

peaceable kingdom

{ an elephant tale }

We're enthralled by elephants, but forcing them to live in our world can result in terrible cruelties. Determined to set things right, **Carol Buckley** has created an extraordinary sanctuary to protect them.

BY LISE FUNDERBURG ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAKE JOHNSON

SHIRLEY WAS 52 and had lived alone for more than 20 years when she took up residence at The Elephant Sanctuary, a 2,700-acre refuge for female elephants in rural Tennessee. After a long and arduous trip from her home at the Louisiana Purchase Gardens and Zoo, the gentle 9,200-pounder had just settled into a barn stall when her new neighbors came to pay a call.

Most of the elephants made gentle advances, but one, Jenny, approached with a sense of urgency, bending the stall gates as she tried to climb over them. The two elephants sniffed at the air between them; suddenly, Shirley broke into joyful roaring. Jenny roared back, and sanctuary staffers pried open the gate that separated the two. The elephants rushed forward and intertwined their trunks. They knew each other, it turned out. Twenty-three years earlier, they had been in the same circus.

Shirley and Jenny were inseparable from that point on, roaming the forests and pastures together. Shirley, 20 years older, took to mothering Jenny, shielding her from the hot sun, for example, on summer days. The two spent seven years together before Jenny succumbed to a mysterious wasting disease this past October, bringing Shirley the first sorrow she'd known in a long time.





Carol Buckley, founder of The Elephant Sanctuary, checks in with a resident and one of the 13 dogs that have also made their home there.

As small as the elephants are big, sanctuary founder Carol Buckley is a fit 52-year-old with pin-straight blond hair. She's a compact bullet of energy, all of it aimed at her "girls." Among people, she often seems to be tapping her foot mentally, waiting for the human interaction to be over so she can return to providing the animal care that feeds her soul. With outsiders, her tone can be clipped; with the girls, she coos endless endearments, as if to a beloved infant.

Over the 30 or so years that she has been involved with elephants, Carol has learned to know and understand them in a profound way, and that knowledge has made her a tireless crusader for their cause. She says she feels a connection to elephants more powerful than any she's experienced with human beings: "Elephants are completely honest," she says. "They may feel a need to hide how they're feeling, but they don't lie."

These highly intelligent and social animals are closer to us than we ever imagined: Like humans, chimpanzees and dolphins, they can recognize themselves in a mirror. Females, like Shirley and Jenny, create loving, lifelong bonds (males strike out on their own once they're sexually active). In their natural habitats, elephants sleep just four hours a day and spend the rest of the time foraging for food, looking for a good mud wallow, playing and socializing; a herd might roam 50 miles in a day. When a baby is born in another herd, elephants go visiting. And when one of the herd dies, they mourn, burying their dead with leaves and standing vigil for days, rocking back and forth in apparent anguish.

Almost 600 elephants live in captivity in the United States, according to the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, about half in circuses and half in zoos, where they are the big-ticket item. We—children and adults alike—are enthralled by their size, their mystery. In zoos, these majestic creatures serve as ambassadors from the wild. They provide us with an enduring connection to the natural world, and they help conservators achieve their goals: to protect endangered species, educate the public and support biological research. But the more we learn about elephants, the clearer it becomes that their role in zoos, as Carol says, is "not about what elephants need and what will enrich their lives; it's about what humans need and what will enrich their lives." In other words, zoos, as well as circuses, can be disastrous for elephants.

Traditionally, in both kinds of environment, elephants have been confined to small, featureless spaces, where they may spend hours standing on concrete or in their own waste. As a result, they often develop arthritis or an infection called foot rot, either

of which can lead to death. Some have been videotaped being beaten with baseball bats and ax handles; some have hundreds of scars from the bull hooks that trainers use to prod them into compliance. In circuses, elephants spend most of the day in chains.

Overwhelmingly, elephants in captivity are bored. With nothing to do and nowhere to go, they fall into listlessness and neurotic behaviors such as self-injury and endless swaying. They become aggressive toward anyone within striking distance—sometimes with deadly results. And because they are deprived of the company of other elephants, their loneliness is limitless.

Most of today's zoo administrators are working hard to upgrade the living conditions of the animals in their care. Some have realized that they can't give the elephants what they need. A handful (including those in Detroit, San Francisco and Sacramento, California) have closed their elephant exhibits, and more are planning to, but other, smaller zoos and private owners are reluctant to give up their main attractions; it often takes a combination of heavy public pressure and viable alternatives to change their position. That's where Carol Buckley comes in.

Carol grew up in Southern California. In 1973, she was living in Simi Valley and studying in a training-and-management program for exotic animals. Looking out her window one day, she saw a baby elephant being walked on a leash. She rushed outside and met Fluffie, the mascot for a local tire store. Over the next two years, she fed and bathed the elephant, teaching her simple commands. She also fell in love—and finally persuaded the owner to sell Fluffie, whom she took home and renamed Tarra. "Fluffie" seemed disrespectful," Carol says, "and for goodness sakes, someday she was going to weigh 10,000 pounds!"

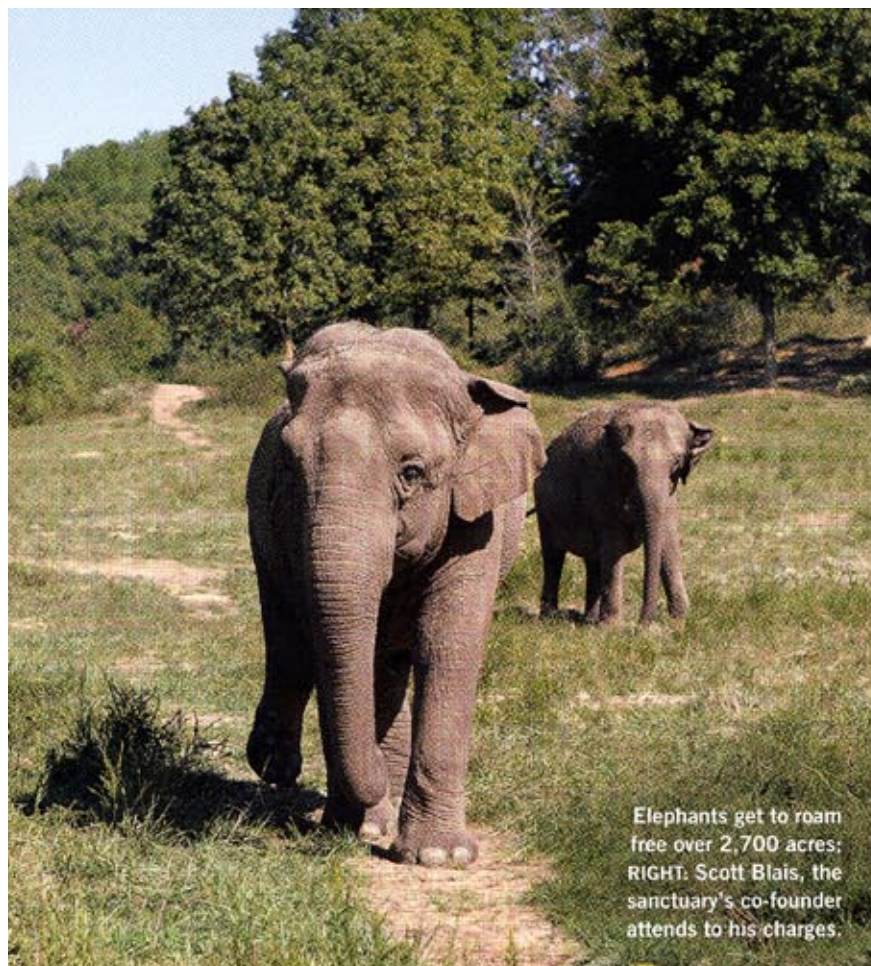
That's how it all began. The two embarked on a 15-year circus career—Tarra on roller skates and Carol in tights and a bodysuit, her sun-bleached hair wrestled into a flip. Every day meant a new town and new adventures, and between performances, Carol found nearby lakes and beaches where Tarra could romp.

Then Tarra outgrew the free-roaming life. She began to balk before shows, and Carol started to worry that circus life had fractured the animal's spirit. "She was like a little child star, a Shirley Temple," Carol says. "She didn't get to be a teenager."

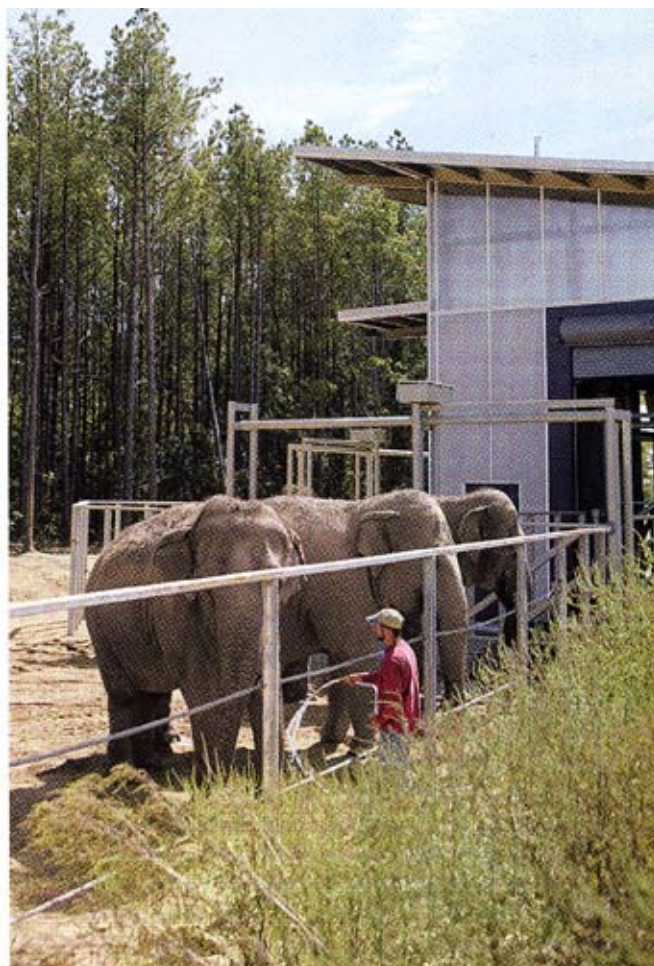
Carol stopped having Tarra perform, but that didn't solve one issue that kept gnawing at Carol: Elephants can live up to 70 years. "I was going to die before she did," says Carol.



Carol Buckley says, "There is nothing greater than being loved and accepted by an elephant."



Elephants get to roam free over 2,700 acres: RIGHT: Scott Blais, the sanctuary's co-founder attends to his charges.



When a baby is born in another herd, elephants go visiting. And when one of the herd dies, they mourn—burying their dead with leaves and standing vigil for days, rocking back and forth in apparent anguish.



"When I dreamed up the sanctuary, I was creating it for Tarra. It was selfish; it was so I would know that this particular elephant would have a safe and healthy place to be. I did not realize in the beginning that by creating that place for her, I would be creating a space for all elephants."

When Carol came upon 200 acres for sale in Hohenwald, Tennessee, she knew she'd found Tarra's retirement paradise. The hot summers and mild winters resembled the subtropical climate of Tarra's native Burma, and the long growing season meant that most of her food could come from the land itself.

Tarra inaugurated the sanctuary in 1995, and a year later, she was joined by Barbara, sent by her owner after developing a chronic wasting disease. More elephants arrived at the sanctuary over the years, one or two at a time, and last winter, eight elephants came within two weeks, all from a private owner

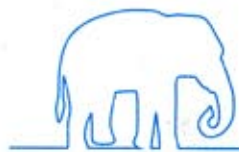
in Illinois who had been cited by the federal government for violations, including physical abuse and failure to treat a long list of lacerations, abscesses and illnesses.

Today there are 18 elephants living at the sanctuary; Carol's successes have been extraordinary. Liz, who was emaciated when she arrived, has put on 800 pounds in six months and will follow caregivers anywhere for an apple. Sissy, who had been beaten with ax handles, stopped carrying a tire as a security blanket the day Winkie decided to make friends. And 60-year-old Delhi relishes the daily cider-vinegar-and-calendula footbaths that have helped heal the burns from the undiluted-formaldehyde soaks which nearly claimed her life.

What Carol does is unique, says Lisa Kane, an advocate for elephants who was involved in Winkie's transfer from the Henry Vilas Zoo in Madison, Wisconsin. "She's created an environment where the elephants' needs come first," says Lisa. "She's given them some dignity."

The elephants thrive on the individualized attention they receive, including medicines, baths and daily foot soaks.





What You Can Do

The Elephant Sanctuary's Web site (elephants.com) includes a wish list that details every need, from paying off the \$6,500 manure spreader to buying more blackstrap molasses, used at the rate of three gallons per day. A constant need is ATV tires (\$70 each), for the "meals on wheels" vehicles.

A few other reputable organizations accept donations and support lobbying and letter-writing campaigns on behalf of captive animals: **In Defense of Animals** (idausea.org), **Born Free Foundation** (bornfreeusa.org), **World Society for the Protection of Animals** (wsps-usa.org) and **Last Chance for Animals** (icanimal.org).

The sanctuary philosophy, simply put, is that nobody tells the elephants what to do. That freedom can be overwhelming to the new arrivals; some won't leave the barn at first. Carol says it's as if they're looking out over the pastures and woods and thinking, "Too big! Scary!"

In time, the elephants acclimate and begin to investigate—walking up and down hills, playing, making friends. They get individualized attention every day, medicine and homeopathic treatments and, perhaps their greatest therapy, space, which allows them to exercise, explore and retreat as they wish. That autonomy, Carol says, "is one of the most powerful tools for recovery for them." They also regain their appetites, typically eating 130 pounds of grazed vegetation (or hay, during the dormant season), supplemented by whole grains mixed with blackstrap molasses, and fruits and vegetables—delivered three times a day via all-terrain vehicles to wherever the elephants happen to be.

As much as Carol reveres her charges, she's careful not to romanticize them, and she knows that her efforts can't always heal their deepest wounds.

"Elephants are wonderful, attractive, soft and gentle," Carol says. "And they can kill you." If they're abused and pressured, their responses can be disastrous. "It's our responsibility to create an environment where we don't put the elephants in situations where they could be deemed wrong or bad."

But precautions can't guarantee safety. Last summer, Winkie, who came with a reputation of being dangerous, killed one of the staff. The sanctuary's cofounder, Scott Blais, was there when Winkie suddenly turned on Joanna Burke, an experienced caregiver, knocking her down and stepping on her, killing Joanna instantly.

Joanna's death forced Carol and Scott to reexamine their mission. They had to ensure that no one else would be endangered, and they also questioned whether their pro-elephant environment came at too great a cost. The answer was no. "For 30 years," Scott says, "Winkie beat up every keeper that came into her life. For six years here, we saw essentially nothing. The circumstances in which the accident occurred were so random: There was nothing out of the ordinary with Winkie; nothing about Joanna's position was unsafe, and if I were in the same situation, I can't think of anything I would do differently. So what was the trigger? It's a testimonial to how deep Winkie's damage is."

Carol is still trying to come to terms with the death. "There are no answers," she says. "What do you do when someone you love kills someone you love?"

Winkie has since been diagnosed with a type of post-traumatic stress disorder, a phenomenon recently noted in elephants all over the world, who are increasingly directing rage at other animals and humans. Whatever's broken in Winkie, Carol is now only more determined to mend.

Over the last 11 years, Carol and Scott have led an extraordinary expansion: buying land, building state-of-the-art barns and laying more than 20 miles of heavy-duty fencing for a property that can now house 100 elephants. There are two fences, one made of steel pipe and cable to keep the elephants in, and one of chain link and barbed wire to keep people out. Now the whole sanctuary is accessible to the elephants—and to the 13 dogs that have gravitated here. One Labrador retriever mix, Bella, is often referred to as Tarra's dog, since the two are inseparable, sleeping together out in the fields, with Tarra using her trunk to swaddle Bella.

The sanctuary attracts throngs of volunteers, who do everything from stuffing envelopes to soliciting donations. They fly in from Minneapolis or drive up from Miami just to spend the day sanding and painting fences, with no guarantee of seeing "the girls." Many of the sanctuary's 62,000 members tune in to the elephants' meanderings via the Web site's live "elecam" (tappedintoelephants.com).

Lisa Kane credits Carol's leadership. "I think it's the purity of her vision that resonates with people," she says. "That's very appealing in our world today, when nothing much is pure—not the water, not the air, not our politics."

As public pressure builds, zoos have begun to respond. Last October, the Philadelphia Zoo decided to send its three African elephants away from their tiny yard to a soon-to-be six-acre habitat at Baltimore's Maryland Zoo. Philadelphia's Asian elephant, 42-year-old Dulary, who has lived at the zoo her entire life—alone for the last few years—will come to Tennessee this spring. When Carol heard the news, she broke into a huge smile. "It gives me an incredible amount of joy to hear that an elephant is being released to the sanctuary," she says.

The decision to move Dulary was easy for Vikram Dewan, the zoo's president, who cited the thoughtfulness that Carol and Scott give to each elephant's situation. Before Dulary moves, Carol will visit her several times, as she always does, and create a plan for a welcoming buddy system.

Other elephants aren't so lucky—among them, 23-year-old Maggie, who lives at The Alaska Zoo in Anchorage. She's been there for 24 years, alone since 1997. (Continued on page 93)

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"Maggie's got another 40 years [to live]," says local resident Penelope Wells, who started a group called Friends of Maggie to promote her relocation, "but she's not going to make it."

Frigid conditions force Maggie inside during the long winter, and Penelope has seen her throwing stones at visitors and charging toward keepers. Maggie repeatedly rubs her tusks against the walls and has scraped the skin on her head raw. "You don't keep female elephants isolated in an inappropriate environment," says Penelope. "It's as simple as that."

The zoo's board of directors discussed relocating Maggie but voted to keep her, buying her a specially made \$150,000 treadmill (which she has yet to use) and recommending other improvements over three years, until August 2007, after which they'll revisit their decision. Zoo director Patrick Lampi says the board had concluded that "Maggie is in good health, this is the only home she's known, and there are health issues involved in transportation and relocations."

Because none of these elephants have the skills to survive in the wild, and there is almost no wild to return them to, no perfect solution exists for them. So Carol does what she can. "We can't take them all in," she says, "but we can change—and

are changing—the way others are managing elephants."

The pace of her days is grueling, the to-do list endless. There's an education center to build and a manure spreader to be paid off, and someone needs to order more molasses-flavored powdered extract. Shirley, slowly recovering from the loss of Jenny, needs special attention, some of which has been provided by Bunny, a petite Burmese elephant who has stayed by her side. But Carol doesn't flag. As she explains, "It's when I get on the four-wheeler, put an elephant's feed out on the ground, and she walks up to me and touches me and rumbles. There is nothing greater than being loved and accepted by an elephant. I think about traveling around the world, which I'd like to do, and then I think, 'You can't do everything in one lifetime.' This is what I picked." □

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