Elephant discovers greener pastures

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Travelers zooming along I-49 North slow down and crane their necks, trying to see if what they thought they saw is really what they think it is.

The resident horses have been staying in groups more since its arrival: eyeing it from across the adjoining pasture with suspicious stares.

Kamba, the object of all this attention, contently grazes, seemingly as much at home here in this horse pasture as on the plains of Rhodesia.

She seems oblivious to the fact that an African elephant is just not a common sight in Acadiana.

Kamba and Doug Terranova, her trainer, have taken up temporary residence at a horse farm between Carencro and Sunset while in the area performing. The duo are part of the Royal American Circus, which is currently putting on shows at several Acadiana high schools. The proceeds from the shows are going to the Acadiana Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.

After stints in Rayne, Crowley, Eunice, Breaux Bridge and Kaplan, the troupe will stage its final show at 8 o'clock tonight at Lafayette High.

T erranova, who grew up next to a zoo, was 12 when he began working with animals. After an early graduation from high school, he joined the Carden-Johnson Circus in Dallas, Texas, in 1978 and has been living the life of a circus animal trainer ever since.

"You start out doing maintenance work and assisting the trainers," explained Terranova on his one day off from performing. "You learn from watching, from being around the trainers and the animals."

"You start off with already trained animals and then progress to training your own for your acts. I've worked with bears, llamas, camels, elephants and tigers."

Terranova and Kamba have been together for a little over a year. In fact, Terranova cut the now 4½-year-old elephant out of a herd that was brought to Dallas to attend to how wild the pachyderm was, Terranova has a scar on his chest where she rammed into him and caused him to suffer a collapsed lung.

African elephants are usually larger, fiercer and more difficult to tame than Asian elephants.

Kamba weighs about 1,300 pounds now and puts away a bale of hay and four pounds of grain daily. The slow-growing African elephant doesn't mature until nearly 20, when she'll weigh between 6,000 and 7,000 pounds.

While Terranova said an African elephant is also supposedly harder to train, Kamba already has a training vocabulary of 30 commands and that will continue to expand. She comes on command, heels, sits, lies down, kneels, performs on a stool, plays a harmonica, rings a bell, fetches, waves a flag and will give you a ride.

"I train through repetition and food reward," said Terranova, who also has three mature Asian elephants and 10 Bengal tigers. "It's a slow process through which the animal begins to trust and respect you."

One can't help but be awed at how graceful a large animal like Kamba can be as Terranova puts her through her paces. He never raises his voice above a conversational tone, only having to gently urge her with a training stick on occasion.

Some days she is not in the mood to perform and will occasionally voice her displeasure with a grunt or a snort. But for the most part, she is willing to please for a carrot, an apple or a handful of monkey chow.

"Being able to pasture her here has been a real treat," said Terranova, who logs some 35,000 miles a year. "Generally, she has to be kept in the trailer or chained while we're on the road."

From here, Terranova and Kamba will head back to the Dallas homebase for awhile; time to rest, brush up on the routine and add new tricks to the act. Then soon it'll be back on the road again and showtime.

And to those of you who may have caught a glimpse of Kamba -- yes, you did see an elephant in a horse pasture.