

# Collaring elephants in the Klaserie

by Michelle and Steve Henley

WE HAD STARTED our search for Benjamin a week before we were due to fit the collars. The days were long, hot and dusty and the sightings of elephant bulls infrequent. Breeding herds were plentiful and we regularly found them seeking refuge from the heat and dryness in the reedbeds of the Klaserie River. We knew that if we were to fly along this green artery we would be sure to find a family unit which we could collar. But where could we find Benjamin for Stefan Breuer?

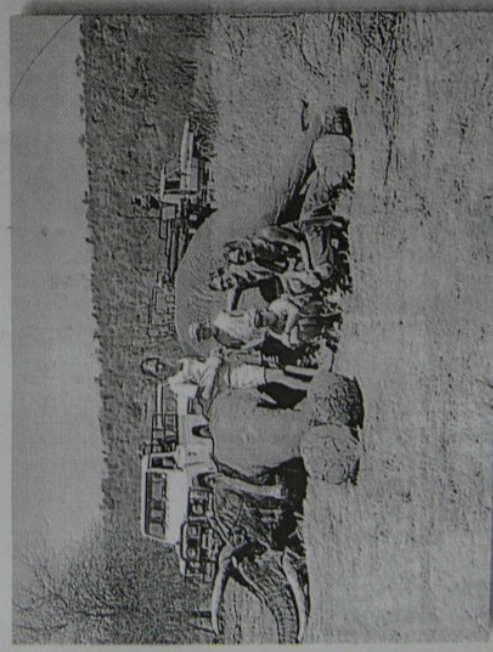
money went directly towards the management of the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve. On Monday, the day before the collaring operation was to take place, Chris Mayes contacted us while we were out searching for animals to the North of Makumu. They had just caught sight of a lovely bull associating with a breeding herd on Makumu. We rushed over to catch sight of Benjamin-to-be, feeding on reeds some distance from the cows.

In spite of being in musth, he was particularly relaxed and practically ignored us. We were elated, as the chances of him moving off overnight while the breeding herd was around, were slim. The following day the plan would be to collar Benjamin, a cow within a breeding herd and another breeding bull!

The excitement was quite tangible when, at 06:00 on Tuesday 2 November, 2004, Stefan and his family, Colin Rowles and three of the Klaserie field rangers and Joel Hancock from Limpopo Provincial Nature Conservation met at Makumu to await the helicopter. Steve Henley and I set off with Dr. Cobus Raath and his veterinarian team from the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve to join the others in Klaserie. Cobus Raath, wildlife veterinarian for IWHI, had offered to conduct the three elephant collaring operations free of charge as a show of support for the Elephant Research Programme

Continued from page 6 ...  
Would we manage to find another breeding bull before the heat of the day made collaring risky?  
Steve Henley and the pilot Danie Terblance searched in vain for Benjamin. During the flight they spotted the nearby breeding herd and a group of three bulls of smaller size than Benjamin. The decision was taken to collar one of the cows and then to search for Benjamin again. We would later also collar one of the sighted younger bulls.

The helicopter landed to pick up Cobus, who had prepared the drugs, while the rest of us drove close to where the helicopter was hovering over the targeted cow. She was a fighter, and although the pilot had planned for her to fall close to the road, she resisted the effects of the drug and fell



Out for the count, and a collar (Photo: Michelle Henley)

# Collaring elephant

to her knees in the riverbed below Mr. Crabbia's house on Dundee. Cobus also thought that she was particularly aggressive towards the helicopter. We were not able to push her onto her side because large rocks kept her propped up. Her female calf of about two years old also refused to leave her side and instead of running off with the rest of the herd, she stuck close to her mother's side. These were not ideal circumstances and the team had to work very quickly. To calm the calf down and to ensure the safety of the collaring team, Cobus administered an immobilising drug and then helped the calf to flop on its side a few metres from its mother. Hastily the collar was fitted to the squatting cow and the antidote delivered to both cow and calf.

They both woke up after 20 minutes. The cow moved off slowly, testing the new object around her neck, while the calf stood flapping its ears. A sedative within the antidote concoction would keep both mother and daughter calm for the next six hours. We left the scene to enable the calf on Dundee not far from where Benjamin and Alex was much younger than Benjamin and was so named by Stefan's son who sat entranced, watching the whole procedure. The antidote was delivered after the collar was fitted. Elephant Alex also rocked himself to his feet unaware that he would be the sixth elephant with a satellite collar providing us with valuable information on the range behaviour of elephants within the APNR.

Where are the collared elephants now?  
The 3rd of November we set out to establish whether the collared cow had reunited with her calf and family. We were surprised to catch up with her at Phalaborwa Mining Company (PMC). Her temporal glands were not streaming, indicating that she was relaxed, and her calf was once again close by her side. We spoke to Tim Patterson from PMC whom had recognised the herd that she is moving with and said that they have been coming to that area for years. He also thought that it was the same herd from which they had removed a snare from a calf some years ago when they had driven the rest of the herd off by helicopter whilst working to free the calf. This may account for the cow's reaction, and explain why Cobus thought that she was a particularly feisty cow. The herd is at present slowly making their way south again, although they appear to be following the Olifants River course very closely.

Benjamin has also moved north since the collaring and is at present on PMC. Elephant Alex has reunited with a bull group and has moved south since the collaring operation.

## Request

This costly project is dependent on donations and sponsorships. Although *Save The Elephants* and Tanda Tula Safari Camp have supported this project both financially and logistically, we are still dependent on donations for the duration of the project.

As we plan to have 30 elephants satellite collared by 2007, we are in need of funds to manufacture more satellite collars. We would welcome any landowner or company interested in donating a satellite collar.

Donations can be made to 'Elephant Research APNR', account number 033356165, Standard Bank, Hoedspruit, Branch Code 052752. Please feel free to contact us at (015) 793 0369 or email us at [michellephant@worldonline.co.za](mailto:michellephant@worldonline.co.za) if you require further information about the project.

to reunite with its mother.  
The search for Benjamin was then resumed. To the delight of Stefan, the message came through from the pilot that Benjamin had been found on Mr. Katzenellenbogen's property. The procedures were repeated at this time with relative ease. Benjamin slowly fell onto his right side on the road. Stefan's wife, Margaret and their children Alex, Melanie and Christine assisted us in measuring the tusks, shoulder height, back length and feet circumference of the sleeping giant. The pungent smell of musth hung heavy in the air and added to the sense of awe and strength one gets when so close to a bull. After the collar had been fitted and blood samples collected for DNA analyses, Stefan was given the opportunity to deliver the antidote while we all returned to our vehicles.

The sleeping giant rocked himself to his feet and without looking back over his shoulder, ambled off into the bush to be swallowed up by the shimmering heat waves in the distance.  
The last collaring operation also took place on Dundee not far from where Benjamin and Alex was much younger than Benjamin and was so named by Stefan's son who sat entranced, watching the whole procedure. The antidote was delivered after the collar was fitted. Elephant Alex also rocked himself to his feet unaware that he would be the sixth elephant with a satellite collar providing us with valuable information on the range behaviour of elephants within the APNR.

Where are the collared elephants now?  
The 3rd of November we set out to establish whether the collared cow had reunited with her calf and family. We were surprised to catch up with her at Phalaborwa Mining Company (PMC). Her temporal glands were not streaming, indicating that she was relaxed, and her calf was once again close by her side. We spoke to Tim Patterson from PMC whom had recognised the herd that she is moving with and said that they have been coming to that area for years. He also thought that it was the same herd from which they had removed a snare from a calf some years ago when they had driven the rest of the herd off by helicopter whilst working to free the calf. This may account for the cow's reaction, and explain why Cobus thought that she was a particularly feisty cow. The herd is at present slowly making their way south again, although they appear to be following the Olifants River course very closely.

Benjamin has also moved north since the collaring and is at present on PMC. Elephant Alex has reunited with a bull group and has moved south since the collaring operation.

## Request

This costly project is dependent on donations and sponsorships. Although *Save The Elephants* and Tanda Tula Safari Camp have supported this project both financially and logistically, we are still dependent on donations for the duration of the project.

As we plan to have 30 elephants satellite collared by 2007, we are in need of funds to manufacture more satellite collars. We would welcome any landowner or company interested in donating a satellite collar.

Donations can be made to 'Elephant Research APNR', account number 033356165, Standard Bank, Hoedspruit, Branch Code 052752. Please feel free to contact us at (015) 793 0369 or email us at [michellephant@worldonline.co.za](mailto:michellephant@worldonline.co.za) if you require further information about the project.



Benjamin-to-be (Photo: Stefan Breuer)

Stefan, one of the Klaserie landowners, had shown a great interest in elephants and their ecology from the outset of the Elephant Research Programme. In 2003 he made a substantial donation toward the project and also offered to donate a satellite collar in August of this year to assist us in achieving our research objectives. Tony McClellan, who had previously paid for the collars of Mac in 2002 as well as Classic and Diney's collars in May 2004, has once again kindly donated an additional collar to be fitted onto a cow. A third collar was paid for by a number of smaller donations.

Stefan indicated that he and his family would be coming to Makumu in the Klaserie at the beginning of November, and with the assistance of the International Wildlife Health Institute (IWHI) we were able to offer the Breuer family the opportunity to participate in the collaring operations. This meant that we were in search of a bull in the vicinity of Makumu which, on Stefan's request, would be named Benjamin. Stefan also made a donation for the privilege of participating in the collaring operation. This



Stefan administering the antidote under the supervision of Dr. Raath (Photo: Michelle Henley)