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**Title:** The elephant I'll never forget; Saba Douglas-Hamilton on her mission to be reunited with the elephant that greeted her as a baby. By Graham Keal.(Features)

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In the world of wildlife presenters, Saba Douglas-Hamilton is unique. After all, there can't be many who have been sniffed and petted at birth by a fully-grown elephant. Now Saba has turned that incredible early experience into an emotional quest to find her old elephant friend.

This week's *The Search For Virgo*, the first of two documentaries for BBC2's *Wild* series, follows Saba's journey to be reunited with the elephant who greeted her birth and who watched her childhood years, before ivory poachers turned their lakeside haven into a bloodbath. If she is successful, it will be her second reunion with Virgo - the first was in 1990.

"My mother, Oria, went into labour in the Manyara National Park in Tanzania, where my dad was working," explains Saba, 31. "When I was born she took me up to Virgo, who greeted my arrival by gently scenting me with her trunk, then she brought her own calf forward for my mother to meet."

The intimacy of this exchange was a tribute to the work of Saba's father, Iain Douglas-Hamilton, who has devoted his life to the understanding and conservation of African elephants. Virgo was a matriarch with whom he forged an exceptional bond.

"She's one of a kind," says Saba. "What my father did has never been done by anybody again. He and Virgo were equally curious about each other. He was this weird primate lurking around her family and she took that critical step forward to break through the barrier to meet him."

Of the 500 local elephants, Virgo was the only wild one brave enough to mix with the humans nearby. "Virgo would come up and greet us," says Saba. "I remember as a child standing very close to her. She would put her trunk in my hand and smell me and bring her calf forward to be introduced. I have no fear of elephants - I respect them. You learn how to read them when they're angry or frightened, how they will react and how to diffuse a situation."

That knowledge came in handy during her search for Virgo when a mature female charged at her. While Saba - who was educated in Wales and Scotland and who has a degree in anthropology from St Andrew's University - laughs it off as a warning gesture, there is little to make her smile about her last encounter with Virgo.

The Douglas-Hamiltons left Tanzania at the end of the 1970s when the political situation deteriorated and the border with Kenya was closed. In the 1980s, poachers ran riot in

Manyara and the local elephant population was almost wiped out. That stopped in 1990, when the worldwide ban on ivory trading saw the price collapse. So Saba and her family returned, hoping that Virgo had survived the brutality.

"Manyara had been hit as badly as anywhere else in Africa," she says. "Just three elephants had survived - one was tuskless and no longer a target, one had a broken leg, and there's a superstition that misfortune will fall on your family if you kill a deformed or handicapped animal, and then there was Virgo, who had just one tusk.

"By some miracle she'd survived. She stepped out of this greenery with her family right in front of us, like a ghost. She was the only old female left in the park. We stopped the car and dad got out and walked towards her. They were 10 feet apart and he began calling softly to her, talking to her so that she could recognise his voice. She lowered her head and put her ears out at a 45 degree angle and you could just see her thinking, remembering.

"She'd had 10 years of hurt, when every association with man had been linked with death. She would have come across elephants that had their faces hacked off, with the smell of humans on them. Yet before that she had been friends with a man and there was his smell again... She stood there for 10 minutes. Then she spun around and went off into the bushes. We were all crying our eyes out, but dad said, 'It's probably better that she's learned to distrust man'."

Saba latest search for Virgo is compelling viewing. It is followed next week by Living With Elephants, in which she meets N'Gokola, a Samburu woman in northern Kenya who has her own elephant quest.

Samburu folklore has it that God created people and elephants together. They worked closely until a woman scolded an elephant for bringing her a log that was too big for her fire, the elephant stormed off, and they have kept their distance ever since. But Saba heard of how N'Gokola had stood up at a community meeting and said it was time the women apologised and made friends with the elephants.

When Saba asks the elders for permission to find N'Gokola they are amused but despatch two Samburu warriors to escort her on her journey. When she finds N'Gokola and her companion, Saba watches as they chant a prayer- like apology to the first approachable elephants they find. The women have such a touching respect for the creatures that mockery seems inappropriate. And after recent tragic events, even the elders would agree.

"One of the elders told me that, during the terrible drought, seven men were killed by elephants," says Saba, who is a trustee of her dad's charity, Save The Elephants. "People were saying that only men had been killed because the women had apologised."

Does all her charity and TV work leave Saba any time for herself?

"Oh, yes, I have a wonderful personal life," she says. "At the moment I'm single, but I move around a lot and long-distance relationships don't work. When I stop moving, things will change."

But for the moment, Saba's attempt to revive her special relationship with Virgo has priority in her life.

1 The Search For Virgo, Sunday, BBC2, 5.30pm.

CAPTION(S):

COMING UP TRUMPS: Saba and her father Iain

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