

CENTRAL LIMPOPO VALLEY ELEPHANT RESEARCH PROJECT

October 2008 Update

SAVING BABIES



In last month's field diary I told the story of four snared elephants. Two of these were close to 6 months old with loose snares around their necks, another a 6-10 year old male with a loose snare around its neck, while a 6-year-old female had a tight snare cutting deep into her trunk.

The Wildlife Department was notified and one of the Wildlife veterinarians would assist us early in October. During the days that followed we continually monitored the different herds. Each of the snared individuals belonged to a different herd making tracking very difficult. Only one of the herds was collared and the movements of this herd were easy to monitor compared to the other groups that had to be tracked.

On the 8th of October we set out with Dr. Joseph Okori and Dr. Rueben Mmadi, two veterinarians from the Botswana Wildlife Department to locate and dart the snared elephants. The young female with a tight snare around her trunk was priority and with the help of the Mashatu rangers we located her early in the morning close to the Mashatu Main Camp. The herd was moving up MMBA Ridge and eventually on top of the ridge we managed to dart the young female. Within minutes she went down and we set to work on her trunk. The snare had cut very deep into the trunk and quite a bit of dead flesh had to be removed. Antibiotics were injected into the wound and soon it was time to wake her up.

Background to the CLRV Elephant Project

The project was initiated in August 1999 in order to determine the status of the Central Limpopo Valley elephant population and to determine the effect of the elephant population on their natural habitat within the Tuli.

The broad objective of this study is to determine how various factors influence movements, occupancy rates in different parts of the home range, social dynamics and conception and survival of elephant groups in the Central Limpopo River Valley. In order to meet the objectives, data will be gathered through field observations of the various herds within the study area concentrating within the Northern Tuli Game Reserve, satellite data on the movements of the various herds collared, weather data from various stations within the study area, vegetation data on the phenology of various plant species as well as long term vegetation change in the Northern Tuli Game Reserve.



Hestelle's herd was located along the Majale River already resting in the shade of the big Mashatu trees. It was getting hot and we had to work fast on the remaining elephants. The young baby was located sleeping next to its young mother under a big Mashatu tree. This was going to be tricky. The herd was close to 30 in size and very spread out along the riverine. The young male was just over 6 months old and darting such a young animal is dangerous for many reasons. Firstly the herd will not be easily persuaded to leave such a young baby behind and pushing them away with a vehicle was going to be difficult. The drug we use on elephants is called M99, an endo-morphine nearly four times stronger than morphine. Elephants are very sensitive to this drug and working out a dosage for such a small animal was risky, but it had to get done. Hats off to Joseph who calculated the weight of the baby perfectly and soon after darting it, the baby went down. After a lot a persuasion the mother left her sleeping calf and we could start working on the snare. Due to the risks to the baby we were done in less than five minutes and the baby back on its feet and soon mother and calf were reunited.

A young female of about the same age in Agatha's herd, one of the collared herds was next in line. We located the herd close to the confluence of the Majale and Limpopo rivers. The young female was a fighter and refused to go down. After nine minutes she eventually fell asleep and we watched in absolute amazement how the adult females bunched tightly around the young baby and every time it collapsed collected her with their feet and pulled her upright. Persuading this herd to leave was a difficult task but at last they moved away just far enough for us to get to work and again within just a few minutes the snare was removed, samples taken and the baby back on her feet.





It was a long day and by 14h00 three out of the four elephants were located and the snares removed. Unfortunately after a long search the fourth elephant it could not be located. We will continue to keep a look out for this youngster.

It was no small task and a huge thank you to everyone involved. A special word of thanks to the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Botswana, Dr. Okori and Dr. Mmadi for their assistance. Thank you to Craig, Bellamy, Guy, Rex, Irene and Dan for their assistance in the tracking and darting of the elephants. To Mashatu Game Reserve thank you for accommodating the veterinarians and making vehicles and personnel available for the darting operation. Thank you to the Mashatu rangers who kept us updated on whenever they spot a snared elephant on their game drives.



Ivory Drives



Snare, the young female in Sofie's group.

During this month a total of 21 guests participated in the Ivory Experience and a total of 4 volunteers staying in total 64 days on the program. Hestelle's youngest boy, Henry turned seven this month and entertained us with several sightings on the Ivory Drives. At seven years of age Henry still suckles from his mother every now and then, but can be seen spending more and more time with the other teenage boys pushing and shoving each other around. On one of the drives during the month Henry spotted a young male in Charge's group and ran across to start playing. The rest of the herd was ambling on and when Henry was at last finished playing with his newfound friend the herd was gone. In a panic Henry started rumbling and trumpeting nearly running into our vehicle in his haste to get to his family. Hestelle just softly rumbled to him slowing down her pace just enough for him to catch up.

We also came across Sofie's group a lot after being able to remove the snare from the young female in her herd. The wound healed well and even though a scare will always be visible, she is happily feeding and doing fine.



Email list

Should you have received this update “via the grapevine” and would like me to email it to you directly in future, please send me an email (mashatu.research@telkomsa.net) and I will add you to the mailing list. Please note that I do not have regular email contact and may not respond to email for several weeks at a time, and this also hampers getting regular updates out.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeanetta Selier'.

Jeanetta Selier

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