

Elephant Orphanage



by Cyril Brass



It is 10.00 am. Time is of the essence this morning. Our tour group gathers in the hotel lobby. Our vehicle waits outside our hotel, the Stanley Hotel, in the heart of downtown Nairobi, Kenya. Today, it is important to reach our destination before 11:00 am.

With camera gear ready, we piled into the land rover and we were off to a very special place, located on the outskirts of the city overlooking the Nairobi National Park. This was the unofficial start to our ten-day African Safari, our first wildlife excursion. Excitement filled the vehicle.

After a quick city tour of Nairobi, we arrived at our destination, The Daphne Sheldrick's Elephant Orphanage. We quickly disembarked and followed Carol, our tour guide, to a field in front of a historic homestead. The growing crowd was kept to one side of the open yard by a single line of rope, about waist high stretched the length of the viewing area, some 50 to 75 meters.

More people were gathering in anticipation of what was about to occur. It was like a growing crowd expecting to see famous celebrities. Everyone eagerly waited for their arrival.

"There! Over there! Here they come!" a voice sounded from within the crowd.

At the far edge of the field, from the surrounding bush, one worker appeared followed closely by thirteen energetic young elephants. They knew exactly where they were going.....to the playground. It was play time!

The keeper led the baby elephants to the mud hole in front of the amazed crowd. Several youngsters rolled around in the mud, splashing and kicking like children in a pool. Others scampered around bumping and nudging their

playmates. With their big ears flapping and trunks swinging uncontrollably, they were having FUN! Playing, bonding and most importantly they were enjoying being elephants.

Of course there had to be one elephant who went against the rules. He decided to see who and what was on the other side of the rope, the people side. With a determined pace, the youngster walked under the rope and into the crowd. No one appeared frightened by the inquisitive little guy. Hands reached out to touch him. One of the keepers quickly readjusted the elephant's direction back to the open area where his friends were playing and being fed.

Elephants are extremely sociable creatures, wanting close contact with each other. Portraying the role of mother, the keepers stay close to the orphans and frequently touch and rub them, trying to imitate what the mother would do to nurture their young babies.

One keeper gave an informative talk about the elephants; where they come from, how they were doing and what will happen to them. There were as many keepers as there were animals in the playground area. The keepers wear identical uniforms so the orphans do not get too attached to any one individual. They all look alike as to not be identifiable. Then the babies do not feel abandoned and alone as their surrogate mother always appears to be close by.

For only one hour each day, from 11:00 am to 12:00 noon, the orphaned elephants come out for public viewing. The rest of the day and night they are kept away from the public, with only the keepers having contact with them.

Each elephant is assigned its own keeper, who acts as a surrogate mother and will stay with the elephant until it is released back into its natural habitat. The keepers have an extraordinary job, looking after the youngster 24/7, trying to treat the baby as if he were a mother elephant. Bottle fed at regular intervals for more than 2 years, the babies are kept warm with blankets and provided shade so they do not get sunburnt. In the wild the baby would stand under the mother's belly to avoid the intense sun. And at night, the keeper beds down right next to his elephant. For elephants, family is the most important thing. It's all about TLC.

Elephants need to be taught. Since they have no mother to do that now, the keeper must teach the youngster how to be elephants. Like covering themselves in the dust to prevent sunburn by rolling on the ground and bathing in mud holes. Elephants have incredible memory and never forget.

Feeding time was enjoyable to witness. The youngsters were still learning how to use their long floppy trunk and mouth. Each elephant was hand fed from large containers containing a special milk formula, successfully created by Daphne Sheldrick, who took many years developing the right ingredient mixture.

Other wildlife species babies are brought to the orphanage as well. During our visit, there was also a young rhinoceros, a baby zebra and two warthogs staying at the orphanage.

The orphaned elephants, from a few months to two years of age, are

brought to the orphanage because either their mother was killed by hunters (unfortunately this still happens), or the babies somehow got separated from their mothers. Calls to the the Daphne Sheldrick's Elephant Orphanage come from all over Kenya, informing them that a baby elephant has been spotted all alone. Rescuing the baby requires immediate action as an orphaned elephant can not survive without its mother's milk and protection for more than a few days. The traumatized babies are brought to the orphanage where they are raised with the intention of gradually re-integrating them back into the wild. The young elephants stay at this orphanage until they reach around two years of age and are in excellent physical condition.

Our group visited the orphanage on a special day as several of the elephants were leaving the next day, going to the Tsavo National Park, the next step towards their release back into their natural habitat. At this orphanage, they will receive less supervision, less milk, and they will find most of their food by themselves. It is the eventual decision of the elephant, not their keepers, when they are ready to go back into the wild. One day, with no farewells, no celebrations, the elephant will head off into the bush of the Tsavo National Park and not return to the orphanage site.

At the end of the hour playtime, the keepers guided the elephants out of their playground. Knowing that playtime was over, the youngsters slowly followed their guardians back to their dormitories.

It was a great privilege for me to have met Daphne Sheldrick, who was

at the orphanage during our visit. She has been the driving force behind this safe haven for young orphaned animals. Daphne Sheldrick is the international authority on hand rearing of wild animals. I strongly believe we should recognize and salute those organizations and individuals who put their life's work and passion into the rehabilitation, protection and preservation of our wildlife. The Daphne Sheldrick's Elephant Orphanage plays an extremely significant and vital role in Kenya's conservation efforts. With the coordination of National Parks and Reserves, orphaned baby elephants and other animals are being rescued to assist in the preservation of these amazing wildlife species in Africa.

This was an amazing experience to start our safari adventure to Kenya and Tanzania. It is extremely rare to be up close in the presence of such precious wildlife. It is a must visit when a person comes to Nairobi, Kenya. Plan to come one day prior to your safari adventure so you have time to relax and recover from jet lag, adjust to the hot temperatures and to visit the Daphne Sheldrick's Elephant Orphanage. A generous donation is all it costs to visit this special place and you help save an orphaned African Elephant. [ca](http://www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org)

For more information on supporting this wildlife charitable organization, visit www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org Cyril Brass is a Wildlife and Sports Photographer living in Calgary. www.cyrilbrass.com cyril@brassphotography.com 403-999-1908