

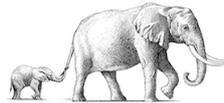
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## Field Notes: The Greatest Christmas Gift

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### FIELD NOTES *from the* SHELDRICK WILDLIFE TRUST

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Dear Inez,

I would like to extend my warmest holiday wishes, wherever and however you are celebrating in the world. Here in Kenya, we are rejoicing in the greatest gift of all: truly bountiful rains. I wish you could see firsthand how gloriously green Tsavo is right now. It's abuzz with life — and new life, in particular! We've met four new elephant babies this rainy season, born to orphans who we rescued, raised, and reintegrated back into the wild. There is truly no better way to close out the year than this, for by saving the life of one orphan, we are creating a future for entire families.

I thank each of you most sincerely for the vital part you play in our work. People around the world make everything we do possible, and not a day goes by that I don't marvel at the generosity, enthusiasm, and compassion of our global supporter base. As this year draws to a close, I wish you a joyful holiday season filled with much love and laughter.

– Angela Sheldrick

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## *The Greatest Christmas Gift: An Emerald Tsavo*

These past few months have been simply extraordinary. Typically, this later wet season is marked by sporadic storms that saturate the ground before moving off as quickly as they arrived. This year, things are different. The rains began earlier than usual and have continued well into December. Unlike the usual isolated storms, the rains have been widespread, sweeping across the plains of Tsavo in great sheets. In fact, both our Voi and Ithumba Reintegration Units have seen more rain than we can ever remember.

Ithumba is particularly transformed. My father called this part of Tsavo the “jewel in the crown” — and right now, this jewel would most certainly be an emerald! The red earth is positively drenched, bursting with life from every branch and blossom. Tantalizing pools and puddles await around every corner. Elephants can’t resist the temptation of fresh mud, and our orphans are no different. Their bath is so full that they can dive into the crystal clear water headfirst, swimming together en masse like a little school of fish. The dams themselves are filled with geese, frogs, terrapins, and even swimming tortoises. It’s truly a glorious sight to behold.



Over in Voi, which struggled through a challenging dry season earlier this year, everyone has breathed a collective sigh of relief. This is a strikingly open part of Tsavo, and up until the rains, it was a dusty expanse as far as the eye could see. Now, the grasses are so tall that our Voi orphans are positively dwarfed by them — sometimes, all we can see is a telltale tip of a trunk or top of an ear! Everything is vibrant; the whole area is fluttering with butterflies of every hue, while elephants both wild and tame are caked in the red earth so synonymous with Tsavo.

Even Umani, which is lush year-round thanks to its forested environment, is particularly verdant. Its waterholes have morphed into extensive ponds, awash with blue lilies and croaking frogs. If you look closely, you may just spot baby crocs who have relocated from the main spring head now that they are spoiled for choice.



Many of our older orphans are taking advantage of the spectacular conditions and using this time to explore their independence. They are spending extended nights out in the company of ex orphans and wild friends, although many still stroll up to rejoin the dependent herd for milk feedings — this is one luxury they find hard to give up!

These favorable conditions benefit everyone. Now that pasture and water is so plentiful throughout the country, incidents of human-wildlife conflict have declined as communities concentrate on farming and tending to their smallholdings.



I can honestly say I can't remember Tsavo ever looking so magnificent. Every living creature is in full celebration mode. Compounding the celebrations have been the arrivals of many of our ex orphans, who

have returned with their babies in tow. Last month, I shared the news of [three new wild-born babies](#) — Wendi's Wema, Edie's Eco, and Mweya's Mwituu — and this month, one more was added to the mix: As dawn broke on December 12th, Sidai arrived at our Ithumba stockades with a [tiny calf in tow](#). Sidai is a lovely girl who we rescued from the drought nearly 14 years ago. The fact that she brought her firstborn, who we are calling Sita, into such a gloriously green world seems a most fitting full-circle moment.



It is never lost on me that while many of us are able to rest and take time off to share the holidays with our families, for our dedicated field teams, the work continues. These people — the Keepers who tend to the orphans, the anti-poaching teams whose presence keeps Tsavo safe, the pilots who patrol the skies, and all the others who we are lucky enough to have on our team — protect this precious place, a landscape that has been so important to my family and is such a vital home to Kenya's wonderful wildlife. This holiday season, and every day, I tip my hat to them and the indelible impact they have on conservation.

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### *Meet the SWT Team: Hassan Adam Ali, Elephant Keeper*

*You have previous experience raising another form of wild animal in the past. Can you tell us about those years?*

Yes, in 2003 I began work as a leopard Keeper, looking after a baby leopard cub being raised in Ithumba by the then Park Warden of the Northern Area of Tsavo. I worked as a leopard Keeper until the leopard was fully rehabilitated and living a wild life on the Tiva River.

*That rehabilitation process must have been challenging?*

I lived alone with the cat on the Tiva River and together we learnt the area. I was able to expose him to the wild, watching patiently as he learnt to hunt, and eventually I left him there after four years to live a wild and free life. It was an isolated life, but a truly unique experience living a life with a cat as magnificent as a leopard, and earning their full trust and friendship.

*What year did you switch species and become a Keeper for elephants?*

It was in 2008 that I began working for the Trust as an elephant Keeper. The two animals are of course totally different, demanding a very different skill set. Elephants are more human-like animals and one can identify with all their emotions, and forge an intimate relationship like no other species on earth I believe. I have been fortunate enough to experience that kind of relationship with elephants.

*Do you perhaps have a favourite elephant?*

We of course should not and do not have favourites, but having said that, I have a very special place in my heart for Ndotto, Lasayen and Murit, as I was part of the team who raised them from infancy in the Nursery and now I am here with them in Voi, guiding them through their next phase in life. Of course, I know them better than most, having spent every day of their lives literally with them, as they all came into our care as tiny babies. Ndotto is a very loving, affectionate little boy and shows his love every single day.

*Was there ever a moment you feared for your life while out in the bush raising these orphaned animals?*

Yes, in Ithumba we walked into a pride of lions. The elephants were spooked and ran to our side for protection, and we were frozen to the spot with the lions glaring us down with twitching tails and looking

very threatening. There was a very tense moment, but I think the presence of the elephants clustered around us humans proved all too strange for them to stick around and they raced off into the dense bush. Our hearts were thumping for a long time afterwards.

*What tribe are you from, and what was your childhood like?*

I am from the Borana Tribe, a tribe that originated from Ethiopia, and in fact my father came from there. I grew up a pastoralist, tending to cattle and goats — so my life now is not much different to that, only elephants have replaced the livestock!

*If you had to describe the Trust in one word, what would that word be — and why?*

I would say the words would be "long-lasting" and "compassionate." Compassionate, as we look to save the orphans who are without families and the compassion extends to the human family within the Trust as well. I experienced that firsthand when I suffered from ulcers two years ago. I became very sick, and medical advice recommended I return home for five months while I healed and grew stronger. All that time, I was able to keep my job with SWT and still benefit from a salary as I recovered. Thankfully, I did recover and could return to my beloved elephants again.

*What is it you love the most about your job?*

I love the mornings. I wake up, stand in the doorway gazing upon a vast National Park, call my friends to join me for the day, and immediately I am surrounded by 34 elephants — sometimes many more — my excellent company for each and every day, the best possible companions a man could ever wish for. I never take that for granted, and every day reflect how lucky I am to be doing a job like this.



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