



Know Your Subject: Elephant Bonding and Greeting with Their Trunks

Description

For a wildlife photographer, the more you know your subject, the better informed your images will be. Knowledge helps you anticipate and interpret the natural actions of your subjects.

Elephants are very smart and interesting subjects, especially when you can pick out social behaviors “ some you may recognize from our own human experience.

Elephant Male Bonding

In the matriarchal world of elephants, males are known as mostly independent sorts. Females maintain close, lifelong family ties, while bulls tend to wander off solo; at times bonding with another male or more a loose group of males.

During a six year study in Namibia’s Etosha National Park, , Stanford University behavioral ecologist Caitlin O’Connell-Rodwill observed for the first time intense, long-lasting bonds among a dozen or so bulls; a tight-knit group of teenagers, adults, and seniors . Other males serve as mentors and mediators for younger ones, enforcing a strict social hierarchy and keeping underlings in line when hormones rage and rowdiness may erupt. In drought-prone Namibia, rank becomes most rigid when water is scarcest. “In dry years the strict pecking order they establish benefits all of them.” O’Connell-Rodwell says. “Everyone know their place.” That means young bulls supplicate more frequently to their elders and peace is maintained while everyone gets to drink.

Trunk Talk: Close up communication is done vocally and via smell and touch. These gestures show affection:



Elephants will test their strength against peers and sometimes against trusted elders. This practice fight ended abruptly when the younger took an accidental tusk to the eye



An over the head caress by a dominant elephant is akin to humans tousling another's hair.

A mock fight between a junior and elder establishes rank among the group.



A mock fight between a junior and elder establishes rank among the group.

A junior elephant greets a senior with deference with a caress then places the tip of his trunk in the elder's mouth





two junior elephants greet each other with a caress of the head

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1. African Wildlife
2. Know Your Subject
3. Photography on Safari

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1. elephant Bonding
2. photographing elephants
3. ranger reports
4. safari stories
5. South African wildlife

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