

'Widowed... And Left With 21 Elephants'

When her husband unexpectedly died, Françoise, who didn't know much about animals, took on Lawrence's Game Reserve... **Linda Dearsley** reports

At 5pm on 4 March 2012, visitors to the Thula Thula Game Reserve in South Africa looked out to see the strangest sight.

The reserves' two herds of elephants, which normally kept away from the house, were massing by the main gate.

They seemed agitated and stress marks, like tear stains, streaked their big, sad faces. Even the babies were distressed, tiny trunks waving. Then, when all 21 beasts were assembled, the elephants lined up along the fence, became still and a low, solemn, rumbling hum, almost like a song, began to fill the air.

The visitors were astonished, but Thula Thula's owner, Françoise Malby-Anthony, 63, understood immediately. Just two days before, her beloved husband Lawrence, a renowned conservationist known as the 'Elephant Whisperer' who had rescued these elephants

and given them a home, had died suddenly of a heart attack.

Lawrence, 61, passed away in Johannesburg, 400 miles from the reserve but somehow, the elephants knew.

'To me it made perfect sense,' says Françoise. 'When my husband's heart stopped beating something stirred in theirs and they crossed mile after mile of wilderness to mourn with us and pay their respects.'

What's more, every 4 March for the next three years, the elephant choir returned at 5pm for a repeat performance.

'I found it enormously comforting,' says Françoise. 'They seemed simply to want to be in the same space they'd once shared with Lawrence. Whenever I felt lost and overwhelmed in the months that followed I drew strength from their visits. They needed me, but I also needed them.'

Widowed with 21 elephants,

Françoise and Lawrence on their game reserve



rhino, giraffe and zebra to look after, Françoise had her hands full. Plus she now had a macho staff of rangers who might not happily accept a woman in charge, so everyone assumed Françoise, who was originally from Paris, would return there.

Françoise wouldn't hear of it.

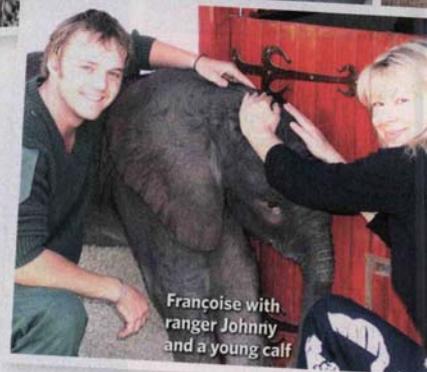
'Thula Thula means peace and tranquility,' she says. 'It was Lawrence's dream and it became mine, too. I fell in love with both of them.'

The unlikely couple had met in London in 1987, where both were visiting a trade exhibition.

Lawrence, from Durban, South Africa, worked in the insurance business but longed to set up a game reserve. Françoise, meanwhile, was happy to swap Paris for sunny Durban to be with her partner.

'The first evening he took me out to the bush, I was cooking at the stove and a mouse fell into my pot and then a snake. I screamed!' says Françoise.

Yet soon, she was beguiled by



Françoise with ranger Johnny and a young calf

the beautiful landscapes and majestic herds of animals swaying through the long grass.

In 1998, when an old hunting lodge with 1,500 hectares of land came up for sale, Françoise agreed to sell their Durban house to buy it.

'We named it Thula Thula,' says Françoise. 'There weren't many animals left and only a farmhouse to live in. I realised that we'd need visitors to fund the reserve so we borrowed more money to build a lodge.'

Not long afterwards they were asked to rescue seven elephants.

'We knew nothing about elephants,' says Françoise. 'But if we didn't adopt them, they'd be shot.'

The couple were fast



Thula Thula means peace and tranquility

PHOTOS: WORLDWIDEFEATURES.COM

10 womanweekly.com

Thula Thula is home to herds of elephants



'We knew nothing about elephants but if we didn't adopt them, they'd be shot'

Keeping cool in the heat



learners. Soon, they were rescuing baby rhinos whose mothers had been killed by poachers, and sick elephants. The reserve expanded to 4,500 hectares and they added another lodge and a tented camp.

'One night, a week-old baby elephant wandered into the garden, lost,' says Françoise. 'Alone in the bush she'd die. We coaxed her into the kitchen. She needed milk but we couldn't think how to get her to drink. Then we had the idea of piercing the thumb of a rubber glove with a needle to make a teat and filling it with warm milk. It worked. She eagerly gulped down the whole glove-bottle and was soon nudging us for more. Milk was flying everywhere, all over the floor, her face and us.' Tummy full, she snuggled up

against Françoise's suede sofa for a nap. Later, they were able to return her to her mother.

There were moments of heartbreak, too, when cruel poachers shot their much-loved rhinos to hack off their horns or when sick animals died, but Françoise battled on.

'For a long time after I lost Lawrence I felt I was drowning,' says Françoise. 'But slowly my confidence grew and I began to see what to do with my life.'

She built a rehabilitation centre for orphaned animals, bought more land to home more elephants and met a new man. 'I met Clement when I was



Françoise and friend at home

fundraising in Durban,' says Françoise. 'I'd buried my grief in work, but Clement brought balance to my life. But best of all he loves Thula Thula and understands how important it is to me.'

✦ An Elephant in My Kitchen (£16.99, Sidgwick & Jackson) by Françoise Malby-Anthony with Katja Willemsen is available to buy from 26 July. To find out more about the reserve, visit thulathula.com

Africa's Disappearing Animals

Despite being one of the largest creatures to walk the earth, the African elephant is one of the most endangered.

It's estimated that 100 elephants are killed daily for ivory and meat. With elephant numbers declining by 62% since 2007, they could be extinct in 20 years.

Similarly the rhinoceros, which means 'nose horn' in Greek, faces a perilous future. At the dawn of the 20th century there were around 50,000 in the wild, but now there are estimated to be only 29,000 left. In the last decade alone, 7,245 were lost to poachers in Africa. For more information on how you can help protect these species, visit wwf.org.uk