

### Echo of the Elephants III

In December 2002, Martyn Colbeck and I started filming the third in a series of BBC documentary films about one family of elephants in Amboseli—the EBs led by the beautiful matriarch Echo. The first film, ECHO OF THE ELEPHANTS, was filmed over a period of 18 months from January 1990 to June 1991. One of the highlights of that film was the birth of Echo's son, Ely, who was crippled and couldn't stand. Ely miraculously recovered through pure will power on his part and the amazing care and loyalty of his mother and sister Enid. In the second film, ECHO OF THE ELEPHANTS: THE NEXT GENERATION, we followed the family for another four years, from 1991 to 1995. We filmed Echo giving birth to Ebony and watched this mischievous and outgoing calf growing up and facing some of the perils of a young elephant. Seven years have gone by since that film was completed and we are now picking up the lives of Echo and her family.

*Cameraman Martyn Colbeck in his specially designed filming vehicle*



As it turned out our filming started with an exciting event before we were even ready for it. On December 2, Martyn and I drove down to Amboseli in his specially modified filming Land Rover, which he had shipped up from Namibia, where he had used

it on a spectacular film he made on the desert elephants. The next morning, December 3, we headed out to see the Park Warden to give him our filming permits. On our way back to camp we ran into two of my field assistants, Norah and Katito, and they had some good news for us. Eliot, Echo's 17-year-old daughter had just given birth early that morning. We drove in to where the EBs were and found Eliot and the new calf, a male, still very shaky on his legs.

I was so pleased for her. Eliot is one of my favorites; she was a totally wonderful calf and adolescent, full of spirit and fun, sometimes doing outrageous things like running over to my car and plopping her head and tusks down on the bonnet or hood. When Eliot was 13 years old in 1998 she gave birth to her first calf right in the middle of our camp one night. I wasn't there but the researcher who was went out the next morning and found her with the new calf. The next day it was gone and we suspect that it may have been killed by hyenas. Two years later she gave birth again. My assistants found her with a weak calf who



couldn't stand. It too died. After that Eliot became a different elephant, always moving on the periphery of the family, not interacting much with the others, looking, for want of a better term, severely depressed. It made me sad to watch her. Now she had what looked like a big healthy male calf. I was delighted.

*17-year-old Eliot suckling her new calf*

Of course, we had left all the camera equipment in camp. We hadn't planned to film until the next day, because Martyn needed at least half a day to get the vehicle all set up. We raced back to camp, grabbed something to eat, threw the cameras, lenses, batteries, film cans, mounts, and tripods into the back of the Land Rover and headed out to the EBs. We were lucky. They were still in a place where we could film and Martyn managed to get some lovely shots of the new calf learning how to negotiate his unfamiliar world.

We filmed for three weeks in December and continued to be lucky with the situations we found. The elephants were in big aggregations coming across the open plains each morning to the swamp. It was a wonderful sight. The new calf was there amongst them and this time it looked like Eliot was going to be a success as mother. In fact, I'd never seen a female be so attentive to her calf. She constantly touched him and waited for him or if he moved away from her she wrapped her trunk around him and pulled him to her. When the female calves wanted to help take care of him, which is common elephant practice, she wouldn't let them. She wasn't going to let anything happen to this calf.

*Eliot's calf falling asleep the rain*

Our next filming period was from January 15 to February 14, 2003. By this time, Kenya had had major elections and we had a new president, Emilio Mwau Kibaki. We needed an 'e' name for Eliot's calf so I decided, in honor of Kenya's new president, to name him Emilio.



Otherwise nothing unusual happened during that filming trip, although, I have to say, it was very nice indeed just to spend all that time with Echo and her family. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know them well again and

learning to recognize all the calves. The most striking difference between the family seven years ago and now is its size. When we completed Echo II in 1995 the EBs numbered 15. By the beginning of 2003 the family had grown to 24 and this was despite six young males leaving. Eric, Emo and Ewan had all gone independent shortly after Echo II was completed. Then much earlier than usual, Ely and his good friend and cousin, Esau left by the end of 2000. The average age of independence for males is 14. Ely and Esau were only 10 years old. By the end of 2002 Erwin, left behind, decided to join the roving young males. He was only 11 years old. We saw them from time to time after they left but now they seem to have moved far away probably into Tanzania where they're hanging out with the big guys.



*Echo leading her big family with Enid and Eudora on the far right, Ella to Echo's right, and Erin behind and to the right of Ella*

The next filming trip was from March 17 to April 11 and this time we were in for a big surprise. We were happily filming the EBs in their normal range in the central part of the Park when suddenly we couldn't find the family one morning. We lost Echo for two days and then found her and the family way out in the western part of the Park in an area she usually only visits in the wet season. The rains had not yet arrived. I got suspicious as soon as I saw her behavior. She was acting coy around males, moving away from them and looking back over her shoulder in what I have called the "oestrus walk".

Echo was in oestrus!!! I was shocked. She had had her last calf in August 2000 when she was estimated to be 55 years old, which I thought was fairly amazing at the time. Now she was 58. I could have been overestimating her age, but not by more than maybe three years. Later I went back and looked carefully at my old ID photos of her from when I first met her in 1973. She looked about 28

years old. I compared what she looked like then to what her 21-year-old daughter Enid looks like now. Interestingly, they look remarkably similar, but the circumference of Echo's tusks in the photos are thicker at the base, which is an indicator of age, and so I concluded that I couldn't have been overestimating her age by much if at all. Perhaps she was 25 then, which would make her 55 today and if she gets pregnant, 57 when she gives birth. However, if I didn't overestimate her age she'll give birth when she's nearly 60! Good old Echo.



*Echo still going strong at 55-58 years old: with her two-year-old calf EmilyKate, her daughter Eliot & grandson Emilio*

We followed the whole oestrus, which lasted for four days, but I'm not going to reveal with whom she finally mated. You'll have to watch the film to find out.

Our next filming period, May 11 to June 12, turned out to be a tragic one for the EB family and for us. Erin, Echo's adult daughter, was speared. The full story appears in another part of the website. As I'm writing this on June 13, I am still shattered by what happened. Martyn is as well.

We were always going to have a long break in filming at this point and resume again in five months time, but little did we know how much we would need the break for psychological reasons. We will start again next December and film for another two to three months. In the meantime, Martyn will be off filming musk ox in Greenland, elephants, rhinos and lions in Namibia and gelada baboons in Ethiopia. I, of course, will continue to make frequent trips to Amboseli and will be visiting Echo and her family as often as I can to see how the family and particularly Erin's calves are doing.

Echo III will appear in the fall of 2004 on BBC2 in the UK and on the Discovery Channel in the US. Martyn and I will also be working on a large format photography book. Besides being an award-winning cinematographer Martyn is also an outstanding stills photographer. For this book he has been experimenting with black and white, infrared, large format and panorama photography. The book will be gorgeous. I'm writing the text—a series of essays covering various aspects about elephants that interest me.

*Cynthia Moss*  
*June 13, 2003*  
*Amboseli*