

Autobiographical Adventures in Africa

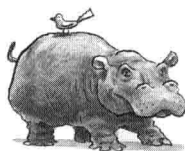
HIPPOS in the **NIGHT**



Christina Allen

Autobiographical Adventures in Africa

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Christina Allen

Illustrations by
Rob Shepperson

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outside her tent, trying to ride a camel, and watching a dung
beetle in action.

Contents: How I got there—My first wild animal sighting—
Lost—Tenting in hippo territory—Camel rides and baboon
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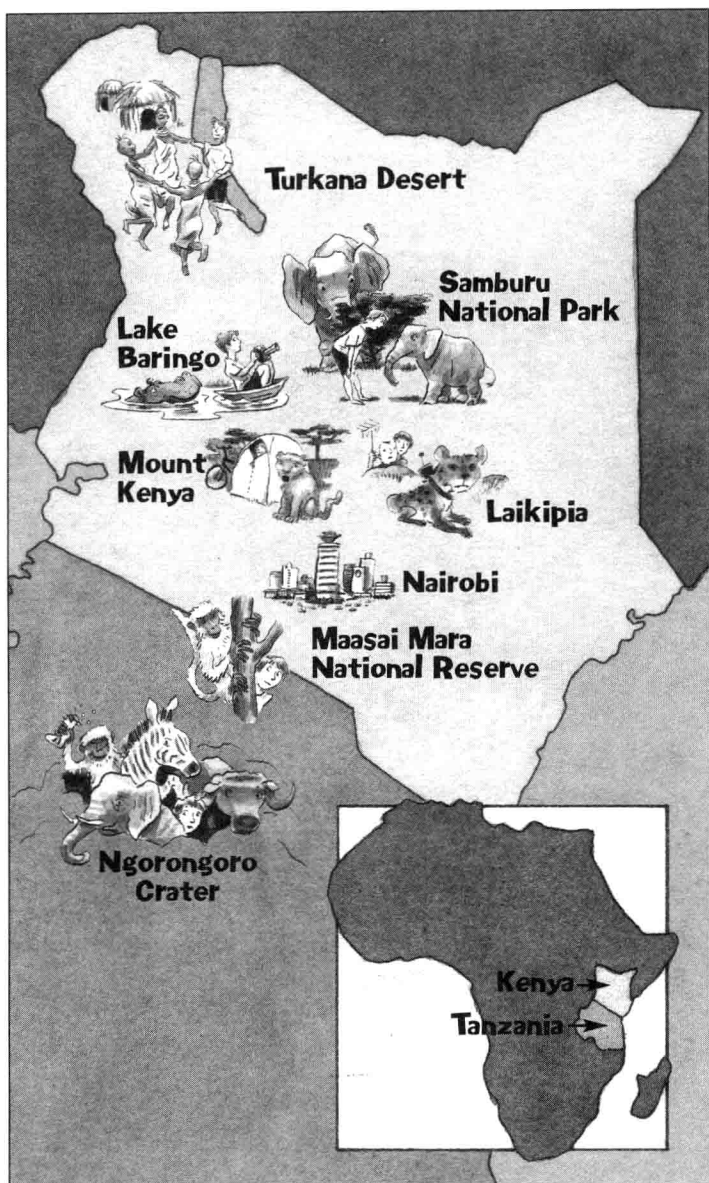
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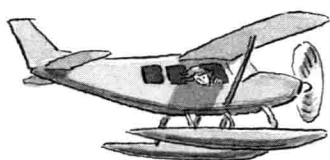
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First Edition

HIPPOS
in
the NIGHT





*To my mom, Jane,
and dad, Jack,
who encouraged my curiosity
and love for nature,
and to Barbara,
who gave me a chance as a writer*

“To see ten thousand animals untamed . . .
is like scaling an unconquered mountain
for the first time, or like finding a forest
without roads or footpaths. . . .
You know then what you had always been told—
that the world once lived and grew
without adding machines and newsprint
and brick-walled streets and the tyranny of clocks.”

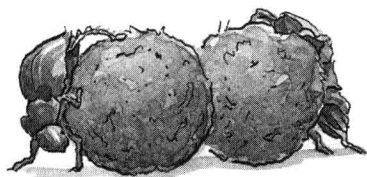
—Beryl Markham

West with the Night



“I really do simply adore Kenya.
It is so wild, uncultivated, primitive,
mad, exciting, unpredictable. . . .
I am living in the Africa I have always longed for,
always felt stirring in my blood.”

—from Jane Goodall’s first letter home, 1957



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I. How I Got There

Can you imagine . . .

Trying to sleep with a munching, crunching hippo feeding inches from your head? Challenging a young baboon to a fight . . . by mistake? Waking up in the dark to the shattering roar of a lion just outside your tent? Playing football with huge, round loaves of elephant poop? Sniffing the soft, sweet fur behind a hyena's ear?

How do I get myself into these crazy situations with animals? I'm not exactly sure, but I think it has something to do with worms.



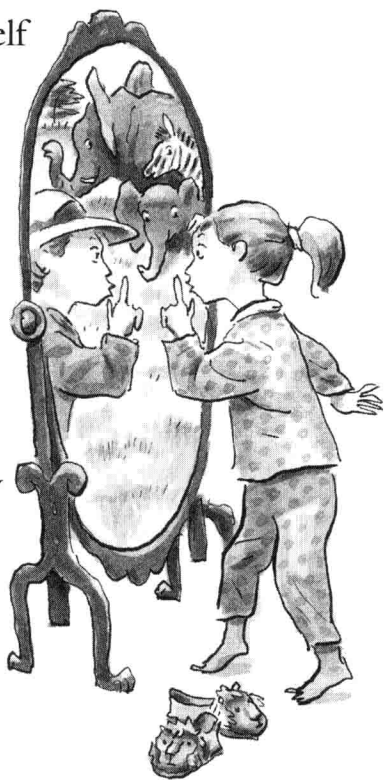
When I was two years old, my mom found me in the backyard laughing hysterically. I was pouring a huge jar of fishing worms all over my lap. Worms wriggled across my legs and squirmed in between my toes and fingers. My mom didn't say, "Christina, that is gross, yucky, icky!" Instead she just laughed and joined me. She's a biologist and thinks worms are cool, too.

When I was six, we moved to Alaska for my dad's job. "Just a year" turned into fifteen, and my lawyer father became a bush pilot, flying small planes into the wilderness. We spent most of our free time looking for wildlife. Flying over Cook Inlet, we would spot what looked like grains of rice floating in chocolate milk, then fly low to discover a pod of beluga whales. Arriving home, we wouldn't be surprised to find a moose snacking on winter cabbages in our garden. Sometimes a

moose and her baby would camp out in our backyard for days! After they left, I would poke around their grassy bed. I learned that moose “nuggets” are round and dry, perfect for target practice on trees and rocks.

I was ten years old when I watched *Out of Africa* with my parents. In the dead of the Alaskan winter, I suddenly imagined myself flying over the hot, dry African grasslands, watching great herds of zebra and wildebeest. I pictured myself on safari, dressed all in tan, creeping dangerously close to photograph a herd of elephants. Throughout my teens I continued to dream of being on safari in Africa. I especially dreamed of seeing lions in the wild. Still, Africa seemed so far away that I never really thought I'd get there.

Science and biology were



my favorite subjects through grade school, high school, and college. I never tired of learning facts about animals and nature—even the parts most people think are gross. I loved the down-and-dirty aspects of animal anatomy and physiology and was fascinated by the cycles of birth, death, and decay that keep the environment in balance. In graduate school I was still playing with nuggets and worms, only I was doing it in the name of science! I studied wild animals in the Amazon rain forest to get a degree in tropical wildlife ecology and conservation. I would tromp around in the mud all day, following tapirs, stinky wild peccaries, and huge rodents, counting their tracks and collecting their poops. I was interested in the fruits, seeds, leaves, and other things the animals ate, and how their



eating (and pooping) habits scattered seeds and helped to grow new trees in the rain forest. I was also concerned about people hunting the animals and cutting down the trees the animals depended on for food.

Before I finished graduate school, one of my teachers told me about a team of young scientists and adventurers that travels on worldwide expeditions called Quests. They explore the mystery of disappearing wildlife—then broadcast their findings to kids in classrooms all over America on the Internet! When I learned that the team often traveled by jeep and mountain bikes, I knew I had to go.

But how was I going to get on the team? I didn't even know how to mountain bike! So I started a crash course. I rented a bike to get myself in shape, but the first time I hit the trails, I encountered a big hill. I decided to go for it, but my technique was wrong. I went flying over the handlebars; then my bike went flying over me and landed right on top of my



head, pinning me to the ground and breaking my helmet. My crash course was more crash than course, but I had learned my first lesson: to always, always wear a helmet.

I did everything I could think of to get on the team.

I called the team members to tell them about people we could visit and theories we could explore; I sent recommendations from people who knew me and information about scientific research I'd done in the past. But after six months they were still unsure about taking me on. I was almost ready to give up, but something inside told me not to. As a last-ditch effort, I flew to Washington, D.C., to attend a big meeting with teachers. I followed the team around and talked to teachers about what we might encounter on Quests. I spoke about what I knew best, my research in the Amazon and the adventures I'd had there—from the thrill of seeing animals in the wild

and learning something new about a little-known animal to such scary moments as falling ill with dengue fever in the middle of nowhere and being bitten by a poisonous snake.

I'm not sure if it was my stories or my persistence, but finally I was invited along as the team biologist! I felt so lucky, but even greater surprises were in store. As luck, or fate, would have it, kids and teachers voted for Africa as the next destination. My dream was coming true.

On AfricaQuest, we'd travel the length of East Africa's Great Rift Valley to meet with scientists and local people, gathering clues to the disappearing wildlife. Recent important research had come out, saying that many animals in Africa were dying off but that the causes were not clear. It said that some species, like elephants and Thompson's gazelles, had been reduced by more than half in just twenty years.

I knew next to nothing about the Great Rift

Valley but figured that studying about it might be safer than learning how to mountain bike. I found out that the Great Rift deserves its name. It's the longest rift, or crack, on the face of the earth! Four thousand miles long and in places almost two miles deep, the rift was created about five million years ago when two of the earth's plates collided. Along the rift extreme volcanic activity created mountains, craters, and ash layers deep enough to fill the crack. Without this thick ash layer, much of Kenya would be underwater today.

I could only imagine what it was like for the animals with ash and lava spewing all over the place. Sometimes the volcanoes would explode so suddenly that animals would get trapped in the lava flows and be instantly incinerated. People have actually found perfect shells of elephants, with every hair and wrinkle captured in hardened lava.

One of the most famous volcanoes, called Ngorongoro, grew with each lava flow until it was about twenty thousand feet high. In its

center was a huge chamber of hot lava, or magma. One day the magma started to leak out and the enormous mountain collapsed, leaving the largest volcanic crater in the world. Today the crater has a big lake at the bottom and is one of the richest wildlife habitats in East Africa. When I read about the giant crater with the lake and all the wildlife, I felt I just had to see it. Seeing Ngorongoro Crater became my own personal goal, my reason for going to Kenya and Tanzania.

I was so busy getting ready that I completely forgot to be nervous. But a couple of days before we left, I started thinking of all the things that could go wrong, like *What if my bike breaks down and I get stranded all alone? What if a lion sees me as a tasty snack? What if I get sick?* I knew I should be excited, but suddenly I was scared.

Our day of departure came fast.

Scared or not, I stepped onto the plane and we took off.

This is the story of my African adventure.