

Episode 61: Elephant Orphanage

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about their visit to an elephant orphanage project in Zambia. They discuss the work of the project and their experience seeing the orphaned elephants.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from Zambia, and earlier today we had the very fascinating experience of visiting an elephant nursery in the capital, Lusaka, and we'd like to talk about that today.

But before we begin, let me remind you that you can get a special offer of ten US dollars in italki credits with your first purchase by going to the website <http://go.italki.com/englishin10minutes>. italki is a convenient, affordable and effective way to learn real, authentic English, so check it out¹ when you're done with this episode.

Right, so today we visited this elephant nursery², umm, which is part of the [Elephant Orphanage Project](#) here in Zambia and, really, the nursery, or the project as a whole, is doing two things: they're rescuing orphaned elephants, and then they're rehabilitating these elephants for release back into the wild.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: And so the first of these is obviously the rescue, and so what do they do with that?

Wendy: Well, it could happen in a few different ways. An elephant may be spotted just by local people in a rural area. They might see a young elephant outside their village and notice that it looks distressed and that, uhh, it doesn't seem to have a mother or any other family nearby. So then the people who run the orphanage would come out and, umm, well, first they would need to capture the elephant and then transport it back to the nursery. It could sometimes happen inside a national park as well, and they told us about one example where the national park rangers were watching this young elephant for a few days and they weren't sure exactly

¹ check it out: take a look at it for the first time

² nursery: a day-care centre for young children (usually human ones!)

what the situation was, because he was approaching different herds³ and trying to interact with them but they were rejecting him, they weren't interested in interacting with him. So finally the park rangers realised that he must not belong to any of those herds and he must be lost from his own herd. Umm, so there are lots of different situations, and a lot of times they don't really know what happened to the elephant and how he or she became orphaned, but in most cases it's because of poaching because their mother has been killed for her tusks and the baby has been left behind because it's too young to have any tusks and so it's not valuable to the poachers. It can also happen that the mother may reject her own baby if resources are really scarce⁴, and there's not enough resources around to feed the whole herd, then it's possible that a young, usually male, elephant could be rejected from the herd. But in most cases it's because of poaching, sadly.

Nick: Yeah, it's interesting as you mentioned that sometimes it's local villagers or other people in the community who are the first ones to notice, because baby elephants don't just walk around by themselves.

Wendy: No.

Nick: Umm, because ... another thing that's quite interesting about elephants is that adult elephants don't have any enemies, except for humans.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: Umm, but baby elephants do, because crocodiles and lions can kill baby elephants, and so the mother elephant would never let her baby just walk around by him or herself.

Wendy: No.

Nick: And so I think the people who live around the national parks and are familiar with elephants, they understand their behavioural patterns, and they're aware they there shouldn't just be a small elephant walking around by themselves. And so then they notify the park rangers or whoever the authorities are, and then there's good communication networks with the orphanage project and so the right people are notified and then they can come and perform their rescue.

Wendy: Umm-hmm. Which is a delicate operation. Uhh, even though they're young elephants, they're still very large and very heavy, and, uhh, so getting them sedated⁵ and transported is a huge ordeal, uhh, but they seem to do a very good job. And we actually found out that they were on a rescue today. Part of the team

³ herds: groups of elephants, and also some other large animals (but not all). This is called the *collective noun*. For example, the collective noun for lions is *pride*, not *herd*.

⁴ scarce: insufficient, in very short supply

⁵ sedated: drugged with the aim of putting the subject in a calm state

from the orphanage project is out on a rescue, probably still as we speak. So hopefully that goes well and they will have a new addition to the nursery very soon.

Nick: Right, because a baby elephant can weigh from, anywhere from fifty to a hundred and fifty kilograms - that's at birth. Umm, so a hundred and fifty kilograms, that's about twice my weight, just at birth. But most of the elephants that are rescued are maybe one year old, so they're even bigger than that. So it takes ... you know, it's a many-person operation to rescue these elephants.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah.

Nick: And so then they're brought firstly to this elephant nursery that we visited today. And so the nursery consists really of, I guess, two areas. There's quite a small, enclosed area, and that's where the elephants sleep. There are, I guess you would call them barracks⁶ for them, an individual kind of sleeping area for each elephant.

Wendy: Yeah, they called it a stable, I believe. So if you can imagine a horse stable, each stable ... each horse would have its own box, its own little area, umm, where the horse would sleep, so it's similar for the elephants.

Nick: And then they eat some of their meals there as well, but then there's also a larger reserve outside of that and they spend most of the time during the day out in that reserve. But they're always with one of the keepers. Because these are very young elephants. Elephants have one of the longest, uhh, periods of youth among all animals. And so an elephant doesn't become fully grown until, well, at least the age of ten - ten to fifteen. And so it's a long process. So these elephants, the ones that we saw today, were all about two years old, and so they're still children, even in elephant terms. And so if they were in the wild, they'd still be drinking the milk of their mother. And so they're not capable of taking care of themselves at this stage.

Wendy: No.

Nick: And so they need constant care and attention from their keepers, and they need a lot of milk. So the orphanage, or the nursery, creates this, uhh, formula, different things in it to try to simulate the milk of the mother, and they eat this - drink this rather - every three hours.

Wendy: Around the clock⁷, constantly, every three hours.

Nick: Right, and so even at night, the keepers actually sleep in the stables, and then they have to wake up every three hours to feed them. And they feed them a

⁶ barracks: sleeping quarters for soldiers

⁷ around the clock: all the time, at all hours of the day

two-litre bottle, and each elephant will consume this in ten-to-fifteen seconds. We saw them do it today and they just absolutely just go through it like nothing else⁸.

Wendy: Yeah, as soon as they arrived back inside their enclosure, they went straight for the bottle, and yeah, it was gone.

Nick: Yeah, if you blinked, you would have missed it, for sure. Umm, and so right now there are three elephants who are part of this group and then there's a fourth one that is a recent addition and they haven't really integrated this fourth one with the other three yet. There's some controlled interaction but not completely, but hopefully soon that fourth one will join the other three. And so they stay there for a few years, really.

Wendy: Yeah, until they're at least three years old at a minimum, because that's the earliest that they can be weaned off⁹ of the milk. Umm, usually between the age of three to five is when they're weaned. And so, you know, every elephant situation is different, but, uhh, they stay there, yeah, at least until they're three years old. And then after that, they go to a different facility, which is actually inside one of the national parks, Kafue National Park. They have a release facility, so it's still a controlled environment and there are currently twelve elephants who are living there, orphaned elephants who are living there. And they've kind of created their own herd, so they've become a family to each other. Umm, and they are learning to be more independent, and some of them are at different stages along this road to independence. Umm, but they're still being cared for by their keepers.

Nick: Yeah, but when they're in this second area, the release area, it's optional whether they come back to the sleeping stables or not. And so they told us that there are currently two who are really at the end of the rehabilitation stage and they're choosing not to come back quite often at night. And one of them has actually mated with a wild elephant in the park, umm, and so they're very, very close to being released. And in fact they'll be ... they're not really released, I guess, they just don't come back eventually.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: At a certain point they just leave, and then that's it.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: And this project has been going for ten years, and because the period of youth of the elephants is so long, they actually haven't had one yet that has been completely rehabilitated and become a wild elephant again. But there are these two that are very close, so hopefully that'll happen soon and that'll be a huge success story for this whole operation and it will make it worth it.

⁸ like nothing else: in a unique way

⁹ weaned off: gradually stopped being fed something. See also: Episode 14: Orang-utans.

Wendy: Yeah, absolutely. And it is a very long process and there's lots of, umm, money and time and effort that goes into caring for these elephants. But, yeah, it was a huge success already that they saw that one of these females had mated with a wild male inside the park, so hopefully that is going to help keep the species going and hopefully these animals, all of these orphans, will ultimately be able to live normal elephant lives inside the park.

Nick: Yep, and so it was a great experience for us to see this today. A little bit bittersweet¹⁰ because, you know, it's very sad to see these young orphans. They're very traumatised, a lot of them are very thin, they're undernourished or malnourished. Umm, but they have, hopefully, a bright future ahead like you said.

Wendy: Yeah.

¹⁰ bittersweet: both pleasant and painful

Comprehension Questions

1. According to Wendy, what are the two reasons that elephants become orphans?
2. What is interesting about the way the orphaned elephants in the nursery consume their milk?
3. What is the recent piece of encouraging news about one of the elephants at the release facility?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. When the soldiers returned to their _____, they found that the enemy had raided their camp while they were gone.
2. Water is very _____ in Namibia, so don't waste it. They are going through a drought so they need every drop they can get.
3. There's a new bar that just opened up near my house. I'm going to _____ this weekend if I have time.
4. It was a _____ moment for my sister when her flatmate got married. She was delighted for her flatmate but sad that they would no longer live together.
5. In order to complete the project on time, many staff members are working _____. They are putting in very long hours.
6. The kids counted six _____ of cattle (cows) on the side of the road when their parents took them on a trip through the countryside.
7. He and his wife both have full-time jobs, so they send their twin babies to _____ every day and pick them up in the afternoon.
8. She is having a serious operation so she will need to be _____ first. That way, she won't feel the pain.
9. Cape Town is an extremely windy city. The wind blows there _____.
10. He took medicine as a child to help with his seizures but eventually he was _____ it and now he doesn't take anything.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Given how long it takes to successfully release an elephant back into the wild, do you think the elephant orphanage project is a worthwhile project? Why or why not?
2. Would you like to be an elephant keeper? Why or why not?
3. How do you feel about elephant poaching and what do you think can be done to stop it?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Mostly because their mother has been killed by poachers, and less commonly because the baby could be rejected by the mother.
2. They drink it *extremely* quickly.
3. She has mated with a wild elephant, which is a sign that she is close to becoming a wild elephant herself.

Exercises

1. barracks
2. scarce
3. check it out
4. bittersweet
5. around the clock
6. herds
7. nursery
8. sedated
9. like nothing else
10. weaned off