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It's dry season and elephants are desperately seeking water - but poachers lie in wait

By TONY RENNELL - [More by this author »](#) Last updated at 09:06am on 29th June 2007

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Searching for water, the herd of elephants sweeps across the bush in central Africa. It is the dry season and they are desperately in need of water and food.

At this time of year they move in groups up to 800 strong, making a magnificent sight from the air.

Scroll down for more ...



A herd of elephants sweeps the plain looking for water

[ENLARGE](#)

Then they find a waterhole on the Tinga river in Chad. Elephants appear on the edge of the bank, juveniles first, followed by a large female. They stand still, listening, until the female nudges one of the youngsters down the bank.

Thirty to 40 then follow, babies in tow. After slaking their thirst, they turn to dunking each other in the muddy water, wallowing, having fun. Just as quickly as they had come, they are gone, filing up the river bank and away.

All this was witnessed by J Michael Fay, a veteran ecologist who has walked across Africa (it took him 455 days) and flown over 70,000 miles of the continent in a small plane. He told readers of National Geographic magazine he had not been treated to such a dazzling social display by elephants for years.

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Females and young slake their thirst

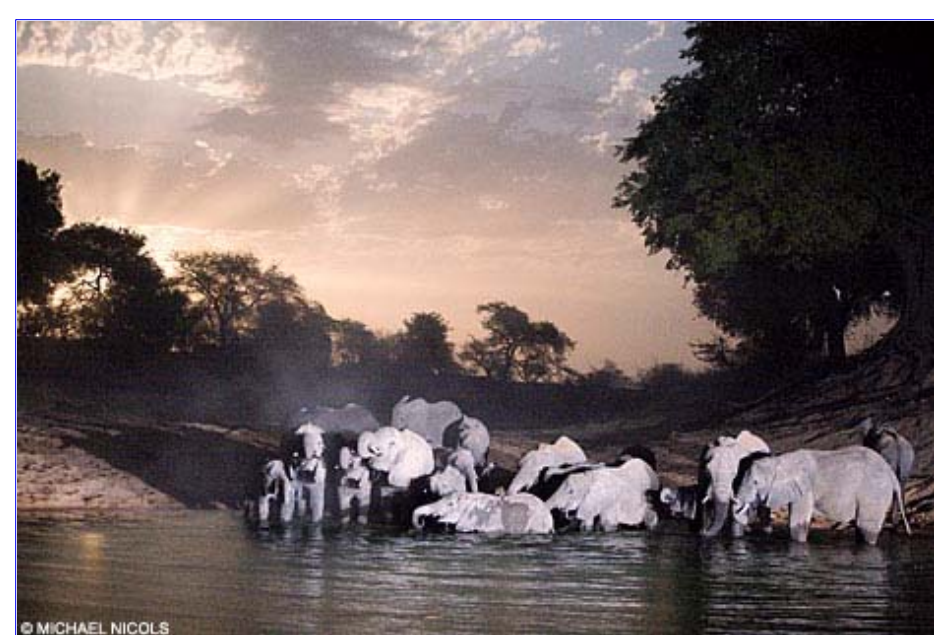
But beyond the joy was danger and despair. The elephants' quest for food would almost certainly take them outside the bounds of Zakouma park, a 1,200 square mile wildlife refuge for more than half a century. And there, poachers wait for them, eager for their ivory.

Thousands of elephants are shot by men on horseback.

Some, only wounded, flee to die a lingering death. One elephant Fay found, a huge bull, had eight bullet holes in his head. Fay said: "He had lived through civil wars and droughts, only to be killed for a few pounds of ivory to satisfy human vanity in some distant land."

The ivory ends up in cities such as Khartoum, where it is sold as sculptures and jewellery, or finds its way to Asia through the black market.

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The elephants appear to have fun at the waterhole



There is little to stop the killing. The 88 armed guards who patrol the Zakouma reserve keep as tight a watch as they can but outside, the herds are cannon fodder.

The civil wars that bedevil the region are also a danger. Fighting is never far away. A pair of Mirage jets chasing retreating rebels buzzed the river and spooked the herds, just for fun.

The elephants are caught in the crossfire. If the poachers don't get them, the constant fighting, back and forth across this tortured land, will.

"The vast majority of elephants in this area don't die of old age," Fay observes sadly. "They die at the hand of man."

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A member of an anti-poaching team who found a group of dead elephants holds up a tusk left behind by poachers



One of the dead elephants - its tusks removed

Back at the waterhole, Fay could only marvel "that these elephants, who spend their lives being hunted and killed by men, can find peace.

"How do they endure the terror and despair? Yet when I meet the Zakouma elephants, all I see is joy."

Unlike men, these giants exhibit no rage or thirst for revenge - just a desire to protect their young.

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21 people have commented on this story so far. Tell us what you think below.

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It's very sad that, as usual a civil war is probably the cause of most of the problems in a country and it's the general population (who have no interest in who is in power) and the animals that suffer. You can guarantee that whoever is in power will have no interest in the animals or people other than how to exploit them. Africa has always been a melting pot and will probably always be, but why should we care about these animals and people when we can't be bothered to help british citizens in zimbabwe. Sorry rant over, but it is all very sad and annoying.

- Tp, Buckinghamshire

"Man proves the existence of hell in his treatment of animals"

- Daphne Birkby, Alton, Hants UK

Stephen in Ascot - Why don't you get of your high horse and go and help your former colonial brothers and tell them to stop living in the past. These are not the local people doing this but armed gangs who keep the money for themselves.

- Len Kinley, Antrim, United Kingdom

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Paula is five months pregnant with a baby she never wanted. Here, she reveals why she had a dramatic change of heart. She is also glowing, for beneath her fashionable smock Paula, 40, is pregnant for the third time



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In her only major TV interview about her time in Downing Street, Cherie Blair attempts to defend herself about the Cheriegate affair, her friendship with lifestyle guru Carole Caplin and claims she isn't bonkers



[Freed Paris Hilton does solitary... in Hawaii](#)

After 23 days in jail, Paris Hilton is enjoying the freedom - and the solitude - of a holiday in the sun. The heiress claimed she was profoundly affected by her time in prison



[Happy 60th Dior Couture](#)

Tonight, while you are perhaps watching EastEnders with a ready meal from M&S on your lap, I will be in a strange and magical place. Probably taking part in a little bit of history in the Palace of Versailles, a few miles outside Paris



[Princess Margaret - Scarred by a forbidden love](#)

When Princess Margaret fell in love with her father's divorced equerry, the Establishment reacted with horror. But today her biographer reveals that there was more to the star-crossed affair than the public ever knew

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[Posh's tough fitness regime for Spice Girls](#)

Victoria Beckham's Spice Girl bandmates are about to get a taste of edamame beans, the secret to her impossibly tiny 23in waist



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Just days before she becomes a real-life married woman, Eva cuts a sultry figure in a blue bikini



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Big Brother housemate Charley celebrated her 22nd birthday by making a drunken exhibition of herself



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She may be TV's Perfect Housewife, but Anthea Turner had to learn a lesson the hard way: never do the housework in flip-flops



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There was only one moment when the Spice Girls didn't have that much to say - when asked to sing



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She tells women everywhere What Not To Wear, but maybe Trinny should have thought twice about this outfit



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Once there was only ever the briefest glimpse of utilitarian sports knicker. Now, there is a fashion parade of hotpants

[FANCY THAT...](#)



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The European Union has turned to shock tactics in its latest bid for self-promotion - making its own dirty video



[Furious TV presenter sets fire to Paris Hilton story live on air](#)

In a protest over having to read a story about Paris, anchorwoman screws up and tries to burn her script



[The elephants' odyssey](#)

Desperately seeking water, a huge herd of elephants sweeps across the plain in central Africa... but poachers lie in wait



[The human cannonball flying through the air with the greatest of ease](#)

This daredevil appears to have mastered the art of flying ... by being blasted out of a cannon



[Meet Eclyse - the ultimate zebra crossing](#)

It was more a case of a zebra cross breeding than a zebra crossing when this 'zorse' was born after a tryst between a zebra and a horse



Love a duck! Mother hen adopts abandoned ducklings

A broody hen has taken three ducklings under her wing after they were abandoned before they hatched

[More fancy that >>](#)