

## *The History of the LA Family*

I first got to know the LA family back in 1975. In those early years I was working out how many families there were in the population and who belonged with whom. As the adult females were photographed and the composition of the groups recorded, the groupings began to emerge as families. Each of these families was then assigned a letter of the alphabet. Thus, the first family photographed became the 'A' family, the next the 'B' family and so on.

I was working very much part-time in Amboseli and not living there, so it took quite some time to get to know all the families. The 'L' family was not recorded until March 23, 1975. That was the first time they were sighted and photographed. Luckily, they were a neat, small self-contained group consisting of seven members:

3 adult females
1 8-10-year-old female
1 4-5-year-old
1 2-3-year-old
1 12+-year-old male

The largest adult female was very distinctive looking because her tusks were strikingly asymmetrical with her left tusk curving upward. I saw this female and her family over the next three days and got to know them a bit better, well enough to assign them the letter 'L'.

I set up a permanent research camp in Amboseli in September 1975 and was living there more or less full time. I now saw many of the central families on almost a daily basis. The 'L' family was one of the ones seen regularly. However, the original seven were not always all together. There was often an unusual grouping of just youngsters – the 8-10-year-old female with three calves. Sometimes they were on their own; sometimes back with the up-curved female. It was intriguing why such a young female would go off on her own with just calves.

During 1976 the family was seen 22 times. By the end of that year I had registered many families, so many that I actually had to start through the alphabet a second time. The A family became AA and the new As became the AB family. The same system was used down the alphabet. Thus, the L family became the LAs when it was necessary to assign another family the letter L. The new family became the LBs.

The individual members in the designated families were also named, each getting a name beginning with their family initial. In the LA family I named the big adult female with the up-curved tusk, Lillian. The next adult female was called Lynne. She was probably Lillian's daughter. The third adult female had disappeared and so never got named. The 8-10-year-old female was named Louise. Eventually the two female calves were called Libby and Lee and the young male was named Accident Prone because he kept getting big gashes out of his ears.



*Beautiful Lillian*

There had been low rainfall in the Park and surrounding areas during 1975, and in 1976 the rains failed with only a miserly couple of inches falling during what was supposed to be the wet season. There was a brief flush of green in April and May and then a serious drought set in. Most of the families broke down into their smallest sub groups to search for food. In June of that year Lynne gave birth to her first calf.

It was a very bad year to be born in Amboseli. I recorded the births of 30 calves. By the end of the year only 15 remained. Of those that died most were probably the victims of drought. 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 begin 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. Lynne's calf died in September 1976.

In the meantime the LA family continued to confuse me because Lillian would sometimes be off on her own and young Louise would be leading her small group of calves. It was unusual for a female as young as she was, still not

even mature, to be leading a family. I suspect that her mother had died and perhaps she had not even been a close member of Lillian's family. Whatever the reason, Louise was not closely bonded to Lillian and Lynne.



*Louise left to set up her own family and was a successful matriarch of the LCs*

In December 1976, the drought came to an end and life changed for the better for the elephants and other wildlife of Amboseli. The next three years proved to be very favorable ones. The rainfall was higher than average with the result that there was abundant and nutritious vegetation. In addition the poaching that had occurred in the areas surrounding the Park came to end in 1977; and in 1978 the Maasai warriors were promoted to junior elder, and with that change the incidents of spearing of elephants decreased dramatically. All in all it was a very peaceful and productive period for the elephants.

During the drought the females had stopped reproductive cycling altogether. However, as soon as conditions improved they began to come into oestrus and mate. Since so few of them had young calves there were a lot of females ready to conceive. The result was a baby boom 22 months after the matings in 1979 and 1980. Only two calves had been born to the Amboseli population between January 1977 and November 1978. 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.

In the LA family Lillian gave birth to a son in June 1979; Lynne had a daughter in March 1980; and Louise had a female in May 1980. All three calves flourished.

However, by this time the LA family was doing something very unusual. It was splitting permanently. By March 1979, Louise along with the female calf named Libby were spending so little time with Lillian that I decided they were a new family and gave them the designation LC. Fission is rare in elephant families. At that time there was only one other case in Amboseli and that was a split of the largest family in Amboseli numbering 29. There have been other splits since then but it is still not a common occurrence. In 1980 Accident Prone also left the family to strike out on his own. He was 18 years old at the time, which is late. Most young males leave by the time they are 14.

I believe that Louise and Libby were the daughters of the adult female who was recorded on the first couple of sightings of the LAs but then disappeared. Perhaps that female was only an associate of Lillian's and not a close family member. The relationships remain a mystery and only Louise knows why she left.

With the departure of Louise's sub-group and Accident Prone, the LA family was reduced to only five members as follows:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Date of Birth
Lillian	F	1934
LIL79	M	6-79
Lynne	F	1961
LYN80	F	3-80
Lee	F	1969

Conditions continued to be good for the Amboseli elephants for the next three years. Many of the females who had given birth in 1979 gave birth again in 1983. Lee gave birth to her first calf in July 1983, a female.

However, environmental conditions changed once again. In 1984 there was another severe drought. 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.

One of the females who was killed was Lee along with her young calf. The following year in 1985 Accident Prone died, perhaps from one more accident. The LA family was reduced to four. They made a good effort to get their numbers back up but Lillian seemed to have trouble producing healthy calves. She gave birth in March 1985 but that calf died in October of that year. Again she gave birth in December 1987 but her calf died two months later in February 1988. Finally in March 1990 she produced a male calf that survived. He turned out to be her last calf but by this time Lillian was estimated to be 56 years old.

In the meantime Lynne had a daughter in February 1985 and a son in April 1989. Unfortunately, tragedy struck the family again and Lynne and her youngest disappeared in 1989. We don't know how they died. Her two female offspring survived.

The little LA family was struggling and we wondered if it would be able to survive once Lillian died. In keeping with our policy of naming calves when they reach four years old (until that time they have codes based on their mother's name and year of birth), we named Lillian's 1979 calf Lewis, Lynne's 1980 calf became Leila and her 1985 female was named Leda.

The next years were crucial for the LAs. Would they be able to raise enough female calves to carry on the family? Fortunately, Lynne's daughters Leila and Leda grew up and started having their own calves. In May 1991 at only 11 years old (the average age of first birth is 13-14) Leila had her first calf, a daughter. Then she had a son in November 1995. Her younger sister Leda didn't waste any time and at just under 10 years old she had her first calf, a female. It was very interesting that they both gave birth at such young ages and that they both had daughters. Whatever was going on biologically it certainly was helping the family recover. By the end of 1995 the family consisted of the following eight members:

Individual	Sex	Estimated or Known Date of Birth	Mother {grandmother} if dead
Lillian	F	1934	
Liaqat	M	3-90	
Lewis	M	6-79	
Leila	F	3-80	Lynne {Lillian?}
LEI95	M	11-95	
Lotus	F	5-91	
Leda	F	2-85	Lynne {Lillian?}
LED95	F	1-95	



The LAs continued to prosper and all was going well for them. Surprisingly, they spent no time with Louise and her group. The break was permanent and complete. They even used a different part of the Park. Lillian and her family concentrated in the central part of Longinye Swamp, while Louise took her family to the south to the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro.

All young males eventually go independent, some as young as 9-10 years, others as old as 19-20 (we call these "Mama's boys"), but the average age is around 14. Lewis was ready for this transition and by the end of 1996 he was out in the world of the bulls. This is a very risky time for young males. After they go independent they venture off on their own or with other bulls and run into trouble, such as getting too close to Maasai settlements or farmers' crops.

Over the next two years Lillian's family seemed to be doing well. The calves were healthy and thriving. Then in 1998 the worst thing that can happen to a family came about. Not unexpectedly, Lillian, who by this time was about 64 years old, died. We never found her carcass but we are fairly sure she simply died of old age. She had had a long life and although she didn't leave a large family they were doing as well as could be expected.



*Leila was forced to take on the responsibility of the family when Lillian died*

The next oldest female, Leila, took over the leadership. She was only 18 years old, which is very young to be a matriarch, but she had a close her sister Leda, which helped her keep the family together. We felt hopeful for their future but nonetheless the team mourned Lillian's death.

Leila led the family well, however, and the next ten years proved to be relatively quiet and peaceful for the Las. Six months after Lillian's death Leda gave birth to a son. The following year, Leila also had a son. The family remained stable with no births or deaths for the next couple of years. Then, in January 2004 Lewis disappeared. He was 25 years old and it seemed likely that his disappearance meant he was dead, although we never found out what had happened to him. In April of the same year Leda had a stillborn female calf and the LA family fortunes seemed on a downward turn. However, some good news came in October, when Leila gave birth to a daughter. We hoped the family would keep having female calves, to help them build up their numbers.

In the meantime we had been naming the calves as they turned four years old. We had almost run out of normal first names and started using themes such as place names in Kenya; stars, planets, and constellations;



*Lynx turned out to be a one-tusker*

plants in Amboseli; French names; Maasai names; pop stars, etc. for each year's calves. We had also started a naming program so a donor could name a calf and follow its life. Lotus, born in 1991, was given a plant name; Leila and Leda's 1995 calves were named Libra and Lynx for the astronomical theme; Leila's 2000 calf became Link because that was the year we were using computer terms; and Leila's 2004 daughter is known as Luanda from the African cities theme

By the middle of the decade, both Lotus and Lynx were approaching reproductive age and Lotus had her first calf, a son, in December 2005. He was eventually given the name Ludovic. Lynx had her first calf, a female in March 2006. We had a Maasai theme for calves born in 2006, and we named her Likizo. Births continued steadily in the family over the next couple of years; in April 2008, Lotus had another calf, a daughter, making Leila a grandmother for the second time. Leda had Leila both had male calves in 2008 and by now we were pleased with the way the LA

family had grown under Leila's leadership. The family now numbered 12 and included the following members:

Individual	Sex	Date of Birth	Mother {grandmother} if dead
Leila	F	3-80	Lynne {Lillian?}
Luanda	F	10-04	
Link	M	3-00	
Libra	M	12-95	
Lotus	F	5-91	
Lavinia	F	4-08	
Ludovic	M	12-05	
Leda	F	2-85	Lynne {Lillian?}
Lachlan	M	5-99	
Lynx	F	1-95	
Likizo	F	3-06	
<b>Independent Males</b>			
Liaqat	M495	3-90	Lillian

All seemed to be going well for the LA family and the rest of the Amboseli elephants but tragedy soon struck. In 2009 Amboseli experienced the worst drought in living memory. By the end of that year 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 an upsurge in poaching. The problem was that there was almost no vegetation left to eat. Amboseli always had 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 calves were the first to go. There was nothing for them to eat and their mothers could not produce enough milk for them, especially as the calves got older. In 2008, 155 calves were born, which was a record. However, the next year these calves were just at the age when they needed to supplement milk with vegetation and there simply wasn't anything they could eat. As a result 102 of them died during 2009. The calves born during 2009 also suffered but they did a bit better because



they didn't have to eat as much vegetation. Of the 87 calves born during the drought 38 died. In the LA family Leda and Leila's 2008 calves died.

Older animals were not spared either. Of the females over 50 years old only two survived. Over half of the matriarchs died. Although Leila survived, Leda died in November 2009, leaving Lachlan and Lynx orphaned. Extraordinarily, Lavinia survived the drought; she was just a little bit older than the other two small calves in her family, and they were male calves, which are particularly susceptible during droughts, because of their higher energy demands. Still, it was a terrible drought, and Lotus did a very good job to bring her small daughter through when so many others died.

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 figure it all out.



*Lotus, her calf born in 2012, Lavinia, and Ludovic on her other side*

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. More calves came in November and December, 49 in all, and then in 2012, 201 calves were born.

The LA family had two new calves in this baby boom: Lotus and Lynx both had calves in January 2012, a male and a female respectively. These calves have survived and thrived.

Over the next years the LA family did something unusual, especially for them. For years, they had been very consistent in the area they favoured in the Park. Every day they came into the central Longinye Swamp and fed and drank in virtually the same spot. If we saw a family there we could almost guarantee it would be the LAs. Then almost overnight they stopped this routine.

In 2012, we saw the LAs 38 times, the next year we recorded them 14 times, and the following year 12 times. Then the rate of sightings went down even lower with encounters of four or less over the next five years. We finally found out that they had moved to the Selenkay Conservancy to the north of the Park when we went up there to see who we could find. We did manage to record two calves, one in 2015 and another in 2016.

Several other families have done the same thing: the VAs, DBs, and Ella's part of the EBs have all become permanent residents along with the LAs. We miss these families but it is actually good thing. Amboseli National



*Liaqat in December 2018*

Park is small and it is very fortunate that the elephants can spread over the ecosystem.

In the meantime, Lillian's son Liaqat has grown up to be a very impressive bull. He is now 30 years old and has begun to come into musth on a yearly basis. We believe he has already fathered some calves. The other independent males from the LA family, Libra, Lachlan and Link, have not been seen for a while, but this is typical of males in their age range. They

tend not to come into the Park but rather roam far and wide, some into Tanzania. We hope to catch up with them and update their ID photos.

Although they remain a small family, the LAs are holding their own. They turned out to be adventurous in moving to Selenkay. It is a rich habitat and they are doing well there. With four adult females and Lavinia at 12 years old, they have a good chance of increasing their numbers. We expect that all four of the adult females have had new calves. We look forward to finding them in Selenkay or seeing them when they make a rare visit to the Park.

### *Structure and Composition of the LA Family*

*June 2020*

Individual	Sex	Date of Birth	Mother {grandmother} if dead
Lotus	F	May-91	Leila {Lynne}
Lundu	M	Jan-12	
Lavinia	F	Apr-08	
Ludovic	M	Dec-05	
Luanda	F	Oct-04	
Loris	M	Feb-16	
Lynx	F	Jan-95	Leda {Lynne}
Lilavati	F	Apr-15	
Lokoiya	F	Jan-12	
Likizo	F	Mar-06	
<b>Independent Males</b>	Code	Date of Birth	Mother {grandmother}
Liaqat	495	Mar-90	Lillian
Libra	595	Dec-95	Leila {Lynne}
Lachlan	678	May-99	Leda {Lynne}
Link	721	Mar-00	Leila {Lynne}

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