

# The common ground of elephants and humans

By Kelly Landen

Throughout time, elephants have had a curious effect on people, creating a sense of reverence and respect. Of course, their massive size and immense strength is enough to demand it. But elephants and humans have much in common, including their intelligence.

An elephant's life span of upwards of 65 years in the wild matches that of humans and has a parallel rate of development, reaching sexual maturity in the early teen years. Both people and elephants have complex social lives and family structure.

Both love, protect, and nurture family members and educate the young with the skills and knowledge they need to survive. Like humans, elephants are not born with natural survival instincts and need to be taught these by their mothers and other female guardians. Lessons include how and where to feed, to use

tools, what to be aware of and to understand their place in their social structure.

Elephants live within tight-knit family units, or breeding herds, that may form part of larger kinship groups. The matriarch is usually the oldest and largest, while her immediate family herd is comprised of daughters, nieces, sisters and the young male counterparts.

Juvenile males will begin spending less and less time with their immediate family as they enter their teen years. They eventually leave their family herd to bond with other males living among a loose group of friends, or bachelor herds, that may travel for years together, break, regroup and occasionally visit their own family from time to time.

Within both types of elephant groups there is a hierarchy and they show respect to their elders. They can be devastated by the death of one of their members.

Elephants can reason and display emotions, including joy, playfulness, grief and mourning.

In addition, elephants are able to learn new facts and behaviours. They mimic sounds that they hear, can self-medicate, play with a sense of humour, perform artistic activities, use tools and display compassion and altruistic behaviours. They have been known to come to the aid of other species in distress, including humans.

Elephants even display self-recognition and recognise themselves in a mirror, which is extremely rare in the animal kingdom.

Scientifically, this can be explained by the fact that the elephant's brain is similar to that of humans in terms of structure and complexity. It is specially designed to accom-



Elephant family mourning,

PHOTO: KELLY LANDEN

plish life-long learning. It has as many neurons and synapses as a human's; the volume of their cerebral cortex (used for cognitive processing) exceeds that of any primate species.

The hippocampus (linked to emotion and memory) is proportionally larger than that of humans or other known intelligent species, and is highly convoluted, which is associated with complex intelligence. This possibly explains why elephants suffer from psy-

chological flashbacks and the equivalent of post-traumatic stress disorder.

For me, as someone who has spent many hours, many days for many years monitoring and documenting elephants, the physiological facts only confirm what I believe can easily be observed.

Conservation issues concerning elephants are multifaceted and complex. I believe if more people were to understand elephants as

beings, they might appreciate elephants' similarities to their own lives. Which would, I hope, create respect and consideration for efforts to help both species share land and resources.

If you encounter an elephant along the roadside, show respect for its space and appreciate the moment together. If you aren't paying attention and don't choose your behaviour carefully, he will. And remember this, truly, an elephant never forgets!

## Birdlife Botswana Conducts Water Bird Count in CNP



These keen birders use their field guides and each other to identify a rare bird. From left to right: Craig Foaden, SpokesNtshwabi, Mayezi Nkwazi, and Peter Laver.

By Bonnie Fairbanks

In July, the Kasane branch of Birdlife Botswana participated in the annual water bird count in Chobe National Park to assess changes in water bird populations. Birdlife branches throughout Botswana participate in these counts at major water sources, so the nationwide health of our water bird populations can be tracked. Since the Chobe River is an essential habitat for many water birds, and water birds can be an indicator for problems in the river, this bird count can raise a red flag for changes in the river that not only affect birds but humans too. To do this count,

we split into 4 teams of 3-6 people, with each team driving along a section of the water front in the park between the old park gate to Ngoma, counting every water bird seen. We also noted any human activities such as fishing nets in the water, which will help us to determine if human activities are changing the way water birds use the river. We had a very diverse group of 19 volunteers, from tourism operators to the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, as well as interested individuals from the community.

We counted a total of 10,976 birds this season. This year's most sighted bird was the white-faced duck, with

a count of 3,415. We were interested to see that many birds seem to have moved from their usual nesting and roosting places within the park to the rapids down river near Mowana Lodge and the Seboba Community Trust. The rapids have not been included in counts in the past due to the difficulty in accessing them for much of the year. Since, the entire length of the rapids cannot be accessed, we have decided to begin doing counts there from the same points year after year, to see if birds are perhaps remaining constant in number but changing their habitat use between the park and the rapids.



PHOTO: BONNIE FAIRBANKS

The little egret and the great egret are common and beautiful inhabitants of the Chobe River. The little egret was the 7th most sighted on the count with 372 individuals seen, and the great egret was 14th most sighted with 91.

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