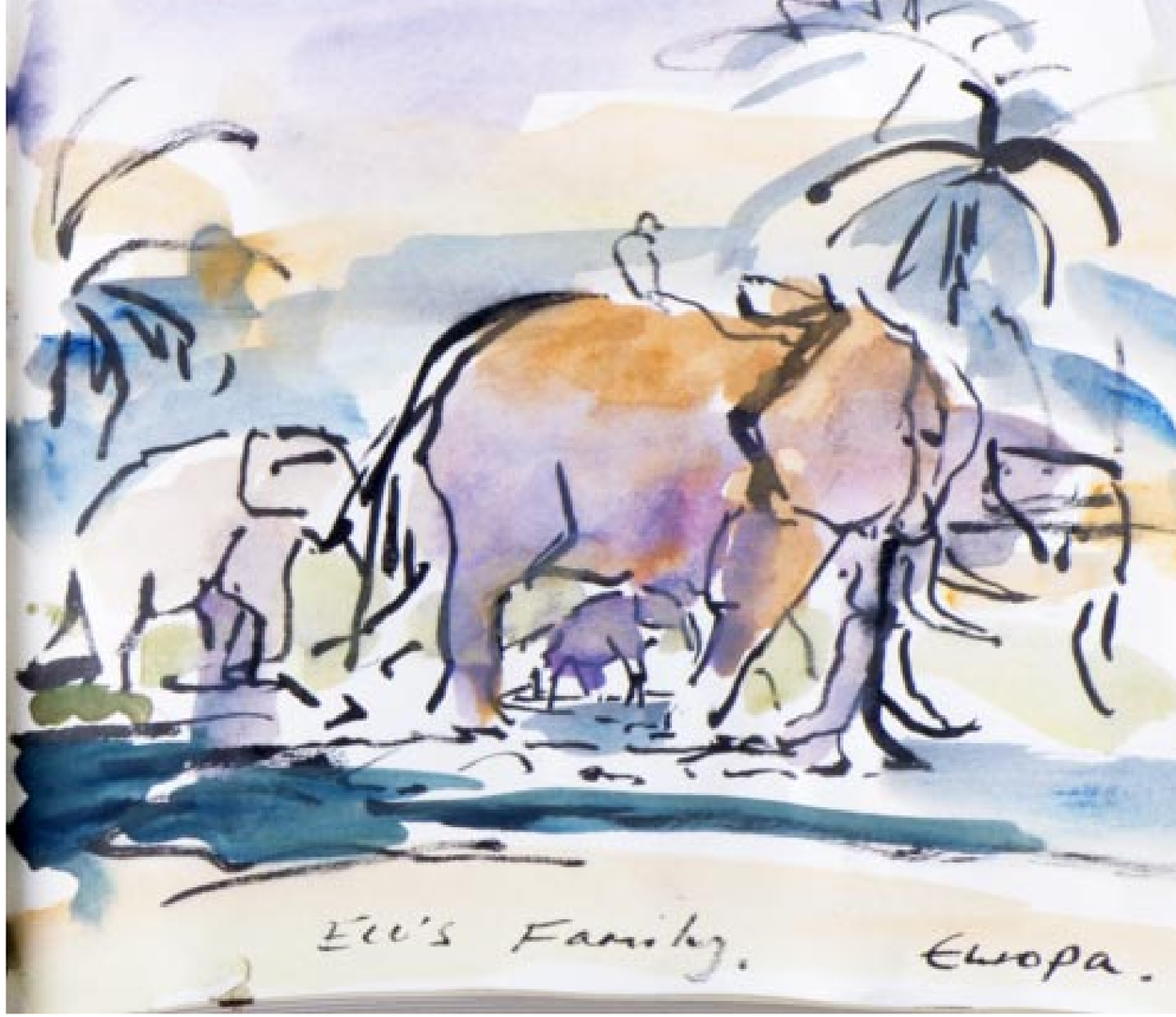

Eu's Family.
Europa.

Impressions of Amboseli

Sophie Walbeoffe and **Cynthia Moss**

Introduction

In 2002 I went to a show of an artist I didn't know, but it sounded intriguing because it was called "Painting in the Clouds". I didn't know what to expect, but I walked in and there on the wall was the most beautiful painting of what I knew immediately was Amboseli from the top of Kitirua Hill looking west. I had to have that painting and although I couldn't afford it I bought it anyway and have enjoyed it tremendously ever since. Today the painting has pride of place in my living room over the fireplace.

The artist was Sophie Walbeoffe. Many years passed and we met again. She had just published a small, gorgeous book of her paintings of Lamu, an island off the coast of Kenya. We talked about the painting I owned and about Amboseli, and Sophie said she travelled to Amboseli whenever she could to paint because of the landscape and the wildlife. I felt that Sophie captured the beauty of Amboseli like no other artist I had seen. I invited her to come and stay with me to paint the elephants.

That was the beginning and we soon started talking about a book like her Lamu one, but with her paintings of Amboseli and some words by me. This is our book: *Impressions of Amboseli*.

Cynthia Moss January 2020

Sophie's Impressions of Amboseli

"If you dream of elephants it is a forecast of riches. The elephant is a symbol of power and wisdom. Elephants own a sense of self." Gypsy folklore.

For a landscape painter, Amboseli park is like magic. It consists of a dry, desert-like lakebed, surrounded by endless swathes of savannah, ribboned with groves of huge, shapely Acacia trees. There are swampy lakes dotted liberally with the dark, indeterminate shapes of elephants, buffaloes, or hippos, and curiously full of birds and their reflections in the water: egrets, herons, ibises, kingfishers, lily-trotters, pelicans, storks and spoonbills. Added to that, there is the back-drop of Kilimanjaro, either with snow peeking out above the clouds or showing in all its glory, with hard blue skies above. The skies and trees are festooned with vultures and eagles and they echo to the cry of the fish eagle and crowned cranes. The plains are the domain of the noisy plovers, Kori bustards, the secretary birds. The Maasai in their red and blue blankets, stalk the plains, escorting their herds to the same swamps and grazing grounds, just as much at home as the elephants and other beasts. Sometimes friends and sometimes foes, each and every one is an integral part of Amboseli and a painting or portrait to be made.

Some days, as I sit in the mid-day heat painting watercolours in Amboseli, looking up at Kilimanjaro often brings back happy and poignant memories from 2001 when I summited it. At times it was tough and so cold that I had to use whatever was at hand to stop the water I was painting with from freezing.

Why paint pictures rather than take photographs? There are many reasons. Firstly, I am not the best photographer; secondly, perfection is not truth. In the pursuit of understanding something else, the beauty of the work of art is the struggle. Drawing from observation is a true way to remember. We do not really know what something looks like until we really look. It is extraordinary how much you remember years later by looking at even a slight sketch or remark made on the spot in a diary.

"The expressive methods of painting can produce an analogy, not an impossible photograph of an instant. Oh, the difference between a snapshot and an image."

(Édouard Vuillard, *Journal*, 6 September 1890)

I find it is more exciting, and easier, to capture movement, depth of field, and colour by working from life rather than by only using a photograph to make a painting. By using the expressive movement of the brush or pencil, it feels and learns the passage through distant mountains, glittering savannah, lingering clouds and sunshine on the backs of wild animals. You feel and see the animals, like no one else has. Your picture has a life all of its own.

Amboseli, and its inhabitants, provide pure nectar to draw from life and an opportunity to capture its energy, beauty, and diversity. Imagine an early morning sunrise armed with all the yellows one could wish for on a pallet. Silhouetted palm trees; a Turneresque scene of fast-changing clouds; warthogs scampering along the grasses; lines of zebra striping the plains; cohorts of cavorting wildebeest, bewildering even the most ardent naturalist with their jumping, grunting and endless meandering; scampering jackals, skulking leopard, lolloping hyena, and last but not least, families of stately elephants strolling majestically out of the sunrise towards the safety of the swamps.

When the car has been quiet and still for some time and the clicking of the engine has stopped, you pick up the noises and smells of the wind. You can even see the wind in Amboseli in the distant slanting rain storms and the agonised twisting of dust devils. Stick your finger into a pot of raw sienna and just twirl your finger in ascending circular shapes on the paper.

Today it's a vanishing world. Whilst some animals are being poached, many are being displaced by loss of habitat and human encroachment. People talk of no animals being left in fifty years. Since I have had the privilege of living and painting among the beautiful herds of elephants, giraffe, wildebeest, impalas, and many more in their natural environment, I believe we should all try to preserve this same opportunity for future generations. If Cynthia's extraordinary research on elephant social behaviour and intelligence can be shared for all to understand and respect, and if my paintings can portray just an iota of the ageless beauty and richness of Amboseli, I hope we can together protect the symbiosis of man and nature for all cultures and generations to enjoy.

"When you paint what you see and feel you must paint very fast. When you paint after that with your thoughts you must paint very slowly". (Winifred Nicholson)

Extract from my diary:

30th October 2017
Arrived at the camp. Amboseli is still dry, the rains have not yet arrived but the heavy heat suggests they are building. Three elephants are playing in the bright marshy green grass around the tent. White egrets and emerald winged hadadas –
I grab my oil paints out of the car and paint until dusk. I am now sorting out my torches as there are a lot of animals I could bump into in the night. In fact, in the Amboseli Elephant Research camp, it is not recommended to leave one's tent after dark. Each tent has a bucket provided in case one is caught short! The cook came to call me and escort me to supper in the mess tent. I am told the black mambas are on the move – not unusual when the rains just start.

This morning, I looked out of the tent to see an orange sky. Zebras snort, fish eagles throw back their heads and cry out. An impala flickers past. I am getting to know some of the elephants by name. Eloise has just walked by. I was shown a beautiful, secluded marsh where I met Elaine and her calf and did some studies for a larger studio painting. I learnt that a baby under the age of one will easily fit right under its mother's tummy, giving it good shade. I met Oprah and her calf.

In Cynthia's camp, where I love to be, the slate-coloured boubous call to each other and there is a bulbul that comes and sits on your cup when you are having breakfast.

My most recent visit to the park in November 2018 was extraordinarily beautiful, as thousands of greater and lesser flamingos had arrived and had taken up residence on the lake. One morning, the EB family had gathered to cross the lake to reach the

swamp on the other side where they would spend the day grazing as is their daily practice and has been for many generations.

The family milled around, waiting for each other to gather together, giving me a good opportunity to paint several watercolours. They know Cynthia's car, which was my improvised studio, so were not afraid of me, nor me of them, and as they waited all around us, some were almost within touching distance. They calmly waited; some ate through the palm fronds or used their toes to uproot and dust off the savannah grass until they were all gathered at the shore's edge. There was a friendly encounter between two rambunctious, young teenaged bulls, which I also drew with all the pushing, raised trunks, clashing of small tusks, and trumpeting squeals, which culminated in dusty shuffling runs through the group. Eventually they all made a line with the calves in the middle and adult females taking up front and rear-guard positions. They plucked up the courage and energy to cross the sea of mud, where they were surprisingly light and quick on their toes, occasionally slipping and sliding or heaving themselves across the muddy water whilst the flamingos pranced and honked out of their way. The sun shone across their backs, the babies seemed to play as they were nudged along the line, splashing and sploshing through the muddy water. The water looked turquoise blue in the sun and behind me snow glinted from Kilimanjaro. This I think is the most memorable moment I have experienced in Africa so far.

Picasso once said "*There is nothing more important than to excite enthusiasm*".
I hope this book of paintings and Cynthia's amazing work with the elephants of Amboseli will enthuse your spirit and encourage you to visit and support the Amboseli Trust for Elephants.

My First Experience of Amboseli

I came to East Africa as a tourist in 1967 and went off with my friend, Mariana Gosnell, on the “milk run” through southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. We hired a car and driver and the very first place we went to was Amboseli. I saw my first wild elephant there – a bull quietly feeding. I saw no more elephants but I remember photographing a gorgeous cheetah, who was posing elegantly on a fallen tree.

I don’t remember my overall impressions of the place. I certainly didn’t think it was a dusty, barren place. Everything was so new, so exciting, so full of adventure. We stayed in the self-help bandas and ate sardines. There were mosquito nets and thrilling night sounds. I was hooked; I fell in love with Africa and to this day I am still in love with Africa.

We went on around the circuit, crossing the border into Tanzania, and driving on to Lake Manyara National Park. I was more or less ordered by a friend to look up a young scientist researching elephants. His name was Iain Douglas-Hamilton. That encounter changed my life forever. Serendipity, if one lets it, can play such a powerful role. I could so easily have decided that it was too rude to just show up at his research station with no prior notice. Where would I be today, who would I be if I hadn’t made that one decision?

Iain took Mariana and me out to the elephants in his beat-up Land Rover and terrified us by switching off the engine and letting the huge matriarch, Boadicea,

charge us at full speed before skidding to a halt in a cloud of dust a few meters away. It is a wonder I ever wanted to study elephants after that encounter.

Mariana and I went on to Ngorongoro Crater, Olduvai Gorge, Serengeti, the Maasai Mara and back to Nairobi. Iain met up with us in both the Serengeti and in Nairobi and invited me to return to Manyara. After a safari with Mariana to Uganda, I took him up on his offer and returned to Manyara as a volunteer assistant for three weeks. The rest is history, as they say. I gave up my job, my apartment, my horse, and my two cats and started my life in Africa in January 1968. Fifty years later, I don't regret for one minute that radical decision.

Going Back to Amboseli

Iain finished his research towards the end of 1968 and went to Oxford to write up his Ph.D. All I wanted to do was to find a way to study elephants again. In another serendipitous break, I wrote to one of the few people I knew in Nairobi, a vet who worked with wildlife, and asked her if she needed a volunteer. She wrote back immediately and told me to come.

This was long before email or even properly working phones. We wrote on thin, little blue airmail letters that folded up. I was in Italy and amazingly our letters were delivered. I got on a plane as soon as I could and flew out to Nairobi. Again I wonder what I would have done if hadn't received her letter? I had nothing to go back to in the US. I only wanted to be in Africa. In my life, that was probably the luckiest break I ever got. There was no looking back after that.

It took me almost four years before I started my own study of elephants in Amboseli. In the meantime I continued to do some monitoring of the Manyara elephants and volunteered on an elephant project in Tsavo National Park in Kenya.

It was September 1, 1972. David Western, who had been studying the ecology of Amboseli, invited me and another elephant researcher, Harvey Croze, to Amboseli to encourage us to look at the elephants there. Harvey had done a study of the Serengeti elephants and was now teaching at the University of Nairobi, but he wanted to continue his elephant work. We thought we might be able combine efforts at a study site in Kenya. David (known to his friends as Jonah) hosted us in Amboseli for the weekend.

The Start of the Amboseli Study

That visit with Jonah and his friend Sandy Price was inspiring. We saw group after group of relaxed, habituated elephants. They barely looked at us when we drove up to them. Harvey immediately started taking identification photos of their ears and tusks. For field scientists, we couldn't have asked for better conditions. We went back to Nairobi after our stay, knowing Amboseli was the place where we wanted to study elephants.

Not only were the elephants willing subjects but they also represented a population that was still relatively natural. So many elephants in other places were rapidly losing their habitat. In Lake Manyara, Iain estimated that the elephants had lost 75% of their range in the previous 50 years before he started his research. They were now restricted to the small area of the park. In other places, protected areas were being fenced with migration routes cut off completely. Land that was open to elephants was being converted to agriculture. In addition, poaching for ivory was increasing.

In 1972, Amboseli was an exception. Elephants were still moving in and out of the central basin on trails that they had probably been using for centuries. They were not restricted at all in their movements and although there was poaching it was not as intense as in other areas. The reason for this positive situation was the people that the elephants shared their range with – the Maasai. Traditional pastoralists, the Maasai did not kill wildlife for meat or trophies nor did they practice agriculture or fence their land. They didn't love elephants but they respected their right to live and they tolerated them.

The Amboseli elephants provided an ideal situation for collecting baseline data on a relatively undisturbed population. We hoped that understanding the behavior and ecology of these lucky elephants might help us know how to conserve elephants across their range.

History of Amboseli

First Impressions

"Barren and desolate" were the words the first European explorer used to describe the area. Joseph Thomson trekked into the great Amboseli basin in 1883. He had been told to avoid the area because of fierce tribesman but he went anyway and found something remarkable. Although it appeared to be a treeless wasteland "game is to be seen in marvelous abundance." (Thomson 1885, p. 276)

Four years later, Count Sámuel Teleki von Szék and Ludwig von Höhnel used a similar route to Amboseli and from the vantage point of a hill on the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro they described what they saw:

> "On the west rose a few low hills covered with black volcanic rocks, whilst on the east the land sunk, in one long terrace, to the plain which stretched far away to the foot of the Julu [Chyulu] chain. There was very little grass, and that little was sere and dry; even the reeds in the swamps were dead or trodden down by wild animals. In the distance we could make out a few thriving steppe plants such as euphorbia, various kinds of succulent bush, aloes and two kinds of Sansiveria, but the ground was everywhere sandy and bare. This dreary wilderness was, however, tenanted by a great variety of birds, including two kinds of doves, starlings with gleaming steel-green plumage, beautiful nut crackers with turquoise-blue feathers, several kinds of fowls, hawks, and

> vultures, marabout storks, and bustards, whilst a little farther away roamed herds of gazelles, antelopes, rhinoceros, zebras, gnus, giraffes, ostriches, and wild boars. One night, too, we heard elephants in the swamp"
>
> (von Höehnel 1894, p. 225)

One hundred and thirty years later, sitting on the same hill, the view would include some significant additions in the form of roads and lodges but much of the landscape would be similar. However, today it would not be treeless and one wonders why there were no trees back in the late 19th century. We cannot blame the elephants because these explorers did not find many there. They only heard some in the swamp. Stands of trees grew later and some have died out in a cycle that has probably been going on for centuries. Rather than elephants or humans, fluctuations in the water table seem to be at work in this cycle.

Protection

In 1906 a large part of what is now Kajiado County, which included Amboseli, was set aside as the Southern Reserve for Maasai. It was not intended as a reserve for wildlife. Rather the Maasai had been forcibly removed en masse from the Laikipia area of Kenya, north of Nairobi, to make way for colonial ranchers and farmers. They were resettled in both southern Kajiado and in Narok, which now encompasses the Maasai Mara Reserve. Gradually, the colonial government began to realize that Amboseli was a very rich wildlife area. As a result, 3,260 sq. kms was declared a game reserve in 1948 and put under the control of the local county government. It remained that way for the next 26 years. During this time, there was growing tourism in the central area of the reserve and it was also a popular area for sport hunting. Ernest Hemingway hunted in Amboseli. He camped for weeks at a time near Kimana Swamp, rarely killing anything, just enjoying being in the bush.

By the early 1970s, conservationists began to worry about increasing human and cattle populations and their effects on the core of Amboseli, where there were estimated to be 70 rhinos among other important species. To assure their protection, with the agreement of the local Maasai, an area of 392 sq. kms was gazetted as a national park in 1974. In return there were promises made to the Maasai for alternative grazing and water. In 1991, Amboseli National Park was declared a UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve.

Today Amboseli remains a National Park at the centre of what is called the Amboseli Ecosystem, an area of 8,000 sq. kms including part of northern Tanzania. It has become one of the most popular parks in Kenya, earning millions of shillings in revenue each year. It is most famous for its views of Kilimanjaro and its relaxed and highly viewable elephants.

The Amboseli Ecosystem

The Amboseli ecosystem is unique. No other place in Africa combines the special hydrology, topography, geology, and cultural history of Amboseli."

H. Croze and W. K. Lindsay, *The Amboseli Elephants*

Geological History

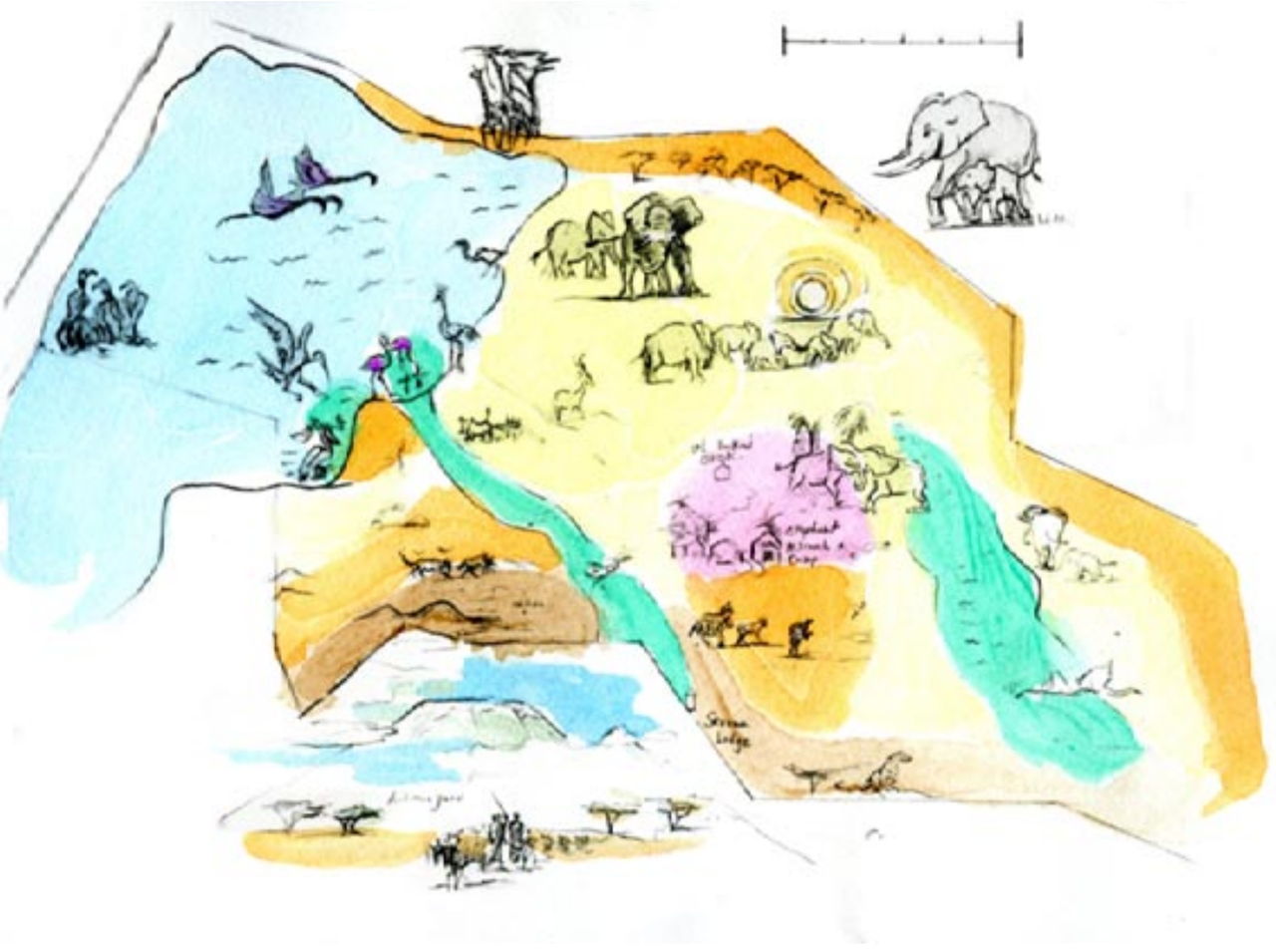
There was once a vast river flowing from the northwest to southeast that ran through what is today the Amboseli ecosystem. It eventually spilled out into the sea in Tanzania. About 1.5 million years ago, the most recent massive eruption of Kilimanjaro blocked the flow of the river and created a closed central basin and a lake with no outlet. The lake and its sediments sat there until about 10,000 years ago, when it began to dry up eventually leaving only seasonal Lake Amboseli.

The area referred to as the "basin" remains and encompasses about 600 sq. kms. Beyond the basin are the foothills of Kilimanjaro, other hills to the west, a distinct ridge to the north and the beautiful Chyulu Hills to the east. They make up the Amboseli ecosystem of approximately 8000 sq. kms.

Hydrology

As the early explorers remarked and many since have asked: What is it that makes Amboseli such a rich habitat for wildlife? The answer, as in much of savannah Africa, is water. Although the rainfall is meager, only 12 inches per year,

Amboseli has year-round fresh, clean, cool water. It comes in underground rivers from Kilimanjaro bubbling up in springs, which in turn create rivers and swamps.



Habitats

Within Amboseli there are seven distinct habitat types.

- The Seasonal Lake: for most of the year it looks like a moonscape. In good rainy seasons it can become a lake again.
- The Alkaline Plains: a hard pan just below the surface makes it difficult or impossible for roots to penetrate. For this reason, only grasses grow on the plains and not trees.
- The Acacia Xanthaphloea/Phoenix Palm Woodlands: a favourite of the elephants and where my research camp is located.
- The Acacia Tortilis Woodlands: the iconic shape of this tree says “Africa”; in these woodlands the birds are different from the ones in and around the swamps and in the yellow fever trees.
- The Swamp Edge: it is here that the wildebeests and zebras congregate in the dry season.
- The Swamps: the elephants are able to utilize the swamps even in relatively deep water. The can spend almost a whole day feeding on the plants that grow there. Few other species are able to eat this kind of vegetation. Hippos, of course, spend the day in the deep swamps coming out to feed at night.
- The Bushland: this type of habitat is home to many species but is particularly favored by giraffe and gerenuk. Elephants often move into the bushland at night to rest and feed after spending the day in and around the central swamps.

The Wildlife

The availability of water year-round and the diverse habitat types attract a remarkable array of wildlife in Amboseli. Within and around the Park live almost all the major East African mammals and more than 400 bird species. The most abundant mammal species are the zebra, followed by Grant's gazelle, and wildebeest. There are also healthy populations of giraffe, eland, buffalo, hippo, impala, reedbuck, and oryx among others. The predators are well represented with lions, cheetahs, hyenas, jackals, the newly renamed golden wolf, and bat-eared foxes in the Park and leopards further out in the ecosystem. The smaller cats – African wildcat, serval, caracal – can sometimes be seen. There are two large primates – baboon and vervet monkey – and the smaller bushbaby. Closer to my heart, of course, are 1,670 elephants.

Birdlife in Amboseli is spectacular. Because of the extensive wetlands it is possible to see in just one morning dozens of water bird species, such as all the various herons, ibises, ducks, teals, and geese. Recently, because of a change in the flow of water, there is an extensive shallow lake, which was discovered by both greater and lesser flamingoes. Recently, there were estimated to be 500,000 flamingoes in this lake making for some unusual photographs of flamingoes under Kilimanjaro and flamingoes mixed in with elephants.

Daily and Seasonal Rhythms

Amboseli is only just over 2.6 degrees below the equator, so day length and night length are about even: 12 hours of sunlight and 12 hours of darkness. The sky starts to lighten around 5:45 in the morning and the red-orange sun appears over the horizon at about 6:30. Within minutes there is full daylight. The sun sets just as rapidly, disappearing around 6:30 in the evening. By 7:00 it is dark, unless there is one of the glorious full moons that turns everything silver.

The grazing animals using the central area of the ecosystem follow a fairly regular daily routine. They come into the swamps and swamp edges in the morning and move out onto the plains and into the woodlands at night. This pattern is very clear with wildebeests and zebras; they are probably trying to avoid predators. Out on the plains they gather in larger groups, where they can see lions and hyenas approaching and there is some safety in numbers.

Elephants also move in and out of the swamps in a daily rhythm, but some families might spend the night in the slightly raised dry areas found in the big Longinye Swamp. However, that is rare and for elephants who are not worried about predation, I've often wondered why they move out at all. My guess is that they are seeking different foods out in the woodlands. Also living with the Maasai for hundreds of years, they are acutely aware of when people move about and for the most part that's only in the daytime. At nighttime the elephants can move and feed quietly, even very close to human habitation.


GB's
Gail Golden

When I was making one of the films about Echo and her family, the EBs, the cameraman Martyn Colbeck and I decided to follow Echo at night to try to film her giving birth. I had seen her in oestrus 21 months before and we were fairly sure she was pregnant and about to give birth. We followed the family for 18 nights in a row and she finally gave birth one evening just as it was getting dark.

The birth was thrilling but it was also very interesting to record what the family did on the other 17 nights. The EBs weren't very adventurous during this period, probably because their matriarch, Echo, was not keen on moving too far. As with the other elephants, they left the swamp area before dark. A couple of nights they moved out into lava towards the mountain (almost impossible to drive over, but somehow I managed); other nights they just moved out to the plains.

What was very consistent with Echo and her family's night behavior was that around midnight they all lay down and went to sleep for about three hours. No one stayed standing as guard and they slept heavily, emitting elephantine snores. On a personal level it was the most intimate I have ever been with elephants. I cherish those nights.

Around 3am the elephants would get up, stretch and yawn and scratch. Slowly they would start to feed nearby and then, with a signal from Echo, they would gather and walk in a purposeful way back towards the central swamps.

The rest of the day was spent feeding, drinking the cool fresh water in the Amboseli springs, resting again but with the adults standing and only the calves

lying down, then more feeding (elephants feed up to 16 hours a day), and towards late afternoon there might be a play session for the calves and sometimes for the adults as well. It's a good life when there is enough rain and thus enough food, and when there is no poaching and no human-elephant conflict. It's not always good, but the Amboseli elephants are luckier than most.

The daily patterns for the grazing species change according to the season. In East Africa there are four seasons: two rainy seasons and two dry seasons. The "short rains" come in October - November; it's usually relatively dry between December and March; the "long rains" come in March, April and May; then there is a long, dry period between June and October.

The wildebeests and zebras concentrate in the Park around the swamps in the dry season. They are dependent on water and need to drink every day. At least part of the elephant population also stays fairly close to the Park. Elephants don't have to drink every day, so some of them have routines of drinking every other day or even every three days. Lactating mothers do need to drink frequently and they are the ones most likely to stay closer to the springs in the Park.

In a good wet season with abundant rain, the Park is virtually deserted. Only the most resident species such as reedbuck, vervet monkeys, impalas, hippos and warthogs stay. The other animals leave in all four directions, going to the areas with the best vegetation. It is thought that the grasses are more palatable on the soils outside the basin, where it tends to be less salty. The grazers are able to stay out as long as the temporary waterholes are full.

While on their wet season treks, the elephants are much warier and more nervous of people moving about. I'm curious to know if they lie down to sleep at night. I somehow doubt if they would feel secure doing so far from the safety of the Park. The elephants might go 50-60 kilometres from the Park but eventually they will turn back and not just for safety. There is a wonderful phenomenon in Amboseli after a good rainy season. The elephants gather together into large

aggregations of 200–300. The largest I ever saw was 550. Elephants simply like to be with other elephants and they will do so when they can, and that is when there is no competition for food.

At this time of high sociality, matriarchs and the older females meet and greet cousins and aunts and others they haven't seen for the whole dry season or maybe even for two years of low rainfall. I believe they are re-establishing bonds and also assessing overall family dominance rank based on the age of the matriarch and the size of the family.

The young males nearing independence find other males their age to test their strength against with vigorous sparring matches. Little calves find new playmates for chasing, butting, and climbing games. And probably most important, it is a time of romance, when females of all ages come into oestrus and the big musth males join the aggregations to find available females ready to mate. There is so much going on in these aggregations that it is almost impossible to take down any kind of systematic data. I just put my pen down and enjoy being with them. There is nothing better to me than being with relaxed, well-fed, energetic elephants clearly enjoying themselves. It is times like this that I know why I've spent 50 years of my life trying to learn more about elephants and trying to make sure they have a future.

The Elephants

The Amboseli elephants are some of the luckiest in the world and I'm probably the luckiest person studying elephants in the world. Amboseli is a haven for elephants and has been for a very long time, thanks to the Maasai people who do not hunt wildlife for trophies or meat. Elephants do get killed and they were sport hunted up until 1977 and there has been poaching in the past by non-Maasai, but compared to most other areas, it is still a relatively safe place for elephants.

When I first arrived to start the study in 1972, there were about 700 elephants in the population, down from at least 1200 in the 1960s. This was a period of ivory poaching, which continued into the 1970s. Also, elephants were still being hunted for sport and bulls that wandered outside the protected could be killed. Fortunately, sport hunting of wildlife was banned in Kenya in 1977 and at the same time poaching decreased around Amboseli with the result that after 1978 the population began to grow.

What made Amboseli unusual when I started was that the elephants were not restricted to a small protected area as they were in so many other places. Amboseli's elephants were still moving in and out of the central basin on trails that they had been using for hundreds of years.

Also unusual at that time was that many of the elephant families in Amboseli were intact, with old matriarchs in their 50s and 60s. Poachers first kill the bulls with their bigger, heavier tusks. When they are finished they turn to the oldest

females with the result that in heavily poached areas, there are few or no older individuals and families are led by young matriarchs in their teens and 20s.

One of the main reasons that my colleague Harvey Croze and I chose Amboseli was that we felt that we could get baseline data on a relatively undisturbed elephant population. This information could be used to compare and contrast with other populations in jeopardy. It is necessary to understand what is natural in order to know how to conserve elephants in the wild.

What does a natural elephant population look like? I have to say right off that it depends on where they live. Elephants are remarkably flexible in their ecology and social structure. Amboseli is a baseline but there are so many variations for elephants living in deserts, in forests, on coasts, on mountains, and in other habitats.

The Families

Wherever elephants are found (except in the dense forests of central Africa), they live in families, each led by the oldest female, with adult males living separately. Families, or family units as they are sometimes called, consist of related adult females and their offspring. The females may be mother and daughter, grandmother and granddaughter, sisters, aunt and niece, or cousins. When a matriarch dies it is not necessarily her daughter who takes over but the next oldest female. Age, experience, and wisdom are important to elephants.

Although family units had been described in Uganda and in Lake Manyara, I was able to show that elephant social organization is multi-levelled, with the family being the base but radiating out to bond groups, clans, sub-population, and the whole population. Elephants live in what is called a fission-fusion society. They come together, they part, they have different relationships with individuals outside the family depending on relatedness, friendship, geographical use of the habitat, and also reproductive state.

In the early years of the study, the average family size was seven. Today families can be very large, with several numbering more than 40. I can use Echo's family, the EBs, as typical. (Each family was given a letter of the alphabet and then all members were named with a name starting with that letter. After I reached 26 families, I started through the alphabet again. Thus, the A family became the AAs and the new A family was designated the ABs.)

When I was first getting to know the EB family in 1975, there were seven in the family as follows:

INDIVIDUAL	SEX	AGE
Echo	Adult F	about 30 years
Erin	F	6 years
Emily	Adult F	about 25 years
Eudora	F	3 years
Little Male	M	7 years
Ella	Adolescent female	about 10 years

Emily was almost certainly her sister. I thought Ella could be Echo's daughter but much later DNA analysis revealed that she was her sister.

Over the years, the females produced calves and Little Male and subsequent EB males left when they reached sexually maturity at around 12 years old. Today the family numbers 56, although Ella's portion has split. The main section of the EBs, with all of Echo's daughters, grandchildren, and nieces is 44. A very successful family, indeed. Some of the families have done just as well, while a few have remained small or have even gone extinct. Currently in Amboseli there are 62 families with an average family size of 22 ranging in size from 4 to 64!

The role of the matriarch

One of the aspects of elephant behavior that has always fascinated me is the concept of leadership. What is a matriarch? Is she the leader? Does she make all the decisions? How does she communicate those decisions?

I did a special study of leadership focusing on a few families, watching them intensely for a half hour at a time. Usually, everyone was doing the same thing – feeding, resting, dusting, walking. I would wait until one adult starting doing something else and then start my stopwatch. After one minute, I would record how many individuals followed the behavior of that female.

The results revealed that only one or two of the adult females elicited a response and they were always the two oldest. Younger females might initiate a change but no one followed.

I also learned about leadership in a non-scientific way. Back in 1990, when Martyn Colbeck and I started following Echo and the EB family for the series of films called *Echo of the Elephants*, I was, among other things, tasked with putting Martyn and his camera in the right place at the right time to capture different elephant interactions and behaviors. It didn't take long for me to become acutely aware of Echo's every move and vocalization. She was the one I looked to to anticipate a move or a greeting. In effect, she became my matriarch.

Elephant behavior can be very subtle but I learned to watch and listen to Echo.

If the members of the family were all resting in a bunch and she gave the low "let's go" rumble and lifted and slid her ears down her neck and shoulders making a rasping sound, I knew everyone would follow her.

Echo didn't always make the decisions. Amusingly, in this family and in others, we have seen disagreements. In a typical case, one female might head off to the west, another to the north. Some follow the one, some the others, but when it's clear they are not all together, an "argument" begins, involving numerous let's go rumbles and steps forward in the direction each wants to go. Usually, one or the other wins in the end, but it can also end with them going their separate ways. Of course, being elephants and loyal family members, they are never split for long.

The Males

The lives of male and female elephants are so different that I soon realized that I couldn't study both. I decided to concentrate on the families and I invited a young scientist, Joyce Poole, to study the males. It was a good decision. Joyce focused on the large adult males and together we discovered what "musth" is all about.

While females stay in their natal families for the rest of their lives, males leave at around 10-14 years old. Some are "Mama's boys" and stay until 17 or 18. In general, young males are not forced to leave, although the adult females may become intolerant of them and give them a tusk poke once in a while when they get too rough with the smaller calves or show an interest in females. However, it seems that the pull to strike out on their own and join the world of independent bulls is very strong.

Although a male may be sexually mature at 12 years old, in a natural population with much older males present, he has no hope of mating with females for another

15 years. Males grow throughout their lifetime, so the oldest males are the biggest males. A 50-year-old male could stand 12-13 feet at the shoulder and weigh 6-7 tons. A newly independent male is not even as tall as an adult female and would only weigh about 2 tons. They have a lot of growing, waiting, exploring, and learning to do.

Finally, when a male reaches his late 20s, he may begin to come into musth, a fascinating phenomenon unique to elephants. Musth is a cyclical period during which the male's testosterone hormone levels increase dramatically causing an almost Jekyll and Hyde transformation in the individual. The outward manifestation of this change is in the bull's postures, gestures, vocalizations and general behavior. From a relatively placid animal going about his daily life of feeding, resting, drinking, mudwallowing, dusting, and hanging out with his buddies, a bull becomes dominant and aggressive. His temporal glands swell and exude a viscous fluid down the side of his face. At the same time, he dribbles urine, including other substances, which has a very strong odor. He leaves his bull area and starts searching for females or for males around his own age to challenge. While walking, he holds his head very high and often emits a deep gurgling rumble while flapping his ears. The dribbling urine leaves a scent trail as he moves.

Those of us who know the signals can spot a male in musth on the horizon from nearly a kilometer away. It's the way he struts across the savannah. All the signals are what Joyce Poole calls "honest advertising". The bull is in effect saying to other males, "I'm in very good condition, I'm surging with aggressive hormones, and I will fight and even kill you if you challenge me." Non-musth males will

definitely get well out of his way when they pick up the scent or sounds of a musth bull. To the females the male is saying, “I am a healthy male, who has survived long enough to come into musth, I will pass on my genes for longevity and robustness to your calf, mate with me.” And the females do preferentially mate with musth males. DNA research revealed that 83% of the calves in the study population were sired by musth males.

Males can continue to come into musth and compete for females well into their 50s. We’ve not had many bulls make it into their 60s so we’re not sure if they completely retire. We do know that some males appear to choose to give up the dominance displays and competition and just hang out with their friends.

In Amboseli, we are blessed with many older, magnificent males. The best-known of these is 50-year-old Tim, a male I’ve known since he was four years old. He has become famous because of his gorgeous, huge, lyre-shaped tusks, each weighing more than 100lbs. Tim is notorious for being a very clever and relentless crop-raider. He has been speared several times and had to be treated by a vet team. Recently, during one of his raids he became hopelessly stuck in quick-sand like mud, but he seems to be like a cat with nine lives, because he was rescued and seems just fine.

The world would be a far lesser place without matriarchs like Echo to endear us or a bull like Tim to fill us with wonder.

The People of Amboseli

There are few scenes in Africa more evocative than the sight of two or three Maasai in their red shukas, long spears over the shoulders, striding across the golden savannah with their characteristic loping gate. It speaks Africa as much as a giraffe or zebra or elephant.

Amboseli has been inhabited by man for thousands of years. The so-called Cradle of Mankind in Olduvai Gorge is a little over 200 kilometers away. Early man almost certainly existed in the Amboseli area as well.

Hunter-gatherers were the first modern humans to live in the ecosystem, as attested to by the many artifacts left behind. About 4-500 years ago Maasai pastoralists, who had moved with their cattle from the Nile valley, arrived and settled, eventually forcing out or assimilating the Dorobo hunter-gatherers.

For most of the 400 or so years they've been in Amboseli, the Maasai were traditional pastoralists, moving with their livestock across the rangelands according to the seasons. They did not build or live in permanent settlements, and most important to wildlife conservation, they did not kill wild animals for meat or trophies. It was forbidden in their culture.

However, Maasai warriors would kill dangerous animals both in retaliation for human injuries or death and to prove a warrior's bravery. Lions in particular were hunted for glory. In times of severe drought or cattle disease, they killed antelopes for meat, but they considered them God's cattle, to be used only as a last resort. This aspect of their culture meant that the Maasai lived side by side with wildlife in a kind of harmony. Their cultural attitude is reflected today in where the richest wildlife areas can be found in Kenya and Tanzania – they are where the Maasai and their close relatives the Samburu live.

The Maasai have a special relationship with elephants. They have a story that explains how elephants came into existence. In Maasai culture when a girl is getting married, the groom's family and friends come to get her from her father's home and take her away to her new home. She is not allowed to look back at her home. However, one day a girl was so distraught that she looked back and she was immediately turned into an elephant.

The Maasai believe that the only animal that has a soul like a human's is an elephant. For this reason, whenever they come upon the skull of an elephant they stop, pick grass and put it in the hollows of the skull in honor of that soul.

Times have changed, of course, and today the Maasai are farmers as well as cattle keepers. Some are also lawyers and doctors and businessmen. They drive cars, have permanent houses, and send their children to university. But, and this is a big but, they also continue to love their culture and try to maintain the best of it. A grassroots organization, the Amboseli Ecosystem Trust (AET), works hard to keep the ecosystem open for both pastoralism and wildlife.

Amboseli National Park is surrounded by group ranches, land owned communally by members. There is tremendous pressure to sub-divide these ranches, giving each member a certain number of acres. The ranch to the east of Amboseli, Kimana Group Ranch, was subdivided with disastrous results in terms of conservation. Many of the plots were sold to outsiders, who fenced them and built lodges and started other enterprises, such as flower farms and quarries. Today, wildlife and people's livestock are excluded from much of that former group ranch and there are only the narrowest of corridors open.

AET worked hard to stop detrimental developments by creating an Amboseli Ecosystem Management Plan which, among other things, prohibited certain kinds of land-use. This plan was officially approved by the Kenya Government for a period of 10 years. A new plan is currently being written.

On a personal level, I am so impressed with what the Amboseli Maasai are doing. They recognize the value of their culture and also the role of wildlife and ecosystem conservation in that culture. If anyone can make it possible for people and wildlife to co-exist, these brave, smart and determined Maasai can.

The Future

Amboseli National Park is very small by African parks and reserves standards. It's only 392 sq. kms, more or less in the middle of an 8000 sq. km. ecosystem. Many of the wildlife species spend more of their time outside the Park than inside. These species - elephants, wildebeest, zebras, giraffes - could not exist in the numbers that they do if they could not range over the larger ecosystem.

Most of the area around the Park is currently divided into group ranches, owned communally by the Maasai. To the southeast the land is owned individually. Across the border in Tanzania, which is an important part of the range of the migratory species, there is partial protection in what is called a Wildlife Management Area.

The future of the Amboseli ecosystem depends on land-use practices. If the group ranches are sub-divided into 60-acre plots or even smaller, the worst could happen. The plots could be fenced and farming started, with the result that migratory routes would be cut off. Elephants and pastoralists can co-exist; elephants and farmers cannot. At the same time Tanzania could reinstate elephant hunting in the area along the border. Many of Amboseli's big bulls were killed there in the 1990s before an agreement was reached between Tanzania and Kenya.

Poaching of elephants for ivory and the killing of other species for bushmeat are both threats to the future of wildlife in Amboseli, but fortunately, the Big Life Foundation with 350 rangers and Kenya Wildlife Service, with its rangers and weapons, are doing an excellent job of keeping these threats under control.

The much greater and longer-term problem is the tremendous pressure on the wilderness areas of Kenya. Sometimes it seems like an impossible task to hold back human population growth and the modern development that goes with it. I could get very discouraged and think about giving up, but all I have to do is go out and sit in my Land Rover among the Amboseli elephants and all thoughts of abandoning them and the glorious ecosystem in which they live are banished.

I have been in Amboseli for 47 years. Yes, there have been major changes in some areas outside the Park, but the elephants are still moving in and out of the Park in close to the same patterns as when I first came to study them in 1972. I am definitely not alone in wanting to save this ecosystem. Those who care are: the Maasai people, the Kenya Wildlife Service, the Amboseli Ecosystem Trust, and conservation organizations such as the Big Life Foundation, Lion Guardians, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the African Conservation Centre and others. I believe we can make a difference and that 50 years from now there will be a huge musth male elephant strutting across the savannah in search of a family with a welcoming female.

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Sophie's Painting Notes

"You can not explain the fascination of painting to someone who is not interested." (Mary Newcombe, 1986)

But just in case anyone is interested and as I am often asked questions such as what colours do I use, I am including as a postscript some of the colours and methods that I used while painting in Amboseli.

For background, Cecil Collins has been the biggest influence on my drawing, and some of what he taught me might be good to remember when starting to paint in the African bush. Firstly, he told me to slow down: calm down, stop, look, listen, notice feelings. Then to make different brush strokes, using both hands, using

both sides of the brain, to make dots and circles, the yin and the yang. He taught the use of the reed pen, red chalk, 4b, 2b pencils, and how to use seven different tones of Chinese ink with both. We not only used both hands but also painted with our mouth and feet. I took these tools to Africa with me and they gave me a whole new energy in trying to paint on-site in the bush. Cecil taught me to meditate before painting. Now painting has become a form of meditation for me.

Advice for those wanting to capture the moment on paper rather than by camera:

- An ink-brush pen and a very small sketch book (A5 or smaller) are the quickest and easiest tools to use. Always remember the weight of line with the brush. If you are more adventurous, get the watercolours out and use a very limited palette. The most useful colours in the African bush are browns, blues and yellows (see below).
- Invest in at least one hard-backed diary book, usually A5 size. Any sketch book with thick watercolour paper is good so you can paint without the paper buckling. Sometimes wet your paper first and paint loosely. I usually have two sketch books, so while you are working on one the other is drying.
- Observe the clouds and the large expanses of landscape. Some of the deepest expanses of landscape in art have been depicted on small sheets of paper.
- Keep drawing all the time. Make a drawing with a thick blunt pencil on a very small piece of paper, then later make a painting from that with as little alteration as possible. I draw fast – it's best for watercolour, as it is an immediate medium.

- Look hard at what you are about to paint. If using watercolour, it is a good idea to decide on a colour palette before starting (see below).
- Remember when you are painting in watercolour to work from the lightest to the darkest colours.
- You have to give a large amount of emotion to painting and you have to take risks, like destroying it and then bringing it back again.
- When painting in the car, you don't have much time to make decisions. You are more often than not driven off by a bored driver or your subject disappears very quickly into a bush.

"I believe in the finished painting as a record of what I saw at that moment. Probably a bad inconsistent effort but at least I have put it down and there is room for another thought to come to the surface". (Mary Newcombe, 1986)

I like this quotation from Mary Newcombe. My work is not like hers but it captivates me.

On safari in Kenya, you are not allowed out of the car in any of the parks, in case you might come too close to a wild animal. Painting in reserves or conservancies often gives you freedom to paint outside of your vehicle, but still look out for animals. I love to paint on a large piece of paper sometimes using a mop! as it's the best biggest brush I can find here in Africa. I place the paper on a foldable drawing board weighted down with stones and go for it.

In parks, you have to adapt your car to become your studio. How comfortable you are determines how well you will paint. Some ideas to help make it easier to paint in a car include:

a small level wooden shelf that can lie between the two front seats on which you can put your ink, water pot and palette. Lean your board and paper or painting book on the dashboard. In Africa, you don't have much of a problem with drying times, but, if necessary, use the car heater or fan. If the car drives off quickly to spot or follow an animal, make sure your ink and water are secure. I find the lantern-type water pot, with smaller bottles of ink and water inside, very helpful as it won't spill. If you are with other people, you have to keep tidy and small, so you have to work out the best way to do this. I am very messy and find it difficult.

The full palette I often use includes:

Naples yellow
Aurelian
Indian yellow
Ultramarine blue
Cobalt blue
Windsor blue
(similar to Prussian blue)
Cerulean blue

Cadmium red
Light red
Raw sienna
Burnt sienna
Raw umber
Burnt umber
Indian red
Vandyke brown

Sepia
Quinacridone rose
(similar to Alizarin crimson)
Cobalt violet
Transparent orange
Chinese white
or white gouache

White is often useful! If you look at John Singer Sargent, he often used body colour to enhance his beautiful watercolours. If you go out in the glaring sun with white paper staring at you, it's possible to hurt your eyes so better to cover the entire paper with a very, very pale wash of yellow ochre or light pink, depending what you are painting. This is then the "white" in the painting. It is important to think of the white (or tinted) paper as your light.

Sometimes I use nine colours:

Raw sienna
Burnt sienna
Burnt umber

Light red
Indian red
Cobalt Blue

French ultramarine
Windsor blue
Payne's grey

That is one yellow, one brown, three reds and four blues.
Best of all is a limited palette of watercolours so you can make quick colour notes. It's a good start to reduce your colours to only six, a warm and a cool colour of each. Below are a few useful colour paletttes that I used in these Amboseli paintings:

Naples yellow
Raw sienna

Winsor blue
Cobalt blue

Light red
Cadmium red

To improve speed, I would limit the colours to only three:

Raw sienna

Prussian blue

Quinacridone rose

If I only had a choice of two colours I could choose:
Prussian blue and Burnt sienna, or Ultramarine blue and Yellow ochre.

If only one colour, just sepia.

One must just explore colour combination. After painting in Africa for so long, I have the confidence to experiment with colour in order to achieve a freedom and vitality.

The above lists of colours give me the results that I like after mixing them in various ways. But please do not regard this list as binding. We all have our own taste for colours. But do make sure the colour is a “permanent” colour that does not fade. Do your own experimenting with colour mixes.

Ink is so useful for quickly putting down an image of an animal or a quick drawing of a tree or noting landscape, rocks, etc. I have a huge selection of hard-backed diaries and sketchbooks and they are used as my library of information. I love to dip into them when searching for inspiration and ideas. It is extraordinary how much you remember years later by looking at even a slight sketch or remark made on the spot.

Chinese ink has a lovely tonality and beautiful colour too. It is useful to make up a few pots of different tones starting with the black. Always keep lids on. French sepia ink is also beautiful to use but it’s difficult, as it has a varnish in it and takes a long time to dry.

Remember there are no rules; it is best to just get out into nature; one can only be what one is.

Oil painting on safari needs a little more thought put into it than painting with watercolours.

On safari in Amboseli with the heat and dust, it is often very difficult to paint in oils, but, of course, it is possible, and I very much like to make colour notes in oils to take back to my studio to make into much bigger paintings. I often go out with tiny painting boards, and they make it easy to paint from the car.

I talked about thumbnail sketches with watercolours. Extend this concept to painting thumbnail canvases when out in the landscape. Cut some canvas into small squares of 2 x 2 inches .

Pochade boxes are useful. When the paintings are wet you can slip one painting behind another without them touching. You can mix your paints on a disposable palette and then shut the lid.

Paints Quick drying Alkyid white Palettte knife
Brushes (take as few as possible, Renoir used only 4 brushes for painting)

Always travel with a rubbish bag. Be eco-friendly, no plastic, and do not pour the turps away. Re-use it by letting it stand, and allow the dirty oil to sink to the bottom of the jar. Re-use the clean turps from the top. Take the bottle of dirty turps home; don’t leave it to poison an animal.

The key in providing the mood for the painting is the colour of the ground.

Feel the sensation and emotion of the paint.

On safari I like to use a quick drying Alkyd white. If you mix it into the other colours it dries everything quickly.

The fewest colours possible can be used to create harmony. They should be carefully selected for the individual subject. An example might be

White	Burnt sienna	Emerald green
Black	Yellow ochre	Ultramarine

When I put too much emerald green, for instance, it can kill off the other colours; so take off the last stroke of bright colour: this can save a lot of time.

Every new colour diminishes the last colour.

When you are stuck with a colour look at the subject matter through a hole in white paper.

Sometimes I want to express myself in a different way and paint really big pictures on safari in oil as well as watercolour. Where there is a will there is a way.

I prefer not to work from photographs. I often think the camera, rather than the artist, is in the painting. It is much more enriching to work from our drawings and feelings.

It is astonishing what you can remember about an African landscape, when you have looked at it at length. You remember the smell of Africa, the colour of the bush, the light on the animals and the dust of their movement, and the changing colours of dawn and dusk. It is those recalled images and our study notes that enable our paintings to come to life.

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How to Support the Amboseli Trust for Elephants

Our work to understand and conserve elephants is supported entirely by individual donors and small foundations. We rely on people who care about elephants and their future, as well as the future of the amazing Amboseli ecosystem.

There are several ways to support our work: from the smallest donations to large bequests, from following a family with our Elatia program to naming an elephant calf. To find out more go to our website: www.elephanttrust.org

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