

BEVA Trust Overseas Project: February 2020

The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust

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We had been warned that, even by Gambian standards, the country was experiencing something of a heatwave for the time of year. As we sweltered on the tarmac outside Banjul terminal building, queuing with fellow passengers for our own temperatures to be checked lest we introduce the 'novel Coronavirus' we'd been hearing about, the whole situation seemed somewhat surreal.

With the blessing of our practice and after a multitude of vaccines, we left a sodden, storm-swept UK with cases full to bursting with medicines, bandaging materials, flymasks, plenty of anti-malarials and 'The Professional Handbook of the Donkey'. Extra baggage had been granted to us as overseas volunteers for a NGO.

We knew very little about the Republic of the Gambia, except that it was a tiny West African country surrounded almost entirely by Senegal with a short Atlantic coastline, rich in flora and fauna, into which the massive Gambian River flowed. The population comprised several distinct tribes, the largest being Mandinka, Fula and Wolof, each with its own language, though with English the national tongue.

The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust (GHDT) was founded in 2002 by two remarkable women, Heather Armstrong and her late sister Stella Marsden OBE. Their aim was 'to reduce poverty in the Gambia through improving the health, welfare and productivity of working animals'. Stella was also a pioneer in returning orphaned chimpanzees to the wild, founding the Chimpanzee Rehabilitation Trust and her life and work are described in her inspirational book 'The Forest Dwellers'.

Ahead of our trip, Heather forwarded much valuable information, helping prepare us for the cases and diseases we would see and challenging us to be creative with the limited resources available. We were fore-warned that there was, as yet, no legislative power in the country's constitution to safeguard animal welfare and that local cultural and religious beliefs, particularly with regard to euthanasia, would be very different to our own. We were delighted to hear that Heather would be in the country for most of our visit and that Emily, a qualified Veterinary Nurse from Exmoor, had settled in well to her 12 month period of volunteering and would be working closely with us.

Having (somehow) proven afebrile and with our heavy bags through customs, we were warmly welcomed by Heather and driver Sharif and travelled through colourful, bustling villages and down a long, bumpy track through cashew and baobab trees, to Makasutu ('Holy Forest'), headquarters of the GHDT and home to a huge menagerie and some of the warmest, kindest people one could wish to meet.

A beautiful large, white, Colonial-style building lay at its centre, with volunteer living quarters above and a spacious classroom and meeting rooms below. Surrounding were

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shady sand paddocks, each with its own small group of horses and donkeys, snoozing beneath the trees or munching on huge barrels of groundnut hay. Forty or so stables lay beyond with, at their centre, the 'The Derek Knottenbelt Veterinary Hospital'.

Eager to meet staff and patients, we dumped our bags and headed straight out. Many of the horses and donkeys were fit and well, being permanent residents in this sanctuary. The 'in-patient' list, with whom we would be more closely involved, was made up of around 30 animals, some new arrivals, some longer stayers. Among them, two donkeys with tetanus, three cases of fistulous withers, commonly a consequence of ill-fitting harness', a donkey whose flexor tendons were healing following a machete attack, another who had lost a foot in similar circumstances. We learned that such incidents and also RTAs occurred regularly at night as a result of animals slipping their tethers and straying onto crops and roads. There was a healing hind cannon fracture (Little Mo) and a healed fractured elbow (Steve), both doing incredibly well. Wassadu, a lovely flea-bitten grey, whose left rump had been badly injured in a landmine incident in which his owner was killed. There were several animals recovering from the tsetse fly-borne Trypanosomiasis and two cases, in the isolation ward, of Epizootic Lymphangitis. A very, very thin, horse duly arrived, brought in by the GHDT truck, one that the Makasutu team had been aware of and trying to rescue for some time. The staff named him Andrew.

Over the following week, we immersed ourselves in the daily routine, getting to know each patient, treating new arrivals, carrying out minor surgeries, working alongside Emily, Yard Manager Paul and a team of Paravets, nurses and other workers and volunteers. A village elder kept watch for invading baboons from the surrounding forest, periodically leaping from beneath his tree to fire a catapult. A small craft market operated in the woods beyond and the sound of traditional drumming could often be heard as dance displays were performed for tourists. Breakfast was distributed at around 10 o'clock each day, comprising a lovely local bread ('tapa lapa') supplied by one of the market stalls. Lunch, for everyone, (between 30 to 50 people), was prepared by cooks Abby or Fatou in one large pot over an open woodfire. Generally, this was rice with fish and vegetables or 'Domada' (rice with peanut sauce), served in large sharing platters, much enjoyed by all. In the evenings, we often took the short walk through the forest to a small, mangrove-edged tributary of the River Gambia, which teemed with wildlife and was a lovely place to mull over the day with our new friends.

On one occasion, we journeyed with Paul and translators to Brikama, a bustling market town not far from Makasutu, to run a 'trek', essentially a 'pop-up' clinic for farmers to lead, drive or ride their animals to for advice and treatment. The GHDT runs these on a regular basis throughout the country, charging a small fee where it can be paid. About 15 horses and donkeys were presented that day, most in reasonably good health and some, encouragingly, just for a routine health check. Bit injuries were common, as were harness rubs, though these are becoming less prevalent following an ongoing GHDT campaign aimed at owner education, the supply of bits, padding and tack from UK donors and pressure for improved cart design.

Twice we did a 'round of calls', checking up on a donkey under treatment for a hock infection, another with multiple skin lesions consistent with cutaneous Epizootic Lymphangitis, then visiting 'Fluffy', a huge and angry camel for his weekly dressing change. This was, by far, the most terrifying experience of my career and I must admit that I beat a hasty retreat to the car, leaving Andrew and Paul to do the honours!

We relished these car journeys despite the heat, since they allowed a wonderful opportunity to observe the day to day comings and goings of the local people. The ladies always beautiful and colourful, the young boys playing football or filling water flagons from their village well, bustling market stalls, little donkeys pulling carts or resting in the shade, most times with water and a bag of hay. We were often stopped at police or customs checkpoints and were always waved on with a cheery smile.

On both Saturdays of our visit, around 30 Animal Welfare Advocate students arrived from the Gambia College for their weekly training day. Their two year course has, at its heart, 'The Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare' as set out and recognised internationally in the Animal Welfare Act 2006. These young people were absolutely passionate that animals be recognised and treated as sentient beings and they represented a beacon of hope for Animal Welfare across The Gambia and throughout Africa. Andrew delivered an impromptu PowerPoint presentation under the cooling fans of the classroom, which we followed with some lively practical sessions on basic wound care, bandaging, suturing and some dentistry, aided by some very amenable in-patients and the GHDT staff.

During our second week, we journeyed with Heather and Sharif about 4 hours upcountry to Sambel Kunda, original home of the GHDT and hospital/sanctuary to about 30 horses and donkeys. This was a much hotter place, incredibly remote and stunningly beautiful. Fula tribesmen herded cattle and sheep in barren fields beyond the compound, guarding them day and night against jackals and hyenas.

Yard Manager Alpha and his team set us to work at once. We drained, lanced and flushed infected wounds, sutured a fresh machete injury, castrated two donkeys and enucleated an eye under the shade of a huge Tabo tree. It was arranged that two patients would be transported to Makasutu for X rays. All the while, a pair of vultures observed from a tree above.

Having pushed on through these cases, Heather suggested a trip up the River Gambia one afternoon. Even this far upstream and in the dry season, the river was truly awe-inspiring. We were hugely privileged to see several families of the endangered Red Colobus monkeys playing in the riverbank trees and witnessed huge black hippos coming up for air before diving back to the depths to graze. Further east, we crossed into the River Gambia National Park, where we saw some of Stella's chimps, living in safety on their designated islands.

The next morning, we headed out before dawn, guided by a young villager the half hour walk to a viewing point above the river, close enough to see the Red Colobus once again, chattering and swinging through the trees.

We returned to Makasutu, spending our last few days following up cases and doing some more teaching, all the while learning far more from the incredible staff than they probably did from us. It became very clear that the GHDT legacy went way beyond the immediate care of the animals, both through the nurture of its staff and their families and via a longstanding programme of education, utilising Makasutu and Sambel and by the financial support of a number of students through School, College and even University. The hope must be that in the long term, the country will itself benefit from this acquisition of skills and training. As for us, this was one of the most challenging experiences of our career and a huge privilege to have undertaken. Everything has seemed a little different since we returned, as if our own perspective of life and work has somehow shifted.

Since we left, Makasutu and Sambel Kunda have gone into lockdown to protect against Covid 19, though thankfully cases in The Gambia remain low at the moment; we pray that they remain that way. One of the tetanus donkeys has recovered, Little Mo's fracture has healed and Andrew (the thin horse) has gained weight, though this has been hampered by his development of Epizootic Lymphangitis.

A few days ago, Heather relayed the historic news that a new Animal Welfare section has, at last, been drafted into the Constitution of the Gambia. A landmark achievement, this is the culmination of many years of persuasion and lobbying and paves the way for specific legislative power to safeguard against the abuse and ill treatment of animals. As such, it sets The Gambia apart as a shining example to West Africa and beyond.

Cheltenham Festival proved to be our last 'normal' week at the practice, with non-essential work stopped and social distancing, self-isolation and staff furlough in place thereafter.