

The Essex girl and her orphans of the bush

AS SHE strides purposefully through an African forest in leopard-print Wellingtons, Essex girl Rachael Murton is pursued by six excitable elephants.

Together, the lumbering animals weigh a combined 500 stone, but Chelmsford-born Rachael retains her composure.

For these young orphaned elephants, this devoted young British woman is their surrogate mum, and each wants to be first for a cuddle.

Tenderly, these colossal beasts — years from being fully grown — raise their trunks to 33-year-old Rachael's face, seeming to wrap her in an embrace.

A biology graduate who left the UK after university, Rachael has dedicated her life to saving baby elephants left without their real mums by poachers killing indiscriminately for ivory and bush-meat in Zambia.

Not only does she nurse the severely traumatised animals back to health, she is also on 24-hour call to mount dangerous rescue operations to bring abandoned elephants to safety.

'I've always loved animals and I left my white stilettos in Essex,' jokes Rachael, who came to Zambia in 2008 after working on animal conservation projects around the world.

She manages the Lilayi Elephant Nursery, the only orphanage of its kind in southern Africa, for anti-poaching organisation Game Rangers International, which has links to the International Fund For Animal Welfare.

The orphanage, near the capital Lusaka, performs a vital role in a country where ivory poachers who sell tusks to dealers for the Far East market are unlikely to be arrested.

When adult females are killed for their tusks, their babies quickly become emaciated because they need maternal milk to grow until the age of two or three.

Forlorn and confused, they are shunned by their herds because their weak state means they are more likely to attract lions. Without human intervention, orphaned elephants would quickly die.

Rachael, who studied at Royal Holloway College, near Egham, Surrey, is the woman park rangers turn to for help, even going up in a micro-light on one dramatic rescue when two baby elephants came close to plunging over Victoria Falls.

Until 2012, when the orphanage was opened, she was based in the bush, living without modern conveniences for many months of the year. Her passion to help was fuelled after she found two-



Dedicated: Rachael Murton

year-old female Suni, who was attacked with an axe when her mother was poached. Rachael and her Zambian keepers now dote on the young elephant who had horrific injuries.

To save Suni's limp leg, Game Rangers International commissioned a special metal boot so she can walk. She also has acupuncture.

The Lilayi orphan herd also includes young bull Zambezi, who has an astonishing rescue story. A barman at a safari lodge spotted what he thought was a rather portly guest splashing about in the swimming pool. Looking closer, he realised it was actually a one-month-old baby elephant.

Separated from his mother, he was desperate for water and had tumbled into the pool as he tried to drink.

Once sufficiently recovered, the orphans will be returned to the wild in Zambia's Kafue National Park. In this gigantic wilderness the size of Wales, they are initially kept safe from harm in a controlled area. But eventually they will be free to roam with the herds.

While the international ivory trade continues to kill thousands, it is left to brave animal lovers like Rachael to pick up the pieces. She makes a formidable ally for the elephants.

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Drink up: The baby elephant guzzles down a couple of litres of milk. Their mothers usually suckle them until they are two or three

Words: THOMAS NEAL



Pinpoint accuracy: Acupuncture treatment restored feeling to Suni's leg



Stepping out: Rachael dons her leopard-print boots to lead the parade



It's a family affair: The orphan elephants are gradually reintroduced into the wild when they are well enough and quickly find comfort and friendship as part of a herd again



I nose you: An affectionate 'kiss' for Rachael from one of the youngsters she has nursed back to health

PICTURES: ROGER ALLEN / NORTH DOWNS PICTURES