

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair and sunglasses leaning out of the window of a white safari vehicle. She is looking towards a large elephant whose head and trunk are visible on the right side of the frame. The background is a dry, grassy savanna.

all the president's elephants

You might think that a presidential decree would be enough to secure the future of a herd of elephants, even in (or maybe especially in) the embattled nation of Zimbabwe. But, as it turns out, you need even more than that. **Mark Stratton** speaks to a determined Aussie whose life and fate have become entwined with some very special elephants. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK STRATTON



‘Lady girl, Lady girl, come on ... goooood girl,’ cooed Sharon Pincott. It was easy to believe she was affectionately addressing a fluffy pet puppy, but strolling obediently towards us was several tonnes of leathery-skinned pachyderm with her herd in tow. What happened next was something quite extraordinary, something I’d never experienced in 20 years of watching wild elephants.

Lady sidled up to Sharon’s battered Range Rover and without a moment’s hesitation put her trunk through the open window and allowed Sharon to stroke it. The matriarch of the L-family was utterly relaxed, her watchful hazel eyes almost transfixed. Meanwhile, the rest of her clan pressed tightly around the vehicle, including a passing male whose towering bulk blotted out the sunlight that streamed through the car’s open roof. Lady’s

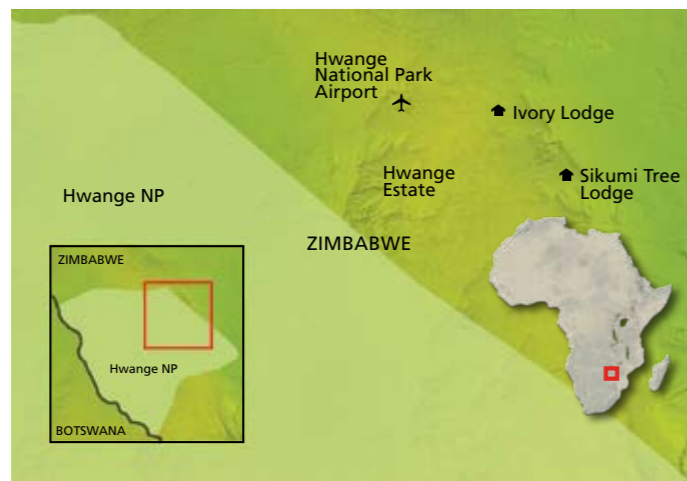
mischievous daughter, Libby, then began to nudge our vehicle, making it rock on its creaking suspension. ‘Libby,’ Sharon admonished in mild rebuke. ‘Naughty girl.’ Libby skulked away like an errant child who knew she’d committed wrong.

Sharon Pincott isn’t your typical wildlife saviour. This hyperactive, 48-year-old Australian blonde from a high-flying corporate background has spent the past

decade in Zimbabwe during the country’s tumult of social and political unrest. Likewise, the elephants she has been instrumental in protecting since 2001 are no ordinary herd. The Presidential Elephants roam between the water pans and vlei of Hwange Estate, a 140-square-kilometre protected area adjacent to Hwange National Park.

During the four days I spent with her in the field and at Ivory Lodge, a luxurious bush camp where we watched ‘the Presidentials’ frolicking in the concession’s private waterhole, *Mandlovu* (‘Mother Elephant’), as she’s known locally, talked about her experiences in conservation, the challenges she’s facing in Zimbabwe and her remarkable rapport with the elephants.

With Zimbabwe receiving relatively few visitors in recent times, many people won’t be familiar with how Hwange Estate’s elephants received presidential patronage.



Before the 1970s, hunting and poaching had left just 22 elephants at Hwange Estate. All were said to be skittish and not proper families. Between 1970 and 1990, Alan Elliott, the owner of the safari operator Touch the Wild, made an effort to habituate the estate’s elephants for tourists. By 1990 they had become so friendly that Elliott realised they were at risk, so he lobbied President Mugabe’s office for them to be given special status. Presidential status was granted that year and it was announced these elephants should ‘symbolise Zimbabwe’s commitment to responsible wildlife management’. They were never to be poached or culled while under presidential patronage. Today, there are around 450 within 17 extended family groups.

There’s no boundary separating Hwange Estate from the adjacent national park, where you estimate more than 30 000 elephants roam. How do ‘the Presidentials’ differ from the park elephants?

They are very different in temperament. You get to within 50 metres of some of the park elephants and they’re already running away. During the 2005 drought many park elephants crossed into Hwange Estate seeking water and I could differentiate them immediately by their behaviour. They were more aggressive than the Presidentials, which held back when they were confronted at waterholes, even though this is their home range. Physically speaking, there are not many big tuskers here as hunting has taken its toll during the past 40 years. The mineral-deficient Kalahari sand also means that their tusks break easily.

In your book, *The Elephants and I*, there’s a photograph of you sitting behind the wheel of a racy sports car hugging your pet poodle. How did you end up conserving elephants in the Zimbabwean bush and driving a decrepit Range Rover?

I grew up in Queensland, Australia, and always had a love of animals, but I was very career-orientated so forgot about this. By my late 20s, I was a national IT director for Ernst & Young, with a lovely

house and car. But when I saw my first elephant in the Kruger National Park during a work trip to South Africa, I just had this feeling it was going to change my life.

From 1993 I was coming to Africa two or three times per year. I sort of went into semi-retirement, taking unpaid leave so I could volunteer on wildlife projects, such as studying cheetahs in Namibia. My life changed after meeting a warden, Andy Searle, who was working in Hwange National Park in the 1990s. Andy introduced me to the Presidential Elephants in 1999, but was killed shortly afterwards in a helicopter crash. It made me think about how short life is. Nobody was studying the Presidentials and, inspired by Cynthia Moss and Joyce Poole’s work in Amboseli [National Park in Kenya], I filled the gap.

their social structure and population dynamics. But by late 2002, as Zimbabwe’s economic situation worsened, poaching had become very bad and I started seeing a lot of snared elephants. My focus turned to establishing an anti-poaching team on Hwange Estate.

You told me that, in hindsight, if you had known how difficult times would be after 2003 you might never have come. Clearly you experienced some awkward years.

In late 2003 some of the Hwange Estate around Kanondo Pan had undergone a land acquisition and a hunting quota was introduced. By this time I was in love with the elephants and I could see the danger to this flagship herd. I knew I had to stay and fight. I joined forces with a society called Wildlife and Environment▶



You started by carrying out research on them, but that focus gradually changed.

Yes, I was naive about the situation and unrest in Zimbabwe in 2001. I’d started by introducing a naming strategy similar to that used by Cynthia Moss in Amboseli, assigning letters to family groups. There was no formal documentation about the Presidential Elephants’ family structures so I built up a photographic record and started monitoring

ABOVE Libby, Lady’s mischievous daughter, nudges the vehicle.

OPPOSITE The M-family, with Misty in the foreground and the matriarch, Mertle, behind Sharon’s battered vehicle, congregates at Ivory Lodge’s private waterhole.

PAGE 35 Misty and Sharon share a moment.

SHARON PINCOTT

Zimbabwe (WEZ) and our first fight was getting the hunting quota reversed. Hunting should never have been allowed as the herd was protected. We also argued that this was a key photographic tourism area. Fortunately the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Authority revoked the licence within three months.

But the Presidential Elephants were still being poached. I'd hear gunshots at night, and by 2004 I was seeing Lady and Misty once every three months as opposed to several times per week. All the tour operators had disappeared so I was the only person aware of what was going on. If you fight for something that people want to destroy, then you become unpopular ... I was. But luckily senior ministers remained supportive of the presidential decree. The land was eventually returned to Hwange Estate in 2005 for photographic purposes, but by that time the elephants would drink hurriedly, then race back into the bush. I'd drive in after them and sing 'Amazing Grace'. I've a terrible voice, but it seemed to calm them down. I'd also park on the open vlei to show them it was safe.

However, when the land was returned and hunting 'stopped', the problems didn't end.

I was seeing four or five snared animals every week. The team would be de-snaring one animal when we'd be radioed to help another. Twenty five per cent of Lady's family was caught in this way. My worst experience was at Kanondo, where I found three-year-old Wholesome, son of a W-family female, Whole, breathing badly. He had a wire snare cutting into his neck. He eventually fell and Whole and her six-year-old daughter, Whosit, raced across and tried to lift him. He was dead. They lifted and dropped him for the next 45 minutes before Whole stood motionless over him. She was distraught, you could see it in her eyes.

At the same time there was no water in the pans, which had silted up. By 2006–07, I had begun regaining the elephants' trust, but I still wasn't seeing them often because they'd gone elsewhere for water. My new fight became to restore the pans and after a long battle for assistance, a businessman from Bulawayo, J.R. Goddard, subsidised the scooping of the pans in 2009. The water is back and so are the elephants, in bigger numbers.



Lady accepts an acacia pod from Sharon.

During this difficult period, you found solace by observing the elephants. You developed a remarkable bond with them.

I think back to Lady during those difficult years – her trunk gradually getting closer to me until she had almost crossed that barrier and accepted me. After three years of my being around her she would respond to my voice and I could put my hand on a tusk. Gradually her confidence built up and by the fifth year I could rub her trunk. When I'm observing the elephants, I'm always aware of their eyes, ears and trunks, and if I see aggressive body language I leave. I'm never blasé. If you lose sight of the fact that they're wild animals, you're in trouble.

But I'm convinced they love human company; they choose to come to me and often doze around the vehicle. During my favourite time, July, which I call 'reunion month', the most senior matriarch, Inkosikazi, will sometimes lead as many as 350 elephants to Kanondo in some sort of celebration. I believe it's a get-together as it is too much of a coincidence that it happens almost every year at this time. It's an amazing spectacle, watching them feed and bathe together. I think there's still a lot to discover about elephant intelligence and how they communicate.

So what does the future hold?

My focuses are to help injured and snared animals, monitor family groups and get tourists back. Zimbabwean wildlife is

doomed without tourism. I see it as an extension of conservation work. I want to let people know that such a herd is found only here in Zimbabwe. The Presidentials could be the one thing that brings tourists back and in the long run this will help to protect the herd. People ask whether wildlife isn't safer fearing man, but to me it's a tragedy if animals live in a world where they have to fear us.

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Sharon Pincott is based at the soon-to-be revamped Miombo Lodge. Her book *The Elephants* and I is available at bookshops and online. You can also visit www.sharonpincott.com



TRAVEL NOTES

To get to Hwange Estate, the author flew with Air Zimbabwe www.airzimbabwe.aero. The airline operates flights to Harare from London and Johannesburg and thereafter flights to Victoria Falls and Bulawayo to access Hwange.

The Ivory Lodge waterhole is a good place to see the Presidential Elephants. Visit www.ivorysafarilodge.com or tel. +253 9 64868 for more information.

Sikumi Tree Lodge lies within Hwange Estate and offers daily game drives among the elephants. On request (and if her time permits), Sharon will accompany these drives. E-mail Sikumi@sikumi.co.zw