

THE COURTSHIP OF AFRICAN ELEPHANTS

BY MAJOR W. E. POLES, M.C.

The Luangwa Valley Game Reserve, in the northern, eastern and southern provinces of Northern Rhodesia, covers approximately 5,000 square miles. It is in two separate sections, divided by a comparatively narrow corridor which is inhabited by an African community. This strip of country embraces the Munyamadzi and Mupamadzi rivers, two of the Luangwa's rare perennial tributaries and cuts north-east to south-west across the valley from the Muchinga Hills to the Luangwa river.

With the exception of a small area in the extreme south, the two sections of the reserve lie along the right bank of the Luangwa, occupying the valley westward to the Muchinga range, whose steep escarpments seal off this low veld country from the relatively high plateau of the Congo watershed. The reserve itself is uninhabited and unspoilt. Its woodlands and plains are not disfigured and nowhere are there roads or man-made tracks. Both northern and southern sections of the reserve and, to a lesser extent, the area of native settlement lying between, holds a great number and variety of game, including a resident elephant population.

A game officer's tour through this vast wilderness extends over nearly four months and, in the course of it, he covers approximately 1,600 miles on foot. Walking is by far the best way of getting acquainted with a piece of country and of watching the habits of its wild life. Mechanical transport allows nothing like the same facility for close, continuous observation, besides which motor tracks must all too frequently by-pass many of the animals' secluded haunts.

Over a period of years I have made notes of what I see as I go along; at midday halts and at each day's end these notes are transcribed in greater detail into a field journal. It is important to write up the diary of the day's events at once, before the happenings become blurred and seemingly insignificant details are forgotten.

On the 10th of September, 1953, I visited a huge tract of treeless undulating grassland known as Chifungwe plain. The plain lies in the central, southern portion of the settled area known as the Munyamadzi Corridor, or Munyamadzi controlled area. The plain itself is uninhabited, though it is surrounded on three sides by scattered native settlements. The place is much beloved by elephants at all seasons and is a Mecca probably

visited by every elephant of the many thousands in the Luangwe Valley at some period or other of every year.

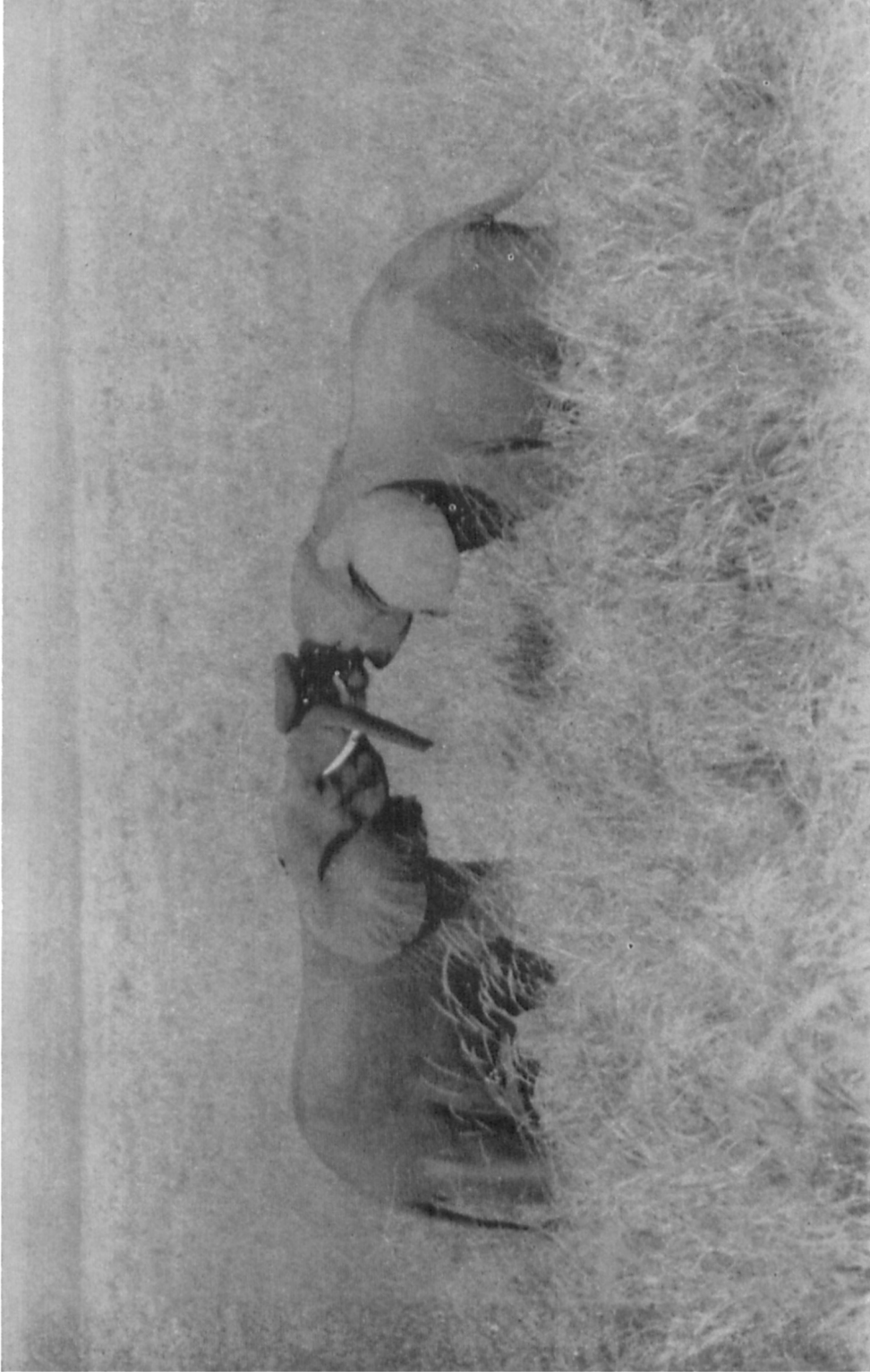
At the period of which I write, the height of the dry season, much of the tall grass with which the plain is covered had been burnt, grazed, or trampled down. From one of the higher ridges I counted 231 elephants, widely dispersed singly and in small troops. There were many little groups out of sight in dead ground between the swelling slopes of the plain. In many places the grass, in spite of being grazed and trampled, remained sufficiently tall and thick to conceal all but the backs of full-grown elephants. Obviously many, particularly juveniles, were overlooked.

Usually it is impossible to go far among these widely scattered herds without discovery. Alarm is quickly communicated and soon every elephant in sight makes off. On this occasion there was little breeze and what was very unusual it remained constant or if it did shift was always in our favour.

We passed between troop after troop of elephants without detection and presently got well into the middle of the plain. Presently, in a depression between adjoining slopes, on one of which a herd of about a dozen elephants was dispersed feeding, two elephants became engaged in what appeared at first to be a friendly tussle. To begin with there was nothing to indicate that this was anything extraordinary and I had no idea that soon I was to see a very unusual sight. The two elephants, a young bull and a mature cow, faced each other with ears outstretched and then advanced until their tusks interlocked. They took hold of each other's trunks, first wrestling and then straining one against the other as in a tug-of-war.

In a little while the cow, who had been rather roughly pushed and pulled about, backed away, apparently seeking to discontinue the struggle. At this time the two elephants were about a hundred yards from us but soon the cow, closely followed by the bull, moved nearer. The bull now took the cow's tail in his mouth and pressing the side of his head against her quarters, frog-marched her a short distance. Releasing the cow's tail, the bull ranged alongside, passing his trunk over her neck and grasping the base of her opposite ear.

So far the demonstration gave the impression of mild bullying rather than love-making and I was astonished when the bull suddenly let go of the cow's ear and mounted her. He rose on his hind legs in an effortless manner, resting his knees on the cow's loins (not the soles of his feet), and shuffled forwards to press his body close against her quarters. The cow stopped and remained still directly the bull let go of her ear.



[Photo by W. E. Poole]

AFRICAN ELEPHANTS—COURTSHIP.

(The bull is on the right.)



[Photo by W. E. Poles

AFRICAN ELEPHANTS—SALUTE AFTER MATING.
(The bull is on the left.)

Being slow to realize the significance of what I saw, I was unprepared to make use of my camera and wasted precious moments seeking an unobstructed view. To my great disappointment I failed to get a photograph of the actual mating, which lasted only about ten seconds. After that the bull shuffled backwards and dismounted as effortlessly as he had got up.

The cow now moved forward a few paces while the bull searched the ground with his trunk at the spot where she had stood. After walking about ten yards the cow turned to face the bull who stretched his trunk horizontally, at full length, towards her. The cow then extended her own trunk towards the bull in the same manner and in this position each advanced until their trunk-tips touched. Without any appreciable pause each animal raised its trunk upwards and backwards over its head in form like the letter "S", in the manner of domesticated elephants trained to salute in this way. They remained statuesque in this position for about half a minute. (My photograph of them in this position is shown here.)

At no time during the courtship did either elephant make any vocal sound.

A few minutes later two other bulls of similar size strolled over from the herd nearby. They came up side by side and between the mated pair. The mated bull showed no resentment and the four elephants fed peacefully together.

But soon the cow elephant began making advances to one of the newcomers, getting in his way and otherwise behaving invitingly. She carried out this manoeuvre four times, each time making her advances to the same bull who each time disappointed her by taking not the slightest notice. This was a pity because I was anxious to discover whether her first mate would show signs of jealousy or resentment.

We kept the cow with her three attendant bulls under observation for about an hour, during which time they grazed continuously. At last the proximity of other elephant obliged us to move on.

The plain was full of elephants and at the time of the courtship several mature bulls were within half a mile of the place where the mating occurred.

Elephants are very wise and it is unlikely that those nearby were unaware of what was going on. The explanation may lie in the fact that after puberty all female elephants, except when they are pregnant, will take the bull whereas the male's reproductive mechanism is governed by a cycle of definite period of desire. No other explanation occurs to me which could account

for the complete indifference of all the neighbouring elephants ; particularly the lack of competition for the cow's favours.

At this time there was a tendency among all the elephants in the plain to move towards water—a matter of great importance and which might cause the postponement of sexual affairs. When courting did start it seemed to be the bull that was reluctant. One particular cow was being fondled by a bull that kept close behind her in a herd marching in single file towards the water holes. The cow repeatedly stopped, apparently with the intention of inviting the bull to mate with her. The bull was disinclined and anxious to go on—finally, exasperated, he straddled her hind quarters with his tusks and placing his trunk against her rump, rushed her forward twenty yards or so. After this she seemed to appreciate the situation and loitered no more. Her consort walked close behind, frequently caressing her back and neck with his trunk as, with the rest of the herd in front, they marched steadily through the grass towards the distant water.

It is by no means unusual to see a bull caressing a cow. Frequently the two animals stand side by side and entwine their trunks. Sometimes the bull passes his trunk over the cow's body, fondling her. Such behaviour is not necessarily indicative of sexual desire, though I have never seen a male elephant other than the master bull of a herd behaving in this way. Cow elephants also are affectionate. I have never seen them indulge in caressing gestures but a female elephant when feeding may often be seen to put a small bunch of grass or leaves into another's mouth.

The fondlings and caresses indulged in between bull and cow elephants and the gifts of succulent titbits by one female to another, seems a manifestation of simple mutual affection. I am sure everyone who has studied elephants, either wild or domesticated, can have no doubt that these highly intelligent animals form strong attachments and deeply-rooted friendships between either sex and all ages.
