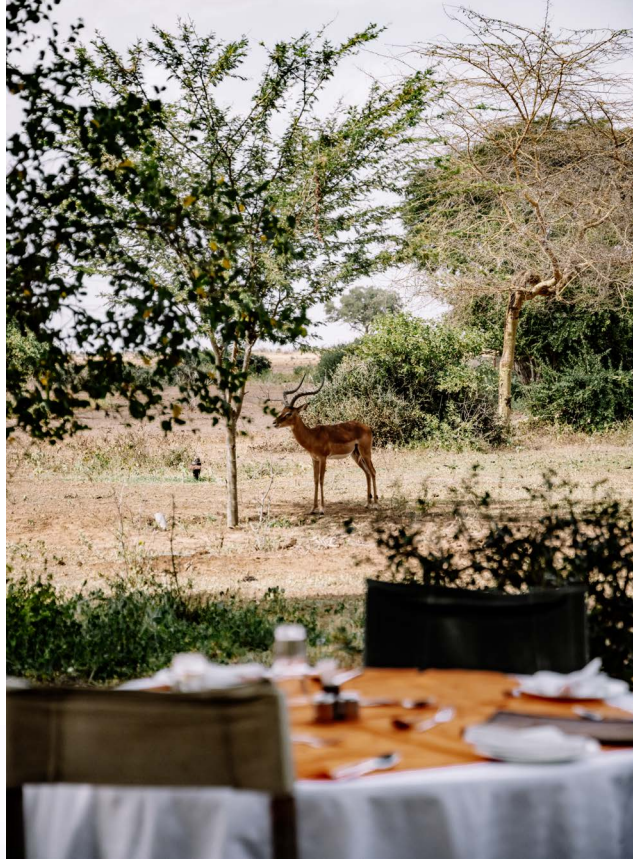


Wildlife Wonders



The big tuskers of Tsavo

Brought to the brink of extinction, Tsavo East National Park's fabled big tuskers are making a comeback, writes Catherine Marshall.

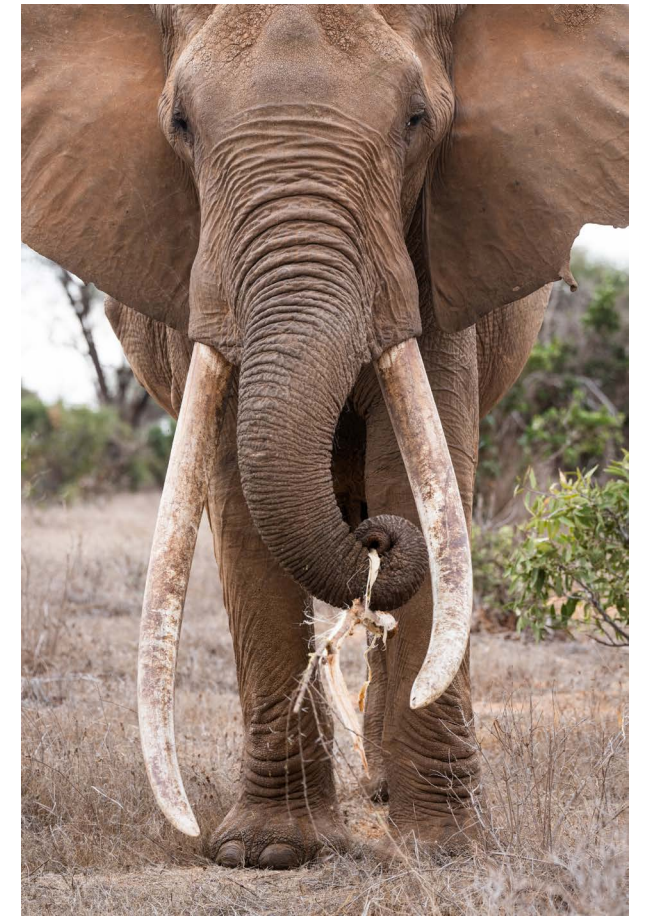
The hunt is over. We have found the big tusker after a days-long search. He sways ankle-deep in love grass, his jowls heavy with ivory. I snare him in my sights, aim the barrel lens, press the shutter. Then I lay my camera aside and lose myself in the majesty of the moment. Before me stands one of Tsavo Conservation Area's eight remaining big tuskers – bull elephants whose tusks weigh in excess of 50 kilograms each and are so immense they often drag along the ground. Brought to the brink of extinction by trophy hunters and ivory poachers, their genes have been identified in 27 younger members of the area's 14,000-strong elephant population. Against such odds, the existence of these so-called “emerging tuskers” is miraculous.

“These genes are being preserved and maintained,” says Nganba Malingi, a guide at Satao Camp in Tsavo East National Park, Kenya. “Patrols are done by air, by road, by foot, monitoring them, collaring them, GPS. And it has been working. Tsavo is a hotbed, an epicentre of the big tuskers, especially Satao Camp.”

This region is indeed a stronghold for tuskers of all stripes: one third of Kenya's elephants live between the contiguous Tsavo East and Tsavo West national parks (which form part of the Tsavo Conservation Area). The earth reverberates with their footfall; herds appear to move as one, gliding across the horizon like paper cut-outs joined trunk-to-tail. Their hides reflect the colours of this painted landscape: black for the cotton soil, grey for the ashen loam, red for the laterite sod streaking the plains.

This camouflage reveals itself close up at dawn as a herd files towards the waterhole at Satao Camp. My tent flaps are open and I can see the elephants from my bed through the tightly zipped mosquito screen. There's no sign of the lion that woke me in the early hours as he passed >>

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Lions are often sighted at Satao Camp; One of the big tuskers of Tsavo East National Park, Kenya; Spot elephants from the tented safari camp; Have your binoculars at the ready on The Big Tusker Safari with Bench Africa; The magnificent mammals are known to hang out around Satao Camp; Impalas watch on as you enjoy lunch under tamarind trees.



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Satao Camp sundowners; Look out over the waterhole from the outdoor dining area at Satao Camp; The best time to spot animals around Satao Camp is on a game drive at dawn or dusk; Tsavo's red laterite soil lends its elephants their distinctive hue.*

by; his mane-haloed face had entered my dreams and lulled me back to sleep. My *askari* (guard) has placed refreshments on the deck and I sip coffee in the company of elephants taking their own morning drink. Though no big tuskers are among them, their gravitas is undisputed; their faces are stained brick-red, their feet shod in patent black cotton soil boots. In the rainy season, up to 1000 elephants will gather here each day, big tuskers among them.

But the rains haven't broken yet; though I could spend all day watching the passing traffic from the camp's open-air dining room or watchtower, Nganba tempts me away on a treasure hunt.

"It's a fresh beginning," he says.

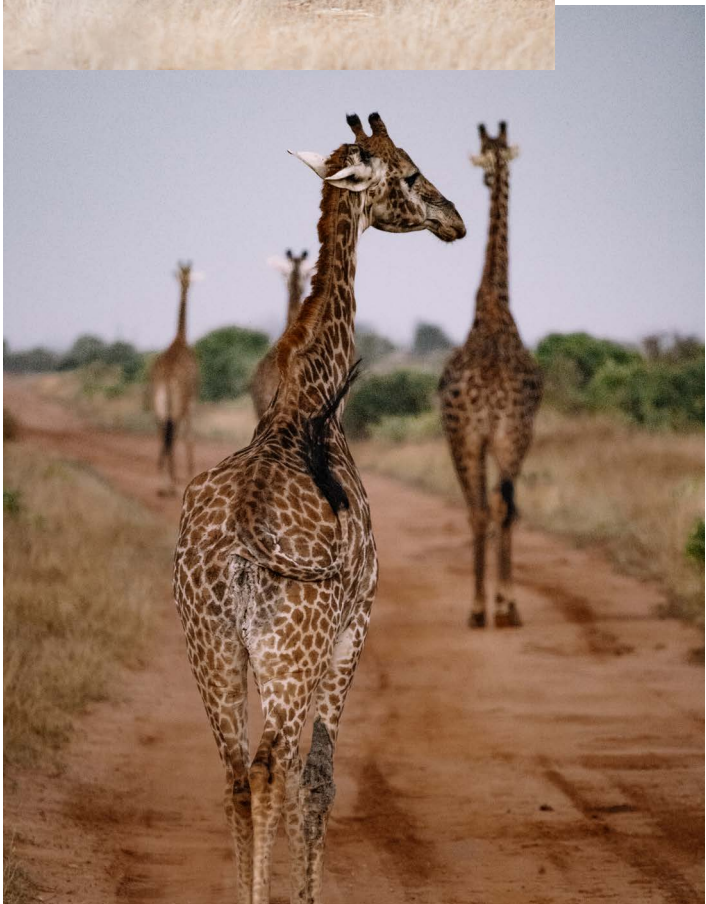
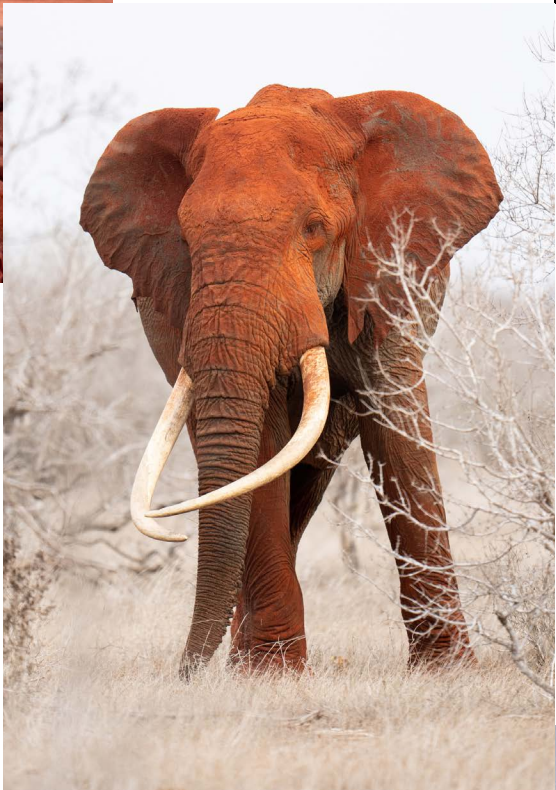
The rising sun snags on the thorn trees and sets the savannah alight. Oryx emerge from a cloud of dust, their horns crisscrossing like wayward exclamation marks. Masai giraffe – the tallest of the species – crane their necks towards an aircraft gliding overhead. It's a Kenyan Wildlife Service aerial patrol, part of that collective effort by conservation organisations to revive big tuskers and protect their kin. As Nganba points out, their work is reaping dividends: poaching has dropped by about 90 per cent; projects initiated by Tsavo Trust, an elephant conservation NGO, have improved economic opportunities for local communities and reduced human-wildlife conflict; and a rescue-and-rehabilitation program run by Sheldrick Wildlife Trust – one of Africa's oldest conservation organisations – has saved scores of elephants impacted by drought, conflict and poaching.

"Tsavo has a future," Nganba says.

He's idling through riparian habitat, the Taita Hills rising blue beyond the thicket. This is leopard territory, but there's another loiterer about: an emerging tusker, one of the elite up-and-comers in whom resides the hope of so many. The elephant turns towards us, his tusks mighty cutlasses carving the air.

"See how they curve inwards?" Nganba says. "Up, down, this way, that way. They are like fingerprints."

From nowhere, a flock of openbill storks floods the sky. They are a portent, it seems, winged sages foretelling a miraculous rebirth.



PHOTOGRAPHY WILLIAM BURRARD-LUCAS (ELEPHANT, SATAO CAMP OUTDOOR DINING AREA)



A Traveller's Checklist

GETTING THERE

EMIRATES flies direct from Sydney and Melbourne to Dubai, with regular connections to Nairobi. emirates.com

STAYING THERE

BENCH AFRICA's eight-day Big Tusker Safari costs from \$5015 and includes rail transfers from Nairobi, accommodation, meals and safari activities. benchafrika.com

EATING THERE

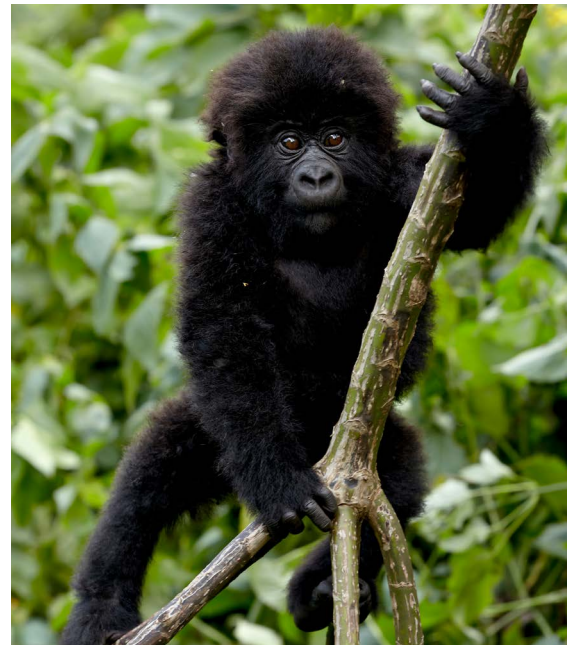
Ask SATAO CAMP to arrange a picnic beside the Galata River or a lantern-lit bush dinner (extra costs apply). sataocamp.com

ARMCHAIR TRAVEL

Pour a sundowner, pull up a chair and enjoy the elephant action on Satao's waterhole webcam. live.sataocamp.com

CONSCIOUS TRAVELLER

The SHELDRIK WILDLIFE TRUST's orphan elephant adoption program enables supporters around the world to contribute to the preservation of the species. Visitors can meet some of the orphans at the trust's Nairobi Elephant Orphanage and at the Voi Reintegration Unit (included in Bench Africa's itinerary). sheldrickwildlifetrust.org



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Rwanda's gorilla naming ceremony

Even the most compelling Sir David Attenborough documentary cannot compare to the thrill of encountering mountain gorillas in the wild. The eco-diverse nation of Rwanda is home to about 1000 mountain gorillas and the great news is that number is slowly increasing. Celebrate the success of conservation efforts by attending a naming ceremony for baby gorillas with Intrepid Travel on a Rwanda Gorilla Naming Ceremony & Uganda tour. In addition to sighting the magnificent creatures in Rwanda, the nine-day adventure includes a game drive in Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park and cruise around Lake Kivu, one of the African Great Lakes. By taking a tour with Intrepid, you are directly supporting Gorilla Doctors, an organisation dedicated to caring for sick and injured mountain and eastern lowland gorillas in the wild. *Carla Grossetti*

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CHECK OFF THE BIG FIVE IN TANZANIA

Like a giant fish bowl of wildlife, the jewel of northern Tanzania's Ngorongoro Conservation Area is known for being populated with all the members of the Big Five (lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and buffalo), a pool full of hippo and even the odd cheetah. Hear the cackle of hyenas as your safari vehicle climbs down into the world's largest intact volcanic caldera in the dawn mist, and ready your camera for non-stop action as you roll around this legendary ecosystem. *Sarah Reid*

