

Warriors Who Once Feared Elephants Now Protect Them

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



Story and photographs
by Ami Vitale

RETETI ELEPHANT SANCTUARY, KENYA—From afar, the cries of a baby elephant in distress seem almost human. Drawn by the sounds, young Samburu warriors, long spears in hand, thread their way toward a wide riverbed, where they find the victim. The calf is half-submerged in sand and water, trapped in one of the hand-dug wells that dot the valley. Only its narrow back can be seen—and its trunk, waving back and forth like a cobra. As recently as a year ago, the men likely would have dragged the elephant out before it could pollute the water and would have left it to die. But this day they do something different: Using a cell phone, ubiquitous even in

remotest Kenya, they send a message to Reteti Elephant Sanctuary, about six miles away. Then they sit and wait. Reteti lies within a 975,000-acre swath of thorny scrubland in northern Kenya known as the Namunyak Wildlife Conservation Trust—part of the ancestral homeland of the Samburu people. Namunyak is supported and advised by the Northern Rangelands Trust, a local organization that works with 33 community conservancies to boost security, sustainable development, and wildlife conservation. The region includes the Turkana, Rendille, Borana, and Somali, as well as the Samburu—ethnic groups that have fought to the death

over the land and its resources. Now they're working together to strengthen their communities and protect the estimated 6,000 elephants they live, sometimes uneasily, alongside. The riverbed that the Samburu men have come to look dry and unyielding, but just below the surface is water. Elephants can smell water, and Samburu families, guided by elephants' scrapings, have dug narrow wells to reach the cold, clean, mineral-rich

elixir. Each family maintains a particular well, which can be as much as 15 feet deep. While drawing water, Samburus sing a rhythmic chant praising their cattle, luring the animals to the life-giving source. During the dry months (February, March, September, and October) the Samburu deepen their "singing wells," and elephants, desperate to drink, come to the wells too. Sometimes they lose their footing and fall in. The warriors don't have to

Brave Samburu warriors found this baby trapped in a hand-dug well: Dubbed Kinya.





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

wait long before a Reteti rescue team arrives in a custom-built Land Cruiser, led by Joseph Lolngojine and Rimland Lemojong, both Samburu. The men have seen this before and go to work swiftly, digging out the sides of the well, widening its mouth so that two of them can step in and slip a harness under the elephant's belly. Then perhaps 12 hours after the mishap, the rescuers, grunting with the effort, hoist the little elephant into the morning sunlight. Waiting, Hoping. Now comes another wait, this time much longer. Elephants are crea-

tures of habit, and more often than not a herd will return to familiar places to drink, and the hope is that this baby, a female, will be reunited with her mother and family. Lolngojine and Lemojong walk the elephant, weakened and dehydrated, into protective shade at the edge of the valley. Gauze is laid over her eyes to calm her down, water poured over her head, and a wool blanket draped over her back. She's going into shock, so a saline rehydration solution is prepared in a half-gallon feeding bottle. With a little trial and error, the calf finds the

“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 collapses into a deep sleep. Through the afternoon and into the evening, the men offer the saline as the agitated baby cries plaintively for her family. By dusk the singing wells are quiet. In the moonlit dark the gray hulk of a big bull materializes to drink. The baby, perhaps mistaking the elephant for her mother, begins to follow the form, with Lolngojine and Lemojong behind her. After a while, spooked by the whoops of hyenas, she trundles back to her Samburu minders. The imprinting on human surrogates has begun. All night the team sits vigil, waiting, hoping, straining ears for the rumblings of her herd. At dawn, some

36 hours after the warriors found the elephant, waiting is no longer an option. They lift the elephant, swaddled in blankets, into the vehicle and head for the sanctuary. Nestled within the crook of a half-moon-shaped ridge, the Reteti elephant orphanage was established in 2016 by local Samburus. Funding has come from Conservation International, San Diego Zoo Global, and Tusk UK. The Kenya Wildlife Service and the Northern Rangelands Trust provide ongoing support. The first rescued elephant, named Suyian, arrived on September 25. The sanctuary's more than 20 elephant keepers are Samburus, all intent on returning their charges, under a



Sasha Dorothy Lowuekuduk mixes formula for the babies.