



# ELEPHANT RESEARCH

– A · P · N · R –

## March 2005

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*This edition will focus on our most recent collaring operations and the movements of the collared elephants.*

The sound of trickling water mingled with other familiar bushveld sounds blends into a harmonious whole which speaks of splendor and abundance. The Nsharalumi is flowing after more than 800 mm of rain since November! The glimmering water lazily winds its way across the sandy river bed that is now fringed with lush grass and ever growing woody vegetation. We are sitting amongst Monarch's breeding herd watching the adult females rhythmically pick and clean grass before placing it into their mouths with obvious delight.

Monarch is one of the recently collared elephants and she is part of the 'Butterfly' herd. Butterflies were first sighted in December 2002. Monarch, together with a younger bull called Soshangane and a prime bull named Brazen were collared on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2005 by Dr. Cobus Raath. Soshangane is a bull that has probably recently broke away from his family unit as he is close to twenty years old and is wandering

very widely in an attempt to familiarise himself with the social landscape. Like Alex and Barry, of similar age group, he will be experiencing his first musth cycles in the near future.



Brazen with his collar and shortened left tusk

Brazen on the other hand is a large mature bull that was first sighted on Ingwelala in May 2003. Brazen has his annual musth cycle from June to October each year and has been found to associate with the 'Grass herd' and 'Kruger names' during this time.

All three new study animals, like Barry and Mandy, now have the recently developed GMS/GPS cell collars which will enable us to keep track of their movements and associations. In total we have deployed ten collars on elephants within the APNR. Regrettably we had to remove Benjamin's collar as he had twisted the counterweight repeatedly and flipped the GPS components of the collar so that they no longer faced skyward, which meant that the battery of the collar soon ran down. Mr. Tim Paxton, security officer at Phalaborwa Mining Company kindly provided information on Benjamin's whereabouts so that Cobus could fly straight towards the mining area and remove the collar after a hard days work collaring other elephants within the APNR.



Classic in musth

Photo: Steve Henley

Classic came into musth at the end of February. He is covering large distances in search of oestrous females. Classic can look very intimidating when he bears down on you after strutting his impressive tusks in a typical head-held-high position.

We are waiting in anticipation for Mac to come into musth and start his long trek south. Presently he is still at Shingwedzi in the Kruger National Park. Perhaps we will be fortunate enough to see Mac and Classic meet up and challenge each other, as there is overlap in their musth cycles.

Joan has kept to her home range sections along the Klaserie and Oilfants rivers. Diney has largely occupied central Timbavati and her herd, the 'Flowers', has been of interest to Classic as one of the younger cows called 'Bottle brush' has recently been in oestrus.



Mandy and her baby

Photo: Michelle Henley

Mandy has a baby now which is a couple of months old and sticks close to her side at all times. Although we would have loved to see her calf when it was younger, she very cleverly stuck to thick bush during the last months of her gestation and early lactation period. This made it difficult to get a clear sighting of her or her calf in and amongst the lush vegetation.

Monarch looks on as a group of young elephants play near by. She has stayed in and around the properties close to Timbavati headquarters. The grunts and squeals of the young elephants in her herd fill the air with a sense of joy and peace. The long grass offers the high-spirited elephants new opportunities to play. In a ripple of tall moving grass they charge towards their unsuspecting playmates which retaliate with triumphant trumpets of delight.

### **Acknowledgements**

David and Marlene McCay are thanked for purchasing the collars of the new study animals. Your dedication to conservation is inspirational. Dr. Cobus Raath, these operations would not have been possible without your support. Cobus, you have gone far beyond the call of duty and we appreciate your commitment to this project. You have not only supported this project logistically and financially but you have also made a substantial financial contribution toward the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve. We would also like to thank the support and involvement received from Dr. Dave Hunter and Mr. Thomas Grimm from One World Quest. We look forward to your participation in future collaring events.

We appreciate the participation and support given by Scott Ronaldson and his competent field rangers. We are grateful for your involvement in the project. Raymond Bezuidenhout and Mwana Bermudes are thanked for all their enthusiasm and photographs. Trish Pontynen and Dean Griffiths are thanked for their logistical and practical assistance during the collaring operations.

Tim Paxton is thanked for kindly granting us permission to remove Benjamin's collar on PMC and for providing Cobus with information on the bull's whereabouts when the collar had to be removed. Tim, we also appreciate all the ID photos that you have submitted ever since you came to hear about the project.

We would like to thank Tanda Tula Safari Camp and especially Brain Masters and Odette Schuld for all their logistical support during the collaring operations. Steve Berg from Motswari is also thanked for reporting all elephant sightings the day before the collaring operation.

### **Quote**

Grass is the forgiveness of nature – her constant benefaction. Forests decay, harvests perish, flowers vanish, but grass is immortal. It invades the solitudes of deserts, climbs the forbidden pinnacles of mountains, modifies climates and determines history, character and destiny of nations. It bears no blazonry of bloom to charm the senses. It yields no fruit in earth and air and yet, should its harvest fail for a single year, famine would depopulate the world.

**John Ingalls**



# Where are all the collared elephants?



Photo Michelle Henley

**Classic**

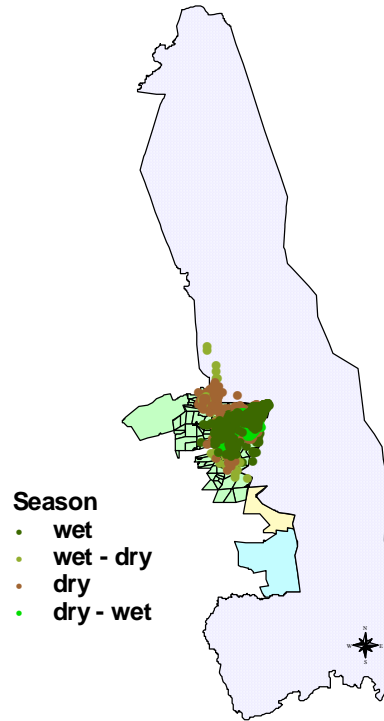


Photo Michelle Henley

**Mac**

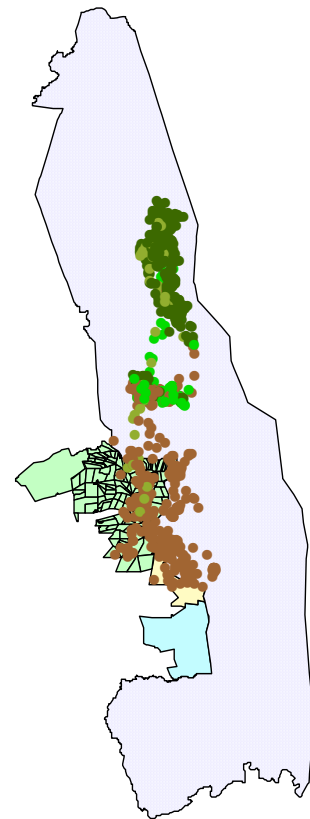




Photo: Michelle Henley

**Brazen**

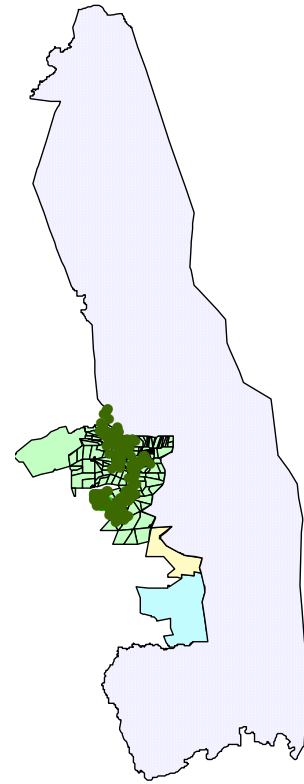


Photo: Michelle Henley

**Diney**

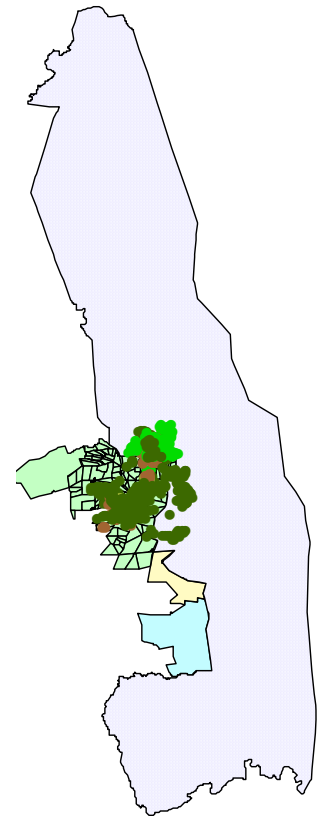






Photo: Michelle Henley

**Mandy**

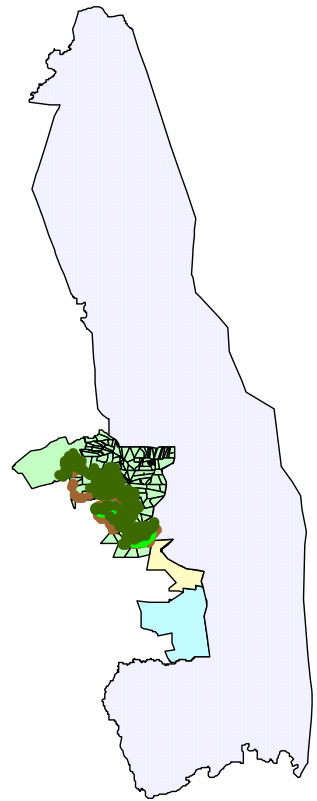


Photo: Andrew de Luca

**Monarch**

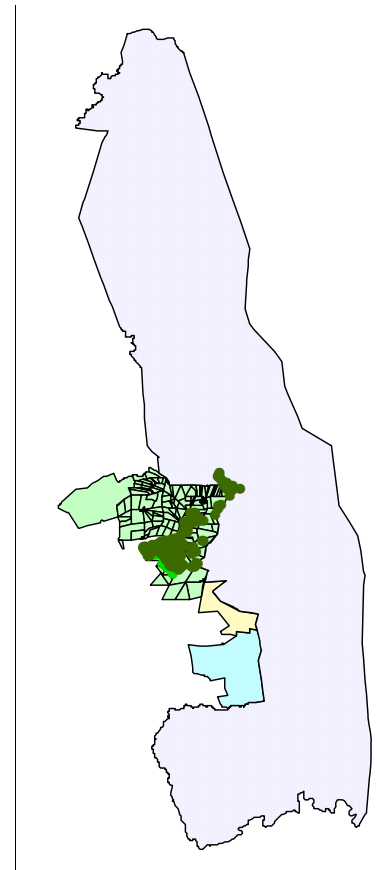




Photo: Steve Henley

**Joan**

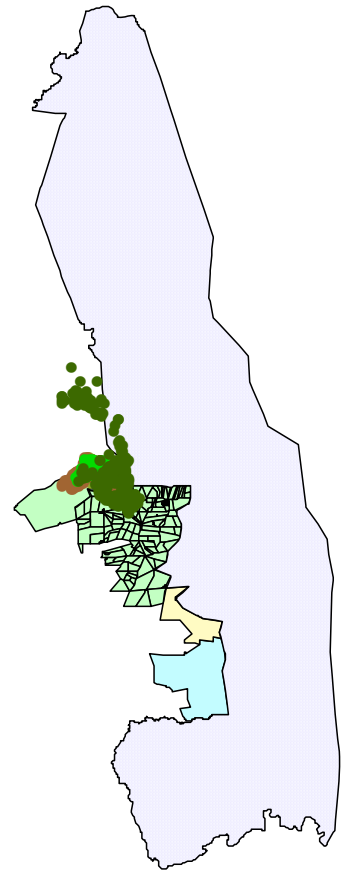


Photo: Steve Henley

**Barry**

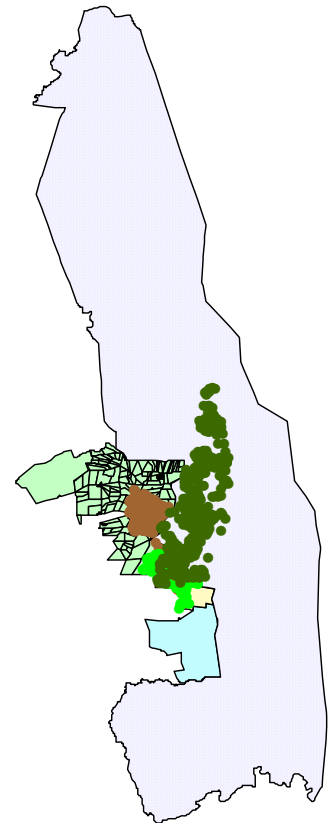






Photo: Steve Henley

**Alex**

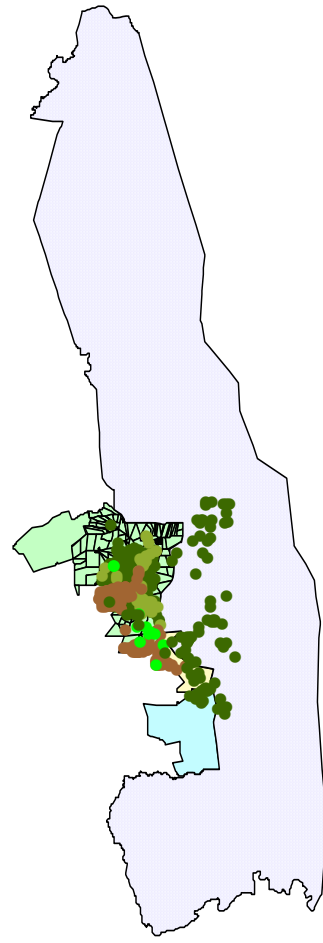
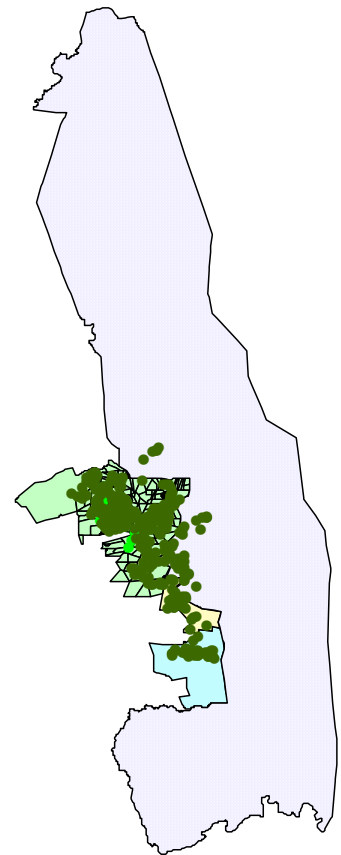


Photo: Michelle Henley

**Soshangane**





# Your thoughts...

*We would like to thank Brendon Schmikle for this month's contribution. The following account has been transcribed without alteration.*

While on an early morning game drive on the farm Rothsay, we came across a large elephant bull being accompanied by two younger *askaris*. All three were just milling around feeding in a small open clearing under a clump of large tamboti trees. They were feeding mostly on a thicket of guarri bushes which we found to be interesting and a bit unusual. We were sitting quietly watching them feeding and the older bull and one *askari* moved away from us to our left and started feeding in another thicket. The remaining bull was to our right, still munching away on the guarri bushes. After a while, he decided to go and join the other bulls. He walked in their direction right in front of our vehicle and as he was just past us, he stopped and reversed up to the tracker's seat, with my tracker Eric in it! The elephant's rear end was literally up against my tracker who by this time had turned his legs sideways as the elephant's hind legs were now almost touching his seat. After some quick deliberations between Eric and me, we determined that he was comfortable with this scenario and apparently so was the elephant. Whilst quietly watching this strange scene, I suddenly noticed that the elephant's tail was draped across Eric's lap and over the hood of the Landrover, further suggesting that the elephant was quite comfortable with the car and Eric! This peaceful and surreal scene was then interrupted by a rocking motion as the car was gently moving from side to side. When I enquired as to what was happening, Eric told me that the elephant was scratching his back foot on the tracker's footplate! When he was finished, he walked forward a couple of paces and turned around to face the vehicle. At this stage, we felt very comfortable with this young bull and all strongly

sensed that he was just curious and almost felt that he wanted to learn about us in some way. Eric kept on reassuring me that he was enjoying this experience and that he felt calm, but that he would let me know when he had had enough or thought it wise to diffuse the situation.

Before we knew it, the elephant approached slowly with his trunk extended towards Eric again. He was eventually standing with his eyes and forehead about one foot away from Eric. The two just stared at each other for a minute or so, and then very gently, the elephant put his right tusk under the tracker seat and lifted it softly. It was just like a curious child wanting to see what something is and how heavy it is, or is it soft or hard? The animal then gently placed his tusk under Eric's leg and ever so gently, nudged him. When he did this, Eric slowly motioned his left hand in front of the animal's eye and he would stop. Each time the elephant did this, Eric did the same. After a few of these interactions, Eric indicated that he had finished playing. I then started the engine and the elephant immediately backed away, but remained facing us. I then turned off the motor and he advanced toward us. I then started the engine and he stopped. I drove a little toward him and he backed away a few steps. If I stopped, he stopped. If I switched off the engine, he came forward. If I started the engine, he backed off and so on. After a few of these interactions, he got bored and peacefully walked off to join his mates to carry on feeding. The interesting thing was that not at any time did the animal show any signs of stress, fear or aggression. The whole experience was incredibly gentle and one really experienced how intelligent these animals really are and how similar some of their behaviour is to our own.

## WHO'S-WHO.....?

*This regular feature will serve as an introduction to individual elephants with which we have become familiar in the APNR. Here we focus on an elephant bull named Ears-pierced....*



**Ears-pierced** gets his name from two tiny holes at the bottom section of each of his ears. He has been seen since November 2003 and like Epoch (who featured in the previous newsletter) has often been sighted in the company of Classic. These three magnificent bulls make for an impressive sight as they wander around the north eastern section of the Umbabat. Both Epoch and Ears-pierce seem to keep in close association with Classic for extended periods and after watching them for some time one can only deduce that they share close bonds.



Classic and Ears-pierced resting close together

As each of these bulls come into musth they disperse from their bull retirement area in the Umbabat in search of breeding herds.

### FACT-FILE: All about being a calf

Bull calves can weigh 120 kg at birth while cows don't exceed 100 kg.

The weight at birth equals 3.5% of the weight of the mother compared with 6-7% in humans.

Twins occasionally occur and make up about 1% of births.

Bull calves suckle on average every 37 minutes while cows suckle every 50 minutes. Suckling bouts last about 1.5 minutes and the calf requires about 15 litres of milk a day.

Nursing averages five years but can range between three to eight years.

The calf is completely dependent on its mother for the first three months of its life. Between three to four months it starts trying to consume vegetation.

Mortality amongst calves in their first year can be as high as 36% (recorded in Uganda).

When born, an elephant has four developing teeth in each side of the jaws. The first molar is lost at 1-2 years.

Tusks typically appear at the age of 18 months to two years.

Daughters stay in the family unit with their mother for their entire life while sons are driven away at the age of 15.

## SPECIAL REQUESTS

*We will be unable to meet the objectives of this study without your input and support. We therefore have the following requests and appeals to make...*

### : ELEPHANT IDENTIFICATION KIT:

If you are keen to assist in the collection of elephant ear patterns or if you have taken any elephant photos and would like to make these available, we would be most appreciative. Please contact us so that we can make an arrangement. If you are interested in ordering an identification kit, email us as soon as possible.

### : NEWSLETTER:

If you would like to contribute to the newsletter in any way please contact us, especially if you have come to know specific elephants over the years and have some interesting stories to tell. We will include your stories in the section entitled 'Your Thoughts'.

### : ELEPHANT MORTALITIES:

We are trying to piece together a map of all natural mortalities of elephants within the region. If you have ANY historic information of elephant deaths that occurred on your property we would greatly appreciate it if you could provide us with the information.

### : RAINFALL DATA:

We want to investigate patterns in rainfall variability within the APNR and as such are looking for reliable records from as many different locations as possible. In particular we are looking for daily rainfall data. We would like to thank all the people that have supplied us with rainfall data and would ask if there is anybody else who would be prepared to make such data available.

### : RESEARCH VEHICLE:

Our research vehicle is slowly reaching the end of its lifespan. We would greatly appreciate any information or contributions that can assist us in purchasing another reliable 4x4 vehicle.

### DONATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS:

We are very grateful to all the landowners and interested parties that have submitted photographs and made financial contributions towards the project. A comprehensive list of all contributions will be displayed on our website. As this costly project is dependent on donations any financial contributions can be made to the Transboundary Elephant Research Programme, account number 033356165, Standard Bank, Hoedspruit, Branch Code 052752.



## OUR NEXT NEWSLETTER.....

*In the next issue of **Elephant News** will focus on the culling debate.*