

All About Elephants

Elephants are the largest land animals in the world. With their distinctive long trunk and large ears, they are a spectacular sight across Africa and in parts of Asia. It is widely believed that there are two main **species** of elephant. These are the African elephant and the Asian elephant.

African Elephants

Weighing up to 8,000kg, African elephants are the largest species of elephant. African elephants can be found in 37 countries within Africa. It is thought that there are two different **subspecies** of African elephant: the forest elephant and the savannah elephant (also known as the bush elephant).



We have a lot of information about savannah elephants as they are easy to observe across large, open planes. These elephants live in herds which contain female elephants and their offspring. Although often made up of elephants from the same family, herds of over 100 savannah elephants have been recorded. These herds are led by a matriarch who is usually the oldest and largest female elephant.

The forest elephant is more difficult to observe as they live among dense trees and rainforests. To estimate forest elephant populations, researchers look at the number of elephant droppings found in a particular area. Interestingly, some studies have found that the forest elephant may be a third species of elephant rather than a subspecies.

Asian Elephants

Asian elephants are smaller than African elephants. They can be recognised by their smaller ears and by the shape of their head. There are a number of subspecies of Asian elephants which include the Sumatran elephant, the Indian elephant and the Sri Lankan elephant.

Unlike African elephants, female Asian elephants do not grow long tusks. Asian elephants also live in smaller herds which contain around seven female elephants. Some studies have found that an Asian elephant's footprint is large enough to provide a home for tadpoles when filled with rainwater.



Elephants in the Wild

Over the years, elephants have faced a number of threats to their survival. These threats include a loss of habitat and illegal **poaching**. As a result, Asian elephants are listed as an endangered species. This means that they are thought to be at risk of becoming extinct. On the other hand, African elephants are listed as vulnerable which means that they are thought to be at a lower risk of extinction. Although their numbers are increasing in some areas, there is still some concern for them as illegal poaching continues to be an issue.

Elephant Tusks

Most elephants grow tusks. These are long teeth that continue to grow throughout their lifetime. Elephants use their tusks for a variety of different tasks. For example, tusks can be used for defence, to scrape bark from trees or to lift heavy objects. This is very similar to most humans preferring to use either their left or their right hand. Many elephants will have one tusk that is shorter than the other: the shorter side will be the tusk that they use more often.

Elephant tusks are made up of ivory which is a type of dentine. The dentine found in elephant tusks is incredibly strong and hard-wearing. While this is excellent for an elephant, it also makes their ivory tusks a tempting product for poachers to acquire. In recent years, many countries have passed laws that ban the trading of ivory. It is hoped that these laws will help to protect elephant populations before they face extinction.



Glossary

species: A group of living things that are very similar.

subspecies: A group within the same species. Subspecies have different characteristics and are often found in different areas.

poaching: Illegally hunting or catching animals.