

TEXT AND  
PICTURES  
LEON MARAIS

# PETTING



□ Medwa lies on his side for Brighton Machipisa to begin the talk on elephant physiology, with Paullina, a veterinarian from Poland, rewarding him with horse cubes.

**Opposite:** □ Tembo responds to the 'trunk-up' command to receive reward and praise for doing the right thing. If he doesn't do as commanded, there is simply no reward.

‘I’VE SEEN PEOPLE IN TEARS AFTER THEIR first encounter with wild elephants, such is the power of the connection between our species and theirs. It's more of a one-way thing in the wild, though, with most elephants being either fairly nonchalant towards humans or downright fearful and aggressive, depending on the nature of their previous experiences with us. But at Elephant Whispers outside Hazyview in Mpumalanga, there's a two-way relationship that's clear to see from the start, with a palpable atmosphere of mutual trust and respect between man and beast.

What amazed me most was to hear from André Kotzé, general manager of Elephant Whispers, how quickly a young wild elephant can become trusting of a human – just a matter of days in some cases. Medwa, a young bull, learned to follow five verbal commands within just one week after he was rescued from a culling operation. Young males that have moved on from their natal herd but are not yet fully integrated with other males are apparently the first to become trainable, as there's an emotional gap in their lives that's soon filled by the human handlers. After just a year to 18 months of training they can be ready to interact with visitors like us.

At this point some readers may be arching their

eyebrows and wondering what right humans have in training elephants, but the elephants at Elephant Whispers are trained according to the ask-and-reward principal, where elephants are rewarded through touch, kind words and a handful of cubes put into the end of a waiting trunk.

From a futureless past, these six elephants, from twenty-six-year-old Tembo to ten-year-old Lindiwe, have all found a new life at Elephant Whispers. Tembo started out life as a culling orphan and spent 18 years in a reserve in the Hoedspruit area before he took a fancy to roaming through the neighbouring fruit orchards, snacking as he went and causing massive damage to the mango, citrus and avocado trees. He was about to be destroyed when he was rescued by Elephant Whispers. Today six-ton Tembo is the star of the show due to his size: 3.2 metres at the shoulder and he's not yet fully grown. Despite his size, Tembo is really just a big softie – senior handler Jimmy fondly recounts how the huge beast took fright at unexpectedly coming across a herd of cattle one day and tried to hide behind him.

The five 'little' elephants – Ziz (short for Zizphus), Medwa, Shamwari, Andle and Lindiwe – were rescued from culling operations and have all settled well at Elephant Whispers, becoming >>

# PACHYDERMS

At Elephant Whispers, ellies are making friends and educating people



□ Hunters and poachers can determine the shoulder height of an elephant by doubling the circumference of its front foot spoor.

□ The final surprise – Medwa gives us a spray down before retiring for the night.

>> ambassadors for their kind and valuable educational props. The Whispers experience is not just about entertainment, and after the awe and wonder had settled I realised that there was a lot I didn't know about elephants.

Our Sunset Interaction and Elephant Back Ride routine started with the overview of the operation by André, after which head handler Brighton Machipisa, who has years of experience and an obvious passion for the pachyderms, gave an incredibly enlightening and humorous talk on elephant physiology, aided by a willing Medwa, the young bull. Medwa lay down on his side and Brighton began at one end and ran us through everything from trunk-tip to tail, with an opportunity for us to touch and feel as he went, Medwa being rewarded for his cooperation all the while. Thanks to Brighton, I finally learned why some elephants in the wild have those big tears in their ears. It's not that they were just ripped on thorns, as I had thought. When a vein on the back of the ear is damaged, the tissue outside of the damage begins to die and disintegrate, gradually spreading to the edge of the ear. Brighton also mentioned that you can work out an elephant's shoulder height by doubling the circumference of its front foot. Fellow visitor Georgie, from Brisbane, Australia, didn't quite believe this, but Brighton quickly proved his point with the aid of a long sugar cane leaf as a yard-stick.

We then moved on to Lindiwe, who opened up

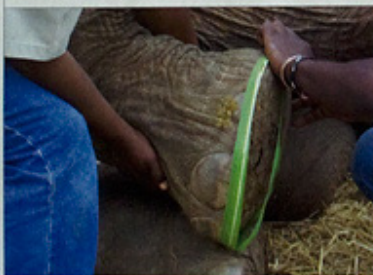
her mouth to show us her brick-sized molars and incredibly soft and muscular tongue, which operates like a conveyor belt, moving massive amounts of food into the chewing zone. Next up was Tembo, towering above us, and we were able to feel his impressive, hard-as-concrete stomach muscles and his skin, which is hard and rough on his flanks but unbelievably soft in the armpit.

Then it was time to go out for a ride, with Roy and Georgie on Tembo and my wife and I on Shamwari, a fourteen-year-old male. Even though only two of the elephants had paying passengers, all six headed out on the walk together with all the handlers and the two dogs, just to keep up the sense of routine. Riding is a comfortable, leisurely and rather aromatic affair. On level ground the gait is slow and ambling, with up to two passengers sitting behind the handler on a special canvas saddle.

The elephants grab trunkfuls of leaves as they go, and as they are pretty much always eating their massive digestive machine is also permanently working, hence the organic aroma that surrounds them. The half-hour walk ended at the stables, where each elephant has its own hay-lined stall. The whole structure is made of sturdy gum poles and allows for physical contact between neighbours, though by the time they got into the stalls the awaiting feast of fresh foliage was their most pressing priority.

We in turn had sundowners and snacks just outside the stables, with the emerging crickets and crunching and snapping of branches as a background soundtrack. Rod and Georgie were blown away by the experience and by the sheer intelligence of the six elephants. It was their second Elephant Whispers experience, having spent part of the previous day watching the herd swimming and cavorting in a small dam, an activity that is clearly enjoyable to all elephants.

From my experience with wild elephants, just a quick look into the eye of an animal can tell you much about its emotional state, and looking at these elephants it's obvious that they are content. They have their needs taken care of by a team of people from various walks of life who all have a deep love and respect for elephants, and who all want this project to succeed. □



Map reference B8  
see inside back cover

**WILD  
EARTH**  
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