



# A life in love with elephants

A hut in Hwange is a long way from the glitz and high life of an IT executive Down Under. But strange things can happen when you meet an unlikely soulmate in a place you never expected to be. By Don Pinnock.

Everyone agreed Sharon Pincott was at the top of her game. By 1993, the blonde from Queensland in Australia was a jet-setting IT executive flying the world with a handsome consort, staying in top hotels, driving a red sports car and attended by a devoted poodle.

Late that year, however, something odd happened. She met an elephant and fell in love. It was in Kruger National Park and, as she watched the huge bull, she inexplicably knew she had come home.

Sharon returned to where she was then living in Auckland, New Zealand, but was haunted by the meeting. She moved back to Brisbane and began juggling her high-powered consultancy work with unpaid volunteer jobs in Africa, working in Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Namibia. But among them, Zimbabwe exerted a powerful pull. There she met wildlife enthusiasts like Karen Paolillo and Andy and Laurette Searle and discovered they were her sort of people.

Andy introduced her to the subtleties of the African bush. His death in a helicopter crash in 2000 became a catalyst for action. Sharon locked up her house in Brisbane, gathered together some savings and moved to Hwange Estate alongside the national park to live with and study the Presidential Herd, a group of elephants given protection by government decree. Friends of this globetrotting young socialite were aghast.

'I walked across the tarmac at Victoria Falls Airport,' she said, 'feeling that I'd arrived where I was always meant to be. I wasn't a qualified researcher, but I took heart in



## Introducing Getaway's Elephant Ambassador

*In recognition of her courageous work with wildlife in Hwange Estate, Getaway has appointed Sharon Pincott as its Elephant Ambassador in Africa. She will be reporting on the herd, its environment and surrounds in the magazine each month. If you want to contact her, e-mail [spincott10@yahoo.com](mailto:spincott10@yahoo.com).*



Dr Louis Leakey's early view of Jane Goodall, whose work with the chimpanzees of Gombe is world renowned. He believed a mind uncluttered and unbiased by theory, a real desire for knowledge and a sympathetic love and understanding of animals were more important than a scientific degree.'

In Hwange, Sharon negotiated the use of a small rondavel – complete with cobras, gerbils, dormice and some bats in the eaves. She bought an old Range Rover which she named Nicki Mukuru.

The mechanic who worked on it complained he'd been trying to make custard out of cow dung. Apart from constant blowouts, it turned out – at least in the early years – to be dependable. In it she set out to explore the bush in clothes that would have made her chic girlfriends back home shudder in dismay.

### Meeting the herd

The Presidential Herd began as 22 frightened elephants in danger of elimination by hunters. By the time Sharon arrived the herd had, under official protection, swelled to around 400, but no formal record of them existed. They were also being caught in snares, which mutilated them horribly and often severed their trunks. Despite legal protection, they were still occasionally being hunted.

'Soon they were no longer just great lumps of endearing grey,' she remembered. 'They were individuals – members of close-knit families –

*Sharon negotiated the use of a small rondavel – complete with cobras, gerbils, dormice and some bats in the eaves*

**ABOVE:** It's hard to avoid the impression that elephants delight in pure, hedonistic pleasure. **OPPOSITE:** A trunk call from a Hwange elephant. The herd became so accustomed to Sharon that they'd amble over, probe with their trunks and rumble a friendly greeting.



*I was no longer interested in making a living. Instead, I wanted to make a life'*

and I was privileged to have the chance to get to know them. I quickly learned that elephants do very human things. They greet, they caress, they protect, they communicate, alert to everything going on around them.'

This familiarity was to be a source of wonder – and of pain. Kanondo Pan was the Presidential Herd's favourite playground and Sharon spent days, and some nights, in Nicki Mukuru watching and documenting.

'It became my office, a far cry from the skyscrapers around the world where I used to spend my time. Zebra crossings were really zebras crossing and families of lumbering elephants formed the only traffic jams.'



**ABOVE:** Sharon in her glitzy, high-flying exec days. **RIGHT:** Getting down and dirty as a toddler with, perhaps, a premonition of her future life in the African bush.



Forging remarkable relationships with these wild, free-roaming creatures, she earned the title of Ma-Ndlovu (Mother Elephant) among the locals. A matriarch Sharon named Lady at first only tolerated her presence, then befriended her in a very elephant way, standing beside the Range Rover with her eyes drooping sleepily as Sharon massaged her trunk. The vehicle's bonnet became dented with friendly greetings from tusks, its wing mirror crumpled when an elephant unintentionally leaned too hard.

'There is a timelessness about watching majestic elephants stride across the plains,' she would write in her book, *The Elephants and I*. 'They are creatures of supreme dignity, undoubtedly belonging to this land. They have a mighty form, yet it's one delicate enough to take an acacia pod from a human's hand. While sitting watching these magnificent beasts, I am forever overwhelmed by a strong sense of what is precious.'

#### A country in collapse

What also became apparent was what was not precious. She returned to Brisbane after about a year and was overwhelmed by the amount of 'stuff' everyone, including herself, possessed. She made a difficult decision: to sell her house, in effect burning bridges and committing her life to Zimbabwe. Her adopted country, however, was in meltdown. The economy had collapsed, land grabs by officials and 'war vets' were crippling agriculture, fuel and food was scarce and professional people were leaving in droves. Hungry people were snaring anything that moved, others were snaring for profit.

'I regularly drove the sandy roads wondering what gruesome wound I'd have to face that day,' she said. 'Would it be a trunk not long enough to reach the mouth with water? Bloodied flesh hanging hideously from a leg? A wire wrapped tightly under a chin, up to the ear, culminating in a disgusting

bow of wire on the top of the head? Water spraying out of a sliced trunk? A thick cable round a neck?'

Hunting was another problem. In 2003, Sharon was informed that Kanondo and the surrounding area had been claimed by the governor of the province and would be opened to sport-hunting. His relatives would settle there. She was no longer allowed in the area.

Sharon was stunned. The Hwange Estate hadn't been hunted for 30 years and the animals were habituated to humans. It would be a massacre.

Aware that her work permit could be revoked, Sharon was unsure what to do as guns blazed. But it was too much to bear and she began making representations to the highest officials in the land. It worked, temporarily, and the hunting quota was withdrawn. But this invoked the ire of the 'settlers' and veiled death threats followed.

Animals scattered and elephant sightings became rare. Sharon documented the situation for all who would listen, both in and outside the country, and the intimidation was stepped up. Police harassed her, roadblocks were set up to prevent her movement on estate roads and she was cautioned at one point not to travel on lonely, main roads because of the possibility of 'death by puma' – a planned 'accident' with a heavy Puma army truck. She was interrogated by officials believed to be from the Central Intelligence Organisation.

But her persistence paid off when the Kanondo and surrounding areas were returned to the original owners for photographic safaris. However, poaching continued.

People asked her if saving elephants was worth risking her life for. 'I never allowed myself time to ponder an answer,' she said. 'I was no longer interested in making a living. Instead, I wanted to make a life.'

But the 'settlers' weren't finished with her yet. More threats followed. Finally, the former governor, now

minister, wrote her a letter accusing her of being an Australian spy assigned with the task of frustrating Zimbabwe's land reform programme. He called her an 'Australian reject' in cahoots with 'racist white Rhodesians' whose provocation needed to be stopped 'one way or another.'

Sharon returned to Australia briefly to see her parents and, while there, was phoned by the Australian embassy in Harare saying it was dangerous to return. But she did. 'It seemed there were so few people in Zimbabwe who truly cared about the plight of wildlife,' she said. 'So many were, understandably I suppose, pre-occupied by their own survival.'

But the stress was wearing her down and land degradation was obvious. Despite the beauty and wonder of the region, which still remained despite everything, Sharon

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finally decided to leave for good ... then found she just couldn't. She's still there, doing what she can to protect the Presidential Herd, still hoping things will come right.

'Seeing elephants in large gatherings always triggers my imagination,' she said. 'I watch and imagine them, together again, hungry for conversation after their long time apart.'

'I imagine them without acid judgement, more respectful of each other than many humans are. I imagine them alone under a full moon, dancing in celebration of their reunion, their trunks and bodies fluid with the exquisite music of the dawn and dusk symphonies. I imagine them roaming this earth forever.' ■

Sharon's highly acclaimed book, *The Elephants and I*, published by Jacana, is available in bookshops throughout South Africa and on-line from [www.bookdepository.co.uk](http://www.bookdepository.co.uk), which offers free world-wide delivery.



**LEFT:** Lady, a free-roaming giant, and her family granted Sharon an extraordinary place in their world. **BELOW:** A youngster revelling in the arrival of the rainy season.

