

THE HISTORY OF THE BB FAMILY

I first met the BB family on October 20, 1973. My colleague Harvey Croze and I were struck by the family immediately because it was led by a huge, tuskless female who had the biggest ears I have ever seen on an elephant. The family was very distinctive. Not only was there this magnificent, big tuskless, but there was also a second tuskless female, a one-tusked female, and a tuskless calf. It looked like this was going to be very easy family to get know and start collecting data on.



Big Tuskless leaning on a family member

As it turned out there was a certain amount of confusion about this “double tuskless” family. We managed to photograph the adult females and began to get some idea of its composition over the next few sightings. I saw the family two more times in 1973 and concluded that there were eleven members. Since I kept referring to the matriarch as Big Tuskless, that became her name and the family was designated the BBs (there was already a BA family) although we still also referred to them as the Double Tusklesses. All the other adult females

were then given names beginning with ‘B’. Bette was named after a friend from high school and Barbara was named after my roommate in college. We named the young female Bonnie and the young male Ben. The family appeared to consist of the following members:

Big Tuskless	Adult female tuskless
her calf	2-3 years old
female calf	about 7 years old
Bette	Adult female tuskless
her calf	also tuskless, 3-4 years old
Barbara	Adult female with splayed tusks
her calf	2-3 years old
Belinda	Young female about 13 years old
her calf	less than 1 year old
Bonnie	about 10 years old
Ben	about 10 years old



ID photos taken October 1973: Bette, Belinda, Barbara and Bonnie

During 1974 Harvey made two trips to Amboseli on his own and recorded the BBs or Double Tusklesses, and took some photographs that were not terribly clear because they were from a distance and the group was nervous. When he came back to Nairobi he mentioned that he had seen the Double Tusklesses and I did not think any more of it.

In March 1975 I recorded the family with two tiny new calves. One was Bette's and one was Barbara's. I saw them twice in September and twice in November 1975 and on the first sighting in November I was sad to record that there was only one first year calf remaining. Barbara's calf had died. It was also obvious that Belinda had lost her calf.

In September 1975 I had set up a permanent camp in the Ol Tukai Orok woodlands in the center of the Park and had begun to observe the elephants on a full-time basis. During the previous three years I had worked part-time in Amboseli, mostly trying to build up a photographic recognition file for the population. By the time I moved to the camp I felt that I knew the families that used the central areas of the Park fairly well. The BBs were one of those families.

Then on November 10, 1975, I was in my camp late in the afternoon when the Double Tusklesses entered the glade at the north end of the camp. They came in, took one look at the tents, and fled in terror. I managed to count that there were 12 animals in the group including two tusklesses and a one-tusker. I thought their behaviour was very odd, because the BBs had been near the camp before and had not been afraid.

In January 1976, I was out on the eastern side of the Park when I came upon the Double Tusklesses. They ran away from my vehicle when I was over 100 yards away. I started to get suspicious. This was not like Big Tuskless—she was a placid, old female who barely gave my car a glance when I drove up to her family. I managed to approach the group from another angle and then turned off my engine and watched them through binoculars. On this day there were 11 animals, including a big tuskless female, a smaller tuskless female, and, wait a minute, a right one-tusk female. I hastily consulted my photo files, and, yes, the BB's Belinda was definitely a left one-tusker. Who was this, then? I looked more closely at the big tuskless. She had a hole in her left ear, as did Big Tuskless, but it was in a slightly different place. And besides, these were not the absurdly huge ears of Big Tuskless. This elephant had normal-sized ears. I looked at

Big Tuskless's photo. The elephant in front of me was certainly not she. I took some photographs from a distance and returned to camp shaking my head.

In the next month I saw these mirror-image Double Tusklesses several more times. They were still afraid of my vehicle but I managed to get some more photos of them. They were definitely an entirely different family, which I eventually called the GBs. I named the two tusklesses Gloria and Gladys and the right one-tusker Grace. A couple of years later, when I was going over the old photographs, I discovered that Harvey had taken pictures of Gloria and Gladys on those two occasions in 1974 without realizing that they were not our original Double Tusklesses.

I gradually got to know the BBs better. I always hate to admit it but they were and remain one of my favorite families. It was something about the character of Big Tuskless. She was incredibly endearing. Every once in awhile she would take exception to my vehicle driving up to her and would charge flat out. Probably because she was tuskless I could never take her seriously. Most of the time she was marvelously tolerant and a great pleasure to be around.

It soon became evident that the BBs formed a close bond group with the UAs led by the very beautiful Ulla. These two families were frequently found together in one coordinated group. They spent most of their time in the eastern part of the Park, climbing up onto Iremito Ridge in the evenings and slowly making their way into Longinye Swamp in the morning.



Coming into the Park in the morning

When I look back now at the age structure of the BB family in 1975 I realize that they were unusual in having several calves in the family. They had six calves under five years old, two of them born in 1975 (to Bette and Barbara). Most of the Amboseli families had very few young calves. It was only several years later that I realized that breeding was being suppressed by environmental conditions at the time.

During 1975 there had been low rainfall in the Park and surrounding areas, and in 1976 the rains failed with only a miserly couple of inches falling during what was supposed to

be the wet season. There was a brief flush of green in April and May and then a serious drought set in. It was a very bad year to be born in Amboseli. I recorded the birth of 29 calves. By the end of the year only 15 remained. Of those that died, most were probably the victims of drought. It was sad and depressing watching these calves get weaker and weaker and then disappear. Their mothers had milk but probably not in great quantity or quality. What really seemed to affect the calves was the lack of suitable vegetation to feed on once they reached the age when they should have started to eat solid food. Calves start to eat a bit of grass when they are between three and four months old, and by the time they are eight months old they need quite a lot of food to sustain them. In 1976 as the drought progressed there was only swamp vegetation which the young calves had difficulty both handling and digesting. Many of the calves that had been born in the early part of the year died in September, October and November. The BBs did not give birth to any calves in 1976, but in the early part of the drought in October 1975 Barbara lost her calf that had been born in March of that year.

Finally good rains came in December 1976 and in the following three years there was higher than average rainfall with resulting abundant and nutritious vegetation. At the same time, for reasons I've never been sure about, the poaching stopped; and in 1978 the Maasai warriors were promoted to junior elders who no longer felt it necessary to



spear elephants to prove their bravery. All these changes meant a period of peace and plenty for the elephants and the elephants—adults and calves alike—gradually recovered.

Big Tuskless with her 1979 calf who was eventually named Butch: he's climbing on Barbara's calf

During the drought, I now realized that the females had stopped reproductive cycling altogether. Only

two calves had been born to the Amboseli population between January 1977 and November 1978, which means there were only two conceptions in 1975 and 1976. However, as soon as conditions improved the females began to come into oestrus again and mate. Since so few of them had young calves there were a lot of females ready to conceive. The result was a baby boom in 1979 and 1980. From November 25, 1978, to June 5, 1980, one hundred calves were born! At times it seemed as if they were falling out of the sky. The BBs made a significant contribution to the baby boom. In 1979 all

the adult females gave birth: Big Tuskless and Barbara gave birth to males; Bette, Belinda and Bonnie had females.

Conditions continued to be good during the early '80s with the result that there was a second baby boom in 1983. The females who had given birth in 1979 and 1980 were ready to give birth again three or four years later. In addition, many young females reached sexual maturity in 1980 and 1981 and they conceived that year and gave birth 22 months later in 1982 and 1983. Big Tuskless's beautiful daughter Bev was one of these young females. (She's a gorgeous female because she inherited her mother's wonderful big ears). Bev had her first calf in February 1982. Bette's daughter Bente (also a tuskless) and Barbara's daughter Bess gave birth to their first calves in 1983. Unfortunately, as is fairly common with first mothers, Bev's calf died. More unusual was that Belinda's and Bonnie's '79 calves also did not survive. But they made up for lost time, and they along with Barbara and Bette gave birth to calves in 1983. In the meantime, the young male who was originally with the family went independent. Big Tuskless's son born in 1971 also struck out on his own a few years later. Even with these departures and the deaths, the family was growing rapidly, from the eleven I originally recorded to 18 by the end of 1983. The composition was as follows:

Individual	Sex	Month and Year of Birth (known or estimated)
Big Tuskless	F	1933
Butch	M	2-79
Bev	F	1966
Buster	M	1971
Bette	F	1947
BE3	M	6-83
Beatrice	F	6-79
Bernadette	F	2-75
Bente	F	1970
BNT3	F	4-83
Barbara	F	1948
BB3	M	11-83
Bronowsky	M	7-79
Bess	F	1971
BS3	F	9-83
Belinda	F	1960
BEL3	M	3-83
Bonnie	F	1963
BON3	F	3-83

In Africa droughts are inevitable and 1984 proved to be a year of very low rainfall. Amboseli experienced hard times once again. Perhaps this drought was not quite on the scale of the 1976 one, but it was devastating nonetheless. Many of the calves that had been born in 1983 died, and because the Maasai and their cattle were competing for the very limited resources, there were many spearing incidents and more elephants died as a result. Once again the BBs did not give birth to any calves during the drought, but two of the calves born in 1983 died in 1985 (Barbara's and Bess's) and Big Tuskless gave birth to a calf in January 1985, which died less than two months later.

As it turned out Big Tuskless may have lost her calf because she was not well herself. In May 1986 she died of what appeared to be natural causes. I saw her one evening. She was slightly separated from her family and kept stretching back. I suspected she was in pain and worried about her all that night. The next morning I went back out to where she was and, sadly, found her dead. I still miss her to this day. Bette, the second tuskless, appeared to take over joint leadership of the family with Barbara, and unlike some groups that lose matriarchs, the family stayed intact.

During the following years Amboseli experienced average to higher than average rainfall and the BBs continued to grow. Then tragedy struck again when Bette died in March 1989. She disappeared but her calves remained with the family, which is the tell-tale sign that a female has died. We have no idea how she died. Her youngest calf, born in May 1987, managed to survive for seven months after she died, but he was just too young to make it without milk and he died at the height of the dry season. Bette's daughter, Bente, at 19 years old took over as head of the little sub-group with her own calf, named Bryony, plus Bette's calves. From that point on she started spending more and more time away from the family moving with Bette's daughters Bernadette and Beatrice (a one-tusker).

Matriarch Barbara

Barbara took over as matriarch of the whole family and has proved to be a wise leader over the years. The family prospered with 20 more calves born from 1991 through 1999. A few of these calves died while they were still very young, but that is to be expected. There were no losses of adults during this period.

By now Bente's subgroup was spending most of its time



separated from the main part of the BBs and we considered it a new family. Bernadette and Beatrice, however, remained with Barbara. Elephants are frequently unpredictable in this way. Bernadette and Beatrice are Bente's sisters. One would think that the closest relatives would stay together but it didn't happen in this case.

The year 2000 turned out to be a terrible one because of a drought. At times like this the Maasai and the elephants are competing for the same meager resources, tempers become short, and conflicts occur. Fifteen elephants were speared and nine of them died before the drought ended in December. The BBs, under the wise leadership of Barbara, avoided the Maasai and came through the drought with only one youngster dying. Four calves were born to the BBs during that drought and all of them survived. By the end of 2000 the family had grown to 35 and consisted of the following after the departure of young males:

Individual	Sex	Month and Year of Birth (known or estimated)
Barbara	F	1948
Blaine	M	3-95
Beckwith	F	7-87
Bess	F	1971
BS9	M	12-99
Boatner	M	7-95
Balanites	M	6-91
Boris	M	12-86
Belinda	F	1960
Benjamin	M	1-95
Bhaskar	M	11-90
Bogoria	F	2-87
BOG0	M	1-00
Bonnie	F	1963
Brinton	M	2-97
Billie	F	5-93
Bjorn	M	5-89
Beryl	F	3-83
Bev	F	1966
BEV7	F	7-97
Bala	F	5-90
Brittany	F	1-85

Bernadette	F	2-75
BN0	M	4-00
Bella	F	4-96
Begonia	F	8-91
Beatrice	F	6-79
BEA0	F	2-00
Barton	F	1-95
Bente	F	1970
BN0	M	3-00
Beardsley	M	4-95
Biswas	M	6-90
Bryony	F	4-83
BRY9	M	4-99

In January 2001 a huge amount of rain fell in Amboseli and the grass was soon up to the elephants' knees. With such a super-abundance of food the elephants and other wildlife grew positively fat on the lush vegetation. Feeling good, the elephants formed huge aggregations of 200-300 and there was a tremendous amount of play. Even the big adult females lost their dignity and ran around with the whites of their eyes showing attacking imaginary enemies in the long grass. It would be wonderful if it could always be like that, but nothing is predictable in African savannahs. The only black spot for the BBs was that in January 2002 Belinda died, possibly of spearing, but we do not know because her carcass was never found. All of her calves survived.

Now as I write this history in October 2010, I wish I could report that the BBs made it through the 2009 drought with few losses. Unfortunately, they turned out to be one of the families that suffered the most, with the loss of 11 members. The number was not so important; it was who they lost. We expect calves to die in droughts but the BBs lost five of their adult females: Bonnie, Bev, Bess, Bernadette and Beatrice. They also lost many calves. The amazing thing is that Barbara survived the drought. She was one of only two females over 50 years old who made it, the other being Deborah of the DBs. All the other females over 50 died. All were matriarchs whose families were devastated.

It is interesting that the BB2s, Bente's family, did not do badly at all during the drought. They only lost one calf. Bente's decision to leave the bigger family seems to have been a wise one. In doing so she avoided competition amongst many members.

I was out in the Park on Sunday morning, the 10th of this month and found the BBs. When I first saw them they were feeding deep in the northern part of the Longinye Swamp. After a while they all climbed out, dusted, rested and socialized on an island in the middle of the swamp. I could see that they were much reduced compared to

huge family they were only two years ago. However, they seemed relaxed and in good condition. Barbara was there right in the middle surrounded by her immediate offspring and grandchildren as well as the sons and daughters of her relatives. She is their anchor, the center of their world.

The BB bulls, out in the world of independent males, are doing well with one tragic exception. Big Tuskless's 39-year-old son Buster was killed in June of this year and his tusks hacked out by poachers. This is a terrible loss to the population; Buster was a gorgeous big bull who was just beginning to pass on the BB genes, maybe even including those wonderful big ears of his mother.

After all the losses, the BBs have been reduced to 19 which is still a large family by any standards. The BB2s, Bente's small sub-group remains with five members. Below is the current composition of both BB families:



Buster

Individual	Sex	Month and Year of Birth (known or estimated)	Mother if Dead
Barbara	F	1948	
Baidu	F	3-01	
Blaine	M	3-95	
Beckwith	F	7-87	
Bernard	M	12-99	Bess
Benjamin	M	1-95	Belinda
Bogoria	F	2-87	Belinda
Bamenda	M	2-04	
Byte	M	1-00	
Bole	F	7-01	Bonnie
Brinton	M	2-97	Bonnie
Billie	F	5-93	Bonnie
Beryl	F	3-83	Bonnie
Browser	M	6-01	Bev
Bodias	F	7-97	Bev

Bala	F	5-90	Bev
Barrymore	F	10-03	
Bold	M	5-00	Bernadette
Bella	F	4-96	Bernadette
BB2			
Bente	F	1970	Bette
Babette	F	5-05	
Burn	M	3-00	
Bryony	F	4-83	
Boaz	M	4-99	

The remaining BB bulls are shown in the table below:

Bronowsky	Jul-79	353	Barbara
Butch	Feb-79	354	Big T
Blake	Jun-83	372	Bette
Barnaby	Feb-83	373	Belinda
Boris	Dec-86	422	Bess
Bjorn	May-89	473	Bonnie
Bhaskar	Nov-90	484	Belinda
Biswas	Jun-90	422	Bente
Balanites	Jun-91	506	Bess
Blaine	Mar-95	580	Barbara
Boatner	Jul-95	581	Bess
Benjamin	Jan-95	582	Belinda
Beardsley	Apr-95	583	Bente

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