

# Elephant Burial Grounds Among the Tea Estates of Northern Bengal

In the fragmented landscape of northern Bengal, a fascinating and sensitive behaviour of Asian Elephants *Elephas maximus* has been observed—burying their deceased calves. With human settlements expanding into forested habitats, such unique behaviours come to light. While burial rituals among African Elephants are well-documented, similar behaviours in their Asian counterparts have rarely been studied.

Five cases of Asian Elephant herds burying their dead calves were documented in the tea estates of northern Bengal. The herds were observed carrying the carcasses using their trunks or legs, searching for suitable burial spots, often in irrigation trenches. Remarkably, the calves were buried in a “legs-upright” position. This positioning likely reflects practical considerations, as it makes it easier for the elephants to grip and bury the body. In narrow spaces, it also ensures that the calf’s head is buried first.

Footprints around the burial sites indicated that all herd members participated in the process, highlighting the social nature of elephants. Forest guards reported hearing loud vocalizations from the herd during these burials, lasting 30–40 minutes. These sounds may represent mourning and a readiness to defend against potential threats. Such affinity towards the young is attributed to the elephants' strong responses to their long gestation periods and the hormone oxytocin, which strengthens bonds within the herd, especially between mothers and their offspring. An intriguing behaviour was observed after the burials: the herds completely avoided the burial sites, instead using alternative routes. This contrasts with observations in undisturbed forests, where herds often spend several hours at burial sites and

revisit them later. The avoidance behaviour in tea estates highlights how human-altered landscapes can influence elephant social behaviours.

These observations reveal both the adaptability and sensitivity of elephants. Their ability to use human-modified landscapes for such social acts demonstrates their resilience, but it also underscores the impact of habitat loss and human activity on their natural behaviours. Conserving these social animals requires a balance between coexistence in shared spaces and the preservation of their natural habitats.

#### JoTT article summarized:

**Kaswan, P. & A. Roy (2024).** Unearthing calf burials among Asian Elephants *Elephas maximus* Linnaeus, 1758 (Mammalia: Proboscidea: Elephantidae) in northern Bengal, India. *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 16(2): 24615–24629. <https://doi.org/10.11609/jott.8826.16.2.24615-24629>

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