

An elephant returns to Somalia for first time in 20 years

March 9 2016, by Tristan McConnell



Morgan, a male bull in his 30s, was fitted with a tracking collar in December in Kenya's coastal Tana River Delta but in mid-February began an unexpected march northwards to Somalia, reaching the border nearly three weeks later

An elephant marched hundreds of kilometres and briefly crossed into Somalia this month marking the first time the animal has been seen in the country in 20 years, conservationists said Wednesday.

Morgan, a male bull in his 30s, was fitted with a tracking collar in December in Kenya's coastal Tana River Delta, but in mid-February began an unexpected march northwards to Somalia, reaching the border nearly three weeks later.

His march has excited conservationists who say it shows the elephant remembered ancient routes after decades of absence due to war.

"He obviously had something in his mind about where he's going," said Iain Douglas-Hamilton of Save the Elephants, a conservation organisation that has put tracking collars on hundreds of African elephants.

Morgan's journey suggests that the Kenya-Somalia border area is becoming less dangerous and that if security were to return to southern Somalia so might the exiled elephants.

From Tana River, Morgan trudged 20 kilometres (12 miles) on the first night and then hid in thick forest the following day, before continuing his march under cover of darkness. He maintained this pattern for the next 18 days.

"He's adopted this extreme form of survival strategy to traverse one of the most dangerous places for elephants in their African range," said Douglas-Hamilton.



Morgan, a male bull elephant in his 30s, pictured around December 2015 when he was fitted with a tracking collar in Kenya's coastal Tana River Delta, in an image released by charity group Save the Elephants

African elephants are threatened everywhere by criminal poaching gangs and armed groups, who kill them for their tusks, the ivory fetching around \$1,100 (1,000 euros) per kilogramme (2.2 pounds) in China.

At least 20,000 elephants were killed last year, according to figures released this month by the Convention on the Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an international organisation.

Morgan's long march north

In some parts of Africa elephants are being killed quicker than they reproduce, but Kenya has seen recent successes with the number of elephants poached in 2015 falling to 93 from 164 the previous year.

In the early 1970s it is estimated there were as many as 20,000 elephants in Kenya's coastal area, but that number has fallen to 300 at most today.

Some credit a Kenyan security operation in the area with suppressing poaching.

"We're seeing more elephants now," said Charles Omondi, a commander in the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) which is patrolling the Lamu area alongside Kenyan soldiers and police deployed to defend against regular deadly attacks by Islamic militants.

There have been no confirmed sightings of elephants in Somalia in two decades, since soon after the start of a civil war that has continued in different forms ever since.

Despite the time that has elapsed, Morgan appeared to have remember the old migration routes.

"A mature bull like Morgan is not wandering aimlessly. He's likely following a route that he learnt earlier in his life, one that has been used by [elephants](#) for generations," said Ian Craig, conservation director at the Northern Rangelands Trust, a Kenya-based conservation group that establishes reserves across the country, including in the area where Morgan lives.

In the end, after walking 220 kilometres (137 miles) Morgan spent just less than 24-hours actually in Somalia—and only went three kilometres over the border—before turning back, presumably after failing to find any willing females with whom to mate.

But the fact of his journey is what excites the conservationists.

"Out of all the tracking we've done in Africa, these movements -- and these circumstances -- are exceptional," said Douglas-Hamilton. "The wandering of this one bull across the entire expanse of Lamu district, from the Tana river to the Somali border, no-one has seen anything like this before."

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