



Vol. 7: Where Trumpets Sound

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On any journey, one should expect the unexpected. Ours is no different. We thought we were nearing the end, but we u-turn back to a rural road in Hohenwald for a rare invitation to meet a special subject described as “passionately intense, playful, complex, exceedingly in-

telligent and endangered.” We meet the elephants.

2,700 acres of forests, green spaces, hills and valleys, spring-fed ponds and a warm barn in winter serve as the nation’s largest natural habitat for endangered elephants - providing a haven for old, sick or needy elephants and education about the crisis

facing these animals. Founding Director Scott Blais opens the gate for us to catch a rare view of these magnificent creatures – a privilege, as the sanctuary is not open to the public.

Rescued from zoos and circuses, 15 elephants live, separated by species (African or Asian), with a few held in quarantine due to

TB exposure. All female, they have names, distinct personalities and life-changing stories. Twenty-five elephants have lived here since the sanctuary opened 15 years ago. Shirley, the oldest (and quite possibly the oldest in the world), is 62, Flora, the youngest, is 28. Tarra was the sanctuary’s first resident when it opened in 1995.

Blais has worked with elephants for most of his life. “I wanted to do more for the elephants who deserved to live like an elephant should,” he says.

“We can only fulfill a small portion of their lives,” Blais says. “We meet their needs as much as we can, and encourage them to

fulfill their needs from other elephants.

The nature behind the sanctuary is for them to look to humans less and less.”

We stand in an observation area where two Asian elephants, Misty and Dulary, are close by, floating in their favorite watering hole – yes, actually floating – splashing and cooling themselves with muddy water. Blais describes the two as “silly as you can imagine with the noises and affection they show each other.” Dulary gets out and walks toward us as we retreat back behind the fence. Her massive gray body moves in slow motion and is very quiet; then she delivers her eloquent trumpet sound.

Anthony and I board four wheelers and set out to find the other Asian inhabitants. I’m riding with caregiver Kat when we catch up to the guys, who have stopped in their tracks.

An elephant appears, moving briskly toward us, dirt kicked up, ears flapping. This is Sissy.

Scott directs us to turn around. He recognizes in Sissy’s body language and bright eyes that she is excited. While he described this behavior as nothing more than being “playful,” my racing heart would call the situation “frightening.” But then, Sissy takes the tip of her trunk, curls it softly onto itself, a greeting of “love taps.” Winkie shuffles up from behind joining Sissy as they veer off to savor treats and the water hose.

We’re riding over rocky paths with dust in our face when we find Tarra. A 37-year-old “social butterfly,” Tarra is famous

for wandering the property with a golden mixed-breed dog named Bella, a stray and Tarra’s best friend for the last 8 years. Interestingly, Tarra makes an inimitable sound of her own that resembled a dog bark.

We watch the inseparable pair as Shirley the “grandmother” – is shading herself under nearby trees.

I suspect it’s not hard to get emotionally attached to these animals and to feel heartache. Blais admits it happens, “instantaneously – especially with those that come here in such desperate conditions. Everything is vital and when they don’t make

it – the ones we don’t get to see transform and never experience true happiness – that makes it hard.”

For Blais, it’s remarkable, “watching the transformation, to see them grow from a sheltered animal to being vocal and expressive.” Their needs revolve around adequate space, natural vegetation, social dynamics and exercise. Caregivers learn from the elephants to listen and respect their space. It’s a haven where elephants find refuge from the emotional and physical damages they suffered in captivity. Their paths to the sanctuary tell of inexcusable living conditions, treacherous travels, ailments and disease, abuse, even fatal situations with handlers, all over the course of decades. But here they have a chance to heal, developing strong social bonds and expressing emotion and loving and grieving over the loss of others.

“They all become amazing and unique in their own way,” says Blais. “We have a lot to learn from that individuality.” He knows each one down to the fold of the ear, the speckle on their skin and the expression on their face.

“Support is key,” he says of the reserve. “Without it we can’t do anything for these elephants. Going forward, the biggest thing we can do is educate.”

A welcome center and education gallery located in downtown Hohenwald is nearing completion (It is following sustainable building practices). Janice Zeitlin, Board Chair, oversees the development of the distance learning and education programs. Interactive displays, exhibits, a theatre and live camera feeds from the sanctuary to classrooms are underway.

“Elephants in captivity are facing a special crisis,” she says. “They touch upon a larger issue of what’s happening to our environment, our climate; and in terms of space, their natural habitat is getting smaller and smaller. Water is an issue. We want people to understand their need for better space and treatment is a global issue.”

We see the elephants as a product of their environment. They need happiness; they long to be understood. I think we can all relate on some level. ☺

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