



ALL PICTURES WILL WHITFORD



A herd of ACTIVITY

When elephants are darted for relocation or to have collars fitted, a multitude of tasks are undertaken to ensure the animal's wellbeing. To give insight to what goes on in these moments, **Sue Watt** recalls her inclusion in an historic translocation run by African Parks in Malawi

Sue, check this elephant's breathing," Peter Fearnhead called out to me. "It should be around six breaths a minute. If it falls below four, she's in trouble, so shout for help."

The Chief Executive of conservation organisation African Parks, Peter was pointing to a teenage elephant with 'A3' emblazoned in white paint on her buttocks, lying semi-comatose on the golden plains of Liwonde National Park.

My husband Will and I had been invited to report on the first day of an historic project to translocate 500 elephants from Liwonde NP and Majete Wildlife Reserve to Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve, all managed by African Parks (AP) in partnership with the Malawian government. The aim was to relieve overcrowding, poaching and human-wildlife conflict.

These operations are meticulously planned and we'd been given a full briefing, but no warnings could truly prepare us for their intensity.

That morning, the team had identified a suitable herd of nine animals mooching around the floodplains of the Shire River. The helicopter whirled overhead, the herd ran in panic, the chopper approached with the vet aiming the dart-gun at his targets, the elephants slumped to the ground in quick succession, semi-

conscious in seconds, as people rushed towards them.

The urgency is real. The priority for vets, rangers and ecologists is to immediately ensure the heavily sedated animals can breathe, checking their airways and shifting their hefty bodies should the lungs be compressed. To the untrained eye, this may appear chaotic, but these experts exude an astounding sense of calm and professionalism: they know exactly what they're doing.

As the first herd to be moved, they were named Group A and numbered consecutively as each one was tended to after the darting — hence the A3 sprayed on 'my' elephant's rear.

On Peter's instructions I sat on the dusty ground next to A3's trunk, which had two small twigs, each maybe 5–8cm long, keeping her airways open. I recall thinking how strange that such tiny items could make the difference to this huge animal staying alive or not.

Then I realised that I might also make that difference. With my hand cupping the end of her trunk, I stared at my watch as each minute passed by, determined not to miscount her long, warm and fuggy breaths. Rightly or wrongly, I felt as if I had the life of this beautiful, vulnerable animal quite literally in my hands.

I sat there counting for some twenty minutes. Gently, I touched A3's skin; as tough as tyres, lined like an old lady's face. Her huge ears were flipped over her eyes as a natural blindfold, shielding her from undue stress should she start to stir. And her wonky tusks — the colour of yellowing teeth — felt smooth and cool.

The fact that someone could callously kill her for these tusks suddenly seemed more abhorrent than ever: now it felt personal. If I wasn't prepared for the shock of the darting, I certainly wasn't expecting the visceral tugs at the heartstrings this moment had triggered.

During those twenty minutes, vets and researchers buzzed around, monitoring her and recording vital data, including:

- Her heart rate, which for a resting standing elephant is typically 4–10 breaths per minute;
- Her pulse rate, which should be 28–52

per minute, monitored by checking the palpation of her middle ear artery;

- Her temperature, usually between 36.5°C–38.5°C, using a thermometer inserted deep into her rectum. If she overheated she would need to be doused with cool water and if it exceeded 39°C, she would have to be revived;
- Monitoring the anaesthesia in case it needed topping up, usually indicated by the elephant moving its trunk and ears;
- Checking her feet to gain an idea of her overall health, height and age. The more worn the sole, the older she is likely to be;
- Measuring the length of her tusks, also an indicator of age and health;
- Taking blood samples for tests and DNA research.

The matriarch (A1), lying nearby, was fitted with a GPS collar to track the herd's movements in their new home. They fit this using a reinforced bar with a hook to slide and pull the collar under the neck. Only used on adult elephants, they usually take around 20 minutes to fit, are 2–3 metres long, 7–10cm wide and weigh up to 15kg.

Soon it was time to crane A3 onto the low loader to be transported to the 'wake-up' crates in the recovery area a few minutes' drive away. With chained webbing tied around her feet, she was winched upside-down into the air.

"It looks awful," Peter had briefed us, "but it doesn't harm them. The capture stress they feel is minimal and well managed with tranquilisers."

He was right, it did look awful. Suspended like a huge grey lump with her trunk hanging down, A3 looked dead. As she descended, we steered her onto the flatbed truck and I helped to lift her trunk, astounded by how heavy it felt in my arms.

Once she was safely positioned, all the emotions I'd kept in check throughout the morning came to the fore. The tears welled up and I had to walk away, even though I understood the bigger picture — that her family would have the space and security they needed at Nkhotakota and their chances of survival were now stronger than ever.