on its feet the great animal stretched up to its full height and turned round to look at its tormentors, but showed no aggression whatsoever. We all simply gathered around the member of the team who held a firearm, lamely wondering what was going to happen next.

Looking down at this miserable bunch, the bull elephant then raised his trunk onto the top of his neck where the unsecured collar, abandoned in the confusion and surrender of the rapid retreat, was still balancing ridiculously. He deftly coiled the end of his trunk around the collar, then with a defiant snort whirled around on the spot, and began walking away with the expensive apparatus dangling from his proboscis. As his strides became stronger he began triumphantly swinging it about, occasionally glancing backwards, from side to side as elephants do, towards an open-mouthed team of so-called experts.

There was further humiliation. We radioed the pilot who immediately got airborne and was soon

contd on page 100

Elephant portraits

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Elephants in Serengeti, Tanzania seem to have a good sense of humour. One day a bull elephant was feeding around our house in the dry season. He smelled rainwater collected off the roof in tanks and headed for one of these to get a nice clean drink, as opposed to having to walk to the nearest river to gulp down dirty water full of hippo dung and other debris. With one tusk he flipped the plastic lid off one water tank and siphoned up a good few mouthfuls.

This was a known and very ‘friendly’ habituated elephant but I didn’t want him developing the habit of breaking into water tanks and finishing off our only supply.

So I got into my vehicle and drove up to where he was standing near the tank, but a very close approach was prevented by a clothes line and tree branches. At my approach in a revving car, he had the good grace to take a break from his slurping, but did not move away from the tank; he gave the distinct impression that his drinking activity would in due course fully resume. We looked at each other pensively for a while, as opponents do.

Without many options available, I opened the car door and picked up a couple of small stones from the ground outside. I stood and threw the first one at his shoulder, which it rather feebly struck before dropping near his front foot. He snuffled and directed his trunk tip to the stone. After examining it briefly he picked it up, coiled up his trunk and threw the stone straight back towards me standing next to the car. But he still did not move. So I threw my second stone at him in the same manner. Having learned the trick, he also returned it in the same manner. We both stood our ground in a stalemate!



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Trying to move the elephant bull raiding the water tank.

Eventually the bull did move off a short distance from the tank, whereupon we were able to get the car behind him and attempt to push him away. I had to drive the car virtually up his backside because he knew that he was being disciplined and deliberately moved as slowly and reluctantly as possible to ‘get his own back’. Twice he turned around to face the car in order to stand and have a break from being forcibly moved. After a total of about 300 metres covered very slowly indeed, he made a final resolute stand and the car method also had to be abandoned.

Elephant adventures

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Elephants in the Serengeti are now confirmed to have a sense of humour. Lion researcher Daniel Rosengren was checking one of his study prides, which were sitting on a rocky kopje when a group of elephants approached to drink from the small river below. As everyone knows, elephants with youngsters in a herd do not like lions lurking nearby and on this occasion one adolescent elephant decided it was his duty to chase away the unwelcome cats. The lion pride was feeling safe perched on smooth rocks above the elephant group, so they didn't bother to move and just stared disdainfully down upon the bigger beasts.

The elephant who was clearly a 'strategist' took a little time to assess the situation. He decided first to

suck up a trunkful of water as though he was just quietly having a drink from a pool at the base of the rock. But once his trunk was full, he extended it, took aim upwards and from close range and blasted the nearest lioness with a strong jet of water. She let out a short sharp growl as lions do when suddenly alarmed, then turned round and scuttled back to her companions and cubs at the summit of the kopje. Not satisfied that his job was yet done, the elephant then charged towards the lion pride from the base of the rock. But when this wasn't sufficiently effective he started climbing up the smooth and slippery rock surface towards them, losing his footing several times and stumbling awkwardly on the ascent. By this time, after such a commotion



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The elephant squirting lions with water. Unfortunately the successful water blast (on a lioness to the left) was so quick and unexpected that it was not captured on film.



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The same elephant continuing to chase the lions off the rock, which he then ‘ascended’. The victim lioness has a mark on its side from the dirty water sprayed by the elephant.

he was no longer alone and so with irate and equally stumbling reinforcements from his family also now backing him up, some ungainly upward progress by a small group of brave pachyderms egging each other on was eventually achieved. Needless to say the job was soon thereafter successfully completed.

From page 97

highly amused watching the elephant heading off over the horizon refusing to give up his highly-coloured trophy (parts of the collar were daubed with red and yellow road paint to increase visibility). His comments are not worthy of print. And to add insult to injury, we then discovered that most of the fiasco had been recorded on film!

Photo identification from *Pachyderm* 50

Martin Brooks

A - Starting on p5:

1. Holly Dublin - OK, that was the easy one!
2. Simon Milledge, Tony Conway, Nigel Leader-Williams, Peter Erb, Liz Brooks, Martin Brooks, Blythe Loutit?, Steve Gartlan, Taye Teferi, Holly Dublin
3. Front - Esmond Martin, Martin Mulama, Simon Milledge, Richard Emslie (reclining), Martin Brooks, Liz Brooks, Yvonne Verkaik, Clive Stockil (reclining), Lyn Harrison, Rob Brett, Sue Mainka

Centre - Clive Walker, next?, next?, next?, Matthew Maige, Taye Teferi, Moremi Tjibae, Hubert Planton, Rudi Loutit, Mike Knight, Philip Muruthi

Back - Keryn Adcock, Mick Reilly, Tony Conway, Karl Stromayer, next?, Ben Okita Ouma, Mike Hearne, Nigel Leader-Williams, Nico van Strien

4. Anthony Hall-Martin, next three?
5. Clive Walker
6. As already recorded
7. First two?, Nigel Leader-Williams (partly obscured), Holly Dublin, Sue Mainka, Blythe Loutit
8. Mike Hearne, next four?
9. Steve Gartlan, Holly Dublin, Raoul du Toit, Rob Brett
10. Matthew Maige?, Peter Erb, Steve Gartlan, next?
11. Blythe Loutit
12. I'll pass on this, although I did spot Tom Milliken, Russel Taylor, David Cumming and Nigel Leader-Williams
13. OK, Holly again
14. Pass
15. Pass

Starting on p21:

Bottom photo: Seated/kneeling behind front row: Drew Connybeare, Mbayma Atalia, Tom Milliken, Ackim Tembo

Next row: Tom Foose, Holly Dublin, Tony Conway, Jorgen Thomsen, John Kundaeli, Alina Kipchumba, Tim Oloo, Emmanuel Severre, Mark Stanley-Price, Esmond Martin, Mateus Chambal, Steve Gartlan

Back five: Mike Knight, Michael t'Sas Rolfes, Peter Erb, Pete Morkel, Rowan Martin