

# 'Elephants! Elephants!'

By **SUSAN SLOSS**

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*Editor's note: This is the first in a series of columns from Susan Sloss about her recent experiences in Africa. Subsequent pieces will run in future editions of Outdoors.*

Elephants — those majestic beasts, the largest of all land animals.

"Africa's true King of Beasts," were fascinating to watch this winter on a recent trip to Africa as they ambled through the bush, napped against a tree, or romped about by the mud.

## THE WILD ONES

Along the Chobe River, in Botswana, we saw herds of elephants meandering, wading, frolicking, and foraging in groups that ranged from three to 40 animals.

The cow herds were the most interesting to watch. In was in these herds that the sizes and ages of the elephants varied greatly.

We "oohed" and "aahed" at the antics of the baby elephants as they ran along behind their mothers, trunks flailing and ears flapping. These "babies" weigh in at 265 pounds at birth, and even after a few weeks still disappear easily beneath the belly of mom, aunt, or siblings. Like all young ones, the young elephants were adorable — we had more fun watching the younger elephants and trying to guess how old they might be, than their mature counterparts. Indeed, they were full of surprises. Just when I thought, "that must be this year's calf," a smaller elephant would emerge from between bellies and legs.

One of our best sightings was at a river's edge where a group of 30 or so elephants were cavorting in the mud. One young elephant in particular looked like it was stuck on its side. Many times it rolled trying to get up, only to flop down again. Glistening wet, it playfully tossed its trunk in the mud as it tried again to roll into a sitting position and push itself up.

"Oh no!" I thought. "It's stuck.

Those many pounds of weight are too much. It will get stuck there and die!"

But no, it was just frolicking.

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On the next roll, it was up and moving. Whew!

As the herds moved in and out of different mud holes along the river, I tried to guess which cows were the matriarchs. The "Safari Companion" book I had along on my iPhone said "the herd's welfare depends on the matriarch's leadership ... the matriarch sets the herd's direction and pace and the rest of the herd follows, spreading out and feeding when she feeds, leaving and closing up when she walks on." (*Estes, Ch. 21*). Small groups would suddenly head off in another direction, some lumbering awkwardly, others slowly, and stop just as suddenly as they started. Over the course of our observation, the herd moved back and forth, mudding, ambling, trunks flailing, ears flapping and generally doing what elephants do — flap, forage and frolic.

My daughter was intrigued by the way they navigated even the slightest slope. They appeared to stop before going down a slope. Then, with trunk extended, they would continue down the grade with a little jog. Later, I learned that elephants stiffen their trunks and use it like a rudder going down, or like a pulley when they need to go up a slope.

Then, there was the day we came across an elephant taking a nap against a tree just a few kilometers away from Savuti Camp. Eager to get to camp, lunch and a shower after hours of driving over the bumpy mud- and pothole-ridden terrain

on that hot sticky day, we weren't about to stop and stare at this one. Yet, as we rounded a bend in the road we saw the elephant's body blocked the entire track. The elephant, as if it had found the perfect pillow, had rested its head on the trunk of a tree growing roadside. We watched for a few minutes, but saw not even a twitch.

"Could it be asleep," I wondered, "in the middle of the road?"

Twenty minutes later it had done nothing more than lethargically move an appendage.

Thirty minutes later, it still hadn't moved.

We scanned the edges of the road to see if we could go cross country around it, but too many small bushes and logs littered any potential route.

We waited.

Eventually, it moved a bit off the road, but not enough for us to drive past with any sense of safety.

Resigned to waiting it out, my daughter played a Ted talk on her iPod, I read and looked about, and we all generally felt hot and hungry. For a while, the Ted talk distracted us. Then suddenly, after another 30 minutes, the elephant woke up and ambled off in pursuit of more food.

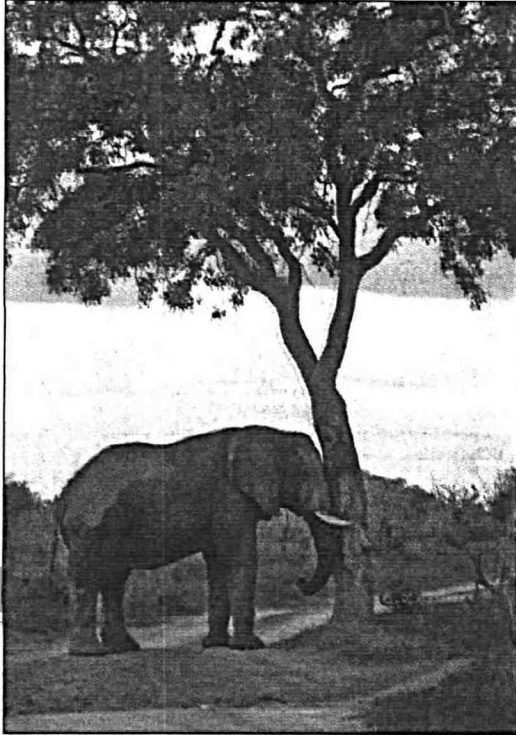
Given that elephants eat roughly 300 pounds of food per day and spend 16 hours feeding, it was no doubt time for this elephant to get on with it.

Gladly, we continued along the track, in pursuit of our own feeding and watering needs.

*Stay tuned for next week's installment: The tamer ones. Sloss climbs on to the back of an elephant and learns much*

*about behavior — both good and bad.*

- Susan Sloss is a Juneau resident.



An elephant naps against a tree trunk near the Chobe River, in Botswana, this winter. The beast napped this way for nearly an hour, preventing vehicles from passing.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SUSAN SLOSS

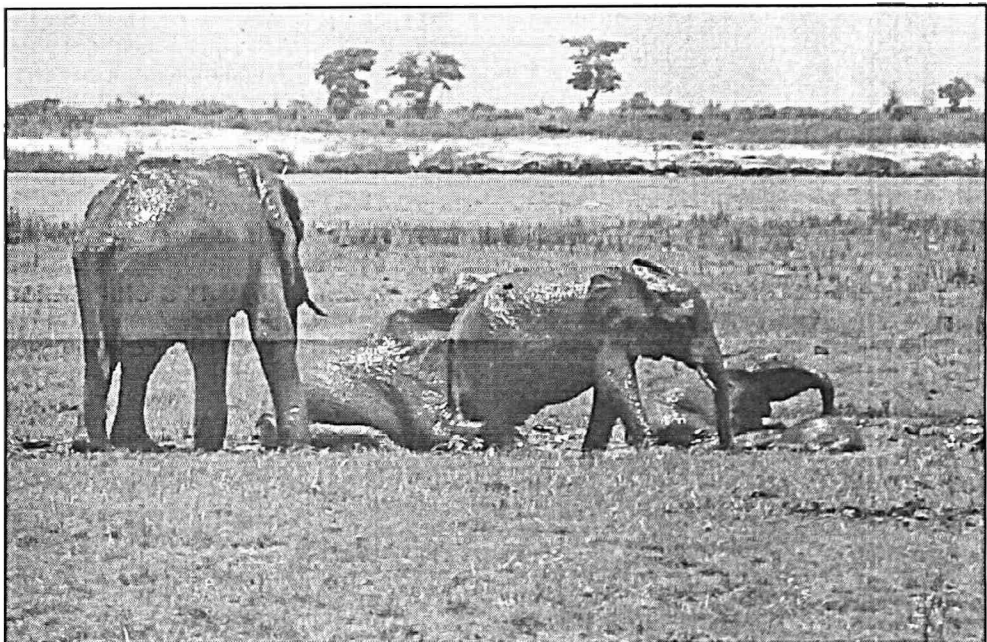


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Elephants, both old and young, romp in the mud along the Chobe River, in Botswana.