

One Big Family

by Jeff Ives

A filmmaker finds out that elephant families can be comfortable with visitors.



NOAA

African elephant.

"I started thinking of them as a family almost immediately," filmmaker Martyn Colbeck told *WR News*. He was talking about wild elephants, not his next-door neighbors. For more than 15 years, Colbeck has filmed a family of African elephants in Amboseli National Reserve in eastern Africa.

Colbeck's film about the family, *Unforgettable Elephants*, aired April 1, 2007, on the PBS television show *Nature*. The film came after studies found that elephants can recognize their reflection in a mirror. That is something only humans, chimpanzees, and dolphins were thought to be able to do. "These animals are smart," Colbeck says. His **documentary** shows just how intelligent African elephants-the world's largest land animals-are.

Leader of the Pack

Colbeck's film follows an elephant family led by a 62-year-old female elephant named Echo. In the wild, African elephants live in herds. They roam long distances to find food. The oldest female elephant, called the matriarch, leads the herd. Adult male elephants live separately from the females and the young calves.

Echo guides her family to fresh water and food while staying alert for danger. The young

elephants are the most vulnerable, or at risk of being harmed. Colbeck witnessed that danger when he saw another elephant family attempt to kidnap Echo's calf, Ebony. Echo gathered the other adult female elephants in her family to come to the rescue. "Together they plowed into the kidnappers to recover Ebony," Colbeck explained. "It showed forethought and teamwork."

Elephant Customs

During his years of filmmaking, Colbeck observed other signs of elephant intelligence. Elephants communicate with each other through low rumbling sounds that people often cannot hear. Family members also make distinct sounds that other members can recognize.

Like humans, elephants have their own rituals, or customs. After an elephant dies, the other family members cover the body with sticks and leaves and linger near the site for days. The animals often return to the site years later.

Protecting the Herd

Amboseli National Reserve covers about 150 square miles in southern Kenya, near the Tanzania border. The Kenyan government protects the nature reserve's elephants from poaching, or illegal hunting. Elephants have been hunted throughout history for the ivory in their tusks. Humans have used ivory to make jewelry and other objects. Today, elephants are an endangered species.

Since strict anti-poaching laws were put into effect in 1968, the number of elephants in Amboseli has risen from 500 to more than 1,200. When Colbeck began filming Echo's family in 1990, the family had only 14 members. Today it has 30 members.

Although the elephants still face some danger from the local Masai tribespeople, the creatures have become remarkably comfortable around human visitors. That makes Amboseli an ideal place for scientists to study elephant behavior.

"The elephants are totally relaxed about having vehicles in amongst the herd," says Colbeck. "Nevertheless, it is still very important to respect the animals and not disturb them. That respect develops into a trust, and in that way we have been able to document some extraordinary moments in their lives." That trust has not only allowed Colbeck to film Echo's family, but it has also made him feel like one of the family.

Echo's Family Tree

The elephant families in Amboseli National Reserve are organized alphabetically. Echo's family is the "E" family, so every member of the family is given a name starting with *E*. Here's how Echo fits in with some of her relatives.

Grandmother

Echo (age 62): Echo is one of the oldest elephants in Amboseli. She is the leader of her family. You can tell that she is old by the length of her tusks. They are almost touching! Wild African elephants live an average of 60 years.

Children

Erin (died at age 34): She was Echo's eldest daughter. Erin died from a spear injury after she wandered too close to a watering hole protected by the local Masai people.

Eliot (age 22): As a young calf, Eliot would run up and rest her head on researchers' vehicles. Now that she has grown up, Eliot keeps her distance from people.

Ely (age 17): When he was born, Ely couldn't walk. The family waited to move until he stood on his own. Now he lives alone. He left the herd at age 12.

Grandchildren

Edwina (age 25): Edwina is Echo's first known grandchild.

Eleanor (age 22): Eleanor helped care for Email after Erin died.

Email (age 6): Email's mother, Erin, died when he was 2. Now the rest of the family takes care of him.

Great-grandchildren

Europa (age 12): Europa is Echo's first known great-grandchild.

Elaine (age 8): Elaine is Echo's second great-granddaughter.

Elmo (age 8): Elmo is Echo's only surviving great-grandson.