



# Saving Mali's Migrating Desert Elephants

by Colette Weil Parrinello

**E**co-guardians spread the word to the Tuareg villagers, "The elephants are coming." Many villagers already know. They will stay out of the thick bushes and trees so they don't surprise the elephants. Villagers believe that when the elephants come, the land and life are healthy. The elephants are *baraka*—a blessing to the people and environment of Mali's Gourma region.

Once there were many thousands of Gourma Desert elephants, but now, there are fewer than 400. The elephants live under constant threat from droughts, militant violence, poachers who want their tusks, loss of water from expanding herds and farms, and encroaching human settlement. Through the dedicated efforts of the Mali people and many worldwide organizations, the elephants have a fighting chance to survive.

## The Elephants' Extraordinary Journey

Every year for hundreds of years, the elephants walk a 350-mile circular migration route in northern Mali, moving around back and forth within the route. This is the longest,

There are fewer than 400 Gourma Desert elephants in existence.



most treacherous trek of any elephant in the world. These tough animals brave sandstorms, water shortages, and extreme heat of more than 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

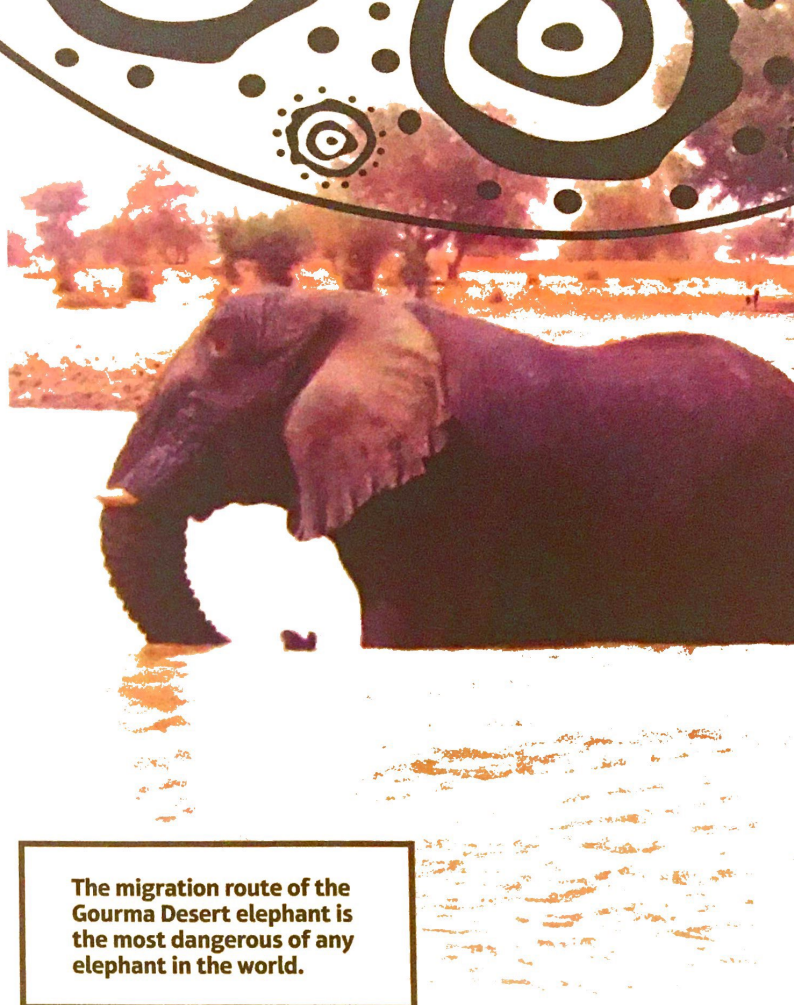
They inhabit a 12,400-square-mile range across the harsh land south of the Sahara Desert in the Gourma region. Following a counterclockwise route, the elephants spend their time in the dry season in the north of the range, moving between lakes and rivers as each dries out. In June when the rains start, they move southwards to the border Mali shares with the country of Burkina Faso because the food supply is better. But there are no lakes or surface water, so when the rains stop and the water dries out, they continue back north.

## The Mali Elephant Project

In 2003, The WILD Foundation (Boulder, Colorado, U.S.A.), Save the Elephants (Nairobi, Kenya) and The Environmental Development Group (Oxford, UK) came together to study the elephants and understand their migration. They fitted the pachyderms with GPS so they could track their migration. Based on their findings, the Mali Elephant Project (MEP) was launched in 2007.

In 2009, the elephants' main lake dried up as huge herds of cattle belonging to wealthy people descended on the elephants' only source of water at the end of the dry season. People, livestock, and elephants competed for the water. The land was overused by crops and livestock.

MEP met with local people and helped them make land and water use rules to protect elephant habitats and help restore degraded areas. The result was more food, forest, and pasture to share with everyone. Patrols by young men called eco-guardians made sure everyone obeyed the rules. They reported land use abuse and protected the elephants by detecting and reporting poaching. Land management improved, livestock numbers were controlled, crop performance improved, and the elephant habitat and migration routes were protected.



The migration route of the Gourma Desert elephant is the most dangerous of any elephant in the world.

## Changes Threaten the Elephants

The elephants have co-existed with the region's many cultures, the Tuareg, Peul, Songhai, Bellah, Rimaibe, Tellem, Maure, and Dogon, but growth in human settlements and increased overgrazing continued to pressure the elephants' survival.

From 2012 to 2015, militant violence and lawlessness broke out along the northern Mali border. Poaching by international trafficking networks skyrocketed. Eighty-three elephants were lost in 2015 alone.

Elephants and local communities were suffering. Families watched their young men being paid to join armed groups. The crises to protect young men and save the elephants brought local communities, international organizations, and the Mali government together to find solutions. MEP helped distribute food aid by donkey cart to prevent it from being stolen via vehicle hijackings. They also trained 520 young men to act as information networks to report and protect the





elephants. Fifty-one elephants were killed in 2016. By 2017, MEP struggled as funding was running out. “At this rate, the Gourma elephants will be wiped out by 2020,” predicted Dr. Susan Canney, Gourma Desert elephant expert and director of the Mali Elephant Project.

### A Global Plea for Help

The plea was heard, and more organizations got involved, most notably the United Nations peacekeepers in Mali, called MINUSMA. The Chengeta Wildlife nonprofit professionally trained Mali’s first anti-poaching unit. The unit learned anti-poaching strategies and received radios, cellphones, surveillance equipment, weapons, and more. Once the unit became fully operational, elephant poaching dropped to extremely low levels.

### Gourma Desert Elephants Today

“Poaching is under control,” says Dr. Canney, “and the elephants avoid areas where there was

poaching in 2015. This means that the elephants are living closer to humans and we continue our work with these villages to show them how to live safely with elephants—for example, when a person goes into the dense bush where an elephant might be, they are to be careful and not surprise the elephant as she might think you are a poacher wanting to kill her.”

The devoted work by many organizations, the Mali people, and the Mali government helps communities peacefully coexist with the elephants and prosper on the land. These united efforts stop the annihilation of one of the world’s most important animals, the migrating Gourma Desert elephant—a global treasure we can all watch and enjoy.

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