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The elephant whisperer: How re-homing a violent herd was the start of a unique relationship between man and giant beast

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They were a herd of violent rogue elephants destined to be shot. He was their last hope for survival. What happened next was extraordinary.

When Lawrence Anthony was asked to re-home a herd of rogue elephants on his private game reserve, he accepted - and found himself fighting a desperate battle for survival.

The story of how he went on to win the hearts - and trust - of an enraged and troubled herd is the subject of a new book, The Elephant Whisperer. Here, in our exclusive first extract, Lawrence, 59, who was raised in the bush and lives on his reserve with his wife, Françoise, describes the beginnings of a remarkable relationship between man and giant beast.

It was 4.45am and I was standing in front of Nana, an enraged wild elephant, pleading with her in desperation. Both our lives depended on it. The only thing separating us was an 8,000-volt electric fence that she was preparing to flatten and make her escape.

Nana, the matriarch of her herd, tensed her enormous frame and flared her ears.

'Don't do it, Nana,' I said, as calmly as I could. She stood there, motionless but tense. The rest of the herd froze. 'This is your home now,' I continued. 'Please don't do it, girl.' I felt her eyes boring into me. 'They'll kill you all if you break out. This is your home now. You have no need to run any more.'

Amazing relationship: Lawrence with the elephant herd matriarch, Nana

Suddenly, the absurdity of the situation struck me. Here I was in pitch darkness, talking to a wild female elephant with a baby, the most dangerous possible combination, as if we were having a friendly chat. But I meant every word. 'You will all die if you go. Stay here. I will be here with you and it's a good place.'

She took another step forward. I could see her tense up again, preparing to snap the electric wire and be out, the rest of the herd smashing after her in a flash. I was in their path, and would only have seconds to scramble out of their way and climb the nearest tree. I wondered if I would be fast enough to avoid being trampled. Possibly not.

Then something happened between Nana and me, some tiny spark of recognition, flaring for the briefest of moments. Then it was gone. Nana turned and melted into the bush. The rest of the herd followed. I couldn't explain what had happened between us, but it gave me the first glimmer-of hope since the elephants had first thundered into my life.

It had all started several weeks earlier with a phone call out of the blue from an elephant welfare organisation. Would I be interested in adopting a herd of elephants?

But there was a problem. These elephants, who lived on a game reserve 600 miles to the north, were ' troublesome.' They had a tendency to break out of reserves and the owners wanted to get rid of them fast. If we didn't take them, they would be shot.

The woman explained, 'The matriarch is an amazing escape artist and has worked out how to break through electric fences. She just twists the wire around her tusks until it snaps, or takes the pain and smashes through.'

'Why me?' I asked.

'I've heard you have a way with animals. You're right for them. Or maybe they're right for you.'

That floored me. We were absolutely 'not right' for a herd of elephants, as our reserve was barely operational.

Born in Johannesburg and raised in remote rural Africa, I had been a nature lover throughout my childhood. After becoming a conservationist in my teens, I finally bought Thula Thula, a 5,000-acre reserve in South Africa, in 1998. Now, a year later, I had just two weeks to electrify 20 miles of boundary fences and build a stockade sturdy enough to keep a herd of troubled elephants in.

Freedom bid: When the elephants escaped they had to be darted with sedatives before being brought back to the newly-reinforced enclosure

It was almost complete when I heard the news that one of the mothers and her baby had been shot while trying to evade capture. I was devastated, and this killing cemented my determination to save the rest of the herd.

When they arrived, they were thumping the inside of the trailer like a gigantic drum. We sedated them with a pole-sized syringe, and once they had calmed down, the door slid open and the matriarch emerged, followed by her baby bull, three females and an 11-year-old bull.

The last one was the 15-year-old son of the dead other. He stared at us, flared his ears and with a trumpet of rage, charged, pulling up just short of the fence in front of us.

His mother and baby sister had been shot before his eyes, and here he was, just a teenager, defending his herd. David, my head ranger, named him Mnumzane, which in Zulu means 'Sir'. We christened the matriarch Nana, and the second female-in-command, the most feisty, Frankie, after my wife.

We had erected a giant enclosure within the reserve to keep them safe until they became calm enough to move out into the reserve proper.

Nana gathered her clan, loped up to the fence and stretched out her trunk, touching the electric wires. The 8,000-volt charge sent a jolt shuddering through her bulk. She backed off. Then, with her family in tow, she strode the entire perimeter of the enclosure, pointing her trunk at the wire to check for vibrations from the electric current.

As I went to bed that night, I noticed the elephants lining up along the fence, facing out towards their former home. It looked ominous. I was woken several hours later by one of the reserve's rangers, shouting, 'The elephants have gone! They've broken out!' The two adult elephants had worked as a team to fell a tree, smashing it onto the electric fence and then charging out of the enclosure.

I scrambled together a search party and we raced to the border of the game reserve, but we were too late. The fence was down and the animals had broken out.

They had somehow found the generator that powered the electric fence around the reserve. After trampling it like a tin can, they had pulled the concrete-embedded fence posts out of the ground like matchsticks, and headed north.

Frankie with her young: Lawrence lived with the elephant herd to bond with them

Three miles away, they were spotted by a motorist. But we weren't the only ones chasing them. We met a group of locals carrying large calibre rifles, who claimed the elephants were 'fair game' now. On our radios we heard the wildlife authorities were issuing elephant rifles to staff. It was now a simple race against time.

It took one helicopter, a search party and two days before we found them in open ground. We darted them with sedatives and bought them back to the newly-reinforced enclosure. But their bid for freedom had, if anything, increased their resentment at being kept in captivity.

Nana watched my every move, hostility seeping from every pore, her family behind her. There was no doubt that sooner or later they were going to make another break for freedom.

Then, in a flash, came the answer. I would live with the herd. To save their lives, I would stay with them, feed them, talk to them. But, most importantly, be with them day and night. We all had to get to know each other.

David agreed to join me in a new home - my Land Rover, which we parked just outside the elephants' enclosure so we could observe their every move. That night, he woke me.

'Quick. Something's happening at the fence.' An enormous shape morphed in front of me. It was Nana, ten yards from the fence, her baby son by her side and the other elephants behind her.

Nana took a step forward. 'That bloody electric wire had better hold,' David said.

Without thinking I walked towards the fence. Nana was directly ahead of me. 'Don't do it, Nana,' I said. 'Please don't do it, girl.'

And so it was that I pleaded with Nana in our life-or-death confrontation - and we connected in a magical way for just a split second, where she seemed to understand exactly what I was saying.

But, by the next day, the naked aggression and agitation was back. I patrolled the fence daily, deliberately speaking loudly so the elephants heard my voice. Sometimes I would even sing. If I caught Nana's attention I would look directly at her, telling her this was her new home.

But each morning, at precisely 4.45am, Nana would line up the herd, facing north. She would tense up, yards from the fence, and for ten adrenaline-soaked minutes I would stand up to her, pleading for their lives. It was always touch and go and my relief as she ghosted back into the bush with her family was absolute.

Just after sunrise one morning, a month after the elephants' arrival, I glanced up to see Nana and her baby at the fence near where we'd parked the Land Rover. As I stood, Nana lifted her trunk and looked straight at me. Her ears were down and she was calm. Instinctively I decided to go to her. I stopped about three yards from the fence and gazed up at the gigantic form directly in front of me. Then I took a slow step forward.

She did not move and, suddenly, I felt sheathed in a sense of contentment. Despite standing just a pace from this previously foul-tempered wild animal who, until now, would have liked nothing better than to kill me, I had never felt safer.

I noticed for the first time her wiry eyelashes, the thousands of wrinkles criss-crossing her skin and her broken tusk. Her soft eyes pulled me in. Then, almost in slow motion, she gently reached out to me with her trunk. I watched, hypnotised, as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

David's voice echoed in the background, 'What the hell are you doing?' The urgency in his call broke the spell. Suddenly, I realised that if Nana got hold of me it would all be over. I would be yanked through the fence and stomped flat.

I was about to step back, but something made me hold my ground - a strange feeling of mesmeric tranquillity. Once more, Nana reached out with her trunk. She wanted me to come closer and, without thinking, I moved towards the fence.

Time was motionless as Nana's trunk snaked through the fence and reached my body. She gently touched me. I was surprised at the wetness of her trunk's tip and how musky her smell was.

After a few moments I lifted my hand and felt the top of her colossal trunk, briefly touching the bristly hair fibres. Too soon, the moment was over. She slowly withdrew her trunk and looked at me for a few moments before slowly returning to her herd.

Later that day, I decided to let the elephants out of the enclosure and into the rest of the wildlife reserve. For the next 12 hours, Nana toured the boundary fence. Then I discovered her and Frankie heaving up a large tree beside the wire.

'No, Nana, no!' I shouted. But as I reached the other side of the fence and stopped in front of her, the trunk splintered onto the fence, collapsing the poles and snapping the electric current. I ran to the fence and snatched at the wires. The herd was almost on top of us.

I pleaded with the agitated animals. I told Nana again and again that this was her home. She looked at me and, for at least ten minutes, we held eye contact as I kept talking.

Suddenly, as if baffled by the fuss, she turned and backtracked into the bush. Weak with relief, I realised that my relationship with the herd had changed - for ever.

NEXT WEEK: THE ELEPHANTS COME TO TEA