A young elephant stands in a savanna landscape, its trunk raised high into the air. The elephant has small tusks and is looking towards the camera. The background is filled with dry, yellowish-brown trees and shrubs under a bright sky.

Toddlers With Trunks

ORPHANED ELEPHANTS FIND A SAFE HOME IN AFRICA

BY COREY BINNS



At a special orphanage in Nairobi, Kenya, infants gulp down baby formula from giant bottles. When

it rains, the staff dresses them in jumbo raincoats to keep them warm. Afterward, the babies splash around in mud baths. The mud protects their skin from sunburn.

What's with this unusual orphanage? It's filled with baby elephants!

Most of the elephants have stories like that of 1-year-old Orwa. Orwa was left alone in the wild after **poachers** killed his mother for her tusks. Luckily, wildlife officials found Orwa. They flew him on a rescue plane to the Nairobi Elephant Nursery.

When Orwa arrived, some of the orphans gathered around him. They rubbed their trunks on his back to comfort him.

"Baby elephants' ability to care and nurture is obvious right from the start," says Angela Sheldrick, the nursery's manager.



Jumbo Job

Elephants are huge even when they are born. They weigh as much as 91 kilograms (200 pounds). They stand about 1 meter (3 feet) tall. But they are fragile creatures. In the wild, an elephant baby depends on its mother's milk until it turns 4 years old. Its mothers, aunts, and sisters protect it from danger.

At the orphanage, babies often arrive sick from hunger and disease. They may act sad and frightened after losing their family.

People at the nursery try to re-create elephant family life to help the sensitive animals survive. They never leave the babies alone. Each elephant sleeps in a stable with a keeper. The babies wake up every three hours to eat. The caretakers feed the orphans special baby **formula**. If a keeper doesn't wake up in time, an elephant will tug at the keeper's blanket. If that doesn't work, the animal will blow air from its trunk into the keeper's ears!

Every morning at 6 o'clock, the keepers give the orphans breakfast (more bottles). Then they all take a long walk through the bush. The keepers act like the elephants' mothers. They show the babies where to find tasty tree leaves. This way, the babies learn how to live on their own.

Back to the Wild

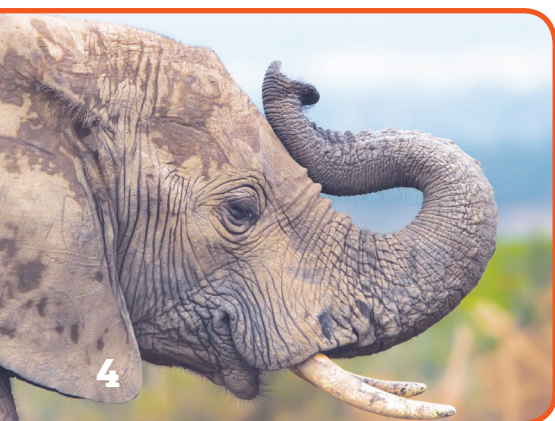
By the time the orphans turn 4 years old, they may be allowed to leave the nursery as they please. The elephants often spend a night or two with nearby wild elephants. Those





sleepovers last longer and longer, until the orphans decide to stay in the wild permanently.

The nursery has raised more than 100 orphaned elephants. The goal is to return the elephants to the wild when they're ready to fend for themselves. But sometimes they come back. Former orphanage elephants have been known to return to show off babies of their own.



Greater Danger

Experts are working on tackling the problem that created the orphans in the first place: poaching. Since elephants are **endangered**, it's illegal to kill them in most countries. But hunters can make thousands of dollars by selling elephant **tusks**, also known as ivory.

Ivory is used to make jewelry and sculptures. It is especially popular in Asian countries like China and Thailand.

"People don't realize that every time they buy ivory, an elephant has been killed for it," says orphanage volunteer Angela Godinho.

The problem of elephant poaching is now at its worst. In 2011, officials discovered and seized a record amount of illegal ivory—21,000 kilograms (46,000 pounds). That

amount means that at least 2,500 elephants were killed.

To help protect elephants, agencies like the Kenya Wildlife Service provide security in national parks. Their "ecoguards" patrol for poachers, track down their camps, and make arrests. But, experts say, heavy poaching will continue until the demand for ivory is reduced.

"We wish we had no orphans," says Godinho. "Even though the orphanage has been amazing at raising the babies, an elephant mother can do the best job."

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