

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Temporal gland secretions in the female Asian elephant

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It was on 21 January 2000, while visiting the Ruhunu National Park that we came across four elephants standing quietly on the far side of the Buttuwa Lagoon. Two adult females and two calves were soon joined by another female and her calf. We stopped our vehicle and waited as we were sure they would cross the lagoon and come over towards us. They crossed the lagoon at 0930h and came over to a vehicle that had been parked in front of us. The leading female, obviously the matriarch, looked agitated though we did not disturb her in any way. She circled the vehicle in front of us and then came to our vehicle with the calf running behind her. When she was going around our vehicle, we noticed that she was secreting from her temporal glands. She was no more than five feet from our vehicle and kept circling us making a peculiar sound that can only be described as "Kek Kek Kek Kek". She was clearly agitated though she did not show any aggression. When another vehicle came up behind us, she went over to that and repeated her performance. Then another female and calves came across the lagoon and joined the herd. They milled around our vehicles for a good half an hour before they moved off into the jungle.

Our tracker was astonished. He had never seen this before in a female elephant. The last time I saw a female having temporal gland secretions was nearly fifty years ago, again in the Ruhunu National Park. Walking was allowed in the park in those days as there was no road network as we see today. Our party consisted of the late Sam Elapata Dissawe. The late A. H. E. Molamure, our camp cook David, Tracker Pinoris and myself, than a school boy. A herd of seven elephants was seen along the Jamburagala road with the Matriarch showing copious secretion issuing

from her temporal glands. While we were observing the herd a large male came along. He was not in musth. He approached the female and began stroking her temples and then tasting the secretions. Each time he did this, he gave a shrill trumpet. This was repeated over fifteen times and the herd along with the male moved off into the jungle. Our tracker Pinoris predicted that the male would certainly come into musth, in a day or two. Though we tried to locate the herd for two days we could not get at it to test our trackers prediction. He had seen females showing temporal gland secretions on two previous occasions.

It is well known that in the African elephant, both males and females show temporal gland secretions. Both Cynthia Moss and Joyce Poole have observed that female African elephants show copious secretion when excited, especially when two herds meet up after a temporary separation. It is very marked in the "Greeting Ceremony" as described by them.

This phenomenon is rare in the female Asian elephant. So far the reason for this is not known. R. Sukumar states that "female Asiatic elephants occasionally secrete from their temporal glands, although the precise significance of this is not clear. I have seen cows secreting in an advanced state of pregnancy or calving"

Though the condition of musth has been known in the Asian elephant for centuries, it was recognized in Africa only recently after the work done on the male elephants in Amboseli by Joyce Poole and Cynthia Moss. I am informed by elephant owners that some female elephants in captivity too have shown periodic temporal gland secretions though not as copious as in the males.