

FIGHTING *for* ELEPHANTS

Running a safari camp, raising a family and working to protect wild elephants – life is busy for Saba Douglas-Hamilton. But the hard work is all worth it when these animals wander past your bedroom, says **Sarah McPherson**.

COMPLEMENTS
**THIS
WILD LIFE**
BEGINNING IN JANUARY
one

Elephants are the most wonderful animals. I can't imagine not living with them," smiles Saba Douglas-Hamilton. She's nipped away from her day job – running a safari lodge in Kenya's Samburu National Reserve – to assist in a field operation involving a 30-year-old female called Wendi, who has just been tranquillised in order to have her tracking collar fitted with new batteries. Saba's task is to use her 4WD to keep Wendi out of view of the herd during the brief exercise.

It's vital that the operation is a success. African elephants are in a losing battle against poachers, and the team – from conservation organisation Save the Elephants (STE) – needs to monitor as many individuals as possible, particularly young matriarchs such as Wendi on whom

many orphaned calves depend for survival.

Juggling conservation exercises in the field with hospitality duties at Elephant Watch Camp (EWC) is now part of Saba's average week. Known from her presenting roles on major BBC series such as *Big Cat Diary*, and her work in elephant conservation, she leapt at the chance to return to the bush after the arrival of her three children – Selkie, now five, and twins Luna and Mayian, now three – brought a natural break to her film-making career. With her husband, zoologist

Saba, her husband Frank and their daughters (left to right) Luna, Selkie and Mayian.



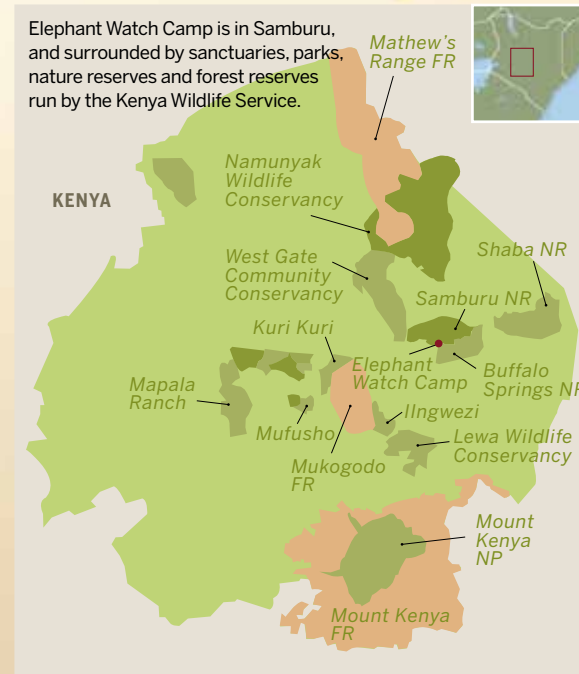
A family of elephants on the move in Samburu National Reserve, Kenya, which has a resident population of approximately 500 animals.



Saba surrounded by elephants as they return to the reserve in time for the rains.

**KENYA'S PARK SYSTEM
KEEPING THE COUNTRY WILD**

Elephant Watch Camp is in Samburu, and surrounded by sanctuaries, parks, nature reserves and forest reserves run by the Kenya Wildlife Service.



SABA'S DAUGHTERS SHARE THEIR BREAKFAST WITH MONKEYS, TAKE BATHS IN BUCKETS AND SOCIALISE WITH SAMBURU VILLAGERS.

For now, Saba's children are enjoying a childhood that reflects her own. She was introduced to elephants when six weeks old (she was born in Kenya, and her father is the zoologist Iain Douglas-Hamilton OBE), spending her formative years climbing waterfalls, catching snakes and creeping up on wildlife. In turn, her daughters share their breakfast with monkeys, take baths in buckets and socialise with Samburu villagers, learning first-hand what is expected of children their age.

But for all its charms, life in the wilderness brings inevitable challenges – on top of the pressures of occupancy and balance sheets. It's not unusual for the weekly fruit delivery, which requires a four-hour drive along a dirt track, to comprise a measly few apples. Staff are struck down with malaria, and kitchen

plumbing emergencies erupt when the dining room is at its busiest, calling for quick-fixes with sticks and rocks.

Then there's living cheek-by-jowl with African wildlife. Shovelling elephant dung off the path is almost as daily a chore as washing the dishes, and black-faced vervet monkeys need constant reprimanding for pilfering the lodge larders. "The staff must think I'm psychotic, running around snarling and baring my teeth, but I try to use body language that the monkeys understand," says Saba, turning down her mouth and popping her eyes. "You stare and you can't blink, and when they look away you know you've won."

But the very proximity of wildlife is the camp's biggest draw, with the elephants the main attraction. Samburu has a 900-strong population of free-ranging individuals, with 500 resident and the remainder transient with the seasons. Thanks to a long history of tolerance from the nomads, who have never competed with or hunted

aren't the dangers of the African bush simply terrifying? "I worry most about scorpions and snakes, as little children can't deal with that kind of poison," says Saba. "And I'm well aware that my daughters are the perfect snack-size for a leopard. But they're growing up with that awareness, just as British kids grow up with an awareness of roads and traffic. Selkie once came across a spitting cobra in the bath – she was within actual spitting distance! – but she quietly backed away and told me about it."

Big Frank – named after Saba's husband – is one of the few remaining older bulls in Samburu. His big tusks make him a tempting target for poachers.



Frank Pope, also becoming chief operations officer at STE, everything came together at Samburu. This career move also returns Saba to our screens in the new BBC One series *This Wild Life*, a behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to offer hospitality in a place where isolation is no excuse for second-best. There are no fences around the lodge, nor the reserve itself – a mere pocket handkerchief in the surrounding wilderness – so wildlife roams through freely. "We get everything coming through here," she says nonchalantly. "Leopards, wild dogs, civets, porcupines, genets, lions, monkeys. Each morning you can read their behaviour from the prints in the sand – it's like catching up with a soap opera of the night."

SPLENDID ISOLATION

Running a lodge in a wildlife-rich corner of Kenya sounds like living the dream. "In many ways I am," agrees Saba. "But it's not easy. It's incredibly remote – there's no shop around the corner, no mechanic, no doctor. You have to be self-reliant." Added to that, virtually all of the staff are local Samburu people – semi-nomadic pastoralists who are closely connected to the Maasai. "They've never been to school, and have their own ways of doing things. It's humbling, at times maddening, but always interesting." Ecotourism provides a vital alternative livelihood for the locals, who are becoming increasingly marginalised as the modern world encroaches on their way of life. The aim at EWC is to create a model that can be copied elsewhere: very low impact (furniture is made from branches felled by grazing elephants; water is hand-pumped from a well and warmed by the sun) and providing the means for young nomads to become the conservation stars of the future. "I'd love EWC to be the number-one eco-camp in Africa," says Saba. "That's my dream."

But how do three small children fit in? If you're a parent,



Above: Frank and the Kenya Wildlife Service at the carcass of a 25-year-old bull elephant that poachers shot with an AK-47. Below: Saba and her three daughters watch a lioness from the Koitogor Pride with her cubs.



Clockwise from top left: Patrick Evans/BBC NHU (x2); Max Hug Williams/BBC NHU (x2)



Elephants, such as this breeding herd in Samburu National Reserve, browse for up to 18 hours a day.

UPSETTING THE BALANCE

The age structure and age-related social organisation of Samburu's elephant herds has altered greatly as a result of poaching. One in five elephant families now has no mature female to lead them, meaning they have no 'memory bank' of information on which to base their decisions.

Elephant lives play out along similar timescales to humans, and some of these orphan herds are being led by individuals that are just 12 years old.

These young matriarchs lack the experience to know what is safe and dangerous – when leading calves across rivers, for example, or where to locate food and water in times of drought.

"You can see it in the tracking data," says Frank. "The elders move with more purpose and streak through the danger zones, while the elephants without experience or leadership have much less direction. That will affect their ability to survive."

"MOST OF THE OLDER ANIMALS HAVE BEEN LOST TO POACHERS, SO HOW ARE THE YOUNG ELEPHANTS DOING?"

mammal monitoring programmes in the world, so far clocking up 17 years of data (see box). The field team patrols the reserve every day to observe the elephants' hormonal state, who they're interacting with and where they're

the species, the elephants are very relaxed in human company. "They literally brush against your car," says Saba, "playing out their lives as they have for millennia."

This extraordinary trust makes Samburu a leading site for elephant science. Among other research ventures (including the successful Beehive Fences project, in which farmers tap into elephants' fear of bees to protect their crops), STE is involved in one of the longest-running large-

Saba and Frank celebrate the end of the season with their extended Samburu family.

going. This data is then matched with collar data, creating clear patterns of long-distance movement.

"By studying the movement data, we can identify where elephants seem to do things intentionally, as if they are planning for the future," says Saba. "We can see situations where they clearly have a sense of their own mortality, and incidences of compassion and empathy."

"We're looking at an elephant society that has essentially had its head chopped off," adds Frank. "Many older animals have been lost to poachers, so what are these inexperienced animals doing with no one to lead them?"

Until recently Samburu's elephants were faring well. The ban on the international ivory trade passed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1989 had called a ceasefire on the poaching crisis of the 1970s and 80s, giving the then-flailing population a chance to recover. By the turn of the century a fantastically varied demographic was emerging.

ELEPHANT CATASTROPHE

But the reprieve was not to last. In 2008 the price of ivory skyrocketed, the result of a surge in demand from the Far East, and the consequences were devastating. In 2010–12 Africa lost 100,000 elephants, mostly older males, whose large tusks make them prime targets. Samburu did not escape the massacre, and a severe drought in 2009 hit



From top: Andy Rouse/naturepl.com; Max Hug Williams/BBC NHU

ELEPHANTS

OLD FRIENDS FIVE ELEPHANTS WE KNOW WELL

After 17 years, Save the Elephants' Long-Term Monitoring project has gathered an intimate knowledge of its subjects. Here are five of the best-known individuals.



NAME ANASTASIA FAMILY ROYAL

Aged 40, Anastasia belongs to Samburu's most dominant and best-known herd. With her older relative Cleopatra, she has been leading the Royals since 2013. The family is very successful and enjoys preferential access to resources.

NAME HABIBA FAMILY SWAHILI LADIES

At 13 years, Habiba is the oldest surviving member of a family devastated by poachers. Without a matriarch to lead them, survival was uncertain until Habiba and her cousins attached themselves to another family.



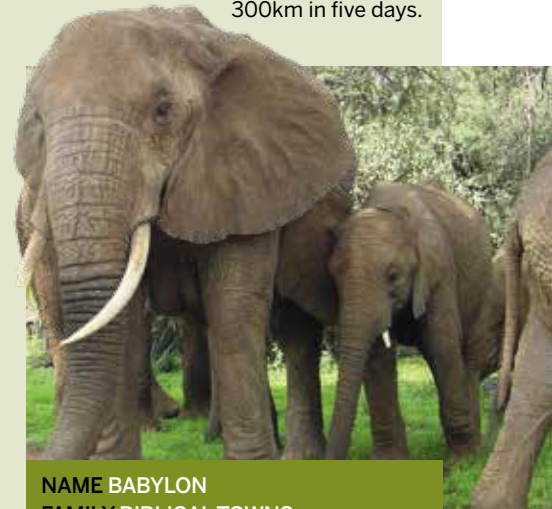
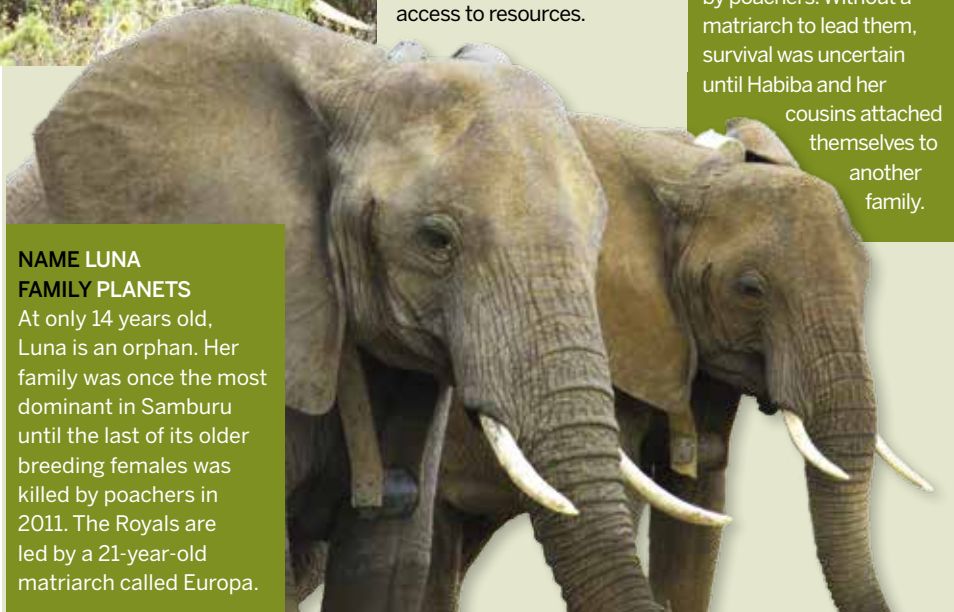
NAME MATT FAMILY N/A

At 42, Matt is one of Samburu's few remaining large bulls, identifiable by his sheer size and asymmetrical tusks. He has the biggest known range of the elephants in the area, once covering over 300km in five days.



NAME LUNA FAMILY PLANETS

At only 14 years old, Luna is an orphan. Her family was once the most dominant in Samburu until the last of its older breeding females was killed by poachers in 2011. The Royals are led by a 21-year-old matriarch called Europa.



NAME BABYLON FAMILY BIBLICAL TOWNS

Over 60 years old, Babylon is Samburu's oldest matriarch. She has survived tribal wars, the 1970s poaching crisis and loss of habitat, and kept her family intact. But her size makes her a target for poachers.

populations further. "Of 120 bulls that we knew when we started studying elephants here, there are now only 10," says Saba. "Each time we lose one, it's like a stone in your heart."

But Kenya is fighting back, in the air and on the ground. STE works with other non-governmental organisations and conservancies, its rangers often putting themselves in the line of fire. "But there is more to be done," says Saba. "We have to prosecute traffickers and stop the demand, which means raising awareness globally that ivory comes from dead elephants, because a lot of people don't know that."

"Beyond the ivory crisis there's the challenge of securing space for the world's largest land mammal on a fast-developing continent," adds Frank. "If we don't get it right, elephants could be lost from the wild within a generation."


Closer to home, the key lies in working with local people. In 2013, 19 poachers switched sides to become rangers, resulting in a dramatic decrease in elephant deaths (in November–December 2012, 25 elephants were killed; in June–December 2013, just one was lost). "We interviewed

two of them," says Saba. "They were oblivious to changes in the law [which elevated the poaching sentence to life imprisonment] and weren't concerned about the rangers. The crunch came when they were ostracised by their local communities. That's why our outreach efforts – to demonstrate the benefits of conservation – are so important, particularly as a new gang is now in the area."

Indeed, it's not what the team achieves in the next decade that will help to swing the balance, it's what they achieve *now*. "This is a crucial year," says Frank. "If we get it right we could change everything." And by welcoming people to Samburu from all over the world, continuing the anti-poaching fight and nurturing home-grown conservationists, let's hope they can do just that. 🐘

SARAH McPHERSON is BBC Wildlife's section editor and curates our *Discover Wildlife* pages every issue (see p89).

➕ FIND OUT MORE

 This *Wild Life* is a 10-part series beginning in January – check *Radio Times* for details.

● For more information visit www.elephantwatchsafaris.com and <http://savetheelephants.org>