Jumbo Babies

Posted on

“Thanks for the milk. It’s time to head back.”

A roly-poly elephant calf eagerly sprinted through the open wooden gate into the feeding area of the Elephant Transit Home. Her more dignified companion sauntered through the gate swaying elegantly. Both walked towards a tiny (few weeks old) elephant calf carefully tethered to a wooden pole. A playful tangle of ears, trunks and front legs followed. Around 30 to 40 similar grey forms in various sizes emerged from the banks of Udawalawe Reservoir. It was feeding time for the baby elephants at the Udawalawe Elephant Transit Home.

Words Chamindra Warusawitharane Photographs Prabath Chathuranga and Indika De Silva

From dawn to dusk baby elephants roam free in the 20 hectares land wallowing away in the hot hours of the day at the perennial water resource, ‘Udawalawe

Reservoir’. At night however, the babies stay within the human-occupied section of the Elephant Transit Home well protected from possible harm.

The forty elephant calves under care have already begun to taste the sweet sense of liberty. The two youngest calves are still constantly under the watchful eye of their human guardians. Once they are strong enough the two calves will join the rest in their rambles.

We reached Udawalawe just in time to catch the 12 o’clock feeding hour. Initially, except for a distant grey form or two and the tiny elephant tied to a pole, there were no elephants visible. We waited with the same impatience that the tiny elephant displayed for the arrival of the other calves. We waited mimicking the silence of the jungle. Soon afterwards two calves that appeared to be friends but with vastly different personalities – one mischievous and eager the other dignified and aloof – walked in and greeted the delighted tiny baby elephant. In an instant baby elephants of various sizes, displaying numerous personality traits, assembled in the feeding area. We watched from behind an iron fence, the imperious trumpeting, comical collisions, independent far away gazes, majestic ramblings and the evident camaraderie. But we were glad to note, all baby elephants were essentially part of the elephant herd and treated humans with respectful detachment.

We watched from behind an iron fence, the imperious trumpeting, comical collisions, independent far away gazes, majestic ramblings and the evident camaraderie.

Whilst the smallest of the calves are fed every two hours, the others make their way towards the feeding area every three hours exactly at the appointed feeding time. We were amazed to hear that the calves have a great sense of time and they all gather at the feeding area right on time several times a day.

Begun in the year 1995 Ath Athuru Sevena: Elephant Transit Home (ETH) has since then functioned as a welfare and a conservation centre for orphaned elephant calves. Remaining faithful to the original concept the ETH rehabilitates orphaned and injured elephant calves until they are ready to survive alone in the wild. The Wildlife Conservation Department of Sri Lanka is the responsible body for the Elephant Transit Home and its baby elephants. The ETH has a foster parent scheme for those who want to help the baby elephants. An individual or a group willing to support the elephant calves

can adopt a calf and give financial support. The money will be used for buying milk powder and necessary medicine for the baby elephant.

It was an incredible spectacle; an ETH employee sent in the babies in twos or threes at a time to be fed and once inside they behaved like a bunch of kindergarteners set loose. Most calves wanted more than their fair share of milk. Once they had their fill, some tried to nonchalantly walk back for more while others stood their ground and rebelliously demanded more. However, several men with sticks guarded the mischievous ones. At first we wondered at the men's ability to identify each calf in the same manner they would identify a fellow human being. But after watching this lot for a while even we were able to tell them apart. Each calf has its own personality and even physical characteristics differ.

These very differences play a major role when it comes to forming or integrating into elephant herds. We were told that even at this young age the elephants form their own groups and some display inborn leadership skills and maternal instincts while others exhibit a decided aversion to younger calves. "When we release elephants we take into consideration the already formed groups", Dr Vijitha Perera, Veterinarian in charge of ETH affirmed.

Most calves wanted more than their fair share of milk. Once they had their fill, some tried to nonchalantly walk back for more while others stood their ground and rebelliously demanded more.

The calves spend four years at the transit home gaining strength, learning to bond and acquiring skills, in a nutshell gearing up for the challenges of the wide wide wilderness. In their mission to help these elephants to adjust to an independent life in the wild, ETH employees try to minimise human contact with the calves.

So far, the ETH has released seventy elephants and most of the released elephants continue to thrive in their natural habitat. Some of the transit home's former dwellers are now proud mothers themselves wandering free with their own offspring in tow. ETH monitors the elephants with radio collars that are fitted before releasing them. "Even after the batteries die, we are able to keep track of the elephants as we know most of them by sight and are familiar with their respective herds", Dr Vijitha Perera said.

As the frenzy of the feeding time died down, the trumpeting stopped and an unusual calm descended on the baby elephants. They started to walk towards the

glistening waters of the Udawalawe Reservoir and the vast stretches of grass and shrubs, in a united mass strong and free.

For more information: Elephant Transit Home, Department of Wildlife Conservation, Udawalawe Tel: (+94 47) 223 2144

[nggallery id=95]