

SMART NEWS

Asian Elephants Bury Their Dead, New Research Suggests

In India, five dead calves were found buried on their backs in irrigation ditches, with evidence that multiple herd members had participated in the burials



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Asian elephants were observed burying calves between 3 months and 1 year old that had died after experiencing infections and malnutrition. Parveen Kaswan



Asian elephants buried five dead calves in irrigation ditches in India, offering possible new insights into the mammals' complex social and emotional lives, researchers report in the *Journal of Threatened Taxa*.

In the past, researchers have observed African forest elephants covering deceased herd members with leaves and branches. But, until now, scientists had not documented any instances of Asian elephants burying their dead.

Five Asian elephant calves were discovered buried on tea estates in northern West Bengal between September 2022 and October 2023. The calves appear to have been placed on their backs in irrigation trenches up to 26 inches deep, then covered with soil. Though their heads and torsos were mostly buried, their four legs remained sticking out of the dirt.

The calves were between 3 months and 1 year old, and they had died from natural causes, such as infections and malnutrition. Bruising on their backs suggested herd members had dragged their bodies over long distances to reach the tea estates for burial. In some cases, the elephants traveled for 48 hours while carrying the dead calves, per *Live Science's* Hannah Osborne.

Researchers assert the elephants specifically placed the bodies in the ditches with the feet pointing upward so that multiple herd members could participate in the burial process. The presence of footprints and dung from multiple elephants at the sites further supported this theory. The team also suspects the Asian elephants intentionally prioritized covering the deceased calves' heads and torsos to protect them from scavengers.

"Elephants are sentient beings and know what they are doing," study co-author Akashdeep Roy, an ecologist at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, tells the *National's* Taniya Dutta.



The researchers believe the elephants dragged the bodies to the burial locations. Parveen Kaswan

Villagers and tea estate managers heard the elephants vocalizing loudly—for up to 30 or 40 minutes—before leaving the burial areas, which researchers say may indicate the herds were mourning. That explanation aligns with the findings of a 2022 study, which found that Asian elephants stood guard over the bodies of dead herd members, made noises and appeared to comfort each other during “calming-like reactions.”

Afterward, the Asian elephants also appeared to go out of their way to avoid traveling near the burial sites. One theory is that the animals linked those routes with “bad memories,” Roy tells *Live Science*.

Researchers suspect the elephants cleverly selected tea estates as burial sites because of their pre-dug trenches and semi-remote locations.

“They couldn’t bury the carcass in villages as there is high human disturbance,” Roy tells *Live Science*. “Neither could they do it inside the forest where there are no pre-built trenches and knowing their inability to dig big holes in this biogeographic zone.”



The bodies were found on their backs, with their legs protruding from the dirt. Parveen Kaswan

Elephants are highly intelligent creatures that can solve puzzles and smell the differences between food quantities. They also understand when their bodies are in the way and have been observed moving items to stand on to reach food.

Still, other researchers urge caution about trying to make sense of the animals’ behavior. For example, it’s possible the calves’ heads were buried and their feet were exposed simply because the irrigation ditches were too shallow.

“We must be careful in how we interpret these results, especially as the mental and emotional lives of elephants are still largely mysterious to us,” says Chase

LaDue, an applied ecologist at Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden who was not involved with the research, to *New Scientist's* Jeanne Timmons.

Whatever the animals' motivations, the observations could help inform future conservation strategies by shedding light on how elephants act in areas dominated by humans, LaDue tells the publication. Humans are increasingly encroaching upon and fragmenting Asian elephant habitat, which is one reason why the International Union for the Conservation of Nature categorizes the species as "endangered."

An estimated 48,000 to 51,000 individuals live in the wild, with roughly 60 percent inhabiting India and the rest scattered between Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia.

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