



# An honorary family member

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**Photography** Mark Samuel and Meghan Spilsbury

Instrumental in securing a reaffirmation of the decree signed by President Mugabe, author and conservationist Sharon Pincott has gone above and beyond the call of duty to ensure the continued protection of an extraordinary clan of elephants. During our recent trip to northern Zimbabwe, we got to spend some time with her, and with these graceful rulers of the African bush.

**I** first heard the name Sharon Pincott when I received her book *Battle for the President's Elephants* for review some months ago. What ensued was months of correspondence between us – me in Cape Town and Sharon in Hwange, Zimbabwe.

Now, after finally meeting Sharon in person, I'm sure that the welcome she gave me upon our arrival in Hwange was very similar to the spirit in which she'd been accepted into the protective world of her beloved elephants years earlier.

Having spent some time getting to know her through our factual, curious or sometimes just plain chatty emails, but still a little daunted, I was instantly

put at ease when she briskly walked up to our towing rig and threw her arms around me, greeting me as if we'd known each other for ages. She was as open-faced and trusting as I'm sure only someone who spends most of her time with nature's most majestic creatures could be.

'The J family have been wallowing around Mpofu Pan. They looked to be moving off, but if we hurry maybe we'll catch a glimpse of them.' These were the first words she spoke – which sent any thoughts of afternoon unpacking and camp set-up right out the window. I was in my element!

To fill you in, Sharon's named the separate family groups within the greater presidential herd after letters

of the alphabet. Some families are her absolute favourites, but every single one has a special place in her heart. So it just happened to be the Js who were spending that afternoon at the nearby pan.

I grabbed my absolutely vital First Ascent Glacier jacket and camera, and we jumped into Sharon's trusty Land Cruiser. We hurried off in the direction of the water, racing the sun as it began its seemingly premature descent. We arrived at the pan in a cloud of dust, and with plenty of daylight to spare, but disappointment took hold of me as Sharon announced that the ellies now visiting the waterhole were not from the presidential herd, but in fact members of another herd from Hwange National

Park. The declared presidential herd is distinct from other herds which frequent the greater Hwange National Park area.

I felt myself sink into the backrest of the passenger seat. Okay, well, you win some, you lose some, right? Wrong! I desperately needed to see a presidential family. I had read so much about them – about who they were and how special it was to encounter them alongside their human guardian. I felt shattered at having to accept that wild animals wait for no one.

‘Over there! Is it? Hold on, where are the binos?’ Sharon’s gentle Australian drawl seemed oddly at home in the African bush.

I frantically strained my neck out the car window, as if pretending to know who or what I was looking for. ‘There, they’re still here!’ announced Sharon triumphantly.

‘That’s Joyce the matriarch of the J family. See, she has a hole in her right ear that’s shaped like a jelly bean!’ I instantly detected the excitement in Sharon’s voice: this is a woman who thrives on introducing these incredible creatures to people who share her love and passion for them.

Cruiser engine idling quietly, we moved slowly around the pan, positioning ourselves among the J family. My editor, Mark, had some concern for our safety, but almost before expressing this, he already seemed reassured: ‘Sharon, are we safe? I feel completely at ease.’ Truly, there was an overwhelming sensation of peace and calm in the air, a feeling that lightened the sense of suspense and relief centred around finding the J family. Not for a second had I even considered that one of these animals might become defensive or aggressive as we sat with Sharon in her 4x4.

‘Joycie, Joycie girl!’ called Sharon, in a way that seemed to soothe the matriarch. It was obviously a sound that



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was familiar to Joyce, assuring her that Sharon hadn’t brought any dangerous strangers into the silently declared circle of trust. I watched, my heart wanting to burst from my chest, as the rest of the herd relaxed and played in the mud, indulging in sandbaths and stomping playfully in the low-level waters of Mpopu Pan. In that moment, it became absolutely clear to me why Sharon had stuck it out, despite the threats to her life, in the face of all her trials and tribulations: these animals are, quite simply, worth it!

We spent a good while observing the J family, until the time came to move on in search of Sharon’s much-loved L, M and W families. The sun was dipping fast and we had limited time, so, throwing caution to the winds, we began our search.

Popping in at the Forestry Commission’s Ganda Lodge, we were able to get an idea of accommodation options within the Hwange Estate area.

Ganda proved to be one of the best, along with Miombo Safari Lodge, where we’d set up camp for the night. Ganda’s rate of US\$75 for South Africans, per person per night, covers accommodation and includes three meals a day. This is a great offer if fixed accommodation is your preference, or you want to have a break from camping for a while.

Watching a few young bulls splashing in the waterhole in front of the lodge, we were reminded of our mission. More families! Jumping back in the 4x4 we scurried off, dodging low-hanging acacia branches and ground hornbills, and navigating our way down the narrow dusty roads that line the estate.

Stopping sporadically beside waterholes to scan the area for flapping ears and stomping feet, Sharon patiently answered my questions and shed light on some of the serious dangers that these elephants face.

Every year Zimbabwe experiences a long dry season – and this year

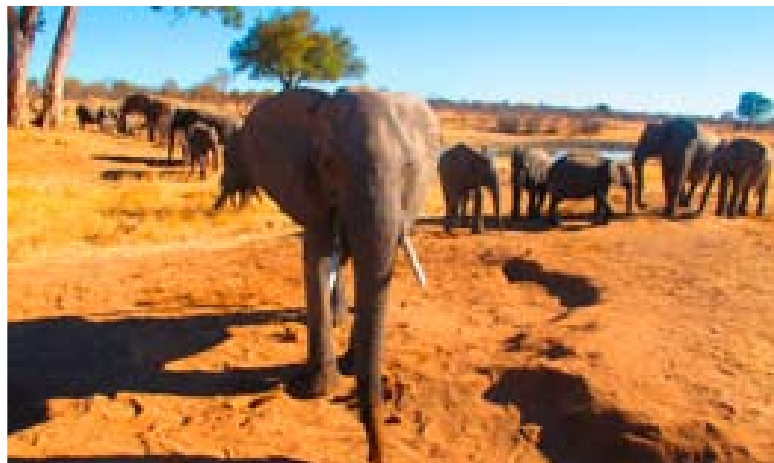
the droughts have set in much earlier than anticipated. ‘But there are pans all over the estate, so what’s the problem?’ I asked, and was shocked by the answer. ‘In several parts of the estate, there’s a lack of empathy or concern for the animals. I’ve pleaded with the authorities to get the pans pumped full of water – in some cases it’s literally just a matter of turning the pumps on – but still, nothing. If we don’t get water into this area, these animals are going to die.’ Sharon stared off into the distance, as if pondering the solution to this life-or-death dilemma for the umpteenth time. ‘It’s cruel, you know. Essentially they will be dying of thirst, and it’s not just the ellies.’

It’s a desperate situation I still can’t get my head around. It all seems so unnecessary.

Heading out of the thicket and into an opening, we noticed several open-topped game vehicles huddled together, with a few elephant bulls approaching ▶

from far in the distance. Sharon surmised that by the looks of things – and by ‘things’ she meant game vehicles randomly parked under a canopy of trees while their tourist passengers indulged in sundowners – the evening clearly held very little in the way of optimal game viewing opportunities. ‘It just means there’s not much happening elsewhere, if this is where they’ve decide to park’.

Deciding to enjoy the little light that was left, we headed back to where we’d started, Mpofu Pan. At peace with not finding the Ws, Ms or Ls, I sat looking out over the still waters of the pan, recalling our encounter with the gentle Js



just a few hours earlier. What a special and privileged experience, to witness a wild animal interacting with a human being in a totally trusting and peaceful way, without coercion, training or tricks. This is something I will carry with me forever.

We spent several hours sitting beside that pan, Sharon regaling us with tales of her troubles and victories. Animals came and went and the sun left us, while a slim sliver of moon stepped in for the night shift. The stillness that lingered with the heat of the day rapidly turned into a crescendo of chorusing frogs, crickets and other

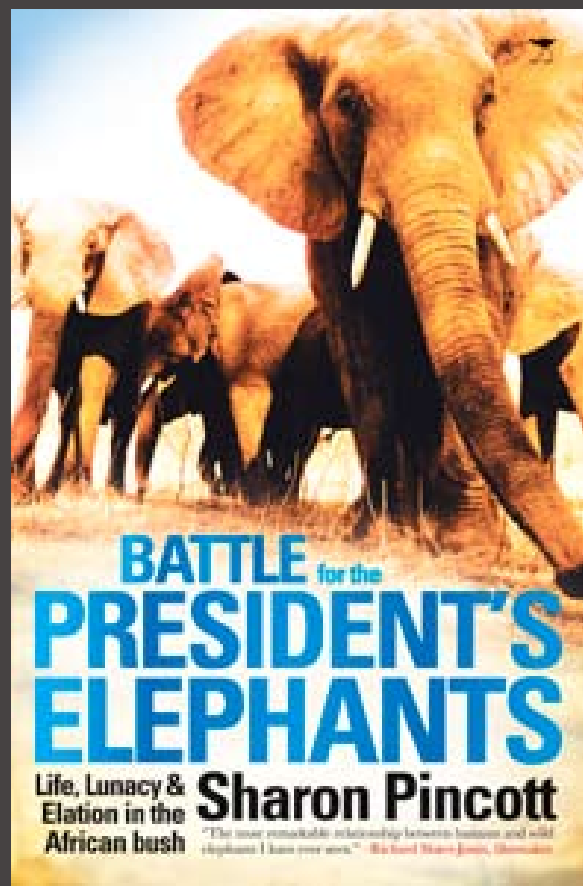
voluble creepy-crawlies: it was Africa as I’ve always known and loved it.

That night I lay snuggled up in the caravan, contemplating the magical events of the day. They say you meet people who bring particular things to your life. Well, Sharon brought an insight and understanding to mine, an example of someone brave enough to follow her heart in search of her true calling. She’s someone who doesn’t believe in giving up or turning back, no matter how big the potholes.

I knew we had to make a move fairly early in the morning, but I needed to say goodbye. Following

the scent of her inviting incense down the sandy path that led to her cottage, I could see that this courageous woman had invested not only in these elephants, but also in her own small space, and in Zimbabwe as a whole.

Thanking her for her time and knowledge, and the incredibly valuable fuel that she had used to drive us around (resources are scarce when you’re self-funded), I said goodbye to someone whom I now consider a friend. What had started as a simple interview had become, over a waterhole, a bottle of Amarula and the majestic J family, so much more! 🐘



## Battle for the President's Elephants

Interview Meghan Spilsbury

Photography Courtesy of Jacana

**Caravan & Outdoor Life:** Your decision to relocate to Zimbabwe has been described as a move towards a life less ordinary. What was it that drew you away from the city and into the savannah?

**Sharon Pincott:** I was a high-flying city girl, who fell in love with Africa's diverse wildlife. One of the people who inspired me the most was a Hwange National Park wildlife warden who became a friend. He was killed in a helicopter accident in the year 2000 while tracking rhino. We were of a similar age – our late 30s – and he had been encouraging me to take the leap, from my routine corporate life in Australia to the wild and unknown in Africa. After his death, there seemed to be no other place for me.

**COL:** When was your very first encounter with an African elephant, and what was it that made you fall in love with these magnificent animals?

**SP:** My first African safari was in 1993, and it happened quite by chance – in fact, when I was on business in Johannesburg. The first wild elephant I ever saw was wayyy over there! He looked as if he was only a few centimetres tall. Nevertheless, he was awe-inspiring and majestic, and it was just such an incredible thing that something so enormous could still roam this earth. Little did I know that, years later, I would actually be kissing a wild elephant like him.

**COL:** So many people enjoy exploring the African bush. What are a few of the aspects that you love about it?

**SP:** I love the quiet beauty. And on the flip side of that, I adore the boisterous wildlife jamborees. There's also something about the African skies that you just don't get elsewhere: stunning sunsets, glorious full moons and the African new moon lying on her back. But it's more than just these alone. It's knowing that so much extraordinary animal life is going about its business beneath these awesome skies.

**COL:** Your story tells of a highly emotional, often stressful balancing act between fighting for the elephants and confronting political and social unrest. What has kept you so dedicated in the face of such adversity?

**SP:** The animals, the elephants, have no voice – at least not one that we understand. Somebody has to look out for them. And I'm a particularly tenacious person. The more some people in Zimbabwe wanted me gone, the more determined I became to stay. Besides, the elephants came to mean so much to me. It's never easy to walk out on special friends.

**COL:** What should people take from sharing the privilege of enjoying Africa's wildlife?

**SP:** With careful observation, you'll notice that wild animals seem to be doing everything for the very first time. There's no boredom, no monotony in their lives. And they don't judge. They have an enthusiasm, and a harmony, that we could all learn something from.

**COL:** What is a common misperception about wildlife conservation in Africa? What is the one thing you would want people to know?

**SP:** I fear that some people, often those in influential positions, don't understand what the word 'conservation' even means. You're supposed to save the wildlife, not kill it. You're supposed to enjoy it, not eat it. The wildlife will not always remain, unless every person regularly does something to help preserve a life. Being a committed wildlife conservationist is definitely not a walk in the park.

**COL:** What advice would you have for anyone who's never experienced the wonders of the African bush, but who might be planning a visit?

**SP:** Allow yourself to revert to your childhood, and enjoy every unadulterated minute of it. Take a few moments every day and close your eyes, and your mouth. The

unforgettable sounds, and smells, of the African bush are so much more intense when you temporarily forgo the gifts of sight and speech.

**COL:** What is your favourite time of day to observe the elephants, and why?

**SP:** It's tempting to say sunset, when calming elephantine shadows abound. It's equally tempting to say after dark, when silvery moonlight glints off ivory tusks. Or perhaps it's when the blazing sun is directly overhead and the elephants are revelling in their love of water. My favourite time to be with the elephants is in fact any time that they're around.

**COL:** What valuable lesson have you learned from the elephants that you think people should be made aware of?

**SP:** My 11 years with wild elephants have taught me that they're incredibly similar to us. They seek and enjoy company, they have conscious thoughts, they share their emotions, of which they have many, and they forgive. What's more, they are absolutely not aggressive by nature. If they happen to behave aggressively, it's because we've made them that way.

**COL:** What is your dream for the future of the Presidential Elephants?

**SP:** I wish for every Presidential Elephant to have the opportunity to live out its natural life. I wish for them to have land that will always belong to them, land lacking in human beings with guns and traps. I wish for the elephants a world where ivory is worthless. I wish for them the respect that they deserve.

Buy yourself a copy of *Battle for the President's Elephants* (Jacana, 2012) at leading book stores nationwide.