

Tracking Bigfoot



The last time an elephant was spotted in the Knysna forest was November 2004. Undaunted, **Tiara Walters** takes up the trail

DON'T go looking for the Knysna elephants; you'll lose your heart. But I didn't know that when I first trudged into the southern Cape's coastal forests, looking for proof that would quell public misconceptions of the mythical Knysna elephants' final demise.

In the '80s I was hooked on Dalene Matthee's captivating forest trilogy: *Kringe in 'n Bos*, *Fiela se Kind* and *Moerbeibos*, set in the haunting Knysna forest just south of the Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma Mountains, stretching from Mossel Bay to Humansdorp and undulating over 550km² of ravines, kloofs and gentle slopes.

I was enthralled by this foggy realm so unlike the bleached highveld grasslands of my childhood. It was a world where I imagined Old Man's Beard drooping in gothic garlands, and serpentine lianas slithering up canopy trees; where, on a clear day, the crown leaves of Cape saffron and red alder would bask in sunlight, and, in the dusty recesses of the cool, pungent understory, a whole ecosystem would thrive. And asserting an ecological niche all of their own would be the critically endangered Knysna Bigfeet. (This is how one should refer to the elephants, according to local lore.)

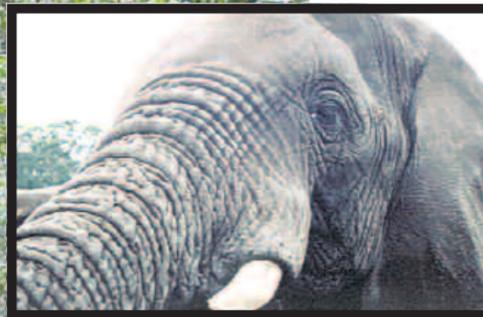
But years passed and I filed the mysterious pachyderms of my youth to some dusty mental corner: Human pressure and an

absence of conservation intervention must've surely killed the last one.

And then, from nowhere, a buoyant story from Don Pinnock's *Loveletters to Africa*: Gareth Patterson, a conservationist who'd worked with George Adamson of *Born Free* fame, was studying the elephants — and was convinced there were at least three.

A few phone calls revealed that South African National Parks — which had recently taken over the Knysna forest's management from the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry — was also quietly monitoring the elephants. If conservation authorities could boost the nearby Addo elephants' once-fraught population from 11 to over 400, there was hope for Knysna's Bigfeet.

I met photographer Geoff Dalglish in Cape Town. We stuffed his 4x4 with tents and sleeping bags, a braai grid and victuals, maps and torches and everything else we needed to survive in the forest for a week. Then it was 500km to Knysna to find the last elephants — and report on little-known conservation efforts that could give new reason for hope.



Pictures: GEOFF DALGLISH



ON TRACK: Elephant trackers Karel Maswati left, and Wilfred Oraai with Tiara Walters in the Knysna forest

A wise old-timer once warned that we'd die of a great loneliness of spirit if all the beasts were gone



PROOF: Gareth Patterson with his prized possessions: two pieces of elephant dung that he collected in late 2004.

"Jislaaik — you *ous* must check! We spent the whole of last week scouring this place for Bigfeet and still no trace," apologises Hylton Herd, our escort and indefatigable Sanparks forester in Knysna, when we report to his office, after-hours, on a drizzly afternoon in late December.

From his office window there's a view of a rip-roaring taxi rank and trader's market, and beyond that the hubbub of the harbour, where 19th century fortune-seekers, woodcutters and hunters smuggled ivory onto timber vessels. By 1900 this covert but flourishing ivory trade, along with vermin and trophy hunters, had reduced the local pachyderm population to almost nothing.

Today Herd believes there are perhaps no more than three elephants stealing through secret corners of the forest and the vicinity. Despite monitoring efforts, no Sanparks staff member has spotted a Knysna elephant since November 2004.

En route to our campsite we pass what seems a hopelessly sanguine sign: "DANGER — You are now entering an area where elephants roam wild. Enter at own risk." I pray for the privilege of being charged by a raging bull in musth, blaring like a banshee, eyes blazing and mammoth ears flaring as we heroically brandish cameras.

Instead we pitch our tents in a quiet forest glade, and clink a toast to the Bigfeet. When the light fades, fireflies glow on night-blackened grass and a wood owl yodels like a hyena.

Later, in sleeping bags, we listen to the rain splash softly on canvas, drowning out the nocturnal forest sounds. An elephant could have tiptoed past our camp and we wouldn't have known it.

Next morning the skies are blue and the forest glistens in the light of dawn. We're fine-combing footpaths for traces of Bigfeet, guided by legendary Sanparks trackers Karel Maswati and Wilfred Oraai. Between them, Herd says, they've seen the elephants 34 times in 18 years.

We're idling along Kom-se-Pad when Oraai reveals that hikers had come across relatively fresh dung in Platbos only the day before. "Sjeez! Why didn't you tell me?" exclaims an indignant Herd. "*Ek het net 'pre-paid' meneer;*" (I only have pre-paid, sir) comes the droll reply.

Off to Platbos. On arrival Maswati takes a theatrical moment to peer at nothing in the sky and then announces enigmatically: "*Die olifante weet ons kom.*" (The elephants know we are coming).

We spend the day under tree cover treading softly on soggy earth, exploring dark hollows and mossy alcoves laden with lichens, puffballs, orchids, mushrooms and ferns. But for the occasional rising kok-kok-kok of a Knysna lorie, the forest holds its breath, as if waiting for the intruders to leave.

The trackers amaze us by finding everything but pachyderms: here a heap of elephant dung just a month old; there, at a burbling brook and squelched into the moist soil, an unmistakable spoor; here candle-wood trees snapped like severed spines and over there, a brutally uprooted sybas tree, shaggy roots sticking wildly into the air.

We call off the search only late in the afternoon, and hold a *bosberaad*: The next day Oraai and Maswati will transect fresh parts of the forest. We'll meet Gareth Patterson, the "Lion Man of Africa", for new leads.

"When I first explored this area I couldn't accept there was only one, maybe just two, elephants left," Patterson muses from his mountain eyrie in the woods the next day. "In a forest so vast I thought anything was possible." His premonitions produced impressive feats: Since 2001 he's walked well over 4 000km of forest, fynbos and forestry plantations, employing techniques that continue to raise eyebrows, such as consulting a swinging pendulum.

Patterson reaches into a box and proudly re-

trieves prized possessions: two pieces of elephant dung he collected in late 2004. One, he claims, comes from a cow, and the other from a youngster. There may well be a breeding herd, however small, still wandering about, for as recently as October last year he chanced upon a cow with a "three- or four-year-old" youngster.

For two years Patterson has also been collecting dung droppings, over 160 of them, for DNA analysis by geneticist Lori Eggert at the Smithsonian Institute in the US. Now that he has the test results I probe him for figures on population size, even familial relationships and sex ratios.

He looks pleased with himself, but remains tight-lipped: He still has to make his findings public. He concedes: "I've proven there are at least three elephants in the forest. We're in for exciting times — let's just call it that."

And so our brief sojourn in the forest flies past. We spend our days, led by Maswati, Oraai and Herd, traversing hairy mountain passes, beating our way through dense woods and kloofs and pursuing well-worn elephant paths. We find undeniable signs of elephant activity in most surprising corners — even week-old dung in mountain fynbos.

But after criss-crossing over 400km of forest and surrounds we depart without as much as a phantasmal glimpse of a real Knysna Bigfoot. I leave encouraged, however, knowing they are there, going about their great, big lives.

But why care? Because the Bigfeet are an integral part of Knysna's fynbos, forests and mountains. Because living elephants would serve Knysna's ecotourism needs far better than dead ones would. And because, as Don Pinnock said, a forest without the possibility of a monster is empty.

In '94 the introduction of three young cows from the Kruger Park failed miserably. One youngster died of pneumonia and, given a lack of fences to rein them in, the other two clashed with farmers and were eventually relocated to Shamwari Game Reserve.

But with the Forestry Department's gradual handover of 97 000ha of state forest to Sanparks, the conservation body has promised to clear-fell and rehabilitate 26 000ha of pine plantations over the next 15 years. This paves the way for Sanparks' Garden Route National Mega-Reserve, comprising the Tsitsikamma and Wilderness National Parks and the Knysna National Lake Area.

To facilitate the reintroduction of charismatic wildlife that once roamed the entire region, such as African buffaloes — and elephants — the area would have to be fenced off. A full-time elephant research and conservation unit would have to be appointed, as urged by far-sighted conservationists over many years.

The Knysna elephant is said to be simply *Loxodonta Africana*, the Savannah elephant; but whether new blood should be obtained from the Kruger, Addo or other populations remains a technical issue that needs resolution.

Sanparks in Knysna could do well, too, to strengthen their collaboration with energetic firebrands such as Gareth Patterson.

If Sanparks, a world-renowned conservation organ, could repeat its strides in saving the Addo elephants, it would be more than a feather in its cap — it would be a watershed moment in South African conservation. But maybe the incentive should be more primal: A wise old-timer once warned that we'd die of a great loneliness of spirit if all the beasts were gone.

Perhaps we shouldn't just confine the good fight to the Knysna elephants' survival, but also — for reasons more visceral than we've yet imagined — expand it to include our own.

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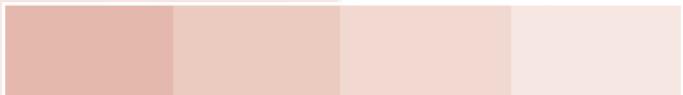
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and body

even tone

helps restore even skin tone



protects against UV damage

helps reduce signs of ageing

helps reduce pigmentation

boosts skin radiance

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