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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Chats, flirting and travel rows – Jumbo is just like us

A 35-year study of African elephants has concluded that they are as intelligent as dolphins and much nicer than humans

Cal Flyn Published: 5 June 2011



Elephants are as intelligent and sociable as apes according to the study (Martin Harvey)

Chimpanzees and gorillas may resemble us more closely, but elephants are just as likely to ape human emotions and skills, according to the most detailed analysis of the creatures ever undertaken.

A 35-year observational study of African elephants has discovered that they wince at each other's pain, argue over directions and are able to recognise more than 100 of their fellows.

Elephants have long been known to display human-like behaviour such as grieving over their dead. However, the sheer range of emotions and their ability to use tools shown in the new study has led researchers to conclude that elephants should be considered at least as similar to humans as some of the most advanced animals.

“They are certainly a higher animal,” said Cynthia Moss, founder of the Amboseli elephant research project near Kenya’s border with Tanzania. “They are right up there with apes and dolphins in their intelligence and their complex social behaviour – and, if anything, they are much nicer than humans.”

Moss’s team has individually tracked about 2,500 elephants, observing and recording their lives over the decades. They conclude there is “no doubt” that elephants display empathy for one another.

In one example, a female adult elephant was seen to wince as she watched a young calf reach out to touch an electric fence. Others have been seen removing branches caught on another elephant’s body or pulling out tranquilliser darts when another is hit.

Two elephants were once observed wedging another elephant between them to stop it falling after it had been tranquillised.

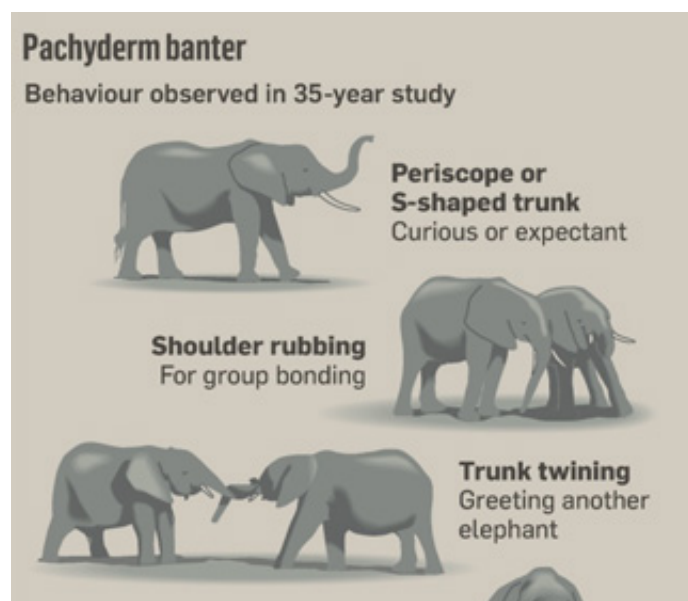
Moss, whose findings have been published in a new book by University of Chicago Press, said: “Sometimes you will see the allomothers [female carers] who ‘babysit’ their younger relatives – rescuing a calf that gets stuck in the mud or retrieving one that gets left behind.”

She added: “You can’t help but get attached. You spend so much time following them for many years, watching as they grow up and have new experiences. They certainly have individual personalities.

“It’s like a soap opera, that’s what keeps you going back. It’s all the same drama ... like ‘did she get pregnant by that bull or another?’”

In addition to their ability to empathise, the Amboseli elephants showed a wide range of body language and sounds to communicate in a way recognisable to humans. Moss has observed them entwining trunks or bumping shoulders in greeting, while playful elephants waggled their heads or prodded another with a trunk to start a game. Flirting females sometimes opened their eyes wide while glancing coyly over their shoulders at suitors.

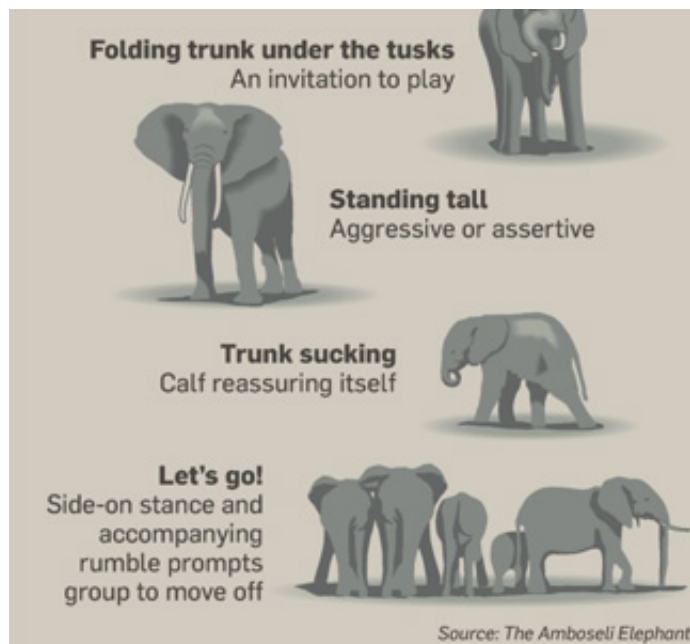
The elephants used complex communications in what seemed to be protracted discussions over which route to take when herds were on the move.



A common signal known as the “let’s go” rumble would prompt lengthy exchanges with the cadence of a conversation until an apparent consensus was reached and the animals would move off in a chosen direction.

Elephants also have the ability to make and use basic tools, such as fly swats taken from branches, and the knowledge to remember routes through the landscape decades after they last travelled them.

They are thought superior to apes in some areas, such as route planning, while other experiments have shown them as capable as primates in co-operating on tasks. Scientists have even suggested their short-term memories are better than



humans' in some respects.

Iain Douglas-Hamilton, who runs the Save the Elephants project in Samburu nature reserve in Kenya, welcomed Moss's research.

"They're definitely compassionate animals," he said.

"The discovery of their cognitive skills is significant because it shows that these skills have developed in parallel along separate evolutionary lines – in effect, that different species are coming to very similar conclusions."

However, others caution against reading human motives and emotion into elephant behaviour. Fritz Vollrath, a professor in the animal behaviour unit at Oxford University, said: "This is a really exciting area in which we know very little. From

these observations, it seems elephants have evolved comparable coping strategies to our own.

"In many ways elephants live similar lives to us – they have a similar life span, and live collectively. The question is, 'Are they really identical to us?'"

"I agree that elephants behave as if they have compassion or empathy, but do they have it like ours? We must be aware that behaviour we might interpret as showing human-like emotions might have arisen for completely different reasons."