

NATURE



# ONCE UPON A TIME IN TSAVO



Written and directed by **Mark Deeble & Victoria Stone**  
Executive producers: **Sabine Holzer, Walter Köhler**

**2 x 50 min.**  
**4K, 5.1 and Stereo**



**TERRA  
MATER**  
STUDIOS



## In arid regions across Africa, a remarkable relationship between elephants and termites creates a waterhole – a green oasis which is central to every animal's life.

**T**he story follows an extraordinary community of creatures, that call the waterhole 'home' over a season in their lives. They range from a family of elephants to a pair of hornbills (aka 'Zazu' of The Lion King) alongside dung-beetles, chameleons, bullfrogs, geese and killifish. The elephant family provides the background. They are the 'architects' and heavy lifters, but the intriguing narrative centres on the characters that live alongside them – at elephant toe-nail height.

Their Tsavo waterhole home exists for just a few months each year. One moment it's a dusty depression in a parched landscape, the next a bustling oasis. Its creation relies on both termites and elephants. Deep underground, termites make clay by mixing minerals with organic matter and saliva. They bring it to the surface to build their mound – and that attracts elephants. Elephants excavate and eat the clay for the minerals it contains, which creates a hollow in the landscape. When it rains, they roll in the mud. A single visit by a herd can remove a ton of mud. The more mud they walk away with, the deeper the hollow becomes, so the more water it holds and the longer it lasts – a waterhole is born.

As soon as it rains, water tracks down the elephant paths and it bursts into life. The race is then on for its residents to raise their families. It is when they come into contact with the waterhole's creators – where dung beetles push their balls between elephants' feet, where chameleons ambush butterflies that flock to elephant dung, where they all have to avoid the giants that move among them. The dramas of the smaller characters drive the narrative – the interactions they have with the larger visitors and predators, as they seek to raise their families. We establish the animal characters and return to them time and again as they struggle to survive.

The hornbills nest in a hollow tree beside the water to try and keep their family safe from snakes, tiny Thumbelina frogs sleep inside water lily flowers only to be ousted by bees in the morning, yellow-billed storks hunt mating killifish – we follow the varied fortunes of a cast of little-known animals who call the waterhole 'home'. Some dramas are tiny, others are huge. One day their world is overturned as a flock of millions of quelea descends on the waterhole, drawing in predators from all over Tsavo

The behaviours and interactions are new and exciting, many have never been filmed before and some are new to science; the result of the film-makers spending four years filming.

Above all, is the imperative to find a mate and raise a family – without being eaten AND before the waterhole dries. All that they can be sure of is that one day the water will disappear – when that happens, the herds are forced to move on, but the smaller animals cannot move with them. They must employ extraordinary strategies if they are to survive. Some fish and frogs cocoon themselves underground and enter a deep hibernation-like sleep. Above them, the mud hardens and they become entombed. Others survive only as eggs in the dust. Tree frogs sit out in the open, covered by a lacquer that they dare not break – or they would shrivel and die within hours.

All are waiting for that day, when away to the East, the clouds start to build ... but when that fails to happen, drought follows and their survival is in doubt. All are desperately waiting for rain ...

The drought finally breaks with the flowering of the rain bush. The waterhole fills again – the animals return and baby tortoises and chameleons hatch from their eggs and emerge. But from the moment the sun comes out, the clock begins counting down once again ...

Some of Tsavo's waterholes last for decades – but eventually each will fall victim to its own success. The more popular a waterhole becomes, the more the grass and trees around it get eaten. The hooves of visiting animals break up the topsoil and then every time it rains, their paths and tracks funnel silt-laden runoff down into the waterhole. For a while it may hold its own, but once more silt accumulates than the elephants remove, the waterhole's fate is sealed. Each year it is smaller and shallower. Eventually, succession triumphs and dense grass and bush show where there was once a waterhole.

However, as long as there are elephants roaming across Tsavo, one day a family will stop on the site of an old termite mound. They'll roll and walk away covered in mud – and a waterhole will be born once again.

A Co-Production of Waterhole Films Ltd /  
Terra Mater Studios / NHK / The WNET Group in association  
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# #terramatters

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