

Boy Scouts in Asian Elephant Society

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Adult male Asian elephants are known to be solitary beings, often called the Lone Bull or Onti-Salaga (in Kannada). They are known to associate with female-led groups when in Musth. Otherwise, they lead a solitary life ranging far and wide gathering food and water. They are known to form groups of size 2 to 4 with other males, mostly when raiding crops. The young males drift away from their family groups/natal herds around the age of 15 years to associate with peers briefly and live a solitary life thereafter.

Our more recent field observations on male Asian elephants in fragmented and human-dominated landscape suggests that male elephant bonding and being in unisex groups (all-male groups) may be a lot more common and larger in size than reported from pioneering studies carried out earlier. The age of males in these bull groups varied from as young as 5 years to as old as 45 years and the group size was as large as 12 individuals. All-male groups with more than three individuals had at least one adult male in it.

Very importantly, these bull groups range large areas in human dominated landscapes which makes them vulnerable to accidental and retaliatory killings and hence is a risky strategy. Recent studies on African elephants has shown that life-history characteristics and inter-individual interactions play an important role in crop-raiding elephants, arguing that simplistic models of exposure of an animal to crops do not fully explain its behaviour. Our study further dwells on the influence of life-history traits as well as cultural traits such as social learning, on the crop-raiding behaviour in male Asian elephants.