Collins English Library Level 5

AMONG THE ELEPHANTS

IAIN AND ORIA DOUGLAS-HAMILTON

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Collins English Library

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Part One Iain Douglas-Hamilton

1 A Problem at Manyara

In 1965 I at last succeeded in talking to John Owen about my African plans. He was Director of the Tanzania National Parks, but that day I met him in England.

A powerfully-built man with grey hair and steely blue eyes, he was trying hard to encourage a large fire in his small well-kept garden in Sussex. The smoke wound its way lazily up into the autumn sky, and threatened to hide the pale English sun.

John turned away from his work, and offered me a chair; then he called to his wife Patricia to make us some tea. He listened patiently while I put forward my study programme on lions. His large frame was crushed into a small chair, and his expressionless blue eyes hid his thoughts. His pipe sent up clouds of smoke.

At the end, he said, "No, Iain, I'm sorry. You can't do it. Someone else is coming to study lions."

I suggested he might want a helper.

"I'm afraid not. You know how these scientists like to work alone."

"Well, surely there must be something I can do?"

"We don't need anyone in the Serengeti just

now." He paused. Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "But we *do* need some studies in Manyara on elephants."

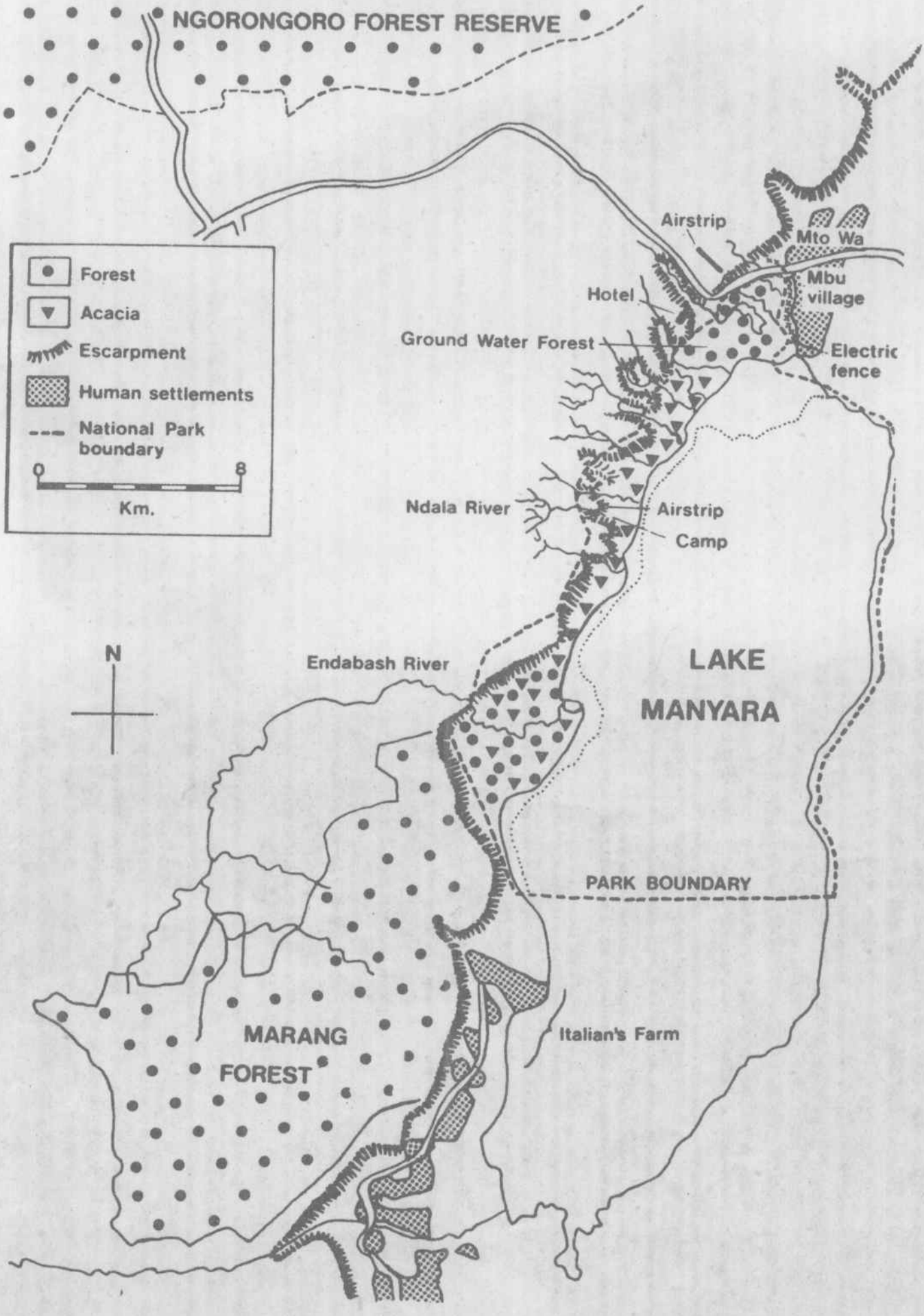
He went on to describe Lake Manyara, and the thin ribbon of land along the north-west shore which was the National Park. Although it was one of the smallest parks in Tanzania, there were a great many animals there. Most attractive to the tourists were the tree-climbing lions. The Park was famous for these, and was becoming one of the most popular in East Africa.

John Owen was concerned about the elephants. Recently they had started to tear the bark off the surface of the trees. As a result, many of the trees were dying. Nobody knew what the elephants needed in the bark; and nobody knew what would happen if they continued this destruction.

The relationship between elephants and their surroundings was something entirely new to me. Between drinks of tea, I listened with growing interest as John Owen told me about the elephants of Lake Manyara.

He ended by saying, "If you want to take up this study, Iain, you'll have to find your own money for it. We can't afford to pay you. But we can give you a car – an old Land-Rover. And a simple little place to live. You can set it up anywhere in the Park, as long as the tourists can't see you."

It seemed a great offer to me, and I accepted gratefully. I returned to Oxford University and finished my degree, then I managed to find some money. I got a lift in a friend's plane to Seren-


NGORONGORO FOREST RESERVE
Forest
Acacia
Escarpment
Human settlements
National Park boundary
0
8
Km.
Airstrip
Mto Wa
Mbu village
Hotel
Ground Water Forest
Electric fence
Ndala River
Airstrip
Camp
N
Endabash River
LAKE MANYARA
PARK BOUNDARY
MARANG FOREST
Italian's Farm

geti. Then I set off in a tourist's car across the dusty plains towards Manyara.

We stopped on the lip of Lake Manyara's great cliff – the escarpment that towers above the western shore. I looked out over the forest that stretched towards the south for kilometre after kilometre: it was broken only by small grassy spaces, and the rivers that cut their way through to the Lake. I was able to see several groups of elephants – at that distance below us they looked like parties of insects.

After a few minutes, we drove down the steep-sided escarpment. Three kilometres later, we reached the foot, dived into forest, and arrived at the village of Mto-wa-Mbu: this was as far as I could go in the car.

The village was full of life. The streets were lined with open-air shops full of bananas and other fruits, colourful cotton materials, and local medicines. People were buying and selling, riding bicycles, talking in groups, or just resting on the grassy borders.

As I crossed the street to buy some bananas, an old ruin of a Land-Rover with a home-made wooden top came to a stop. The driver was a white man, wearing a dark green bush-jacket with a leather belt. Large brown boots covered his legs up to the knee, and dark glasses hid his eyes. On his chest he wore the little circle with the picture of a jumping antelope, and the words TANGANYIKA NATIONAL PARKS in gold and green round the edge.

He introduced himself, and I discovered that he was staying at the Park Rest House: I was

going to be there myself until I had built a camp in the Park. This was Vesey. Without his dark glasses, his face was cheerful and friendly, and like John Owen he was seldom without a pipe in the corner of his mouth.

Over a refreshing cup of tea, we talked about the elephants in the Park. Some people believed there were far too many of them; and some of them must be shot, to save the Park from destruction. Vesey completely disagreed. He himself had been studying the Manyara trees and plants for years, and he refused to accept the idea of 'destruction'.

Changes like these were simply a part of nature, he said, and the elephants were a necessary part of it. They opened up the thick bush, and allowed other plants and animals to come in. Without the elephants, these animals and plants could never make their way into the region. He believed it was best to interfere as little as possible with these natural rhythms.

But Vesey could not prove that the elephants were not destroying the acacia-trees. And the others could not prove that the elephants' numbers were too large. Obviously my first year's work would have to include a study both of the elephant numbers and the state of the acacia-trees.

After a supper under whispering gas-lamps, I fell on to my bed, and did not wake till the sun shone next morning. We then made an early start, so that Vesey could show me the entire Park in one day.

2 A Drive in the Park

The dusty road from the Rest House wound down to the main road. A turning led us to the entry gate, where a clerk sat and sold tickets to tourists. Behind the gate, the forest began, and at once we entered the cool shade under the tall umbrellas of the trees.

Vesey said there was not much rainfall in the area, and the forest only grew at all because it was well-watered by numberless streams. This water had its origin about forty-five kilometres away in the Ngorongoro Highlands, and appeared at the foot of the escarpment within Manyara. The forest was therefore named the Ground Water Forest, and depended on water that fell well outside it.

As Vesey's old grey Land-Rover wandered a few kilometres south, the forest gave way to acacia woodland. With their spreading branches and their rough brown bark, these beautiful flat-topped trees represented Africa itself for me.

Now I could see the first signs of elephant destruction. The pale, ghostly white trees looked naked without their protective blanket of rough bark. The damage was only occasional, but very obvious: torn bark hung from the trees in

ribbons.

Half-way down the Park, just past a wide, sandy river, the Ndala, the escarpment reached almost to the Lake's edge. Then the space between Lake and cliff widened again. Next, we crossed a plain of long grass, and entered thick, sweet-smelling bush. On our right, the escarpment once more towered near, and a huge waterfall dived down its side: the Endabash River, which supplied the whole of the southern end of the Park with water.

The track ended thirty kilometres south of the main gate, where some hot springs appeared out of the ground. The local name of this place was Maji Moto, which means hot water in the Swahili language.

Here the escarpment rose straight up from the Lake for a thousand metres. It seemed impossible that elephants could find their way from here to the Marang Forest Reserve at the top. Then, as the sloping evening light began to change the bushes into pure gold, a group of elephants crossed the road, just in front of the car. The moment took me by surprise.

A silent, orderly line of cows was 30 metres in front of us, blue-grey in the shadow. A breath of wind carried our smell in their direction. Ears stood out, and a row of long trunks rose in the air above their heads like dancing snakes. They tested our smell, then blew out their breath again with a *whoosh*.

That evening, as we drank coffee, my ideas began to take shape. The question was clearly: "Should we control elephant numbers by shoot-

ing, or let nature take its course?" Hundreds of elephants' lives and the fate of the woodlands depended on the answer.

First I must count the number of injured and destroyed trees. Then I must count the elephants. Their numbers in turn would depend on their birth rate, and their death rate, and their movements in and out of the Park.

Before anything else, I had to be able to *recognise* large numbers of elephants by sight, as easily as I could recognise different men. This must be the central method of all my work.

3 All Elephants Are Different

After Christmas, I went out to look at elephants, in an ancient Land-Rover which John Owen had lent me. One of the staff of the Park came with me — a young man called Mhoja Burengo. The elephants spend much of the short, dry season in the Ground Water Forest, at the northern end of the Park. Mhoja suggested that we should go there.

To find the elephants, we stopped and listened. Elephants are never silent, whether resting or feeding. Deep-sounding growls from the throat of a member who is separated from the

Mhoja Burengo

rest — the high complaint of a baby when his mother pushes him away from her food — youngsters trumpeting loudly in playful fury, as their little tusks bang against each other with a *clonk*: all these sounds give away their position.

In the forest, the winds are often tricky, especially at mid-day. The heated air is pulled upwards, and cold air rushes underneath from all directions. These unexpected air currents can give elephants your smell, and you are lucky to remain undetected for long. Mhoja always watched the direction of his cigarette smoke.

We heard the sound of breaking branches, and saw some huge ears moving among the leaves. We climbed a tree, and I balanced at the end of a thin branch. I had a clear view of some males — a group of bull elephants only ten metres away.

Delighted, I took many photographs.

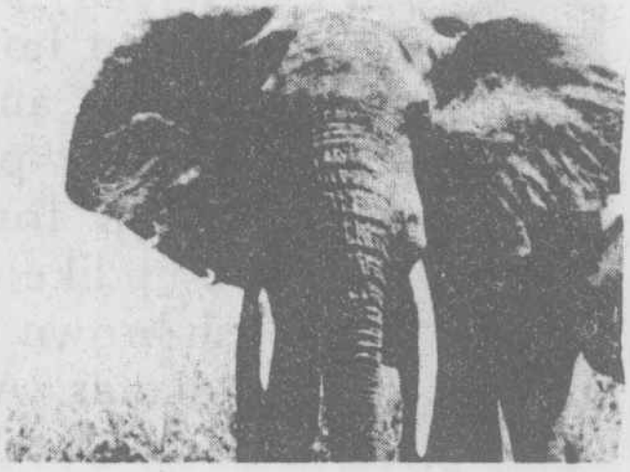
Mhoja pointed out how white the bulls were. He said the colour of an elephant was a sign of its movements in the past twenty-four hours. Whiteness meant the forest, where the nests of white ants stood up like white fingers among the green. Yellowish-brown meant a mud pool in the acacia woodlands. And a dirty grey meant the region of the southerly Endabash River.

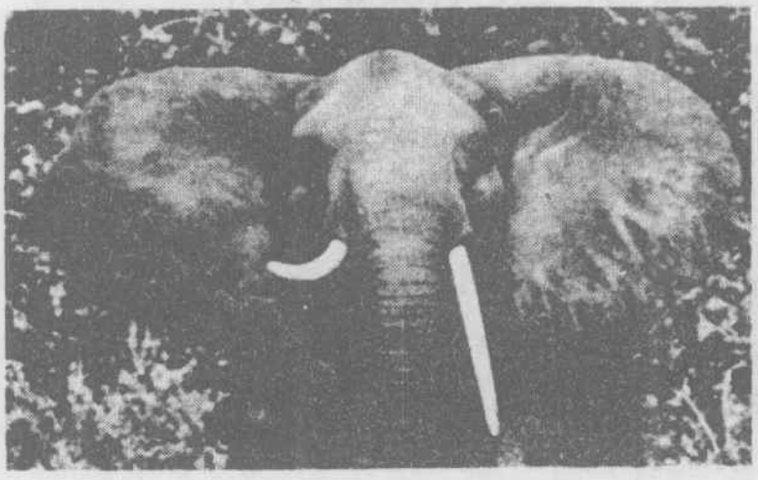
Every day I took more photographs of elephants, but it was difficult. They spent much of their time in the dark shadow of the trees. As a rule, I could only see a few backs, or a part of an ear, or the shiny whiteness of a tusk. An elephant group seldom had all its members out in the open.

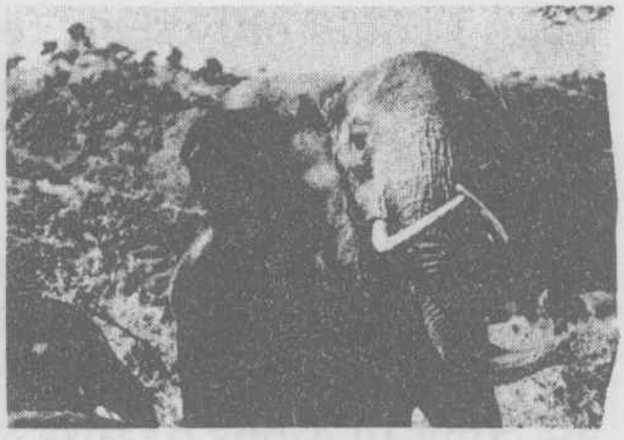
My photographs were not very good, but they did show one thing – all elephants are different in appearance. There are an unbelievable number of combinations of tusks and ears.

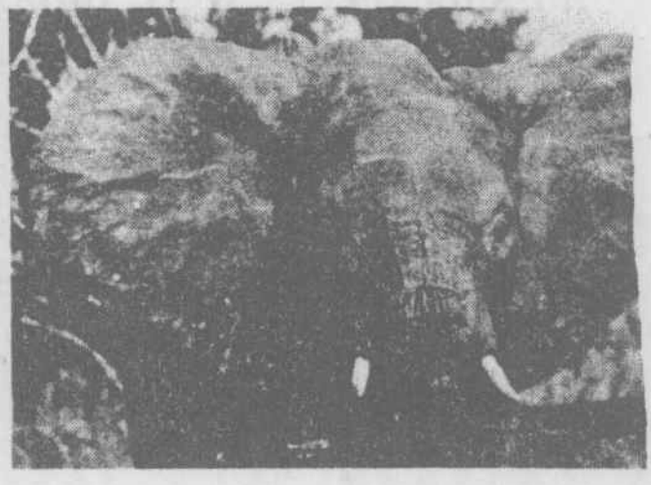
Often an ear was almost smooth, with only one or two small bits out of the edge. But these missing pieces were important for recognition – their shape, straight or curved sides, their depth and position. Certain elephants had ears with many holes in them, and some had large tears in the centre of an ear. I found that older animals were responsible for these (some bad-tempered old cow who pushed her sharp tusk through the ear of a youngster).

An elephant's tusks continue to grow all through his life, and broken edges are gradually worn smooth. If they do not break in a sixty-year-old lifetime, they can reach a length of over









Photographs illustrating the different combinations of tusks and ears