

## *The History of the BC Family*

The individuals who eventually were eventually assigned the family code BC were first sighted and photographed in August 1975. They were seen a group of 20. Among them was a very old female who had been seen previously. We called her Loretta but we didn't know which family she belonged to. Sadly she died by the end of that year, but in time I decided



from behavior and resemblances that she had been the matriarch of the family we later called the BCs. It must have been a blow for the others to lose her because they were relatively young and she was

*Bronwen when she was the matriarch of the BCs; she broke her left ear as an adult an experienced leader of around 50 years old. I had only seen the BCs that one time in 1975 before Loretta disappeared. I didn't see them at all in 1976 despite the fact that I had set up a permanent research camp and was monitoring the elephants almost on a daily basis.*



*Beda in 1977*

I began to see them regularly in 1977 and recorded them on 12 occasions. Where they were in 1976 is a mystery. Even though I had seen them 13 times I was still having trouble deciding who belonged in the BC family. I often saw them with the JB family led by Justine and then also with the HB family led by Horatia. When they were together it was as if they were one family, but because I had seen the BCs without these two other families several times I concluded that they were a unique family.

It wasn't until 1978 that I felt confident to say that the BC family consisted of the following members:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Date of Birth
Beda		1953
Bronwen		1961
Blossom		1963
Beulah		1966
Brenna		1966
Young Male		1967
Bianca		1967
Brita		1972

It is striking that there are no young calves in this list. The only calf is Brita at six years old. I could tell who her mother was. It might have been Beda or Loretta. When I first recorded Beda she had a small calf of about two years old. That calf died in 1976 due to the severe drought Amboseli experienced that year. A male calf of around eight years old also died during the drought. He might also have been Beda's but I wasn't sure. It was obvious that they were not doing well in terms of reproduction. However, they were not unusual. Both poaching and the drought in the 1970s took their toll on the Amboseli elephants. Other families were also suffering. More than half of the calves born in 1976 died and because the females were in such poor condition only two calves had been born between January 1977 and November 1978.

Fortunately, the situation changed and there was good rain in 1977 and 1978 and the poaching ceased. The females began to come into oestrus again and mate. Since so few of the Amboseli females had young calves there were a lot of females ready to conceive. Twenty-two months later a baby boom started which lasted through 1980. From November 25, 1978 to June 5, 1980, one hundred calves were born. At times it seemed like babies were falling out of the sky.

The BC joined the baby boom. Bronwen gave birth to a daughter in March 1979; Blossom had a son September 1980; and Beda had a daughter in November 1980. Sadly Blossom's calf died a year later when Blossom died of unknown causes.

The family continued to do well over the next few years with more calves being born. Brenna, Brita and Bianca, all first-time mothers, had calves. Only Brenna's died when he was six months old. The family was growing and thriving



*Beautiful Brenna*

Then environmental conditions changed once again. In 1984 Amboseli experienced one of its periodic droughts, but this one was harsher than most. In 1984, the rains basically failed with only a miserly couple of inches falling during what was supposed to be the wet season. It was sad and depressing watching the calves get weaker and weaker and then disappearing. 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 vegetation in their diet to sustain them. In 1984 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.

At the same time the Maasai had promoted a new warrior set and the combination of the drought and scores of young men out to prove their bravery was devastating for the elephants. In all 67 elephants died during 1984: 11 adult females, 13 adult males, three juveniles, 13 weanlings, five second-year calves, and 22 first-year calves.

The BCs actually did better than most families. They only experienced one mortality. Brenna had given birth to another calf in June 1984 but this calf died two months later. That was the second loss for Brenna. Bronwen had also given birth in 1984 but it was in November just before the drought broke. This calf survived.

Over the next few years, there continued to be births, but there were also two very disturbing deaths. Beda, the matriarch died in 1988, we believed from spearing. Bronwen took over as matriarch but she died along with her youngest calf four years later in 1992. We thought this might have been a poaching. In neither case did we find the carcass so we could only estimate

the cause of death. Beulah and Brenna both born in 1966 were left to lead the family. After a short time it was clear that Brenna was the matriarch. At the end of 1992 the BC family consisted of the following:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Date of Birth	Mother if dead
Brenna	F	1966	
BRE92	M	Jul-92	
Barsaloi	M	Sep-87	
Beulah	F	1966	
Bevan	M	Oct-85	
Bianca	F	1967	
BIA92	F	Apr-92	
Baringo	M	Apr-87	
Brita	F	1972	Beda?
BRI92	F	Feb-92	
Bryn	M	Aug-83	
Bridget	F	Nov-80	Beda
BRG	F	Jan-91	
Baird	M	Nov-84	Bronwen

By now there were many calves to name. The calves have been named according to the system I use. Usually a calf is not named until it is four years old. Up until that age it is referred to by a code based on its mother's name and its year of birth. Thus, before Barsaloi was named he was referred to as BRE87 meaning Brenna's '87 calf. I was starting to run out of the usual first names, so I started using themes. For the 1987 calves I used Kenya place names. Barsaloi is place in northern Kenya. Bianca's '87 calf was named Baringo for one of the Rift Valley lakes. Also I started an Amboseli elephant naming program for donors and this definitely helped with new names. hroughout the 1980s the BCs continued to associate with the HB and JB families. They were particularly close with HB family. Loretta, the big old matriarch of the BCs, had seemed bonded to the HB matriarch Horatia. Although the BCs had several changes in matriarch they continued their friendship with the HBs but not so much with the JB. So much depends on friendships between members of two different families.

In fact, for a while we considered the BCs and HBs as one family because they were always together. Horatia seemed to be the uber matriarch taking care of everyone whether or not they were HBs or BCs. In February 1992 I was lucky enough to witness the birth of a calf in the daytime. About 99% of calves are born at night. On this occasion I was with filmmaker Martyn Colbeck and we found Brita in labor. She was off to the side straining and within a few minutes the calf dropped to the ground. Then it was



pandemonium as the families surrounded her. Brita did not seem to know what to do but then Horatia pushed through the others and took over. She got the fetal sack off the calf and got him to his feet. All the time the rest of them were bellowing and trumpeting in celebration. It was a wonderful sight that I will never forget.

After Bronwen's death in 1992, for reasons known only to elephants, the families decided to shift their range. Having been peripheral western elephants for almost twenty years, all three families started spending much more time using the central zone of the Park, and the area immediately to the south. Perhaps they felt safer in this area, as Tanzania in particular was becoming more dangerous for Amboseli elephants in the late 1980s before the ivory trade ban of 1989 took effect and made poaching unprofitable for a while.

At the turn of the millennium the BC family was doing well. They had only lost one adult, Beulah, in the previous eight years, which is quite a remarkable record. However, tragedy struck in 2008 when Brenna was speared and



*Horatia (Rt) helping Brita with her newborn calf*

killed. The loss of a matriarch is always profound for an elephant family and it was no different for the BCs. Brenna had done an excellent job of leading her family. The females gave birth to nine calves between 2000 and 2008, almost doubling the family size as all the older females and young, newly mature females gave birth. All of these calves lived and even more unusual all of them are still alive today. Brenna was definitely a good matriarch. Fortunately, Bianca, who was only a year younger than Brenna, was able to take over.

While the family was increasing through births it was also now losing some of its males as they reached sexual maturity. Females born into a family stay in the family for the rest of their lives. Males, on the other hand, leave on

their own accord, although sometimes they may be encouraged, anytime from 10-14 years. There have been a few "mama's boys" who stayed until they were 18 or 19, but that's rare. Many of the BC boys were reaching the age of independence and leaving to go out into the world of adult males. Those who left were: Bryn, Baird, Bevan, Baringo and Barsaloi.

At the end of 2008 the BC family consisted of 21 individuals as follows:

<b>Individual</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Estimated or Known Date of Birth</b>	<b>Mother if dead</b>
Bianca	F	1967	
BIA08	M	Jun-08	
Bamako	F	Feb-04	
Binary	M	Oct-00	
Baby Face	M	Nov-96	
Bouenza	F	Apr-92	
BOU08	M	Apr-08	
Bujumbura	M	May-04	
Brita	F	1972	
BRI04	F	Feb-05	
Bitmap	M	Sep-00	
Brandy	F	Nov-96	
Busira	F	Feb-92	
Bridget	F	Nov-80	Bronwen
Boscia	F	Jan-91	
Blythe	F	Nov-80	Beda
BLY03	M	Feb-03	
Buyoya	M	Sep-97	
Beckham	M	Nov-02	Brenna
Banda	F	Apr-97	Brenna
Benito	M	Jul-92	Brenna
<b>Independent Males</b>	<b>Code No</b>	<b>Birth Date</b>	<b>Mother</b>
Bryn	374	Aug-83	Brita
Baird	391	Nov-84	Bronwen
Bevan	407	Oct-85	Beulah
Baringo	434	Apr-87	Bianca
Barsaloi	433	Sep-87	Brenna

Life seemed to be going well for the Amboseli elephants, but nature began to show its harshest side. Not enough rain fell for two years in a row and then in the third year, 2009, there was barely any rain at all. Amboseli experienced the worst drought in living memory. People, livestock and wildlife all suffered. Sixty to eighty percent of the cattle died; 83% of the wildebeest, 71% of the

zebras and 61% of the buffaloes perished. Nearly 400 elephants died both from the drought and an upsurge of poaching.

Some elephant families fared better than others but there were losses in all the families. The BC family did much better than most; only one calf died during the drought, the five-month-old son of Busira. It was her first calf.

The drought broke in December and fairly good rain fell in 2010. African savannahs are remarkable in being able to recover quickly. Within a couple of months the woodlands and plains were transformed from what looked like bare soil to lush green swards.



*Brita grew up to be a spectacular female; she is now the matriarch of her family*

Slowly the elephants began to recover. They put on weight and there was a spring in their step. The ATE team had their work cut out for them trying to discover who had died, who had survived, and who all the orphans were. It took almost a year to be able to figure it all out.

In the meantime, it didn't take the females long to recover enough to start breeding again. Already in January and February 2010 we recorded females in oestrus. With a twenty-two month gestation period we expected to start finding new calves in November 2011. And that's exactly what happened. There were actually two births in October, so those females were



surprisingly early. More calves came in November and December: a total of 46, and then in 2012 there was a deluge of calves, another 200!

The BCs contributed two calves to this remarkable baby boom in 2012: Bouenza had a female in January and Banda had her first calf in June. They went on to produce eight more calves over the next five years. Sadly there were also some deaths and one was particularly tragic because it was the matriarch Bianca. She had led the family successfully through the horrific drought of 2009 only to be killed along with her daughter Busira in 2012. We do not know the circumstances of the deaths, but it was almost certainly caused by man.



*Three of many healthy calves in the BC family with their mothers*

Brita, who was by then 40 years and thus an experienced female, took over as matriarch. The family continues to do well under her leadership. By August 2017 there were 22 members of the family plus 12 independent bulls. Having that many males grow up and successfully move away is definitely an achievement.

If the BCs and the other elephants in Amboseli are left in peace I am sure they will continue to thrive. We at the Amboseli Trust for Elephants are doing all we can to make that possible.

*Cynthia Moss  
Amboseli National Park  
October 2017*



*The Composition and Structure of the BC Family  
October 2017*

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Date of Birth	Mother {grandmother} if dead
Brita	F	1972	
Breeze	M	Nov-10	
Bernice	F	Feb-05	
BNC16	M	May-16	
Brandy	F	Nov-96	
BDY15	F	Nov-15	
Blythe	F	Nov-80	Beda
Banquo	M	Apr-13	
Bieke	M	Sep-09	
Boscia	F	Jan-91	Bridget {Bronwen}
Blue	F	Apr-14	
Bert	M	Oct-09	
Bouenza	F	Apr-92	Bianca
BOU15	M	Jan-15	
Babinza	F	Jan-12	
Bounty	M	Apr-08	
Bujumbura	M	May-04	
Bamako	F	Feb-04	Bianca
BKO15	M	Nov-15	
Bazooka	M	Jun-08	Bianca
Banda	F	Apr-97	Brenna
Baboa	M	Jun-12	
Independent Males	Code No	Birth Date	Mother
Bryn	374	Aug-83	Brita
Baird	391	Nov-84	Bronwen
Bevan	407	Oct-85	Beulah
Baringo	434	Apr-87	Bianca
Barsaloi	433	Sep-87	Brenna
Benito	528	Jul-92	Brenna
Baby Face	631	Nov-96	Bianca
Buyoya	M	Sep-97	Blythe
Binary	710	Oct-00	Bianca
Bitmap	711	Sep-00	Brita
Beckham	791	Nov-02	Brenna
Brad Pitt	796	Feb-03	Blythe