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Juvenile Nonfiction

Travels with Tarra
Carol Buckley
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"What has 16 wheels and a trunk? Tarra—the world's only roller skating elephant," read the headlines of the Los Angeles Times in the spring of 1981. Tarra displayed her skating skills in shows around the world, in Korea at an international stage show, with the New York City Rockettes' chorus line, and in films. She even presented an Academy Award envelope for the movie *Passage to India.*

The author, a college student studying exotic animal care, first saw Tarra when the pachyderm was used as a promotional gimmick by a tire store, in 1972 when this was still legal. Buckley introduced herself to the store owner and began to spend time with the animal, becoming a substitute for the family Tarra would have had in the wild.

Buckley found Tarra very intelligent: "I only had to show her once how to crack a watermelon, and after that it was her favorite food." Tarra loved attention and learned many tricks, including playing the harmonica. "Children who came to see her were amazed how coordinated her trunk was. They were surprised that she could pick up the harmonica and position it correctly so that when she blew it made music."

Throughout a twenty-year period Buckley and Tarra appeared in television commercials, movies, talk shows, at circuses, theme parks, and zoos. As Tarra grew older, some of her earlier tricks "no longer held the thrill" they had when she was younger. Buckley began to think about the future for Tarra and other working elephants. She and a veterinarian friend found 800 acres of land in Tennessee and turned it into a sanctuary for captive elephants. "This would not be a zoo or a theme park. There would be no visitors. It would be just for the elephants." It was called Elephant Sanctuary.

Interwoven in this true story are interesting facts about elephants—as a baby Tarra drank a formula made with powdered milk, peanut butter, oatmeal, bananas, vitamins, and minerals mixed together. At age six she was over five feet tall and weighed close to 4,000 pounds.

Travels with Tarra would be most appropriate for third- through sixth-graders, who would enjoy the animal story, although they would not use it for research. This book could provide a starter for discussion on wild animals. Should we keep wild animals as pets? What would be the needs of wild animals as pets? A companion teacher's guide on elephants, at two grade levels, can be downloaded from Elephant Sanctuary's web site: www.elephants.com.