

Day 5, Raku finally decides to turn up.

Andrew's blog: Day 5

Today's training session began with the appearance of the second elephant we were supposed to be training during this workshop however this particular elephant, Raku, never turned up on previous days owing to the various interruptions of the bull elephant. Raku had something of a reputation for being a little bit aggressive in that she was prone to kick. Unlike horses, elephants are capable of kicking forward, back and sideways, so we need to be careful. I began teaching her to step back since step back has a natural propensity to inhibit aggression (because aggression is wired with forward). In only a few repetitions using positive reinforcement, Raku was stepping back quite placidly when she suddenly decided to leave and ran off toward the vast interior of the National Park. So that was that.

Sometime later when we were training Purdoi, Raku turned up again and we did a few more repetitions. I emphasized that the kicking and other bad behaviour would diminish if the mahouts continued to train her basic responses. I hope we can get a few more repetitions with Raku by tomorrow, as that is our last day. Purdoi on the other hand is doing all her manoeuvres with ease. We faded away the assistants to a large extent so that Papu, (Purdoi's mahout) was now mostly controlling Purdoi as he rode her in the usual area. So now it was time to venture away from here and expose her to being ridden in novel areas. So Papu rode Purdoi around the vicinity of the elephant camp and for the most part, Purdoi responded very well, occasionally needing assistance when she would stall. With repetitions and plenty of positive reinforcement, Purdoi improved and at the end of the day during the tea session, the mahouts acknowledged Purdoi's improvement.



Raku finally decides to get involved; she probably just worked out we had a bag full of bananas.



A post training cup of authentic Assam tea gives the mahouts a chance to ask questions and convey their concerns.

The main question was that they felt that this method would take time. I was a bit taken aback as we had come so far in just 5 sessions of only 30 minutes each and the traditional training takes up to 3 months. What they were worried about though was that after I left India, whether they would be able to make such progress without me. So this drove the point home to me that tomorrow, being the final day of the workshop, I should go back over all the of the early work and ensure that I leave them with a clear picture of the steps involved and to assure them that it is not difficult provided they remember the sequence of cues, pressures and rewards and avoided punishment. Tomorrow I am also hoping we can ride Purdoi to the river and give her a bath.



Purdoi will now come when called, and the mother in the background is much more relaxed.



At the end of each day, the mahout scrubs down his elephant and covers it with mustard oil before releasing it back into the national park for the night.

