

PREMIUM

ANIMALS

# Do elephants bury their dead calves?

Five young Asian elephants were found mostly covered in tea plantation ditches in India's Bengal region. But some experts question if they're evidence of true burial practices.



This buried carcass was found on the New Dooars Tea Estate in northern Bengal. PHOTOGRAPH BY WEST BENGAL FOREST DEPARTMENT

By Laurel Neme  
May 31, 2024

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While scientists have long known [African savanna elephants likely mourn their dead](#), little has been reported about such emotions in wild Asian elephants. Now, an intriguing new study suggests they bury dead calves.

The research describes five instances, in 2022 and 2023, in which different herds dragged their deceased babies to irrigation ditches in India's northern Bengal region and buried them there. In all five cases, researchers found the calves' legs sticking up out of the ground, with their heads, trunks, and backs covered with soil.

Burials are rare in the animal kingdom. Both African and [Asian elephants](#) and magpies cover their dead with foliage—what scientists call "weak" burial—but this is unique, say study co-authors [Parveen Kaswan](#), an Indian Forest Service officer, and [Akashdeep Roy](#), senior research fellow at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research in Pune.

It is the first recorded evidence of full burial in Asian elephants, they say in the study, [published recently in the \*Journal of Threatened Taxa\*](#).

This behavior is "not shown by any other non-human species," Roy says. "It puts the elephants apart. This behavior also tells us how much they care for their loved ones."

But several experts say they need more proof, especially because a person has not witnessed the burials, which occurred exclusively on tea estates. "The authors didn't present enough evidence that it was elephants doing the burying" on purpose, says Heidi Riddle, vice chair of the [Asian Elephant Specialist Group](#), part of the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Species Survival Commission.

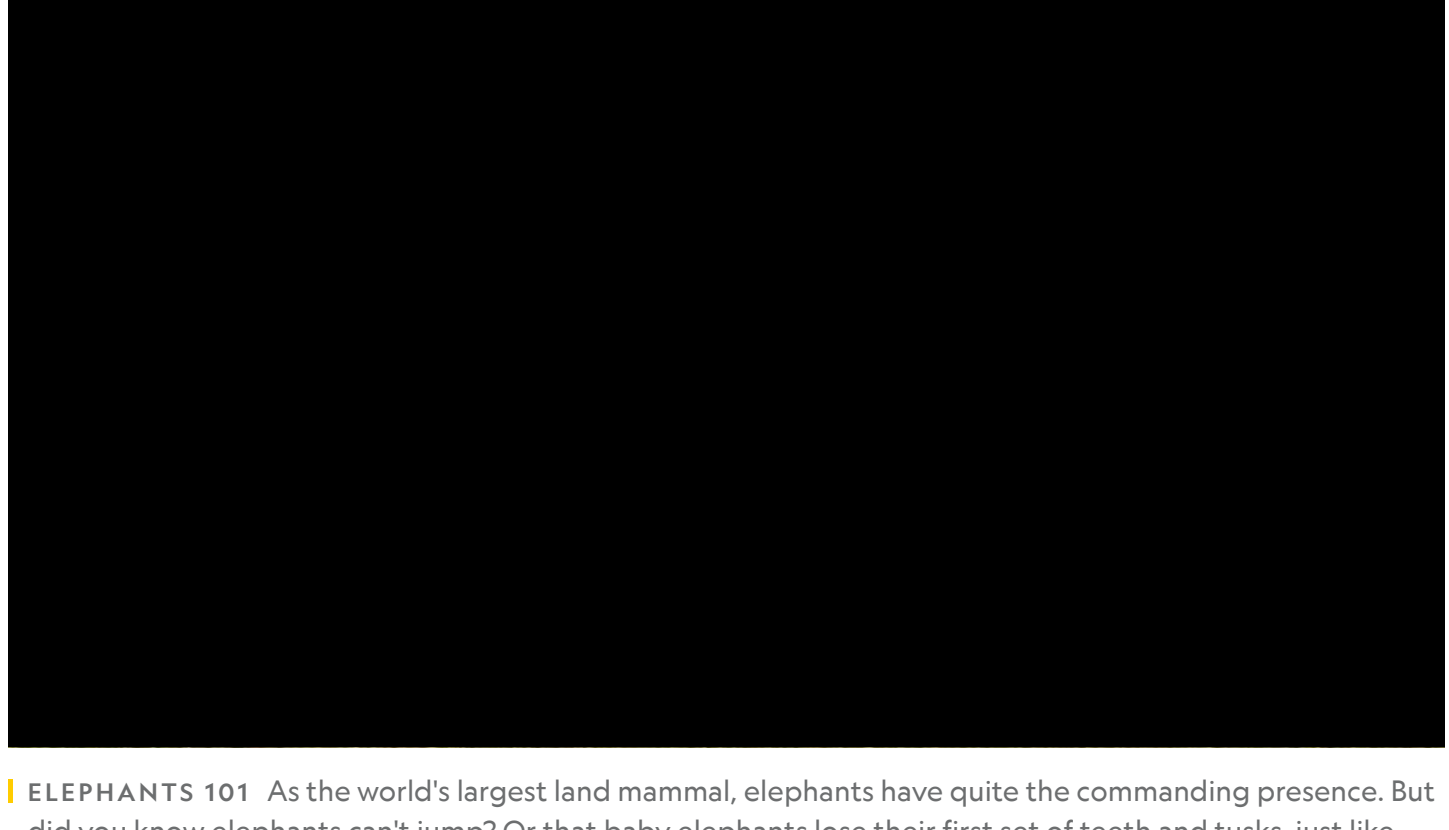
"I would be hesitant to over-interpret those behaviors," adds ecologist [Raman Sukumar](#), a professor at the Indian Institute of Science's Centre for Ecological Studies in Bangalore.

He notes that actions described in the study, like carrying dead calves or kicking soil over a carcass, are normal for Asian elephants, but may not be actual burial behavior.

## Still a mystery

Most of the burials occurred between July and November, when farmers cultivate rice paddies and elephant herds migrate in search of food. Due to forest fragmentation, the pachyderms must cross tea plantations as they move from one area to another. [\(Read: "Elephants are learning to live with us. Can we do the same?"\)](#)

Elephants chose the sites purposefully, the study says, waiting until nighttime to carry "deceased calves to isolated locations away from humans and carnivores while searching for irrigation drains and depressions to bury the carcass."



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In two cases, estate managers or guards heard elephants vocalizing at night and found the corpses the next day. For the three others, people happened upon the carcasses randomly. The West Bengal Forest Department, part of the Indian Forest Service, removed the five bodies to conduct postmortem exams, which showed the calves had died from various causes, such as poor nutrition and infections.

Most unusual was the upright position of the calves' legs, the study authors say. Elephants likely carried the dead calves by their legs and trunks, so "that's the position where they can hold the carcass and put it in" the ditches, which are usually about 1.5 feet deep, Roy says.

But there likely isn't anything meaningful about the exposed legs in particular: If the burial spots were deeper, he suspects the elephants would also cover up the legs.

## Careful placement?

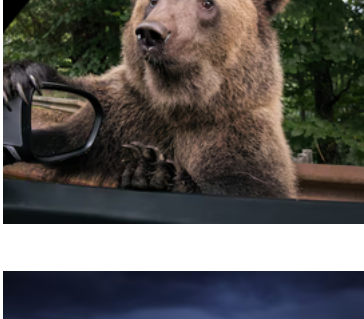
Kaswan and other forest department officials examined the burial sites and found footprints of different-size elephants on both sides of the trenches and over the carcasses. This shows "a combined effort in burying the carcasses," says Roy.

"These are leveling footprints," he explains. "They know how much pressure to put and where."

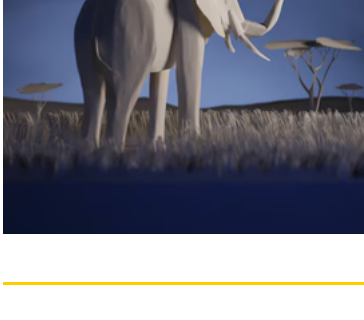
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However, Riddle says it "could be evidence of exploring, not burying."

"They could be feeling with their feet," she says, "and also with their trunks, which would likely not leave any marks [or] impressions in the soil." [\(Learn how Asian elephants comfort upset friends.\)](#)

The postmortem exams also found bruising on the calves' backs, but no fractures.

Roy says the bruising indicates "the calves were dragged a certain distance," while a lack of fractures suggests they didn't fall into the ditches but were placed there carefully.

Riddle agrees bruising proves the calves were dragged, but the absence of fractures may not show careful placement. "If the calf was dragged and placed upside down, even if other elephants patted down the dirt ... any possible fractures might only be hairline fractures of the rib cage, which may be difficult to determine."

## Isolated behavior

When Riddle asked the Asian elephant specialist group about this burial activity, "nobody else has seen it," she says. "It appears to be very specific to tea gardens in northeast India."

After the article's publication, however, retired forest officers and estate managers contacted the study authors to report seeing similar burials in years past. [\(See elephants' superpowers—animated.\)](#)

[Aritra Kshetry](#), director of the Indian nonprofit Coexistence Consortium, has also witnessed it in northern Bengal, including at New Dooars Tea Estate, one of the sites including in the study.

At one site, he "saw the dead calf being carried by the mother for an entire day." The next morning, he "saw the calf buried in the leg-up position" surrounded by dozens of elephant footprints.

"Circumstantial evidence pointed to the fact that these series of events could not have been mere coincidences," he says, adding it was clear that elephants had placed the calves in that position.

If the calf had fallen in, he says, it "would fall headfirst, with the forelimbs in the ditch and their hind limbs on the slope."

## More evidence needed

However, both Sukumar and Riddle have doubts that elephants manipulated the calves into these positions, and would like to see more photographic or other solid evidence to prove what's happening. [\(See how National Geographic has photographed elephants the past hundred years.\)](#)

"You might get one or two calves this way," Sukumar says, but "it's strange to see five dead calves, all from different herds, in the identical body position, particularly over such a short time span."

Even still, the scientists don't discredit the observations.

"Animals by and large often do things that are totally unexpected," Riddle says.

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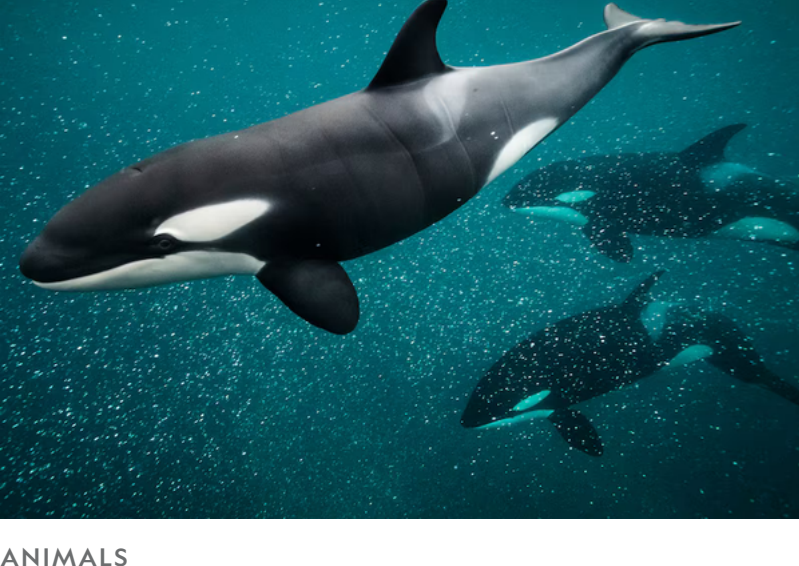
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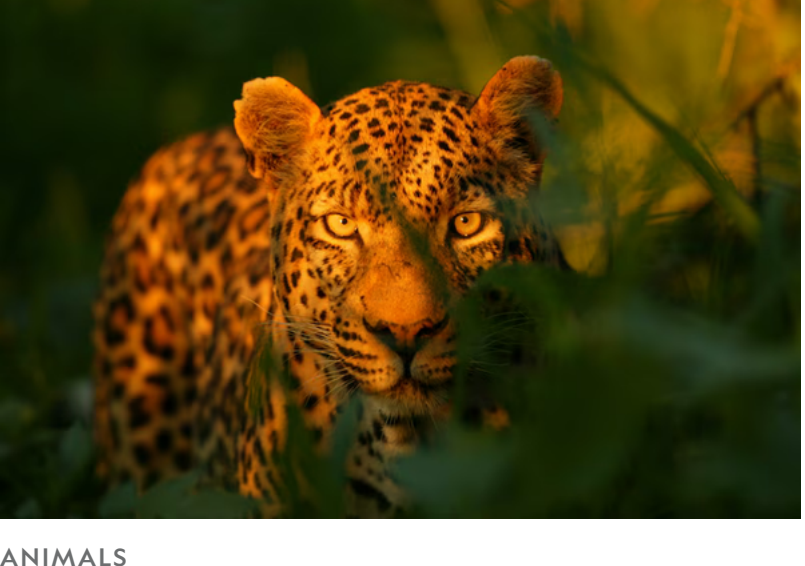
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