

## Elephant Collaring in Zakouma National Park during 2012 by Jean Labuschagne



The fifteenth of March 2012 marked the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> elephant collaring operation in Zakouma National Park and the second since African Parks took over management of the park in October 2010. Weeks of preparation had gone into organizing media crews, a veterinarian, vehicles and of course the collars themselves. The usual concern regarding the collars' shipment was thankfully avoided when two willing individuals coming up from South Africa brought the 7 elephant collars in their luggage. The lead from old car batteries was melted down on site in Zakouma to make the 7 kg weights for each collar.

The start of the operation coincided with a visit of various Ambassadors from Ethiopia, EU delegates from Brussels as well as dignitaries from N'Djamena and the Salamat Region. As the VIP's were only in the park for a few days the team decided to collar one of the Goz Djarat bulls – a herd of males that move primarily between Zakouma HQ and Goz Djarat, the main entrance to the park.



Babi Prokas

**An exciting moment for many - helping to lift the elephant enough to enable Pete to remove the dart from the underside**

Once the aircraft had guided the vehicles to within 400m of the herd Dr Pete Morkel, our very able veterinarian and some of the ground crew set off on foot to what would be the first elephant to be collared in 2012 – a fitting Z12. This being the second operation with the same team, everyone was relaxed and familiar with the procedure. Pete's shoes were off; stalk, aim, fire dart, arrive at elephant, water, measure up, fit collar, monitor, more water, photos, roll him over, remove dart, wake him up....it was a smooth, albeit hot morning and the return to base yielded 3 Land Cruiser's full of tired but smiling faces.

As we already had 9 collared animals from 2011 a concerted effort was put in to try and collar elephants from smaller groups without collars, in order to get an even dispersal of collars throughout the population. A change in tactic was needed, as the current method of collaring as early as possible in the morning meant that we were faced with one herd of 400 odd elephants, and no inkling as to who normally 'hangs out' with who. This posed the problem of potentially

collaring 2 animals from the same family group. With a bit of observation from the air crew it was decided that we would attempt to collar the next animal closer to midday. The heat caused the herd to split up and congregate in smaller pockets of animals around shady trees. The aircraft could easily pick out groups that did not already have collared animals amongst them and lead the ground team in on foot. In addition, the heat also meant that the animals were far more relaxed; docile even, making it far easier for the team in the air to keep an eye on the darted animal and where it went down. Z16 collar was fitted with great success and the following 2 collars were put on using this new technique.



**Pete prepares the antidote which is used to revive the elephant after the collar has been fitted. TV Tchad was present to document the operation.**

While all this was happening, a motorbike team from Zakouma had been sent to Fodjo Swamp, about 80km north-east of the park. Word had come in from nomads in the area that there was a group of elephants staying there who would often drink at the swamp at night. The guards from Zakouma were to investigate and see whether they could get GPS coordinates of recent signs. This herd would be an incredibly important group to collar as they were staying so far outside the park.

On a Saturday morning Souleyman, one of our guards that was up in the north, radioed from the upper branches of a tree to Zakouma HQ saying that the elephants were definitely there and that they had a GPS coordinate of fresh tracks. Preparations began immediately to send two vehicles north to Fodjo to prepare a landing strip for the aircraft and set up a temporary camp from which the team could operate. A rendezvous of 1600 hours somewhere on a camel trail north of



**The WCS aircraft takes off from the airstrip cum camel trail**

the swamp was set between the pilots and the ground team and the vehicles set off on the dusty 6 hour drive. At 15h30 the two pick-ups arrived at a section that was as straight and long as can be expected on a camel trail and everyone immediately got to work clearing the strip of any debris and smaller trees and shrubs. True to their word Kilo Delta, the Cessna 182 operated by WCS, buzzed overhead and made their decent shortly after 4pm. Step one had gone smoothly, everyone was there. All that remained was the small task of finding 13 elephants in an area of about 1,500 km<sup>2</sup>. New information from a nomad arrived early the next morning of fresh tracks and the motorbike team was immediately despatched to follow up. The aircraft did a couple of early morning flights, however by mid morning there was still no sign of the elephants. Whoever was left in camp piled into the aircraft for the third flight of the day, and it was on the way back to the strip that a somewhat sleepy Pete said “there they are”!

Next step - reaching said elephants: the motorbike team had come to within 2 km of the herd along a narrow trail. With only one spare wheel left (3 spares were now flat), the ground team set off on a very slow 5 km weave through *Dichrostachys* thickets - a puncture's heaven! With some guidance and encouragement from the guys in the air, we inched our way to within 500m of the herd and continued the rest of the way on foot, carrying only what was



**A trail through thick thorn bush meant for motorbikes and livestock – not a 4x4!**

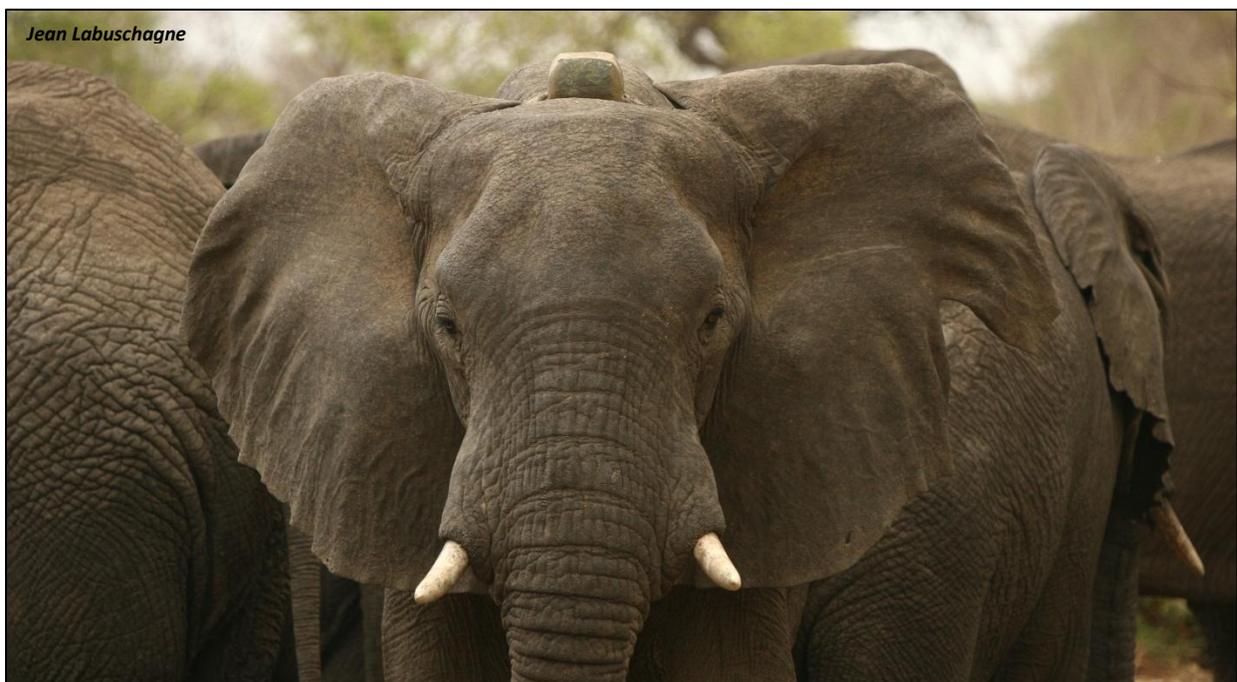
completely necessary for the operation. In contrast to Zakouma's fairly docile reaction to the dart, this little group of thirteen decided that they were not too keen on the procedure and took off through the bush, sending us on an 8 minute sprint through some very thick and very thorny vegetation. Running blind with the odd “left”, “right” and “straight” relayed to us over the radio from the air, we eventually reached the elephant cow looking like we were fresh out of battle. Fitting the collar went smoothly and it wasn't until she woke up that things started getting a little sticky. A couple of serious charges and one mutilated tree sent everyone running like ants in every which direction, only to re-emerge a few minutes later, recovering dropped bags and water bottles along the way. By this stage the vehicle had managed to inch its way closer (although in the process had used our last spare tyre...) - needless to say the 5 km back to the camel trail took even longer than on the way in, with all care being put towards protecting our rather precious four wheels. The aircraft flew in 3 more spare wheels the next day for our return to Zakouma – a tired but extremely pleased crew.



*Marketa Antoninova*

**In temperatures of over 40°C the ground crew works hard to fit the Z14 collar as quickly as possible**

The remainder of the operation went smoothly with the last elephant collaring being attended by Board members of African Parks Foundation from Holland and the CEO of African Parks from Johannesburg. It was a busy yet satisfying 3 weeks which passed with very few hiccups. Now one small signal sent via satellite every 4 hours to a computer programme and then imported into our GIS as a small dot on a map tells an entire story. It tells us where the elephants are, what their movements have been, who they have been with, how fast they are moving, where they go to drink and even what temperature it is. But most importantly, it tells us that so long as those dots on the map are there, that elephant at least is there too.



*Jean Labuschagne*