

The elephant shrink

The astonishing story of one woman's quest to heal the trauma of our most treasured rare beasts - and what they can teach us about our own minds

By Jane Warren

BORN into a loving and protective family, Jenny had never strayed more than 15 feet from her mother's side. Supported by a devoted coterie of aunts and older sisters she was learning how to use her trunk, forage for food and communicate using low-frequency rumbles and higher-pitched trumpets, together with a variety of visual signals including subtle anglings of head, body, feet and tail.

Her herd was her home. It was a place of knowledge and safety, guided by a wise matriarchal elephant in her 60s who was as adept at leading her extended family to water during a drought as she was at teaching them to show respect for their ancestors on pilgrimages to visit the bones of their ancestors.

All this knowledge and security was wiped away in five brutal minutes when the hunters culled Jenny's family in the mid-Nineties.

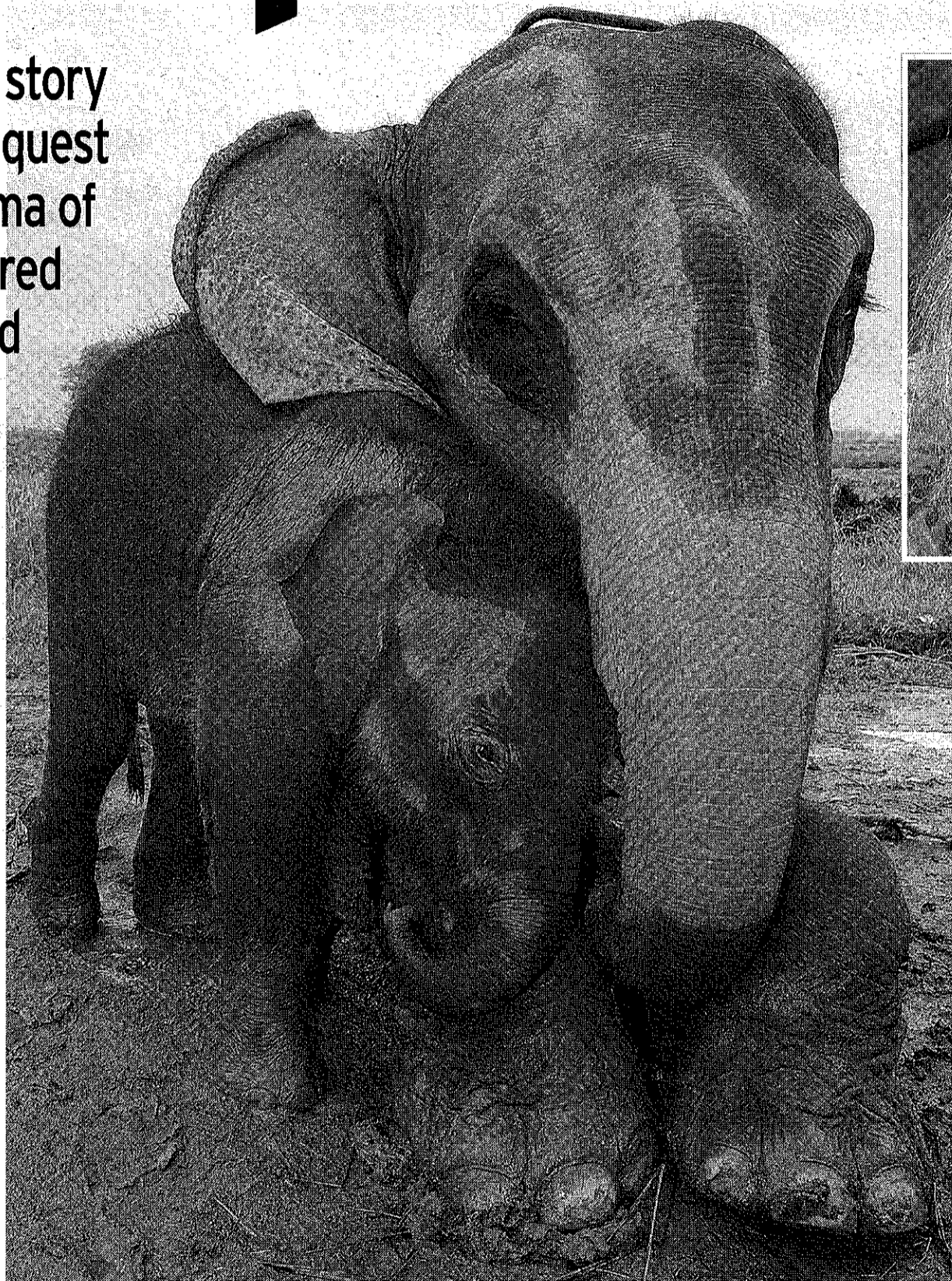
While they rounded up the screaming orphans, the terrified young female was tethered to the dead bodies. She was forced into a truck for relocation from Africa to America and kept in confinement by a man who had a history of using welding torches and metal prods on sensitive areas of the body.

Now aged 32 and living in a zoo in Dallas, Jenny's story has been told in a new book by renowned animal trauma specialist Dr Gay Bradshaw, who explains that Jenny is aggressive to other elephants and frequently harms herself. She rocks, bangs her feet against the wall, spins in circles, screams, shakes, presses her head against the ground and intentionally consumes plastic bags and other rubbish.

"Elephants don't do well when they are made captive and sustain the deprivations imposed by zoos and circuses," she says.

But her conclusions go much further. Together with other experts in the animal trauma field she is convinced that elephants such as Jenny are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, an affliction that until now was thought to affect only human beings. Under their tough exterior it seems that elephants are much more like us than we imagined.

"They have large centres for emotion and memory which means



SAVIOUR: Gay Bradshaw has devoted her life to coming to the rescue of elephants

helps individual elephants and their communities survive the effects of human violence. In collaboration with sanctuaries and scientists the clinic develops treatments that use the principles of psychology and traditional healing.

For several years she has collaborated with the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya where she says the trust's human care givers are like surrogate mothers to the young orphan elephants.

"The work gradually restores their psychological and emotional well being to the point where they can be reintroduced to existing wild herds," she explains.

IN THE nursery the baby elephants will follow the keepers wherever they go because they are their family. The keepers even sleep with the orphans at night, never leaving them alone, teaching them to trust again. They encourage them to play games like football to form new social bonds with each other. Above all, the elephants are treated with respect, understanding and kindness.

"Helping an elephant recover is easy. You create a nurturing, safe and trusting environment of unconditional love which enables them to come out of their shells for ever."

So far more than 80 elephants have been successfully returned to the wild after up to 10 years in captivity. "It is possible to bring an elephant soul back to life," insists Dr Bradshaw. Amazingly some of the orphaned elephants have chosen to return to the sanctuary years later with their own wild-born calves in order to reunite with their keepers and introduce them to their elephant "grandchildren".

"Reunions are joyous and moving. It is an impressive sight - a family reunion of awesome proportions that proves we are all kin under the skin."

● To order *Elephants On The Edge* by Gay Bradshaw (Yale University, £25) send a cheque payable to Express Bookshop to Elephant Offer, PO Box 200 Falmouth TR11 4WJ or tel 0871 988 8367 or visit www.expressbookshop.com

that trauma stays with them, just as it would with a human being. They are intensely social, think and feel as we do and have a developed sense of self. We aren't ourselves unless we are in a relationship with another person and the same is true for elephants."

THE majority of circus or zoo elephants were born in the wild and taken from their families to live in captivity. "Most of the elephants we see have had a succession of very severe traumas. Many, like Jenny, have seen their family killed."

Even when treated humanely elephants in captivity suffer from diseases and behaviours unknown in the wild. "Elephants are devoted care givers who rarely reject or kill their babies. But infanticide in zoos is so common that babies are routinely removed from mothers

after birth and the cycle continues." Bradshaw is convinced the fabric of elephant society is falling apart. "Years of habitat loss and poaching, along with culling to control numbers, means that the number of older matriarchs and female care givers has drastically fallen. So too has the number of elder bulls, who keep younger males in line."

Orphaned elephants from decimated herds behave in a way similar to humans who lacked adult mentors when they were young. In parts of Zambia and Tanzania a number of elephant groups studied contained no adult females at all.

"As a result calves are being born to and raised by ever younger and inexperienced mothers. Orphaned elephants that have witnessed the death of a parent at the hands of poachers are lacking the support of traditional elephant society.

"Where for centuries humans and elephants lived in relatively peaceful co-existence there is now hostility and violence. Elephants are

suffering and behaving in the same ways that we recognise in ourselves as a result of violence."

Across Africa, India and Asia elephants have begun to attack humans and it's so commonplace that a new statistical category, known as human-elephant conflict, was created by researchers to monitor the problem.

Researchers are also concerned about abnormal levels of elephant aggression directed by these normally peaceable animals towards other species. Since the early Nineties young male elephants in South Africa have been raping and killing rhinoceroses and up to 90 per cent of male elephant deaths are attributable to other male elephants compared with a rate of six per cent in more stable communities.

Fortunately Dr Bradshaw and her peers have discovered that elephants, like humans, can be healed, although it takes many years to see changes. In her work as executive director of the Kerulos Center she