

# Elephant Facebook

By Mark Hager.

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Forty-four by my count. Nearly four dozen elephants within one sweeping glance, some within five paces from our vehicle and all within a hundred. Moseying slowly, they pluck juicy green grass with their trunks and munch it thoughtfully, all by and large facing into the fresh late afternoon breeze, little ones nestled under tummies of mothers or aunties. It's the 'elephant gathering' at Minneriya, near Habarana.



As the huge tank built by King Mahasena seventeen centuries ago shrinks in surface coverage every dry season, elephants by the hundreds come out of nearby forests to fatten on nutritious grass springing from the exposed lake bed. Our jeep stands between the browsing elephants and a nearby stretch of lake edge occupied by dozens of black-headed ibis and Asian openbill. To my eyes at least, elephant life looks good at the moment.

With me in the jeep are three elephant experts: Drs. Jenny Pastorini and Pruthu Fernando of the Centre for Conservation and Research (CCR) and Mr. Tharaka Koggala, operations head at Cinnamon Nature Trails, Habarana. They have taken me out not just to witness the gathering, which is reason enough to be here, but also to introduce me to something called the 'Cinnamon Elephant Project.' A collaboration between CCR and the Cinnamon group, the Project augments scientific understanding of elephant lives while also paving the way toward a value-added form of ecotourism. It does so at the moment mainly by identifying and naming individual elephants. While I obsessively count the elephants over and over in an attempt to specify their number accurately—as if this somehow represents my contribution to science—my companions are snapping photos as fast as they can, photos they will pore over painstakingly in their identification and naming exercise.



(<http://www.echelon.lk/home/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Upsi2.jpg>) Underway a little more than a year now, the Project has identified and named roughly eighty elephants who hang out at Minneriya and Kaudulla national parks, at Hurulukele Eco Park and in adjoining areas. It's a delightful part of Sri Lanka, of course: dry and breezy airs, bird-laden reservoirs around every other turn, rock formations bursting dozens and sometimes hundreds of feet out of scrub jungle. The lanes, settlements, fields and streams make it perfect for poking around on bicycle. As I pedal along, I find myself wondering whether elephants appreciate nice landscapes. (One handicap is that their colour vision is weaker than ours.)

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For three reasons, the project focuses first on identifying tuskers. For one thing, they have tusks, which puts them in a minority and reduces odds of confusion. Secondly, tusks differ from animal to animal in size, shape, thickness, symmetry, curvature and orientation up or down, toward the centre or outside. Sometimes tusks are broken. Third, tuskers—mature ones at least—tend to be loners or to keep company with small numbers of companions, as compared with mommies, aunties and juveniles, who mill around peripatetically in larger clusters, making it difficult to be sure whether the individual you espy at the moment is the same one espied moments ago.

What scientists want is quick, easy, reliable markers of identification. Though elephant eyesight is not acute, I'll wager they can identify one another at dozens of paces by the quirk of a gait or the flick of a trunk. We are not so attuned to them of course. After tusks, our scientists go to ears and tails. Ears fold (or don't fold) from the top (primary fold), inward or outward, large fold or small, symmetrically or asymmetrically as between the two ears on any given individual. Likewise with folds from the side (secondary fold): inward or outward and so on. Tails also tell tales, especially through bristles at the tip. Bristles are present or absent, symmetrical or asymmetrical on front and back. Some individuals can be marked by unusually short tails. (Fighting males bite tail pieces off each other.) After tusks, ears and tails, you can move onto markers like

sway in back, forehead and nasal prominences, injuries, limps, scars, ear-vein patterns and spots or mottling.



(<http://www.echelon.lk/home/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Upsi3.jpg>)

The project gives elephants evocative, easily-remembered names. Meet some of the boys? Young tusker Lucky has outward primary and secondary folds on his right ear but his left-ear secondary fold is inward. He has no tail tuft. Gajan, named after the Tamil playboy actor, ‘dances’ while walking, always moving in hyperactive ways. Cane Tusker sports long, downward-sloping tusks, wear and tear on his left ear, no secondary fold on his right. He appears frequently in all three parks and in the jungle between Habarana and Dambulla, usually in the company of his non-tusker young buddies, Kuna and Ulpana. He has been photographed at sundown, sauntering along the Habarana-Dambulla Road. Bandu was spotted in the Eco Park in February. The bottom tip of his right tusk is gone, probably due to juvenile mishap. His right ear shows a gouged out portion and a bullet wound scar mars his right flank. Rhino, Unicorn and Ivan all have full tusks only on their right sides, though Ivan retains a vestigial left tusk along with his mangled left ear: evidence perhaps of a fight he wished had gone better. A young non-tusker male, Podi Wijje, can easily be identified from his dozen or so bullet wound scars.

In addition to the photo ID initiative, the Project plans to track three jumbos with radio collars. This is not cheap. Collars cost roughly \$5000 apiece and yield data for three years or so on average before malfunctioning or falling off. Through an earlier collar-tracking effort, Drs. Jenny and Pruthu learned a lot about the movements of eleven elephants in the Habarana area. None remained within the park where it was collared, though they mostly stayed closer to Habarana than was expected. The subjects all moved across the rail track and Trincomalee road north of Habarana from time to time, but rarely crossed the Dambulla road to the south. A fair conjecture is that they cross the Trincomalee road and shun the Dambulla road because the latter is heavier with traffic. This has an unfortunate consequence, however, because crossing the Trinco road generally goes with crossing the closely-adjacent train track.



(<http://www.echelon.lk/home/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Upsi4.jpg>) Elephants crossing the tracks get injured or killed by trains every year, always at night. Dr. Pruthu suggests stepped up efforts to identify favoured crossing spots—CCR’s studies already offer some preliminary data—and limiting train speeds through the area and especially at those spots.

Our trunk-swinging friends also regularly cross the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa roads north-south or south-north, as many a visitor can attest. The earlier CCR study showed that Hura crossed the Anuradhapura road frequently, nearly always within the same 200-metre stretch.

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Collared in Kaudulla, Mahasena (named after the king mentioned above who built the Minneriya tank) crossed the railway and the Trinco road before his collar stopped transmitting. Transmissions from Big Uncle, ranging regularly from Kaudulla north to Kantale and back, went ominously stationary after a time. He was found shot to death 200 metres from a paddy field he may have raided.

A third Project component is on Facebook. One Facebook group—‘Elephants of the “Gathering”’—lets tourists post photos and locations of elephants they spot, along with dates, times and comments. Launched last December, the group will augment the Project’s ID and data gathering work. (Outside the Cinnamon project, another group coordinated by Dr. Jenny—‘Sapumali the Elephant’— follows the life of one main character and several supporting ones in southern Sri Lanka.)



(<http://www.echelon.lk/home/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Upsi5.jpg>) As reliable IDs and related data accumulates over the years, scientists will learn much about families, networks, conflicts, food sources, health, habitat, demographics and challenges. Body changes (e.g., skinny/fat) can be tracked across seasons and year-to-year and correlated with events such as strong or missed monsoons. We can learn about patterns of mating, pregnancy, lactation and separation of maturing males from their nurturing broods. Beside the boon to pure science, the Project aims to cultivate over time a brand of value-added tourism. Up till now, trackers have trucked tourists to spots where elephant sightings can be expected and then basically said, “Look, elephants.” Guides trained by the Project, however, could say: “Look, there’s Raja. He was born two months ago and those are his sister, Princess, and his brother, Tough Guy. Tough Guy has an intestinal ailment and has been losing weight. Raja’s mother there, Rosie, is in her late 30’s and Raja is her fourth offspring. We have a pretty good idea that Raja’s father is Rex, who also fathered Princess and Tough Guy. He spends a lot of time over in Eco Park but he was spotted here near Rosie about the time Raja was conceived....” Tourists who really want to learn about elephants, not just see and snap them (though that’s awesome, to be sure) might pay serious money for that kind of safari.

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