

Elephant Tales

Note: This article was first published in 2009.



NOAA

Scientists are trying to find out how elephants communicate.

Shirley, a 4-ton elephant, has something to say. She opens her mouth and gurgles. The nearby elephants understand the sound, but it's just noise to me.

What exactly is Shirley saying? Scientists are not sure, but they are trying to find out how elephants like Shirley communicate. I visited Shirley at the Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee. A **sanctuary** is an area in nature where wildlife is protected. The sanctuary is home to Shirley and five other elephants—Bunny, Jenny, Sissy, Tarra, and Winkie. All six animals were once in zoos or circuses. Now they roam freely on 2,700 acres of grassland and woods.

A Noisy Group

Not all the elephants at the sanctuary gurgle like Shirley. Tarra barks like a sea lion when she is happy. Bunny speaks in squeaks. I soon got used to hearing the different "voices" of the elephants. When one gray giant came close to me, I wondered which elephant it was. Then I heard the thwap sound of her trunk slapping the floor. "Aha!" I said to myself. "That's Sissy clapping." I also learned that the elephants share a special language of screeches, rumbles, and trumpet-like sounds.

Elephants also communicate in a way that people cannot hear. **Infrasound** is a sound that is too low in pitch for the human ear to pick up. Scientists believe that elephant infrasound can travel for miles. Elephants in a herd use it to keep in touch when they become separated.

Old Friends



*U.S. Fish and
Wildlife Service*
Asian elephants are
endangered.

The elephants speak to one another for the same reasons people talk. Sometimes they even shout with excitement. When Shirley first came to the sanctuary, Jenny looked at her and began to roar. Shirley roared back. At first, the animal keepers had no idea what the fuss was about. Later, they discovered that Shirley and Jenny had crossed paths 20 years earlier in a circus. The elephants' roars meant they still recognized each other. They had a lot of catching up to do!

Elephants at Risk

There are two species, or kinds, of elephants—Asian and African. In the wild, both species are endangered. Animals are endangered when so few exist that the species may die out. In 1970, almost 2 million Asian elephants lived in the wild in Southeast Asia. Now only 25,600 to 32,750 live there. Their habitat, or home, is being gradually destroyed. As the population grows, humans are building on more of the land. In Africa, only half as many wild elephants exist today as lived there 20 years ago. Humans have illegally killed the animals for their tusks. Tusks are the long, curved front teeth of elephants.

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. What animals live at a sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee?

- A lions
- B cheetahs
- C hippopotamuses
- D elephants

2. This text is divided into sections with subheadings. What does the author describe in the section with the subheading "A Noisy Group"?

- A different sounds made by elephants
- B what it is like to be a circus elephant
- C how to plan a visit to an elephant sanctuary
- D ways to save the habitats of elephants

3. Read these sentences from the text:

"When Shirley first came to the sanctuary, Jenny looked at her and began to roar. Shirley roared back. At first, the animal keepers had no idea what the fuss was about. Later, they discovered that Shirley and Jenny had crossed paths 20 years earlier in a circus. The elephants' roars meant they still recognized each other."

Based on this evidence, what can you conclude about elephants' memories?

- A Elephants have excellent memories.
- B Elephants have poor memories.
- C Elephants are good at remembering places but bad at remembering other elephants.
- D Elephants are good at remembering threats but bad at remembering places.

4. Read these sentences from the text: "A sanctuary is an area in nature where **wildlife** is protected. The sanctuary is home to Shirley and five other elephants—Bunny, Jenny, Sissy, Tarra, and Winkie."

Based on these sentences, what does the word "wildlife" probably mean?

- A wild people
- B wild animals
- C wild circuses
- D wild behavior

5. What is the main purpose of this text?

- A to describe the elephant sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee
- B to describe Bunny the elephant and the noises she makes
- C to describe communication among elephants
- D to describe people who have illegally killed elephants for their tusks

6. What is infrasound?

7. Explain how infrasound is helpful to elephants. Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

8. Choose the word or phrase that best completes the sentence.

Shirley and Jenny recognized each other _____ 20 years had passed since they last saw each other.

- A because
- B before
- C even though
- D instead

9. Answer the questions based on the sentence below.

Jenny and Shirley roared when Shirley first came to the sanctuary because they recognized each other.

Who? Jenny and Shirley

(did) What? _____

When? _____

Why? _____

10. Read the vocabulary word and definition below, and complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

Vocabulary Word: communicate (com · mun · i · cate): to give information about something to someone else.

10a. Read the five sentences below, and underline the word **communicate** in each sentence.

1. Honeybees cannot talk, but they communicate with each other by dancing.
2. I was sad that my friend did not communicate with me after she moved away.
3. The firefighters used walkie-talkies to communicate when they were in the burning building.
4. While swimming, I waved my hands in the air to communicate to the lifeguard that I needed help!
5. I tried to communicate with my dog by barking, but it seemed that my dog had no idea what I meant.

10b. Use the following vocabulary word in a sentence: **communicate**.

11. If you make a face at someone, is that an example of communicating? Why or why not?
