

The History of the FA Family

The FA family was discovered and photographed on the second day of the Amboseli Elephant Research Project on September 2, 1972. On that morning so long ago, there were 11 elephants in the group. We photographed all the adults. It wasn't until the following year that we worked out who was in the family. It turned out that some of the individuals present on the first sighting were members of another family, the FBs. The FAs appeared to have a close relationship with them, but we determined that the FAs were a small family of five.

The matriarch was a beautiful, big female who was named Filippa. In 1973 she was with a year-old calf. Also present was a young adult female who we assumed was Filippa's daughter. She was called Fiona. There were two immature females eventually named Fenella and Fifi.



Beautiful Filippa photographed on the 2nd of September 1972

Filippa	Adult F
C'72	M
Fiona	Young adult F
Fenella	Immature F
Fifi	Immature F

Over the next few years when they were sighted we saw the FAs with other adult females. During the 1970s there was a great deal of poaching in Kenya and throughout Africa. Amboseli did better than some places but there were still many losses. The result was that some females lost their families completely and became what we called "floaters". They joined other families for a day or a week or in a few cases for good. The FAs were sometimes seen with Pie, an adult female with a big pie-shaped cut in her ear; Pie's female calf, who was called Fabia; and another adult female named Mary. I wish we had DNA from these females.

Pie, her youngest calf, and a 10 year-old-male, who we thought was her son, all disappeared in 1974, probably due to poaching. Fabia survived and became a floater but she eventually joined the FAs permanently.

The year 1976 turned out to be a bad one for the Amboseli elephants and other animals as well, because there was a very serious drought. It was also a time of heavy poaching and of spearing by Maasai. Over 60 elephants died that year. Many young calves died. 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. There wasn't enough food for them or their mothers.

Under Filippa's wise leadership the FAs only lost one calf during the drought. This was a four-month-old calf born to Fiona. From 1977 to 1982, life was peaceful for the FAs. The family began to grow with births for Filippa, Fiona and Fifi. Then tragedy struck in 1982 with the death of Filippa. Losing a matriarch is always devastating for a family, but it was particularly so for the FAs. Estimated to be 54 years old, Filippa was 29 years older than the next oldest female, Fiona, who was only 25. The younger members had looked to Filippa for all the decisions made for the family. Now they were on their own.



Fiona stepped up and did her best, but there were losses over the next 10 years with many calves dying. In that period eight calves

Filippa's oldest daughter, Fiona, took over as matriarch in 1982

died, but at least the adult females were spared. Nevertheless, the family remained small because of the fatalities. The family consisted of the following eight members at the end of 1992:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Date of Birth	Mother if Dead
Fiona	F	1957	Filippa
Farley	M	Dec-86	
Faith	F	May-79	
Fifi	F	1964	Filippa
Freya	F	Nov-88	
Fleur	F	May-83	
Fenella	F	1968	Filippa
Fabia	F	1969	Pie

Six more calves were born over the next six years but only one of them survived. The FAs were not succeeding as a family and it was worrying. They were missing the wisdom that had been provided by Filippa. A number of adults also died in the 1990s and early 2000s. Faith, Fifi and Fabia all disappeared, either poached or in conflict with people.

Despite all these losses, things finally began to look up for the FAs at the end of the century. Fiona had another son in 1999 and he survived. Then from 2001 to 2009, the FA females gave birth to eight calves and every one of them survived. This was despite the worst drought in living memory in 2009. 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. There is always water in Amboseli, fed from Kilimanjaro, but 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.

Among the mortalities was a terrible one for the FAs. Fiona died, almost certainly poached for her long, elegant tusks. She died at the height of the drought in October 2009.

In December 2009, the drought finally broke and good rain began to fall in Amboseli starting in January 2010. The FA family did better than most. While some of the families lost as many as seven adult females and almost all their young calves, Fiona had managed to get her family through the drought with not a single loss, except for herself.

Fiona's younger sister, Fenella, became the leader of the FAs. At 41 years old she was well-equipped to be a matriarch. She was also a very feisty elephant who sometimes came into conflict with local people. Apparently, she had little tolerance for livestock.

In the beginning of 2010 at the end of the drought, the FA family consisted of the following:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Date of Birth	Mother {grandmother} if Dead
Fenella	F	1968	Filippa
FEN08	M	Jun-08	
Freetown	M	Jan-04	
Fleur	F	May-83	Fifi {Filippa}
FLE10	F	Jun-10	
Florence	F	Jun-05	
Firefox	M	Jul-01	
Freya	F	Nov-88	Fifi {Filippa}
FRY11	M	Jun-11	
Fabrice	M	Jan-05	
Fanta	F	May-07	Fiona {Filippa}
Fishburne	M	Feb-03	Fiona {Filippa}
Flickr	F	Mar-01	Fabia {Pie}
Fausta	F	Dec-94	Fabia {Pie}
Independent Males	Code No	Birth Date	Mother
Farley	487	Dec-86	Fiona
Fergus	542	Dec-93	Fiona
Ferdinand	668	Apr-99	Fiona

It took them some time but the FAs managed to grow their family to 14 plus three independent males out in the world of bulls. Considering the devastating losses in 2009 it was actually a remarkable achievement.



Feisty Fenella became matriarch in 2009

During the next three years several interesting events occurred in the FA family. Three calves were born to the family—one each in 2010, 2011 and 2012. The 2010 calf was born to Fleur. It was amazing that she was able to carry it through the drought. Freya gave birth to the calf born in June 2011 and that was an even more

amazing because that was the only calf born that year up until October 2011.

The reason for the lack of births was the 2009 drought. Females were in such poor condition that they stopped cycling and coming into oestrus. With a twenty-two month gestation period that meant that there were no births during most of 2011. When the drought broke some females responded immediately in January and February 2010 and then gave birth in October, November and December 2011. It was the beginning of an unprecedented baby boom. Forty-nine calves were born at the end of 2011 and then 201 in 2012. All the females who had lost calves and the ones who had stopped cycling quickly made up for lost time.

The FAs only contributed one calf to the baby boom but he was very special. Born in January 2012 to Fenella, this male calf was *leucistic* meaning he was not albino but he had a partial lack of pigmentation. His skin was pale and his tail and ear hair was light in color. However, his eyes were the normal amber color. Once he started getting covered in mud and dust it was difficult to see the difference but it was there.

One other calf born in the population at that time was also leucistic. Sadly, and coincidentally both of their mothers were killed that year. We believe

Fenella was speared after killing a cow. The other mother, Jemima, was probably poached. Luckily, both calves, now named Faraja and Jasiri, were captured and taken to the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust orphanage in Nairobi. They graduated from the nursery and are now at the Umani Springs release center and doing very well. To read about their histories and their present status go to: www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org.

One other unusual thing that happened was that Fausta, Fabia's daughter, left the family and joined the KA family. It was not all that surprising since Fabia had been a floater and the FA family had a close relationship with the KA family. However, what was intriguing was that her younger sister Flickr did not go with her. She

remains a firm member of the FAs. Elephants are very complex in their relationships. I would guess that Fausta had a close friendship with someone in the KAs and Flickr was more at home with the FAs. We are mystified when things like this happen but we also like that elephants surprise us.



Pretty Flickr stayed with the FAs

After the tragic death of Fenella in 2012, Fifi's daughter Fleur took over as matriarch. We can only guess that she changed their behavior and ranging because the family has done remarkably well ever since. There has not been a single death in the family for nine years. During the same period there have been seven births and all the calves have survived. Fleur gave birth to a male in 2014 and Freya, Flickr and Florence had calves, all females, in 2016. Wasting no time Fleur gave birth again in 2018, this time to a daughter, and Florence joined in with a son in 2019. In January 2001, Fanta had her first calf at 14 years old.

Fleur has been an exceptional matriarch in keeping her family safe. At some point in her life, she damaged her left ear but it does not seem to have done her any lasting harm.



The FAs current and very successful matriarch Fleur

Under Fleur's leadership the FA family stands at 14, plus eight independent males. Four of the independent males are Fiona's so her legacy continues.

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Date of Birth	Mother {grandmother} if Dead
Fleur	F	May-83	Fifi {Filippa}
FLE18	F	Mar-18	
Foufou	M	Jun-14	
Flurry	F	Jun-10	
Florence	F	Jun-05	
FLC19	M	Sep-19	
Fortune	F	May-16	

Freya	F	Nov-88	Fifi {Filippa}
Fantasia	F	Apr-16	
Fyodor	M	Jun-11	
Fanta	F	May-07	Fiona {Filippa}
FTA21	F	Jan-21	
Flickr	F	Mar-01	Fabia {Pie}
Fenia	F	Mar-16	
Independent Males	Code No	Birth Date	Mother
Farley	487	Dec-86	Fiona
Fergus	542	Dec-93	Fiona
Ferdinand	668	Apr-99	Fiona
Firefox	752	Jul-01	Fleur
Fishburne	815	Feb-03	Fiona
Freetown	842	Jan-04	Fenella
Fabrice	864	Jan-05	Freya
Ferrero	917	Jun-08	Fenella

Cynthia Moss
Amboseli Trust for Elephants
June 2021