

Close Encounters of the Endangered Kind



Episode VIII: Land of the Giant Tuskers by Tricia Berry

After flying to Nairobi, Kenya the night previously, the next morning we met our driver who was taking us to Tsavo National Park, the largest of Kenya's 23 national parks the next morning. The area, comparable to the size of Switzerland, has two sections divided by the highway from Mombasa to Nairobi: Tsavo East and Tsavo West. We would be staying at the guest cottage at the headquarters of Tsavo Trust in the Tsavo East section.

To get there meant a 4-hour drive down a two-lane highway busy with trucks bringing product from the port in Mombasa into Nairobi and vice versa. Drivers on the road were boldly dodging oncoming traffic as they passed the trucks in front of them, braking quickly or accelerating as needed. I was sitting in the front passenger seat - on the left again.

I wore out my right leg slamming down on the non-existent brake. Fast-approaching cars were often coming straight at us as we tried to pass trucks blocking our view of the other side of the highway. The backs of cement trucks were usually just feet away and my nerves were a wreck as our excellent and experienced driver responded to the sudden braking of vehicles in front of us. Debbie and Joe in the back seat were oblivious, reading and sleeping their way to Tsavo. To me the passing game the motorists played trying to hurry the commute was more daunting than any safari drives we had while in Africa.

IEF has been supporting Tsavo Trust's aerial monitoring and providing anti-poaching support for the last remaining "Big Tuskers" since its inception. Big Tuskers are male elephants carrying tusks that reached almost to the ground and are estimated to weigh at least 100 lbs. each tusk. Female elephants carrying similarly large tusks are called Iconic Cows and are also monitored and protected. Large tuskers, male and female, used to be a common sight in Africa in the early 1900's. With unregulated hunting for trophies and ivory, and then the huge crisis in poaching, few big tuskers now remain.

Tsavo Trust, run by third-generation Kenyan native Richard Moller, was founded to provide long-term protection and community conservation programs to this critically important area. They collaborate with the Kenya Wildlife Service to

protect and serve both the animals and communities so all benefit from the protection of the Tsavo Conservation Area.

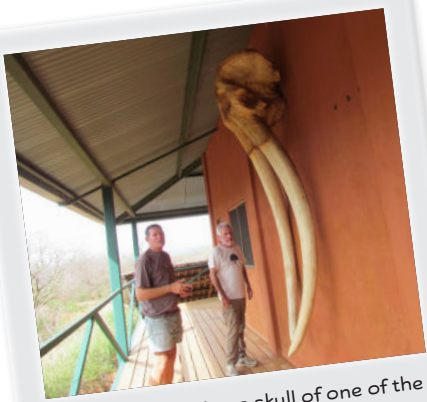
I was relieved to finally see the park entrance. We pulled off the intimidating highway to tumble down the red dirt road to Tsavo Trust's Headquarters. Driving past the electrified fences that help keep animals from the busy highway, we immediately startled a bateleur eagle on the side of the dirt road who dropped half of his snake meal when he saw us, flying to a branch of a nearby tree. Debbie and our driver identified what was left of the snake as a Puff Adder. Hopefully that was as close as we'd ever get to this species of dangerous venomous snake.



What was left of a bateleur eagle's meal—a
venomous puff adder.

The very annoyed eagle screamed at us when we stopped to get a closer look at the snake and quickly retrieved the rest of its precious catch after we drove by. As we traveled the dusty red road, it became apparent that adorable little dik-dik antelopes were as ubiquitous as the squirrels at home. You never knew when one or a few would decide to dart across the road right ahead of our vehicle.

We were dropped off at the open-aired guest cottage in the Tsavo Trust compound. It had two large enclosed bedrooms, each with its own outdoor bathroom, and a simple dining room and sofa area overlooking a river watering hole. We were even provided with our own personal chef who used an attached



Richard shows Joe a skull of one of the Big Tuskers at Tsavo Trust

kitchen to make our meals and pack safari lunches for us.

That afternoon we toured the Tsavo Trust headquarters and met the staff: Richard Moller and his delightful daughter Alia, who, as his main assistant, did much of

the administrative work. Alia's

husband Nick is their chief pilot making daily flights surveying the park. They live in a home with their 18-month-old toddler Theo, and are next door to Richard and his wife, Alia's stepmother, and their school-age son. The operation also has anti-poaching, community and tech specialists who work long hours protecting the vast Tsavo Parks

During a tour of the operations center, Richard showed us skulls and tusks of some of the Big Tuskers who had passed, named and remembered fondly by Richard. He also gave a brief overview of their operations and mission. Next his son-in-law Nick showed us around the grounds.

I gasped when I saw a small zebra foal laying on the ground in a small fenced yard watching us. He had been recently found orphaned and is now being hand raised. The little guy was fine, and just resting in the heat of the mid-day sun. Rescuing orphaned and injured animals is not uncommon for the Tsavo Trust team. Afterwards we walked to the airplane hangar to see the four small planes used to patrol the park. When Nick asked us if we'd like to experience a typical daily reconnaissance flight, we of course said YES!! We planned it for the next morning.

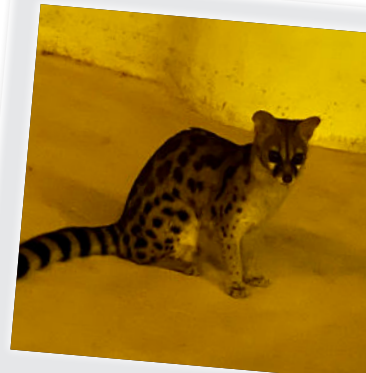
Sundowners are an African pre-dinner tradition, like Happy Hour in America. Tsavo had three other guests visiting so we

met on top of a rocky mesa, put out lawn chairs and socialized over snacks and cold drinks. Debbie, Joe and I were not sure our four-wheel vehicle driven by Nick would make it up the steep rocky sides without flipping over but no worries with Nick at the wheel. It was fascinating to look out and see the long lava flows that made up the hills running through the flat plateau of the park as the sun disappeared on the horizon.

Everyone we met in Tsavo are part of the African conservation world, and it was eye opening to hear about the intricacies of their work, the roadblocks they had to navigate, and their future plans and long-term goals. Life is not easy and Alia shared with me the pros and cons she and Nick had to consider in deciding to raise their son Theo in the Tsavo bush.

We returned to the guest cottage that evening relaxed and inspired by the company and conversation. We had a wonderful surprise when a little wild genet came begging for food when we sat down for our evening meal. Our chef told us that she was known to hang around the three houses in the compound at dinnertime. She seemed to know humans found her adorable and would reward her with table scraps. Looking a bit like a weasel, she had spotted fur and a long fluffy tail, and acted very much like a shy house cat.

Our chef said the genet loved the chapatis we were having. This confused me as I thought this small animal was a type of cat, which I know are carnivores. It turns out genets are their own species and this little visitor liked whatever food we wanted to share with her. We kept tossing her chunks of chapati and she couldn't seem to get enough - amazing for such a sleek little animal.



A charming guest at dinner: the chapati-loving genet

Next Episode:

The 10% Plan

Farmers are afraid of and dislike elephants because they come onto their property and feed on and trample crops, break into grain storage buildings, destroy homes, and sometimes injure and kill people. Due to this, many farmers have no interest in protecting elephants and would prefer to see them all eradicated.

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November 2-13, 2025



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