

Elephants are the [largest](#) existing land animals. Three living [species](#) are currently recognised: the [African bush elephant](#), the [African forest elephant](#), and the [Asian elephant](#). They are the only surviving members of the [family Elephantidae](#) and the [order Proboscidea](#). The order was formerly much more diverse during the [Pleistocene](#), but most species became extinct during the [Late Pleistocene](#) epoch. Distinctive features of elephants include a long [proboscis](#) called a trunk, [tusks](#), large ear flaps, pillar-like legs, and tough but sensitive skin. The trunk is used for breathing and is [prehensile](#), bringing food and water to the mouth, and grasping objects. Tusks, which are derived from the incisor teeth, serve both as weapons and as tools for moving objects and digging. The large ear flaps assist in maintaining a constant body temperature as well as in communication. [African elephants](#) have larger ears and concave backs, whereas Asian elephants have smaller ears, and convex or level backs.

Elephants are scattered throughout [sub-Saharan Africa](#), [South Asia](#), and [Southeast Asia](#) and are found in different habitats, including [savannahs](#), forests, deserts, and [marshes](#). They are [herbivorous](#), and they stay near water when it is accessible. They are considered to be [keystone species](#), due to their impact on their environments. Elephants have a [fission–fusion society](#), in which multiple family groups come together to socialise. Females (cows) tend to live in family groups, which can consist of one female with her calves or several related females with offspring. The groups, which do not include bulls, are usually led by the oldest cow, known as the [matriarch](#).

Males (bulls) leave their family groups when they reach puberty and may live alone or with other males. Adult bulls mostly interact with family groups when looking for a mate. They enter a state of increased [testosterone](#) and aggression known as [musth](#), which helps them gain [dominance](#) over other males as well as reproductive success. Calves are the centre of attention in their family groups and rely on their mothers for as long as three years. Elephants can live up to 70 years in the wild. They [communicate](#) by touch, sight, smell, and sound; elephants use [infrasound](#) and [seismic communication](#) over long distances. [Elephant intelligence](#) has been compared with that of [primates](#) and [cetaceans](#). They appear to have [self-awareness](#), and appear to show [empathy](#) for dying and dead family members.

African bush elephants and Asian elephants are listed as [endangered](#) and African forest elephants as [Critically Endangered](#) by the [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#) (IUCN). One of the

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biggest threats to elephant populations is the [ivory trade](#), as the animals are [poached](#) for their ivory tusks. Other threats to wild elephants include [habitat destruction](#) and conflicts with local people. Elephants are used as [working animals](#) in Asia. In the past, they were used in war; today, they are often controversially put on display in zoos, or exploited for entertainment in [circuses](#). Elephants are highly recognisable and have been featured in art, folklore, religion, literature, and [popular culture](#).