

100 YEARS OF ELEPHANTS: SEE HOW NAT GEO HAS PHOTOGRAPHED THESE ICONIC CREATURES

Eliza Scidmore, the first female writer, photographer, and board member for *National Geographic*, has another accomplishment to her credit: She was the first person to publish a photograph of an elephant in the magazine, in December 1906.

An inveterate traveler who brought Japan's famous cherry blossoms to the U.S. capital, Scidmore had photographed Asian elephants being rounded up in Siam (now Thailand) to serve as work animals for the king.

A year later, in 1907, the magazine published nighttime photos of African elephants near Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro. The photographer, Carl Schillings, worked in the style of George Shiras, aka Grandfather Flash—the first person to use camera traps and flash photography to capture images of wildlife.

But it wasn't until 1912 that the publication ran its first feature story on elephants, part of a well-publicized hunting expedition, led by former president Teddy Roosevelt and photographed by Carl Akeley, a taxidermist for P.T. Barnum, founder of the Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Looking back on a century of the magazine's reporting on pachyderms, Julia Andrews, an editor for the National Geographic Image Collection, says there are "definite trends that would shift from decade to decade."

For instance, Andrews says, in the early years the prevailing theme was elephants as the hunted: "The story was very much 'man with his trophy.'"

In the 1920s and 1930s, as zoos became more popular and piqued curiosity about wild animals, stories emphasized elephants' roles as beasts of burden. In 1928, *King Kong* directors Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack wrote and photographed a story about taming African elephants, claiming "the mighty beast, having submitted to man's superior intelligence, serves him well."

Then, in the 1950s and 1960s, smaller cameras made field reporting easier, and African safari culture blossomed. By this period, *National Geographic*'s reporting on elephants had changed to "the idea of you going *into* the habitat of the animal, not the other way around," Andrews says.

When Quentin Keynes—Charles Darwin's great-grandson—photographed a story in Kenya in 1951, it was titled "Africa's Uncaged Elephants" and shot from a custom tree house he built on the savanna. The camera traps first created by Shiras also began to evolve into smaller, more sensitive units that could capture the daily lives of wild animals as never before.

A conservation shift

Barely any elephant stories were published in the 1970s. But the 1980s brought with them an era of conservation reporting, starting with the November 1980 article “Africa’s Elephants: Can They Survive?” by Explorer Iain Douglas-Hamilton and his wife, Oria.

National Geographic Explorers Beverly and Dereck Joubert began what would be decades of work observing and studying the African elephant with their May 1991 piece, “Eyewitness to an Elephant Wake.” The story was one of the first to show that elephants have an “emotional inner life”—that like humans, elephants grieve their dead, says Lori Franklin, an editor at the National Geographic Image Collection.

The magazine’s coverage of elephants has had meaningful impacts on society, Franklin says. “The Hidden Cost of Wildlife Tourism,” a 2019 cover story photographed by Kirsten Luce, revealed abuse of captive elephants; that led to a massive petition and eventual release of a well-known, injured animal into a sanctuary. *(Look back on a century of Nat Geo’s tiger photography.)*

The three-part magazine series “Megatransect: Across 1,200 Miles of Untamed Africa on Foot”—the saga of Explorer Mike Fay’s journey across the middle of the continent, photographed by Michael “Nick” Nichols—ultimately led to the creation of 13 national parks in Gabon and three in the Republic of the Congo.

Into the 21st century, *National Geographic* continues to focus on elephants’ decline. All three species—the African savanna elephant, the African forest elephant, and the Asian elephant—are now endangered, mostly because of ivory poaching and habitat loss.

But there are also stories of hope, with photographers seeking out solutions to the crisis. Nick Nichols’s photographs of raincoat-adorned orphaned elephants at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, the world’s most successful rescue center for baby elephants, were especially popular with readers. Ami Vitale’s reporting on warriors who once feared elephants but now protect them, in Kenya’s Samburu National Reserve, also highlighted how change can happen for the better.

In the May 2023 cover story “The Elephant Next Door,” Brent Stirton’s photographs illustrate how Asian elephants and people are jostling for space in a rapidly urbanizing world. *(Watch the trailer for Secrets of the Elephants, a four-part National Geographic series streaming on Disney+.)*

National Geographic’s century of reporting on these “magnificent” species is an unrivaled achievement, Andrews believes: “We are educating people about elephants, and in the end, we should be very proud of that.”

Source: By Christine Dell'Amore

Photos curated by Crystal Henry

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 **LIVEWORKSHEETS**

Task 1: Choose A, B, C, or D for each question.

1. Who was the first person to publish a photograph of an elephant in National Geographic?
 - A. Carl Schillings
 - B. Eliza Scidmore
 - C. Teddy Roosevelt
 - D. Lori Franklin
2. What was the theme of elephant stories in National Geographic during the 1920s and 1930s?
 - A. Elephants as conservation subjects
 - B. Elephants in the wild
 - C. Elephants as beasts of burden
 - D. Elephants as religious symbols
3. What technological advancement in the 1950s and 1960s changed elephant reporting?
 - A. Color printing
 - B. Aerial photography
 - C. Smaller cameras
 - D. Digital imaging
4. What was the main focus of National Geographic elephant stories in the 1980s?
 - A. Elephant hunting
 - B. Elephant conservation
 - C. Elephant circus performances
 - D. Elephant domestication
5. Which explorer's National Geographic article led to the creation of national parks in Gabon?
 - A. Iain Douglas-Hamilton
 - B. Quentin Keynes
 - C. Mike Fay
 - D. Beverly Joubert

Task 2: Fill in the blanks with NO MORE THAN 2 WORDS OR A NUMBER.

1. The first published elephant photo appeared in National Geographic in
2. The country once called was previously known as Siam.
3. was the first person to photograph an elephant for National Geographic.

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4. In, former U.S. president Roosevelt led a hunting expedition featuring elephants.
 5. Conservation reporting on elephants in National Geographic began in the