

The History of the WA Family

From the early days of our research the WA family has had a very close relationship with the MA family. In fact, from time to time we have been on the point of amalgamating them into one family and then being elephants they split up and went their separate ways for awhile and we were back to deciding they were two families. At the moment they are two families.

The WA family was first sighted on March 26, 1975. They made up a group of six individuals: two adult females, one young female, and three calves--a six-month old, a four year old and a five-six year old. This small group was separate but close to the MA family.

They were on the west side of the Enkongu Narok swamp near Observation Hill so I thought they might be western elephants. In Amboseli the population can more or less be divided into eastern and western elephants with the Enkongu Narok swamp course dividing the two. The subpopulations usually stick to their part of the ecosystem in the dry season but in the wet season elephant families can be found anywhere and the families from both sides of the swamp freely mix together.



Wendy with her 1974 calf on the first day they were sighted on March 26, 1975

It was the beginning of the wet season when I first recorded the WAs. The next time I saw them it was September 1975 and well into the dry season. Now they were in a totally different part of the Park. They were sighted for five more times that year and always on the eastern side, so that first sighting was confusing. They seemed to be northeastern elephants.

Since I had such good sightings of this family from the beginning I felt confident of the composition and named them early on. The family looked like this:

Wendy	Adult F
Calf F	born around Sept 1974
Calf M	about 5 years old
Willa	Adult F
Calf F	5-7 years old (maybe Willa's)

The 10-year-old female I had seen with them the first day turned out to belong to the MAs. She was eventually called Marcia.

In 1976 I saw the WAs 22 times. They were sometimes with the MAs, sometimes not. It was on December 17, 1976 that I recorded a major tragedy for the family. Wendy was missing and her youngest calf was present and staying close to Willa. If a female is missing and her calves are in the family, it is usually a bad sign. It means something has happened to the mother. I knew there had been an attack of some kind because Willa was injured. Part of her tail was hanging by only a small piece of skin. It was obviously painful because she kept rubbing it on bushes. I suspected her tail had been shot off by a bullet and poachers had killed Wendy.

I saw the WAs again on January 6, 1977 and the hanging half of Willa's tail had fallen off. On this occasion I didn't see Wendy's calf. At two and half years old she could survive but only just--most calves who are orphaned below three-four years old die without their mothers. Two weeks later I was surprised to find Wendy's calf with the family staying close to Willa. I would be watching out for her. On that same occasion I noted that Willa's tail had healed.



Willa's ID photo

The loss of Wendy appeared to change the association patterns of the WAs. Before they were often found on their own, but after her death they were sighted with the MAs far more often. Perhaps they felt more secure with the experienced matriarch, Mariana. At the time of her death Wendy was 39 years old. The next oldest female, Willa, was only 18. Mariana was 32 and thus her leadership abilities were a draw for the small WA family, which now only numbered four.

I saw the WA family frequently during 1977 and got to know them much better. I named the other members. The older female calf was called Winnie; and I did something with Wendy's calf I've only done two other times. I named her WendyII. The reason for this was that Wendy had been named for a very close friend who was devastated by her loss so I promised to name the calf Wendy too. The male calf, which had appeared to be Wendy's older calf, disappeared in February of that year and was not seen again.

By the end of 1977 there were only three members of the WA family. Now they were almost always with Mariana and the MAs. They were lucky to have had a bond group they could join in this way.

The poaching that was going on in the 1970s lessened greatly by 1978 and the Amboseli elephants were left in relative peace. There had been a terrible drought in 1976 and as a result only half the calves born that year survived. At the same time the females were in such poor condition that they stopped reproductive cycling. The drought ended in December and good rains fell during 1977. It took the females a bit of time to recover. Twenty-two months later in November 1978 the first calf was born after a long period with no births. More calves were to follow with the result that there was a baby boom in 1979-1980.



WendyII survived against the odds when her mother died; she grew up to be a successful female

There were no changes in the WA family until January 1980 when Willa gave birth to a son. His arrival caused great excitement in the small family. Winnie and WendyII both wanted to take care of him. Two years later, Winnie, who was 12 years old, gave birth to her first calf, a female. In the meantime Willa seemed to be trying

to make up for all the losses in her family. Usually a female has a calf every four to five years but Willa had another calf in 1983, a

second male, and then she had yet another calf in 1986, this time a female.

Unfortunately, there was another bad drought in 1984 and Winnie lost her calf at the height of this drought. She rallied however and gave birth again in February 1987. Also that year WendyII had her first calf at the age of 13. Sadly this calf only lived for six months. It is not uncommon for a mother to lose her first calf. At the end of 1987 the family had grown to seven and consisted of the following:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Month & Year of Birth
Willa	F	1958
WIL86	F	Dec-86
Wickstrom	M	Mar-83
Winston	M	Jan-80
Winnie	F	1970
WIN87	M	Feb-87
WendyII	F	Jun-74

Willa had done well by her family. Some families that were reduced to less than five members had a much harder time building up their numbers again. Over the next years the family continued to grow and prosper.

The loss of her mother when she was only two and a half appeared to have a detrimental on WendyII when she tried to raise her own calves. She had a second calf in September 1989 but this calf died in January 1991. Finally in November 1992 she gave birth to a calf that survived, a female. After that she had no trouble raising calves.

The WA family experienced an exceptionally good period after this loss in January 1991. Ten calves were born over the next 11 years and there wasn't another death in the family until August 2002. Sadly, this next death was profound. Willa died of an illness probably caused by a snare wound. We are fortunate in Amboseli in that there a few snares compared to most of the other wildlife areas in Kenya but once in a while an elephant gets caught in one. The snare did not remain on Willa but it may have caused a systemic infection.

The death of Willa was very sad for the family and for the researchers who had been following her life. She had done such a good job against the odds of both raising Wendy's orphaned calf and leading her small family for 25 successful years. Willa was 18 years old when she took over and died at 44 years old. She was definitely one of our heroines.

It fell to Winnie to take over the leadership. She had the capacity at 32 years old. Nevertheless, the security of being with the MA family was very appealing. At 57 years old Mariana was a very wise and experienced matriarch. It is no wonder that Winnie kept her family close to the MAs. It was during this period that we considered making them one family because they were never apart. At the end of 2002 the WAs consisted of the following:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Month & Year of Birth	Mother if Dead
Winnie	F	1970	?
Wiga	F	Dec-99	
Winter	M	Feb-96	
Willow	F	Oct-91	
WendyII	F	Jun-74	Wendy
WND00	M	Mar-00	
Wanda	F	Dec-97	
Wouri	F	Nov-92	
Winona	F	Dec-86	Willa
WNN00	M	Apr-00	
Waris	M	Apr-90	Willa
Wellington	M	Mar-94	Willa
Willard	M	Aug-98	Willa
Independent Males	Code No.	Birth Date	Mother
Winston	334	Jan-80	Willa
Wickstrom	390	Mar-83	Willa
Wayne	455	Feb-87	Winnie

Three of the males born to the WA family had gone independent as all young males do. Females stay in their family for the rest of their lives but males leave shortly after reaching sexual maturity at 12-14 years old. However, they have a very long wait before they can begin to compete for females. They still have a lot of growing to do. Elephants grow throughout their lifetime so the older an elephant is the bigger it is. This is particularly true for males. They grow steadily throughout their lives. Therefore a 14-year-old male who might be 6-7 feet at the shoulder is no match for a 40-year-old bull who could be nearly 11 feet at the shoulder. The WA males still had a long way to go.

Over the next six years conditions continued to be good for the WAs and for most of the Amboseli families. Then in 2009 Amboseli experienced the worst drought in living memory. At the same time the demand for and the price of ivory had skyrocketed especially in China. We began to see poaching for the first time in many years.

By the end of 2009, 83% of the wildebeests, 71% of the zebras, and 61% of the buffaloes had died. Close to 400 elephants perished from both the drought and the upsurge in poaching. The problem was that there was almost no vegetation left to eat. Amboseli always has fresh water because of the underground rivers coming from Kilimanjaro. These rivers create permanent swamps in the Park. So the animals did not die of thirst but rather from hunger. In addition, in the case of the elephants, as they weakened they appear to succumb to disease as well.

The WA family did much better than most of the families in Amboseli. In fact they lost no calves and only one member of their family died.

Sadly, that was WendyII. We suspect she was poached because she had large tusks for a female and thus would have been a prime target. Her calf born in April 2007 survived at two and half years old just as WendyII had done when she lost her mother.

It was an unhappy coincidence.



Winston with a big triangle out of his ear was easy to recognize; ivory poachers cut him down in his prime in 2010

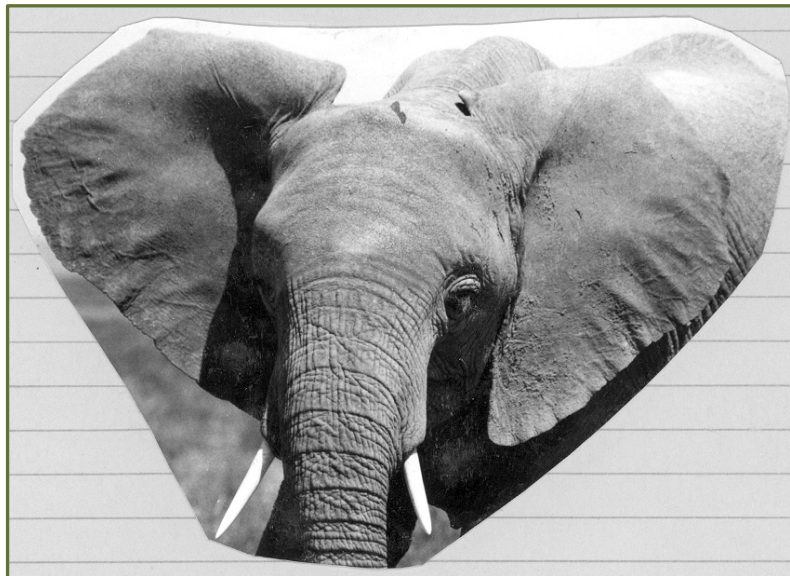
The following year a horrific tragedy happened to a WA individual. Willa's son Winston was just coming into his prime at 30 years old when he was cut down by poachers. Winston had been one of the calves I did a special study on back when he was a baby in 1980. I had watched with particular interest as he grew into a fine male. Somewhere along the way he had torn a huge triangle out of his ear so he was always very easy to recognize. When his carcass was found it was immediately obvious who it was. It made all of us on the project very angry at the loss of this magnificent bull.

In 2011 we made the decision to put tracking collars on five females in the Amboseli population. This was a difficult decision to make because we have always tried to maintain a policy of non-intervention in our research. Our goal has always been to be a "fly on the wall,"

observing elephants but not interfering with them. Darting, immobilizing and radio collaring is definitely hands on, but the very future of the Amboseli elephants depended on knowing and then protecting the important corridors into and out of the Park. We had to put our misgivings aside.

We wanted to put collars on females from five families that we knew left the Park in different directions. With our excellent and very experienced collaring team and with our knowledge of the elephants we set a record by collaring all five females in one morning. Everything went very smoothly. Each elephant was only down for about 20 minutes and was then revived and returned to her family only a little confused about the thing around her neck.

To the east we collared Ida and Lobelia from the IB and LB families. We knew they went south and east when they left the Park. To the north we chose Vicky who already had a collar that had run out of battery. We took that one off and replaced it. Vicky is one of our stars. She is a pioneer who ventures far to the north. To the southwest we chose Maureen of the MB family



because we knew they spent a lot of time in Tanzania. Finally to the west we chose Willow of the WA family. We knew the WAs and MAs travelled back and forth across the bare lake bed but we needed to know how far they went and how much time they spent outside the Park.

Willow's first ID picture when she was eight years old

The collaring of Willow was highly emotional because of the way her family and particularly her mother Winnie responded. We darted Willow and she began to get groggy after about 10 minutes. Winnie and the others surrounded her and tried to keep her on her feet, but she soon went down. At this point we had to move the others away. Winnie did not appreciate this at all but she did back off. However, she didn't go far. She and the others stayed close by watching everything we were doing. We soon had the collar on and gave the antidote to Willow and she was up almost immediately.

What happened next is what made it so emotional for both us and the WAs. Willow was standing and feeling her collar. She must have made a low rumble that we couldn't hear because her mother and the others raced over and greeted her with rumbles and trumpets, earflaps, trunk-entwining, and much touching and feeling. No one can possibly tell me that elephants don't experience intense emotions.



Willow (left) and Winnie (right) greeting after the darting

Today the WAs are thriving and Willow is providing us with very important data. She and her family travel farther than we thought and go to areas we will need to protect in the future. There is talk of creating a whole new town in the area they particularly like. We want Winnie and Willow and all the members of their family to continue to be able to move freely across the Amboseli ecosystem.

The current composition and structure of the WA family is as follows:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Month & Year of Birth	Mother if Dead
Winnie	F	1970	?
Ward	M	Feb-12	
Wills	M	Feb-08	
Warren Beatty	M	Mar-03	
Wiga	F	Dec-99	
Winter	M	Feb-96	
Willow	F	Oct-91	
Willemijn	F	Mar-09	
Winona	F	Dec-86	Willa
WNN12	M	Sep-12	
Wilder	F	Jun-05	
Wingding	M	Apr-00	
Willard	M	Aug-98	Willa
Wouri	F	Nov-92	WendyII
WOU12	F	Dec-12	
Whitecap	F	Feb-07	
Wanda	F	Dec-97	WendyII
Wim	M	Jun-09	WendyII
Windows	M	Mar-00	WendyII
Waragi	F	Apr-07	WendyII
Independent Males	Code No.	Birth Date	Mother
Wickstrom	390	Mar-83	Willa
Wayne	455	Feb-87	Winnie
Waris	503	Apr-90	Willa
Wellington	575	Mar-94	Willa

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August 2013*