The Jumbo Babies Cometh

Posted on



The jumbos go marching to bathe again hurrah hurrah!

One of the best places to observe elephants up close and in large herds that roam freely is at the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage. Its 24 acres home to 77 elephants, the orphanage lays claim to 69 elephant births throughout its history. We ventured in to the familiar territory once again, this time to get better acquainted with the young members of Pinnawala.

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There's something joyful about baby elephants. Just the sight of them lolloping about is heartwarming to see. At Pinnawala, there are plenty of opportunities to observe junior jumbos and their amusing antics and even reach over and pat their prickly heads or have a turn at feeding milk.

The year 2011 was a big year for the orphanage with 15 births taking place following a successful breeding programme. The naming ceremony that followed was quite the occasion with tourists gathered to witness the christening of a lively jostling bunch of jumbos. The visitors even enjoyed the privilege of having baby elephants named after them. As a result some of the youngsters today have names such as Elvina, Trinkie, and Binuki—a diversion from traditional names such as Mahasen, Kumari and Kandula.

While there have been no births since 2011 the breeding programme is set to begin again. Of the 15 youngsters most have already weaned from their mothers but still remain close to maternal protection and company. This is seen especially during bathing times, which occur soon after feeding times twice a day. The herds shuffle along in a long column and cross the road to reach Ma Oya—a sight that is reminiscent of some great migration. The youngsters huddle close to their mothers or hardly ever wander too far, except on a few occasions when the fun and frolic of daily ablutions become all too exciting.

With a timetable of feeding, bathing… and more feeding and more bathing, the orphanage is a haven for elephants to get about their daily routine. However, several babies remain at the enclosure while the herd sets out to the river. These few are some of the youngest in the orphanage and have been brought to the orphanage by the Wildlife Department. Orphaned in the wild these jumbos find safety and comfort at Pinnawala. Less than 1.5 years of age, they are fed staggering quantities of milk and feeding times are extended for longer periods than that of the rest. These moments are crowd favourites as the youngsters gulp down all too eagerly, litres and litres of milk, and the show of impatience involving

shoving, and nudging each other makes for endearing moments. While the rest lounge around in the river the orphaned babies who are without an adult elephant to tend to them, instead receive the care and attention of a mahout who bathes them at the enclosure.

Aside from milk some youngsters have already begun feeding on solids, such as coconut palms, kitul palm and logs, and jak fruit branches. We watched the many feeding rituals across the enclosure, never tiring of observing some juniors who could already bust a hard log with one hefty leg to rip apart the fibre and fold it into their mouths. Often, older youngsters use size to their advantage to block smaller members from reaching the piles of feed. This playground bullying leaves highly disgruntled baby jumbos who can only resort to antics of indignation. Some have learnt the virtue of patience early on, standing dolefully in blinking silence for a tidbit to come their way.

We paused to watch two more young jumbos, and their comical behaviour at a small enclosure. The younger of the two appeared to be in a mischievous mood, worrying the other for attention as he tailed him around the pen. After several failed attempts he simply turned his back on ‘big brother’ evidently quite displeased.

There’s much to see around Pinnawala from one enclosure to the next, aside from the daily rituals of feeding and bathing. And the baby jumbos add much more character with their colourful temperaments.

