Welcome to the Elephant Kingdom â€“Physical Characteristics.

By Treeves

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Elephants are the largest land-dwelling mammals on earth with two extant species- The African elephant known as Loxodonta Africana and the Asian elephant as Elephas maximus. The prehistoric times had a diverse and populous group of large mammals regarded as the third species- Mammoths with the scientific name of Mammuthus is now extinct. The African elephants have subspecies like Savanna or the African Bush elephants and then the Forest elephants. The Savanna or the African Bush elephants are found in savannah lands of 37 countries in Africa, to the south of the Sahara Desert and the forest elephants inhabit the dense rain forests of west and central Africa. The Asian subspecies can be seen in India, Indonesia, Sri Lankan, China and rainforests of Malaysia. The African elephantâ€™s appearance differs a lot from their counterpart in Asia and there are several distinguishable features.

The African Elephant is considerably bigger in comparison and they have large ears, with a concave back unlike their cousins in Asia who have flat or rounded back. The Asian elephants are brown to dark gray in color and have coarse hair thinly spread over their bodies. The shape of elephant head is another noticeable factor. Asian elephants have a dent in the top of their heads that resemble a heart shape, while African elephantsâ€™ heads are round with no indentation. They have very thick skin that protects them from the harsh weather and they make use of their trunk as a limb. The trunk which acts as a nose and upper lip has more than 40,000 muscles, with the help of which elephants consume food and water. They have pillars like legs to support their body weight. Because of these strong muscular legs, elephants can stand for very long time. The sole of the elephant's foot is covered with a thick, cushion like padding that helps sustain weight and prevents slipping. This tough, gelatinous cushion like material of the feet enables elephants to walk almost silently.

Another notable feature of elephant is its tusk, the second upper incisors. In Asian elephants, only the males have external tusks, but both males and females of African species have tusks. Tusks grow continuously for most of an elephantâ€™s lifetime and are an indicator of age. Usually elephants are right or left-tusked, and they make use of dominant tusk as a tool to dig for food, to clear the paths while strolling, and thus shortening it from constant wear. Tusks are an inherited characteristic and will differ in size, shape and direction. The tusk, made of calcium phosphate is also known as ivory and is very good for carving intricate artifacts. Elephants are hunted for the most valued tusk and poaching for the ivory is one of the major factors in the reduction of the world's elephant population.

The other day on my Dish TV there was a documentary on wild elephants that showed a peculiar behavior of elephants. From this satellite TV show, I came to know that elephants wallow in mud holes of colored soil to protect themselves. Wallowing is an important behavior in elephant society especially when they are in herds; it becomes like a group ritual for them. The mud acts as a sunscreen, protecting the elephantâ€™s skin from harsh ultraviolet radiation. An elephant uses its trunk to blow soil onto its body after taking bath to protect its sensitive skin from damages like insect bites, sun burns and moisture loss. This curious behavior of elephants also helps the skin in regulating body temperatures. The elephant, characterized by its high level of intelligence, interesting behavior and complex social structure is a wonderful animal to know.

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