

The Story of Erin

One of the best known elephants in Amboseli, Erin of the EB family, died in May after a three week struggle for survival involving her family, the Amboseli Elephant Research Project (AERP) team, a BBC cameraman, and the staff of the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS).

Erin and her daughter Erica earlier in 2003 safe and calm in the Park



Erin was speared by Maasai moran (warriors) sometime in the last week of April 2003. From the research records of when the family was sighted, we estimated that the spearing occurred around April 25. The AERP research assistants found the EB family without Erin in early May and then about a week later they discovered

her badly injured and unable to walk. She had two very deep spear wounds high up on her right shoulder. From the placement and direction of the wounds, she was probably speared from above while feeding in the swamp. She was in the middle of the Park near the Ekongo Narok Swamp. In fact her family is very sedentary and rarely leaves the Park. Therefore, we concluded that she was not speared in a conflict situation since she was inside the Park in an area where no cattle come to drink. There was also no way that she could have been speared outside and come back into the Park since she could barely move. Senior Warden Robert Njue called in the KWS vet team from Nairobi and they immobilized and treated her on May 8. The vets confirmed that she had two deep spear wounds.

Someone from the AERP team was with her every day from the day that she was found until the day she died. The Warden even posted a guard on Erin at night whenever she was alone with just her youngest calf, who was only 20 months old. He was worried that predators might attack the calf.

Martyn Colbeck and I had started a new film for the BBC about Echo and her family including Erin in December 2002. It will be the third in a series started in 1990. When we heard about Erin, Martyn was in England and I was in Nairobi. He got a flight as soon as he could and arrived in Nairobi on the night of May 10. We flew down to Amboseli on the morning of May 11 and went out to Erin that afternoon. The sight of her was extremely disturbing for both of us. This was a female we knew so well; we had literally spent years watching and filming her or just sitting with her and her family. She was in so many ways like an old friend and to see her in pain was almost unbearable. As difficult as it was, from that day on Martyn stayed with her for 12 hours a day, and I did as well for much of that time, over the next 10 days.

After she was first treated on May 8 Erin appeared to get somewhat better, but then she got worse. The problem, which often happens with deep puncture wounds in elephants,

is that the wounds could not drain and septicemia was setting in. The Senior Warden called the vets in again. They immobilized Erin on May 16, cleaned out the wounds, which were full of pus, tried to make drainage holes and pumped her full of antibiotics. We were worried she wouldn't be able to get up again but she did. Once again she improved and was able to move a bit, but by May 20 she started to go downhill rapidly.

The following reports on Erin, written on the day of her death and the following day, are from my diary:

May 21, 2003:

The most amazing thing about this whole episode is that the rest of her family has never been more than about a kilometer from her and usually only about 200-300 meters away. Each day (and probably in the night as well) they come back from time to time to greet her and then drift off to feed again. Her oldest daughter Edwina and some of her calves often stayed closer by. It's almost a month since she was speared and yet they haven't given up on her. None of us has ever seen a family be so loyal to a



Echo, Eliot & others come to greet Erin; her 20-month-old calf is at her side

member. First of all they're way out in the western part of the Park far from their core home range. Normally Echo would only have stayed out there for a few days of feeding before returning to the central part of the Park. Sadly in the last two days they haven't been coming to greet her although they're still in the area. I don't think she's going to make it. It will be devastating for the family because she's the mother of three immature calves, one only 20 months old, plus two adult daughters and three grandchildren.

May 22, 2003:

Erin died last night around 8:30. Yesterday morning I stayed in to work on a report but I got a series of disturbing radio calls from Martyn and went out to where they were right after lunch. Erin was in very bad shape. The strangest and most gruesome thing happened to her. The whole pad/sole of her good left foot came away. It must have been the pressure of putting all her weight on it and walking on it for over three weeks. It was obvious she was in excruciating pain. It was agony for her to stand on either foot. We called AERP's Project Manager Soila Sayialel, got her to call the Warden who got through to the vets in Nairobi. By this time, I knew we had to put her down but I didn't want the rangers to shoot her without tranquilizing her first and so we needed the vet. It was now 3 o'clock in the afternoon. All of KWS's planes were in Laikipia. I desperately didn't want her to go through another night. Soila got through to AERP colleague Harvey Croze on his mobile. He was amazing. He rented a plane (generously paid for by the Born Free Foundation), miraculously got to Wilson Airport by going a back way, because the whole city was jammed by a student riot, met the vet there and took off around 5:15.

In the meantime, around 3:30, Erin collapsed onto her chest. She got up but fell again after about 15 minutes. In a way we were relieved. There was no question now that she could recover. We knew what we had to do. Fortuitously, part of the family visited her earlier in the day and the calf went off with them. One of my biggest worries was how we were going to get him back to the family if Erin died.

Soila met Harvey and the vet at the Amboseli airstrip and they arrived at where we were around 6:45. Senior Warden Njue had already joined us with Erin. He has been so extraordinary in his concern and in the actions he's taken. He insisted that she be put down then even though they would have to work in the dark because he was afraid that Erin would be attacked by hyenas and die a horrific death. Another kind of warden would think it was a waste of drugs and bullets if the elephant was going to die anyway, but he has been involved in the whole Erin saga from the beginning when he put a guard on her each night while she was alone with her calf. I've never experienced a warden with such empathy before.

The vet, Dr. Isaac Lekool, who was the same one who treated her with such care the other two times, darted her and within about 10 minutes she was snoring loudly. M99 is a powerful morphine derivative and so before she was completely out she went into a state of bliss with no pain. To let her have those few minutes meant everything to me. Once she was completely tranquilized a ranger shot her. Erin died at 8:30 on the night of 21 May 2003.



Erin at peace at last 22 May

It was all so senseless. The EBs were in the Park. There's no conflict right now. The Warden, is determined to stop this kind of spearing of elephants and lions. Today he brought eight Maasai elders from the community out to Erin's carcass and showed them the ghastly result of spearing. I waited nearby (I didn't want to see the carcass after they'd chopped out the tusks; Martyn and I had visited her just after dawn) and met with them after they saw her. I told them that her family was very gentle, that they stayed in the Park most of the time, that she was the mother of five offspring and three grandchildren, that her youngest calf was less than two years old, that I'd known Erin since she was four years old, that she was still young, only 34. I also reminded them that we've paid them over 600,000 shillings for livestock killed by elephants and that we can't continue to do that if the spearing

continues. I asked for their help. They said they would have meetings and try to find the people who did it. They also said we were all here together, that we were all part of the community. We agreed that the spearing was bad for the community. It was actually a good meeting. It might help.

After Erin's death we continued to monitor the EBs as closely as possible to see how the calf was doing and to know what the family would do now that she was dead. The day after she died on May 22 I found them only 500 meters away. Erin's youngest calf was with his older sisters. The family stayed in the area for the next two days. We don't know if they visited the carcass on any of those nights. It did not appear that any elephants had. By May 25, Echo and her family had left the area. They were found with about 150 other elephants on the 27th, seven or eight kilometers away, down along the Tanzanian border in an area where the EBs had never been recorded before. There was an abundance of grass and fragrant herbs there, but they were nervous because they were far from the Park boundary in the heart of Maasai territory. I was particularly nervous, worried that someone else in the family would be speared. They stayed there for over a week and on June 2 they returned to Erin. Martyn was there to film them coming in from the south and making a beeline straight for the carcass, which by now had been completely eaten by hyenas. Only the skull, lower jaw, a femur and pelvis were left. The family went to these bones and touched and smelled them. What can I say about their behavior. I would give anything to know what elephants are thinking and feeling when they examine the carcass of another elephant and particularly a close relative. The individual who arrived first was Erin's eight-year-old daughter Echeri.



E-Mail in a swath of nutritious green grass, still looking fat three weeks after his mother died

Over the next 10 days Martyn and I continued to spend as much time as possible with the EBs. They remained in the west of the Park where the rains had been good and had created large swaths of nutritious grazing. This vegetation will be crucial for Erin's little calf, whom I decided to name "E-Mail" (we are using an Internet theme for the calves born in his year, 2001). Normally, he would have suckled until he was about four years old, but suddenly he has to rely on vegetation alone. E-Mail hasn't tried to suckle from anyone else in the family or not that we have seen. If he was much younger he might have been allowed to suckle from a close relative, but he's too old now to start with a different female. All the females are suckling their own calves and in general a female only has enough milk for one calf.

I have hope for E-Mail. He had a good start in life with a very successful mother. The grazing is good for now. His sisters--Echeri and Erica—are sticking close to him. Interestingly, he seems to have established a relationship with Eliot and her calf Emilio and also with Echo's daughter Ebony. They certainly won't let him be taken by a predator. If he can get through to the next rainy season in November he will survive. We have had two calves orphaned at 18 months who have survived without milk. If it looks like E-Mail is doing badly towards the end of the dry season we will consider intervention.

Erica with E-Mail behind: she carries her head low and looks "depressed"

So far E-Mail is doing fairly well although he seems confused and scared at times. Luckily he was a chubby calf and he doesn't seem to have lost much if any weight. Echeri at eight years old also seems to be adjusting. It is harder to tell what Erin's adult daughters are experiencing. Edwina and Eleanor, are busy with their own calves and Edwina is about to give birth again any day now. The one offspring of Erin's who seems "depressed" is five-year-old Erica. The tilt of her ears and the way she carries her head indicate that she is disturbed. We will be keeping a close watch on her as well.



The death of an adult female in any elephant family is always a major devastating event with major repercussions years down the line. Orphaned calves die; even a surprisingly large proportion of calves that have been weaned die after their mother's death. Males who survive as orphans leave the family earlier, which subjects them to greater danger. Females without mothers are not as successful at raising their own calves when they reach maturity. In addition the family structure and size changes. Bigger families with more large adult females are better able to compete for limited resources. Even if the female herself was not the matriarch, as in the case of Erin, the succession when the matriarch does die may not be clear cut and as easy because of the loss. The EBs are definitely suffering. They are a different family now.

On a personal level, the loss of Erin hurts more than I can articulate. I had known her since she was four years old. I miss her. I feel like I failed her. On a broader level, her death is a failure of our conservation efforts. I won't give up but it seems to get harder all the time to resolve the problems elephants face today.

*Cynthia Moss
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Amboseli*