

The History of the YA Family

The YA family is one of the smallest in Amboseli and it has remained small since the beginning of the study. When I first recorded them in 1975, at six members they were actually close to the average family size. Today with families numbering 40-60 members it seems almost impossible that the average family size was seven in the 1970s.

I met the YAs for the first time on August 17, 1975 and found them again the following month and on this occasion I got a good look at them. There was a big, handsome female who appeared to be in her early 50s. A second younger female was about 30 years old and I assumed she was the big female's daughter. With them were four calves under 10 years old. I assigned them the letter 'Y' and named the two adult females. I decided that the family consisted of the following:

Yolanda	adult female around 50
Male calf	4-5 years
Ysolde	adult female around 30
Male calf	yearling
6-8 year female	
8-10 year male	

I recorded the Y family two more times in 1975 and on each of the sightings for that year the Ys, who eventually became the YAs when we went through the alphabet a second time, were close to the JA family led by Jezebel and the SA family led by Sona.

These three families appeared to form a bond group whose home range was in the western part of Amboseli. There are 58 family units in the Amboseli population. Each is led by the oldest female, the matriarch. There was no doubt that the matriarch of the YAs was Yolanda.

Elephant families do not move about randomly. They associate with other families and have particularly friendly relationships with specific families. Those families that greet each other, often move together, and generally show affiliative behavior toward one another are considered members of the same bond group. The JAs, SAs and YAs were a typical bond group.

Sometimes close-knit bond groups can cause us confusion. Members sometimes drift between families and this was the case with the young 6-8 year-old female I first assigned to the YAs. Shortly after that I decided she was a JA and gave her the name Jill. Then she started spending more

time with Yolanda again so I changed to Ylla only to have her go back to the JAs, and so she became Jill once again.

I saw the YA family seven times during 1976, but this turned out to be a very bad year for the Amboseli elephants. There was serious drought as well as poaching for ivory and spearing by the Maasai. Many elephants died that year and among them were Yolanda and her male calf. I suspect that Yolanda was poached because she had large tusks. Unfortunately, it is the bulls and the big matriarchs that are targeted by the poachers.



Beautiful Yolanda in 1975

The loss of a matriarch is tragic and profound for any elephant family. Losing Yolanda, such an old wise female, must have been a terrible blow. Ysolde was 31 years old at the time so capable of leading her family, but her strategy instead was to spend more time with Jezebel's family. At the time Jezebel was 41 years old and more experienced than Ysolde. The SB family with older matriarch Sona was also often with them.

The drought broke at the end of 1976 and conditions for wildlife and people. Sadly, the good fortune did not last through 1977 for the SB family. In November 1977 I found the SB family, once again with the JA and YAs, but on this day Sona was not present. I never saw her again and suspect that she was also poached.

After the deaths of matriarchs Sona and Yolanda it was interesting to see how the three families interrelated. Ysolde basically joined Jezebel's group and very rarely moved on her own. On the other hand, the SBs led by Sara became far more independent and spent less and less time with the JAs and YAs. I always wonder how bonds between individual elephants are formed and why some are stronger than others. Jezebel probably had strong bonds with Yolanda and Sona and I suspect that their bond had kept those three families together. Ysolde appeared to have a stronger bond with some of

the younger members of the JA family. The three families still formed a bond group but it definitely was not as tight as when the three older matriarchs were alive.

Good rains fell during 1977, 1978 and 1979. At the same time the serious poaching came to an end. This was a very good period for the Amboseli elephants with only a few Maasai spearings to mar the halcyon days. Because of the previous drought years only two calves were born to the Amboseli population from January 1977 to November 1978. The birth rate was so low, because females were not in good enough condition to reproduce. After the good rains fell, they gradually recovered and began to conceive. Twenty-two months later, in December 1978, an elephant baby boom began.

The YAs only had the one female, Ysolde, who was old enough to give birth and she did so in December 1979. However, a few months later she became very ill, so much so that eventually she left her small family and stayed at the swamp edge with her small calf. She became thinner and weaker and I was



Ysolde and her male calf in 1975

sure she was going to die. Tragically, because Ysolde was so weak lions were able to attack her calf and kill him in June 1980 when he was seven months old.

More time went by and I kept expecting to find Ysolde's carcass but miraculously she started to feed again and gain back some strength. She returned to her family but the illness had taken its toll. All her muscles had weakened so much that her shoulder blades stuck up and her back was swayed like an old horse's. Ysolde never recovered her former shape but she did get back into good enough condition to reproduce. In April 1983 she gave birth to a daughter.

Ysolde was obviously doing remarkably well. There was terrible drought in 1984 and many of the calves that were born in 1983 died, but Ysolde successfully raised hers. In 1988 she had another daughter. These calves were eventually named Yvette and Yvonne. Ysolde's male calf, born in 1974 and named Yves, became independent of the family in early 1988. By the end of 1988 Ysolde had managed to create a family a little family of three, but with potential to grow with three females now.

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Month & Year of Birth
Ysolde	F	1945
Yvonne	F	Dec-88
Yvette	F	Apr-83

During the next few years Amboseli experienced average to higher than average rainfall and the YAs had no further setbacks. Ysolde stayed close to Jezebel and her family. Then in November 1993, the grand, old matriarch of the JA family died. Over the previous year she had been looking distinctly old--sunken and bony, and then a few months before her death she started to be seen on her own from time to time. By October she was alone frequently and was slow and lethargic. All of us on the project were very sad knowing she did not have long to live. In late November she disappeared having last been seen on November 20th. After searching for her by plane, her carcass was found on December 3rd in the center of her home range. All the evidence indicated that she had died of natural causes. It seemed like the end of an era in Amboseli.

This loss must have been a big blow to Ysolde. Jezebel had been a leader for everyone. Jezebel's sister Joyce took over as matriarch. She was four years older than Ysolde and so someone she could still form a close bond with.

By now Ysolde was close to 50 years old. Nevertheless she continued to have calves. In March 1995 I found Ysolde some distance from her daughters and the JAs. It appeared that she had given birth in the night. I couldn't see the calf and then I noticed hyenas feeding on something about 50 meters away. When I went closer I could see it was an elephant calf. Either it has been stillborn or they had managed to separate it and kill it. I never even saw what sex it was. Ysolde stood with her head hanging low looking very disturbed.

Wasting no time Ysolde became pregnant again two months later and gave birth to a male calf in March 1997. This calf died of natural causes when he was less than a month old. He turned out to be Ysolde's last calf.

Females can go on reproducing into their early 60s but it is rare. Most females stop having calves in their 50s. In 1997 Ysolde was 52 years old. Now it was her time to be a leader and a grandmother to her daughters' calves. I was very pleased when her daughter Yvette gave birth to her first calf in April 1998.

Three years later Yvonne had her first calf in May 2001 but sadly Ysolde did not live to see this calf. She died of natural causes in 2001 at the age of 56. She did well, everything considered, leaving two daughters, a son and a grandson.

Yvette was only 18 at the time, which is very young to be a matriarch, but she was not forced to make decisions on her own. She stayed with the JA family, which was being expertly led by the big matriarch Joyce who had turned 60 years old in 2001.

However, young adult females who don't have living mothers do not do as well reproductively as females who do. Although Yvette was successfully raising her son, Yvonne's calf died five months after he was born. She didn't give up trying. She gave birth to a female in February 2007. In the meantime, Yvette had a daughter in January 2003. The little family was growing and consisted of the following:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Month & Year of Birth
Yvette	F	Apr-83
YVE03	F	Jan-03
Yusuf	M	Apr-98
Yvonne	F	Dec-88
YVO	F	Feb-07

All was going well for the YAs and Yvette gave birth to another son in May 2008. There were no more losses in the family for close to seven years. Unfortunately, the good years would soon be over. Amboseli underwent the worst drought in living memory in 2009. Thousands of cattle, sheep, goats, zebras, wildebeest and other animals died. The elephants were not spared; nearly 400 elephants died including 250 calves.

These two families did not do badly compared to some of the others. In one family seven adult females died. However, there was one profound death in the JA/YA bond group. Joyce died. This was not surprising since all but two of the Amboseli females over 50 died during the drought. Joyce was in her late 60s. Jill, who led a subgroup we called the JA2s, also died, but the other adults survived. They lost seven calves, among them Yvette's 2008 calf and that was the only death for the YAs.



Yvette and her fat, healthy '03 calf, who was eventually named Yakoota

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. It always amazes me. Underneath that dusty ground the seeds and roots remain waiting for the moisture to release them.

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 sure 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 get births in November 2011. And that was exactly what happened. There were actually two births in October, so those females were surprisingly early. In November and December 44 more calves were born and then in 2012 there were 197 for a record-breaking baby boom.

Yvette joined as quickly as she could and had a male calf in January 2012. Yvonne followed with a female in October of that year. Both calves are doing well.



Yvette, her '12 male calf and Yakoota

An interesting thing has happened with the YA family. After the JAs lost Joyce, Yvette has been much more independent and has separated with her small family. At 30 years old she is acting as the matriarch. Her family consists of her and her sister Yvonne and their calves, but someone else has joined them. Thirteen-year old Juninho, the daughter of Janet, has decided she would rather be a YA and she spends all of her time with Yvette and Yvonne. I always say that elephants never fit into neat boxes. Janet died in 2006 and her own mother died in 1988. After she lost her mother Janet spent her time close to the YAs. Juninho no doubt formed a close bond with the members of that family and has decided to stay with them.

Although still small at eight members the YA family is hanging in there. We're rooting for them to continue to increase. The family currently consists of the following:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Month & Year of Birth	Mother if Dead
Yvette	F	Apr-83	Ysolde
YVE12	M	Jan-12	
YVE03	F	Jan-03	
Yusuf	M	Apr-98	
Yvonne	F	Dec-88	Ysolde
Yuka	F	Oct-12	
Yeomans	F	Feb-07	
Juninho	F	Feb-02	Janet
Independent Males	Code	Birth Date	Mother
Yves	277	Feb-74	Ysolde

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