



**BORN
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FOUNDATION



Asian Elephant

Species factsheet

Welcome to the world of the Asian elephant – smaller than their African relatives, but still the largest living land animals in Asia. Elephants have complex social lives, remarkable memories and a defined culture passed through generations. Sick family members are cared for and dead relatives appear to be mourned. An elephant’s versatile trunk can pick up food, touch and greet other elephants, and draw up water (200 litres each day!). Big ears (the largest in the world apart from African elephants) are flapped to keep cool, strong molar teeth grind up food, and rumbling calls – too low for human ears – allow long distance communication.



Meet the family

The elephant is the largest living land mammal. Two species exist in Africa and one in Asia. A male Asian is 8m from trunk to tail, stands 3m at the shoulder and weighs five tonnes, as much as five cars or 80 people! An Asian elephant has a hump-shaped back and smaller ears. Male Asian tusks are very small, while females have no tusks at all.



How are Asian elephants classified?

Living things can be organised into different groups. Species that are alike are grouped together. This is called 'classification'.

Class: Mammals

Order: Proboscidea

Family: Elephants

Species: *Elephas maximus* (Asian)

Where are they found?

Some 35,000 Asian elephants are found in India and 12 other countries in SE Asia. Sadly there have been drastic population declines due to the ivory trade and habitat loss, and elephants are extinct in many parts of their former range.



Where do they live?

Elephants need a large 'home range' to find enough food and water, and follow 'elephant paths' to migrate from one area to another. Asian elephants generally live in tropical forests, but are also found in thorny forests and grasslands. They are found from sea level to 3,000m.

What do they eat?

Elephants are herbivores (plant-eaters) with massive appetites, and feed 75% of their time, eating up to 150kg a day. They graze on grass, and browse on leaves, twigs and bark. Elephants act as 'nature's gardeners', dispersing undigested plant seeds through their dung. A 'keystone species' they help maintain their ecosystem, creating vital pathways and knock over trees allowing smaller species to feed.



Who do they live with?

African elephants feed, rest, travel and play in their close-knit family herd, led by a dominant older female called a 'matriarch', but Asian elephants form more 'fluid' social networks, with weaker social ties than in African elephants. Asian elephants tend to live in family herds of two or three related adult females and their calves and other offspring. Adult males tend to be solitary or live in temporary 'bachelor' groups.

How do they reproduce?

Elephants can have a 70-year life span and mature around 12 years. Mating takes place after courtship. Pregnancy lasts 22 months and at birth the mother is often helped by an experienced female 'midwife'. The 100kg newborn calf relies on its mother's milk for up to four years and is cherished by the entire herd.

Are they endangered?

Sadly yes, Asian elephants are officially listed as 'endangered', which means the species 'faces a very high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future'.

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What problems do they face?

Asian elephants are mainly threatened by loss of this habitat, due to competition with people for land. The Asian elephant has a long association with humans and is domesticated in certain countries. Captive breeding is rarely successful so elephant calves are caught from the wild to be trained to carry logs, kept in temples and used for elephant-back safaris. Born Free supports the Elephant Transit Home in Sri Lanka, which rescues orphan elephants and returns them to the wild when they are ready. Born Free also works to reduce 'conflict' between people and elephants and promote practical ways to help people protect themselves and their crops. Born Free fights the terrible trade in wild-caught elephant calves for zoos and circuses.



How many are there?

1900 – 100,000

1995 – 50,000

Today – 35,000

What about captive elephants?

Elephants do particularly badly in captivity and suffer physical and psychological disorders, high infant mortality and reduced longevity. These sensitive, intelligent and complex creatures are entirely unsuited to zoos and circuses and often display abnormal behaviours, repeatedly swaying, rocking and shaking their heads. Zoos and circuses still capture elephants from the wild to bolster failed captive breeding programmes.



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