

A reassuring workshop | Andrews Blog

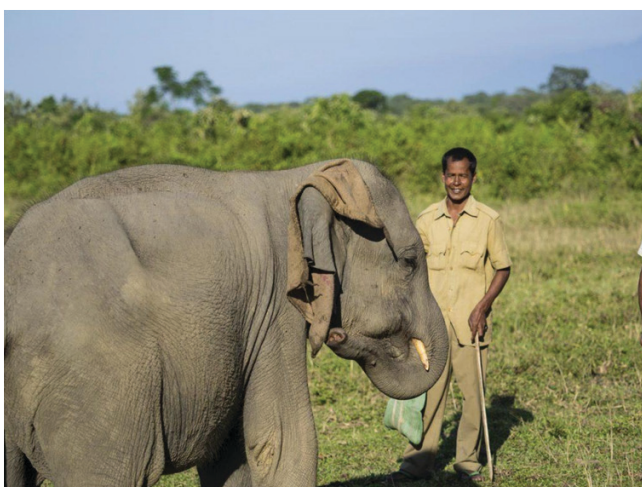
Training Day 3

My intention was to begin this third and final day with further consolidation of mobility control, but by the time I reached the young elephants and mahouts they were already retrieving things. Ok so we go with the flow, no problem. In the first few repetitions however, Monish had forgotten his bag throwing skills that he learned yesterday afternoon. Once he had touched the bag though, it all came rushing back. Now he was not only throwing the bag on to his back with more accuracy, he began to fetch the bag on command and then throw it on his back. All the mahouts in the camp came to watch his hilarious stunts as he perfected his hurling skills. At one point the bag landed on my head. Next the mahouts got even more keen to try a large branch. This needed to be refined very fast because Monish was hurling the branch left right and centre.

What I appreciated at a deeper level was the way the mahouts had translated the training sequences from mobility control to trunk control without needing explanation. This showed me that the mahouts understood the training concepts and gave me some confidence that they would continue it and could translate it further to other areas of elephant training.



Each day starts with the preparation of the food rewards. In this case, sugar cane.



Monish not sure where he left his bag.

Neela on the other hand became stuck in picking up the stick. I've seen this before because the elephants have been hit with a stick in the past so they are often a bit reluctant to hand it over. While these elephants haven't been trained in the past, they have grown up with their mothers in the camps and have been harried and sent away for getting into mischief, so Neela knew what sticks were about. She became restless and did not want to stand still anymore. So we gave her a bag instead of a stick and so I took over and first reminded her about staying still and as soon as she calmed down, she started with the bag. In no time she was picking up the bag and then we shaped the behaviour to throwing it onto her back as we did with Monish. She was soon at the same level as Monish.



We did some more reminding of stop, go, slow, turn and step-back in preparation for riding a few days later. As this is only a three-day workshop it would have been a long shot to mount the elephants after just 5 or 6 sessions in total. However during our celebrations at the end of the workshop, one of the mahouts was caressing Neela and decided he would briefly climb on her back. She didn't make any objections at all. He repeated this with the same effect. I was glad this happened because it revealed the calmness gained when training is clear, fair and consistent. Normally the elephant would shake vigorously until the mahout came off.

It was sad to leave the camp after our brief visit. We marvelled at what had been achieved in just six short training sessions and felt very grateful that the mahouts had embraced the training from the outset. In the past I have had to deal with some scepticism until I prove myself, but this time was different. Some had participated in my workshops in the past and others had heard of them. Whichever way, it was good to see that in the birthplace of elephant training some 5 millennia ago, the mahouts are open to learn new ways.



A beautiful Hindu shrine built by the mahouts by their camp out in the national park.

Thanks to all who have donated funds to help us help the elephants and the mahouts as well as contributing to the saving of Tigers rhinos and elephants through training elephants in anti-poaching. Special thanks to our patron Dr Chris Townend and Working for Animals. Also to Pip Robinson and Sara Curtain for suggesting and carrying out the fundraiser that enabled us to do workshops in three separate countries in this single trip.

Tomorrow we leave for Thailand with a totally different scenery and circumstances. Let's see how that goes.

