Warriors Who Once Feared Elephants Now Protect Them

Trailblazing Samburu communities in northern Kenya have come together to save orphaned elephants.



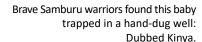
Story and photographs

RETETI ELEPHANT SANCTU- remotest Kenya, they send a ARY, KENYA-From afar, message to Reteti Elephant the cries of a baby elephant Sanctuary, about six miles in distress seem almost hu- away. Then they sit and wait. man. Drawn by the sounds, Reteti lies within a 975,000young Samburu warriors, acre swath of thorny scrulong spears in hand, thread bland in northern Kenya their way toward a wide riv- known as the Namunyak erbed, where they find the Wildlife victim. The calf is half-sub- Trust-part of the ancestral merged in sand and water, homeland of the Samburu trapped in one of the hand- people. Namunyak is supdug wells that dot the valley. ported and advised by the Only its narrow back can be Northern Rangelands Trust, a seen—and its trunk, waving local organization that works back and forth like a cobra. with 33 community conser-As recently as a year ago, vancies to boost security, the men likely would have sustainable development, dragged the elephant out be- and wildlife conservation. fore it could pollute the water
The region includes the Turand would have left it to die. kana, Rendille, Borana, and But this day they do some- Somali, as well as the Samthing different: Using a cell buru—ethnic groups that phone, ubiquitous even in have fought to the death

Conservation

sources. Now they're work- a particular well, which can ing together to strength- be as much as 15 feet deep. en their communities and While drawing water, Samprotect the estimated 6,000 burus sing a rhythmic chant elephants they live, some- praising their cattle, luring times uneasily, alongside. the animals to the life-giv-The riverbed that the Sambuing source. During the dry ru men have come to looks months (February, March, dry and unyielding, but just September, and October) the below the surface is water. El- Samburu deepen their "singephants can smell water, and ing wells," and elephants, Samburu families, guided by desperate to drink, come to elephants' scrapings, have the wells too. Sometimes they dug narrow wells to reach lose their footing and fall in. the cold, clean, mineral-rich The warriors don't have to

over the land and its re- elixir. Each family maintains





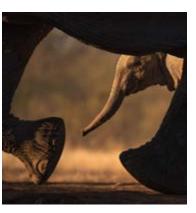


Shaba, now nearly two years old, is the proxy matriarch of the younger Reteti orphans.

longer. Elephants are crea- and error, the calf finds the

wait long before a Reteti restures of habit, and more often cue team arrives in a cus- than not a herd will return to tom-built Land Cruiser, led familiar places to drink, and by Joseph Lolngojine and the hope is that this baby, Rimland Lemojong, both a female, will be reunited Samburu. The men have with her mother and family. seen this before and go to Lolngojine and Lemojong work swiftly, digging out walk the elephant, weakthe sides of the well, widen- ened and dehydrated, into ing its mouth so that two of protective shade at the edge them can step in and slip a of the valley. Gauze is laid harness under the elephant's over her eyes to calm her belly. Then perhaps 12 hours down, water poured over after the mishap, the rescu- her head, and a wool blanket ers, grunting with the ef- draped over her back. She's fort, hoist the little elephant going into shock, so a saline into the morning sunlight. rehydration solution is pre-Waiting, Hoping. Now comes pared in a half-gallon feedanother wait, this time much ing bottle. With a little trial

"We take care of the elephants, and the elephants are taking care of us. We now have a relationship."



Suyian was rescued in September 2016 when she was just four weeks old.

nipple, sucks greedily, then 36 hours after the warriors collapses into a deep sleep. found the elephant, waiting Through the afternoon and is no longer an option. They into the evening, the men lift the elephant, swaddled offer the saline as the agi- in blankets, into the vehicle tated baby cries plaintively and head for the sanctuary. for her family. By dusk the Nestled within the crook of singing wells are quiet. In the a half-moon-shaped ridge, moonlit dark the gray hulk the Reteti elephant orphanof a big bull materializes to age was established in 2016 drink. The baby, perhaps by local Samburus. Funding mistaking the elephant for has come from Conservaher mother, begins to follow tion International, San Diego the form, with Lolngojine Zoo Global, and Tusk UK. and Lemojong behind her. The Kenya Wildlife Service After a while, spooked by the and the Northern Rangewhoops of hyenas, she trun- lands Trust provide ongoing dles back to her Samburu support. The first rescued minders. The imprinting on elephant, named Suyian, arhuman surrogates has begun. rived on September 25. The All night the team sits vig-sanctuary's more than 20 il, waiting, hoping, strain- elephant keepers are Saming ears for the rumblings burus, all intent on returnof her herd. At dawn, some ing their charges, under a



Sasha Dorothy Lowuekuduk mixes formula for the babies.