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Elephant Talk: The Surprising Science Of Elephant Communication (Nonfiction • Grades 4-8)



Synopsis

On a hot day in the African savannah, a group of elephants searches for food. While foraging they often lose sight of one another. Yet at the end of the day, in one coordinated movement, the elephants suddenly regroup. This coordinated movement—known as a "herd call"—has puzzled scientists and caused them to question how elephants communicate with each other. Since the 1990s, scientists have gathered significant data on elephant "talk." Biologists have determined that elephants use a complex system of communication of at least ten distinct sounds, combined in many variations. Researchers are now asking: what do these sounds mean? As scientists study the elephant sounds that humans can hear, they are also identifying ways elephants communicate through nonverbal behaviors and making sounds too low for human ears. Scientists have realized that elephants even receive messages by using their sensitive feet to feel vibrations in the ground. All of these discoveries are helping elephant researchers better understand elephant behavior. But the elephant's time as a wild animal is running out. Threatened by habitat loss and illegally hunted for their ivory tusks, elephants are on the brink of extinction. Will understanding elephant talk be the key to saving the species?

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Customer Reviews

I work as a docent at a zoo and specialize in elephants. As such, to me this book was very (too) basic. Also, the author spent too much time detailing technically how various researchers conducted their research on elephant communications (i.e., what equipment they used, etc.). It would have been better to spend more time on the results and conclusions of the research. In my opinion, this book is aimed at high schoolers.

Such a well written book for 6th-9th grade students. Other reviewers have described the fascinating content, so I want to focus on the writing. Downer just nails it for me. She introduces ideas and then clearly develops these ideas. Her writing is cohesive, tight--the reader know where she has been and where she is going. Downer creates access to less familiar concepts by including clear definitions, examples, descriptions, explanations--all imbedded in the text. She cites studies from the field and quotes researchers as you explores different dimensions of elephant communication. Reading this book would be an opportunity for a student to develop some depth of understanding; excerpts from this text could be used as mentors for informational writing as well. I do wish there had been a few more graphics to support the content. For example, in Chapter 3, Downer describes how the scientists use "spectograms" as one tool researchers use to study the elephants' infrasonic communication. It would have been helpful to see what these look like. Another note, a savvy 4th or 5th grade read could tackle this book. My hesitation is that the text does include words like "genitalia" and "sexual maturity" - but their use is strictly technical and there is not a detailed description of either of these concepts--just a mention in service of discussing animal communication. It's as though the author thinks you are a mature (middle grade to early high school) audience and you already know about these concepts. I guess whether you recommend this book would depend on the maturity of the reader. And - a BUMMER - that it only comes in library binding which is always more expensive. I wish the publisher would put this out in paperback so more teachers and students could afford to access it.

An elephant calf walks closely behind his mother, already closely observing her and others in the herd as he begins to learn their language. Elephant language, or "elephant talk," can be expressed in many ways from body language, a wide array of calls, and even infrasound communication. As young calves mature they continue to glean behavioral cues from their "close-knit family" in order to

survive and thrive in their herds. For many years scientists have been hard at work gathering information on the way elephants communicate with one another. In this book you will be able to "listen" and look at the African savanna elephant, the African forest elephant, and the Asian elephant, and walk right along beside scientists as they attempt to uncover the complex ways that elephants communicate with one another. You'll be able to get a glimpse at elephants who remain in captivity such as Daisy, and others who remain in the wild. Elephants have been by our side for thousands of years as they joined us "in religious festivals, guarded temples, and presided over weddings." They have gone to battle with us and have assisted us in building, but now are facing a battle of their own. With approximately 600,000 elephants remaining in the world, they now face extinction in the wild if poaching continues at its rapid pace. The more we can learn about "elephant talk," the more we may be able to help them help themselves. Observation has shown the different life stages of the elephant from its helpless beginning to toddlerhood, teens, and adulthood and how they absorb and learn language. Learning about elephants and their social networking has also helped scientists learn about language development. You will learn many things about their social behavior from how many generations coexist, to how they form alliances, to how they use tools. The trumpeting call of the elephant is perhaps the most well known form of communication, but this is "only one of more than seventy vocalizations." Scientists who have been observing elephants for many years were mystified by some of their behavior. Take for example, on December 26, 2004, when the elephant populations fled "to higher ground in the moments before the tidal waves struck" after the devastating earthquake. How did they know the tsunami was on its way? You will learn about one theory Caitlin O'Connell-Rodwell proposed when she observed elephant's "synchronized freezing" and tiptoeing. You will also learn about infrasound, elephant physiology, their fluttering foreheads, their body language cues, numerous scientific observations, the appalling practice of poaching, and you'll learn many other interesting facets of the elephants' lives and how they talk to us and each other. This is a fascinating overview about elephant communication skills and how they "talk" to the world. The integration of elephant verbal and nonverbal cues such as body language, socialization, and invisible ways of communication such as infrasound, bring this animal to life in a way that I haven't seen done in a book for this age group. We learn of the work of numerous scientists and scientific studies throughout these pages. Many young people have heard of animals such as Koko, but this book shows the elephant as a creature who can be just as beloved. There is an excellent chapter on human-elephant relationships that touches on animal rights, a topic that is of high interest to many students. There is an excellent selection of appealing photographs scattered throughout the book as well as several informative sidebars. For example, there is a very

interesting one on how elephants can use "visual and chemical cues" to ferret out predators, including those of the human persuasion. In the back of the book there is an index, a listing of organizations assisting elephants, an "Elephant Dictionary," a selected bibliography, and additional recommended book and website resources to explore. This is a Junior Literary Guild Selection. This book courtesy of the publisher.

For some reason I heard about this book and I instantly became fascinated in elephants. Just ask my wife as she was so tired of me rambling on about elephants. The book finally arrived in our library and I was so excited to read it. I skipped ahead of all my other reading tasks and books and late fees to read. I loved it. What a cool book. Actually, what a cool animal! This massive beast of a creature is so intelligent. I learned so many things and more than anything else I have a new respect for this animal. The skills of elephants are amazing. I kept learning and learning while reading I have not done this in quite some time. I never knew that elephants gather a cluster of long, thick grass to clean their ear canals. I never knew about all the vocalizations and communication methods of elephants. Quite amazing. I never knew they pooped over 300 lbs a day. I never knew you could make paper from their poop. I never knew that there are around 150,000 muscles in their trunk while the human body has around 8000. I just never knew. And now I do and I feel so much better about. Read this book. Great for anyone, even reluctant readers because the pictures are amazing and it is not saturated in a lot of scientific talk. Off to watching animal shows with my kids. I need more books like this.

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