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Elephants

Species factsheet

Elephants are remarkable intelligent animals, the largest living land mammal. Their versatile trunk can pick up food, greet other elephants, and draw up water (225 litres each day!). Big ears are flapped to keep cool, and rumbling calls – too low for human ears – allow long distance communication. Elephants live in loving family groups and express a wide range of emotions. They have incredible memories and pass a defined ‘culture’ down through generations. Sick family members are cared for and dead relatives appear to be mourned.



Meet the family

Two species exist in Africa, the savannah and the forest, and one in Asia. A male African elephant can be 9m long, 4m high and weigh 6 tonnes, as much as 5 cars or 80 people! An African elephant has a concave back and the savannah species has the biggest ears in the world. Asian elephants are smaller, with a hump-shaped back and smaller ears. Elephants are distantly related to rabbit-like hyraxes, and gentle slow-moving dugongs and manatees, the only vegetarian mammals in the sea.



How are 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: *Loxodonta africana* (African savannah)
Loxodonta cyclotis (African forest)

Where are they found?

African elephants live in over 35 countries south of the Sahara Desert. Sadly there have been big population declines due to the ivory trade, and elephants are extinct in many parts of their former range.

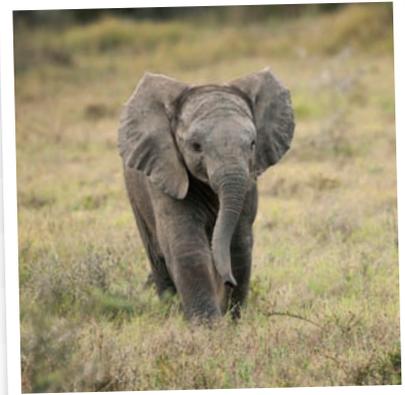


Where do they live?

African savannah elephants live on open plains, while forest elephants inhabit forests. They all need a large 'home range' to find enough food and water, and follow traditional 'elephant paths' to migrate from one area to another.

What do they eat?

Elephants are herbivores (plant-eaters) with massive appetites. They feed 75% of their time, eating up to 200kg of grass, leaves, twigs and bark a day, using strong molar teeth to grind up food. Elephants act as 'nature's gardeners', dispersing undigested plant seeds through their dung, creating vital pathways and knocking over trees allowing smaller species to feed. In droughts they dig down to underground waters supplies.



Who do they live with?

Elephants live in a close-knit family herd, led by an older female called a 'matriarch'. Using information passed on by her mother, she guides and protects the family, which consists of her sisters, daughters, cousins and their calves. The matriarch's knowledge of the home range and water sources is vital.

How do they reproduce?

Elephants live up to 70 years, maturing around 12 years. Bull elephants live outside the family herd and mating takes place after courtship. Pregnancy lasts 22 months and the mother is often helped by an experienced 'midwife'. The 100kg newborn calf relies on its mother's milk for up to four years.

Are they endangered?

African elephants are officially listed as 'vulnerable', which means they 'face a high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future'. There are around 35,000 wild Asian elephants and they are officially 'endangered'.

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What problems do they face?

Sadly elephants are killed for their ivory tusks and every year thousands are shot by well-armed poachers. Born Free campaigns against the ivory trade and funds anti-poaching patrols. We also reduce conflict between local people and elephants, helping farmers protect crops with better fencing, 'deterrent crops' (eg chilli) and early warning systems. Find out more at www.bornfree.org.uk

How many African elephants are there?

1900 – 10 million
1979 – 1.3 million
1989 – 600,000
Today – 420,000

What about captive elephants?

Throughout the world, thousands of elephants are kept in zoos and circuses, often in terrible conditions. They can suffer badly both physically and mentally, have reduced lifespans and rarely breed. These sensitive, complex creatures are entirely unsuited to captivity and often show abnormal behaviours, repeatedly swaying, rocking and shaking their heads. Zoos still capture elephants from the wild because captive breeding programmes don't work. Born Free campaigns to stop captive elephant exploitation.



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Keep wildlife in the wild

Find out more at www.bornfree.org.uk



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