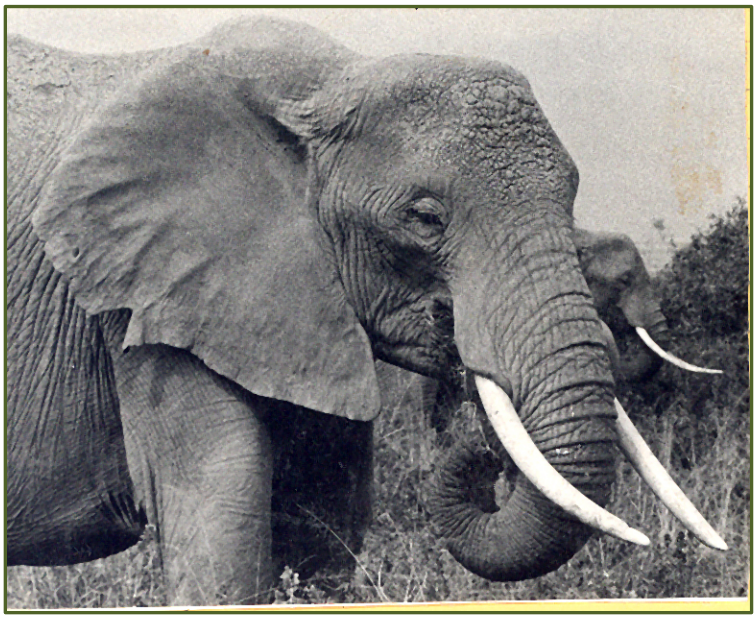
The History of the MB Family

The MB family was one of the last families to be recognized in the Amboseli population. The Amboseli Elephant Research Project was started on a part-time basis in September 1972. My colleague Harvey Croze and I would together or separately try to get down to Amboseli as often as possible over the next three years. In that period our main goal was to identify individuals and families and to try to work out their associations, distribution and ranging patterns.

We gradually built up an identification file of individuals based on photographs of their ears. Each elephant ear is unique with holes, bumps, nicks, slits and distinctive vein patterns. By the time I started a full-time project based in the Park in September 1975, I had identified 43 families.

Over the next year I added more and on January 21, 1977 I found a new family with particularly beautiful females. I assigned them the family code MB. Each time a family was discovered they were assigned a letter of the alphabet and each adult given a name starting with that letter. I had already gone through the letters once and had to start again with AB, BB, CB, etc. There was already an M family, so they became the MA family and the new family became MB.



An early ID photo of beautiful Megan

When I first met the MBs they were in the eastern side of the Park but thereafter I saw them in the west. I guessed that they spent a lot of their time in Tanzania and that is why I hadn't spotted them before. They were more wary of cars than the central elephants but they were not aggressive.

On that first day they were in a big aggregation of 230 elephants. I managed to photograph three adult females from this new family. I gave them Irish names—Maggie,

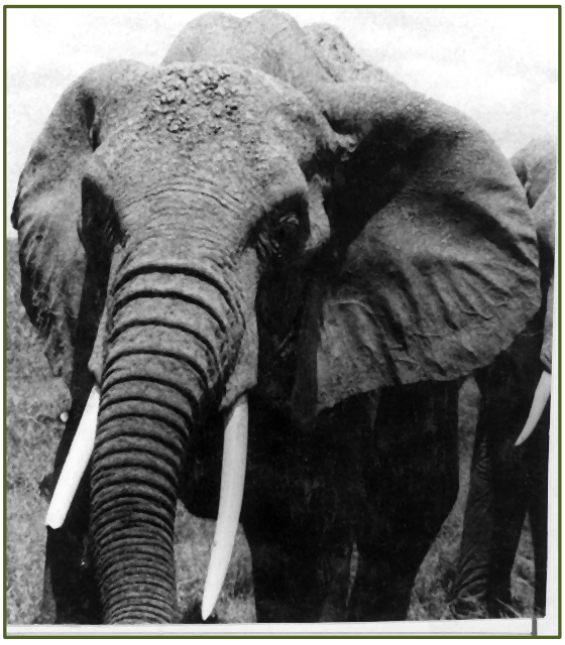
Megan and Molly. I saw them three more times in January and then again in May, June and July. There appeared to be 12 members of the family.

Maggie	Adult F
Megan	Adult F
One year-old calf	F
Molly	Adult F
YF left-broken tusk	F
YF straight-tusked	F
5 calves 7-9 years old	F
10-12 year old male	M

I noted right away that they did not have any young calves other than Megan's year-old daughter. There had been a terrible drought in Amboseli in 1976 and many of the population's calves in the 0-5 year-old range died. Older calves were able to survive such as the six calves in the MBs. It was frustrating because it was difficult to tell to whom these calves belonged since they were no longer suckling from their mothers. And clearly some were orphans because there were only three adult females. What was amazing was that Megan had managed to get her calf through the drought. She was born just as it became critical around January 1976 and somehow survived.

After that first year I began to see the MBs on a regular basis. They became more relaxed around my vehicle. I could now watch them carefully to see which of the older calves followed or stayed near which females.

During 1976 the females in all the Amboseli families had stopped reproductive activity because they were in poor nutritional condition. As a result only two calves were born 1977 and none in 1978 until November, 22 months after the drought ended. Fortunately good rains had come in 1977 and the females began to recover.



Minnie, the straight-tusked young female

The first female to give birth was Delia of the DBs. Four more calves came in December. Then in 1979 and 1980 we had a deluge of calves. All the females seemed to be making up for lost time. The MBs contributed to this baby boom. The first to give birth was one of the young adult females. Now called Minnie, she had a daughter in January 1979. Molly gave birth to a female calf in November of that year. In 1980 Megan and Molly had calves, also females. All these females meant that the family would grow because they would stay for the rest of their lives. By the end of 1980 there were 16 members of the family and all but one was a female, which was very unusual.

Two more young females, one I called Mercy and the other Milly, reached maturity. Mercy gave birth in February 1981 and Milly in November 1982. Both had daughters. In the meantime in 1982 after short calving interval Minnie had a new calf and this was finally a male. Three more young females named Moyra, Miranda and Melinda had their first calves in 1983 and 1984. Maggie had another daughter in 1984. The family was growing rapidly.

I was able to assign mothers to two of these young adult females based on their behavior and association patterns, others were confusing, and still others had obviously lost their mothers before I met them. I decided that Moyra belonged to Maggie and Miranda to Molly. The young male went independent and the calf born to Miranda died when she was three months old, which made only two losses in the family. At the end of 1984 the family numbered 20 and consisted of the following:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Month & Year of Birth
Maggie	F	1942
MAG84	F	Dec-84
Maisie	F	Mar-80
Moyra		1970
Megan	F	1953
MEG80	F	Nov-80
Mia	F	Jan-76
Molly	F	1954
Mathilda	F	Nov-79
Miranda	F	1971
Minnie		1963
MIN82	M	Mar-82
Monica	F	Jan-79

Mercy	F	1967
MER81	F	Feb-81
Milly	F	1968
MIL82	F	Nov-82
Maude	F	1969
Melissa	F	1970
MEL84	F	12-84

Calves are named in January of the year they will reach four years old. In the meantime, they are given codes based on their mother's name and their year of birth. I had named Maisie, Mia, Mathilda and Monica.

All was going well for the family but in 1984 there was another drought and an increase in spearing by the Maasai who were in fierce competition with wildlife for the little remaining vegetation. There were many deaths that year but the MBs only lost Miranda's calf. However, the following year proved to be tragic for the MBs. Maggie was killed by poachers and her youngest calf died as a result.

Losing a matriarch is profound experience for an elephant family. Maggie was 43 years old when she died, 11 years older than the next oldest female. She was very experienced, very self-assured, and an excellent leader. The family would miss her terribly. Megan at 32 years old had to take over.

A young calf learning how to use her trunk

Luckily for the MBs, Megan turned out to be a very successful matriarch. Over the next three years there was little change in the family. Only three calves died. Rainfall was relatively high for Amboseli and there was no poaching and very few incidents of spearing by the Maasai. Then in 1988 Molly disappeared presumably killed but we did not know how. Three more calves died but no adults.

In the meantime there were several successful births in the MB family with an excellent rate of survivorship. Megan, Melissa, Miranda, Moyra, Maude and Minnie all had calves. And some of the young females gave birth for the first time; Mercy, and Mia had their first calves.

Megan must have been doing something right because between the end of 1992 and August 1997 there were no deaths at all which was an exceptional record. However, in 1997 Mercy died. She had been speared.

More calves were born and the MBs had grown to a large family under Megan's leadership. At the end of 1997 the family consisted of the following 30 members:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Month & Year of Birth	Mother {grandmother} if dead
Megan	F	1953	
MEG94	M	May-94	
McKinley	M	Nov-88	
Maureen	F	Nov-80	
MAE97	M	May-97	
Mia	F	Jan-76	
MIA95	M	Oct-95	
Minnie	F	1963	
MIN94	M	May-94	
Morgan	M	Mar-82	
Monica	F	Jan-79	
MON96	F	Jul-96	
Milly	F	1968	
MIL94	M	Apr-94	
Meave	F	Nov-82	
Maude	F	1969	
MAU94	M	Nov-94	
Merle	F	Nov-88	
Melissa	F	1970	
MEL97	F	May-97	
Maria	F	Nov-88	
Moyra	F	1970	Maggie
MOY95	M	Jan-95	
Maerua	M	Jan-91	
Maisie	F	Mar-80	Maggie
Mathilda	F	Nov-79	Molly
Miranda	F	1971	Molly
MIR94	F	Dec-94	

Maya	F	Feb-81	Mercy
Malati	F	Mar-90	Mercy

In 1998 only one calf was born, a son to Minnie, but it was an excellent year for all the Amboseli elephants. Like the rest of Kenya, the Park received a huge amount of rain courtesy of an *El Nino*. There was a super-abundance of food and all the elephants grew positively fat on the lush vegetation. 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.

Towards the end of 1999 we began to see the results of *El Nino*. Baby elephants seemed to be raining from the sky. Up through October 1999 there were 63 births, which were expected, but in November and December we suddenly had a deluge of new calves. These were conceived 22 months before, starting in January 1998 when the *El Nino* rains were well underway and the elephants were in the best possible condition to breed. In the last two months of 1999 alone 48 more calves were born giving us a new record of 111 births for one year.

Milly's son Meschach soon after he went independent

The MBs made a significant contribution to this baby boom. They produced seven calves, all of which have lived to this day, which shows that a good start in life is important. In the meantime some of they male calves who had been born into the family were becoming independent. Young males leave their families at the average age of 14. For some it's a slow transition. They start by moving at the periphery of the family, then they may go away for a day or so before returning to the

immense security and protection that the family provides. Eventually, the pull to be out with the other males seems to win out and they leave for good. Others just seem to leave from one day to the next. We also have had a few "Mama's boys" who have stayed with their mothers until they were 18 or 19.

Over the next several years between 1998 and 2007 the MBs flourished. There were 32 births and only 10 deaths. Most of the deaths were of calves--we always expect some calf mortality--but three were of adult females: Monica, Maude and Melissa. We don't know how they died but we suspect it was the result of human-elephant conflict.

Beautiful Mia in happier times

During 2008 there were several more deaths, but this was the beginning of what would be a terrible time for elephants, people, livestock and all the wildlife in Amboseli. Starting in late 2008 and all through 2009 the area experienced the worst drought in living memory. Even the very old Maasai men and women could not remember a worse year. More than 80% of their cattle died. The wildlife suffered as well—83% of the wildebeests, 71% of the zebras, 61% of the buffaloes, and 25% of Amboseli's elephants died.

There simply wasn't enough food for the animals. Although there is always water in Amboseli, fed from Kilimanjaro, with no rain there was little or no vegetation. Most of the calves born in 2008 and 2009 died. Even more tragically many of the older females died. All but two of the big adult females over 50 perished. Elephants have six sets of teeth in their lifetime and when the sixth set wears down it is difficult for an old

elephant to chew tough vegetation. At the same time there was an upsurge in poaching and in most cases we didn't find the carcass and so could not tell if an adult female died from the drought or was killed for her ivory.

The MBs lost many calves and six more adult females: Mia, Meave, Milly Moyra, Maisie, and Morag. It was devastating for them and all the elephant families in Amboseli. We wondered if some of the families would ever recover but we underestimated the resilience and flexibility of elephants.

In December 2009 the drought finally broke and good rain began to fall in Amboseli starting in January 2010. Tragically, just as conditions were improving, the MB's matriarch Megan was killed, almost certainly by poachers. She had long, graceful tusks. With all their losses during the drought this death was a particularly brutal blow to the family. Megan was 57 when she died. The next oldest female was Minnie at 47 years old. Fortunately, she had the experience needed to lead the family.

Minnie and part of the MB family

Luckily for all of us in Amboseli, a new organization was created in 2010 to deal with the poaching. Nick Brandt, a brilliant photographer, had been photographing the Amboseli elephants for several years. He was distressed by the losses and started the Big Life Foundation, which supports local Maasai scouts. Big Life created a well-equipped, dedicated anti-poaching force of 400 Maasai scouts. Poaching of elephants virtually came to a halt.

In the meantime, it took the Amboseli elephants a few months to recover but they were soon in good condition once again. The females had stopped reproductive activity during the drought year with the result that 22 months later in 2011 only one calf had been born up until October. Then a baby boom began.

Qumquat was the first to give birth on October 12. From that date until the end of 2012, 251 were born, an all-time record. The MBs wasted no time. They produced three calves in 2011 and three calves in 2012. In the next five years 17 more calves were born to the MBs and not one calf death was recorded.

The MBs are such a large family now that it is not surprising that they break into subgroups with membership depending on close relatedness. We rarely see them all together. However, there has been amazing rainfall in Amboseli in March 2018. Once the grass and other vegetation grows up as a result of all this life-giving water, the MBs will probably get together again in large aggregations. It will be a highly social time with the adult females meeting old friends and relatives, the young males testing each other's strength, the calves finding new playmates, and the big musth coming to the aggregations to find females ready to mate. It's the best time for elephants and for those of us who watch them.

Cynthia Moss
March 2018

MB Structure & Composition
March 2018

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Date of Birth	Mother {Grandmother} if Dead
Minnie	F	1963	
Mcheli	F	May-14	
Miles	M	May-09	
Muntari	F	Jun-02	
Malvolio	M	Nov-13	
Madigan	F	Jul-96	Monica
MDG15	F	Feb-15	
Milena	F	Dec-11	
Miranda	F	1971	Molly?

MIR17	M	Nov-17	
Majani	F	Mar-14	
Maurella	F	Jun-09	
Mathilda	F	Nov-79	Molly
Mercutio	M	Nov-13	
Mimi	F	Jun-08	
MMI18	M	Jan-18	
Maureen	F	Nov-80	Megan
Marilyn	F	May-15	
Momo	F	Jan-09	
Margaux	F	Sep-05	
MGX17	F	Oct-17	
Maya	F	Feb-81	Mercy
MAY16	M	Mar-16	
Maksim	M	Dec-11	
Malati	F	Mar-90	Mercy
MTI16	M	Jan-16	
Maalia	F	Oct-12	
Marshmallow	F	Jun-08	
Mitzi	F	Jan-03	
Macbeth	M	Sep-13	
Merle	F	Nov-88	Maude
MRL16	M	Feb-16	
Mbato	M	Oct-12	
Martini	F	Jun-07	
Maria	F	Nov-88	Melissa
MRA15	M	Jun-15	
Malugie	F	Dec-11	
Museveni	F	May-97	Melissa
MUS16	M	Jan-16	
Mabinja	M	Aug-12	
Mozilla	F	Jul-01	Morag {Moyra}
MZL18	F	Jan-18	
Melenge	M	Aug-14	
Mogadishu	F	Feb-04	Moyra {Maggie}
MOG15	M	Jan-15	
Michelle	F	May-03	Maisie {Maggie}
MCH17	F	Dec-17	
MCH15	M	Jan-15	

Independent Males	Code No.	Birth Date	Mother {Grandmother}
Maerua	518	Jan-91	Moyra {Maggie}
Meshach	563	Apr-94	Milly
Masud	649	Jun-98	Minnie
Max	683	Sep-99	Megan
Merlin	685	Nov-99	Maude
Malcolm	687	Jun-99	Moyra {Maggie}
Mouse	725	Mar-00	Monica
MySpace	759	Jun-01	Maureen
Makelele	782	Nov-02	Maria
Matt Damon	883	Mar-03	Maude
Monrovia	847	Mar-04	Monica
Maurice	900	Jun-05	Maya