



Day 6. Purdoi shows off her progress.

Andrew's blog:

Andrew's blog: Today is our final day of training for this workshop and WTI (Wildlife Trust of India) had arranged a feast to celebrate the workshop, at the mahout's quarters – a robust building on stilts to avoid the annual monsoon flooding. There the 13 or so mahouts cooked us an Assamese specialty – a great spicy lunch of various curries and rice cooked in overly large pans on pit fires.

They shared their 'Assamese tea': rum in warm water which was rather easy on the palate. One of the mahouts sang with tremendous feeling and comic overtones a traditional song about venturing out on a journey with elephants and lamenting leaving his family behind. Clanging pots and pans provided orchestra: total entertainment.



Kaziranga mahouts enjoying their own version of Assamese Tea. Local rum with warm water.



Purdoi came and found us at the camp, keen for more bananas.

Shortly after, we were about to go and find Purdoi for some final training, but she found us first. She arrived unannounced at the mahout's quarters where we had the feast and was keen to join in and check out if we had any bananas. So we encouraged her back to the training area and began.

Purdoi needed only occasional assistance when she forgot the commands but mostly was moving well from Papu's direction. I took a back seat role and the mahouts did all the work using negative reinforcement as well as positive reinforcement impressively. So we decided to head for the river.

This actually wasn't such a big deal – Purdoi hesitated a few times as going to the river meant leaving her mother, friends and the camp behind, however when she faltered she was keen to follow me (though I wasn't doing any training by this time). She happily stepped down the bank into the river where she was given a wash. Then we headed back to camp and did few turns on the way just to check. Like many horses, Purdoi was much better at left turns than right ones so more practice is needed there. Once back at the training area, we decided to leave it at that. Purdoi was now ready to be taken further and eventually out on the rides to collect grass with the other elephants.





Potentially a world first, we used a GoPro to record a riders perspective of the training, giving us a clear view of the different signals the mahouts use which will help us to refine our teaching method.



The head-mahout, a man who is following in the generational tradition of his ancestors explains the issues and limitations they face for both their traditional training method, and the alternative we are teaching.

Australia (Working For Animals) who kindly funded our internal travel and accommodation in India. Ben Fulton-Gillon has not only been great company here in India but has done a super job in filming, recording, publishing, prompting me and also for his bold attempts in training me in social media. Thanks again to all Australians and New Zealanders who helped make this possible.

With the closing of another workshop, the HELP method of training has been spread a little further, and once again, well received. There is still a long way to go before we've accomplished our goals, but there is an Indian proverb: "better to collect the spear that missed the elephant than the arrow that killed the hare". I'm sure that this is a project that will eventually succeed to enrich the lives of the 14 thousand working elephants throughout Asia.

With a fitting backdrop of the sun setting over the smoky and humid haze of the vast plains of the Indus valley that has been home for the past week, we finished off with me giving a short talk on the training principles where I emphasised the importance of giving cues before light pressures, only using stronger pressures when light ones failed and marking the moment of the correct behaviour with Sabash! (meaning 'well done!') followed by a food morsel. I explained the food should be gradually phased out to a minimum.

I also focused on the importance of avoiding the early breaking in where the animal is tethered and beaten until it 'submits' as this will only create aggression at a later date.

The head mahout who is direct descendant of countless generations of mahouts told us all that his big tusker (male elephant) is dangerous to work with for everybody else except him because of events that occurred during breaking in that the elephant never got over. It was interesting to hear this come from a mahout. It's difficult to explain the scientific concepts, but they still recognised the impact.

I complimented the mahouts on the general mental well being of the elephants – its extraordinary to see such happy working elephants living almost a free life and actually choosing to stay in camp.

The mahouts also asked me to impress upon the highest government levels that funding for both food for the elephants and human resources was badly needed if the government was serious in revolutionising training. There was no doubt that the mahouts were serious in doing so.

Apart from all the generous donors who helped make this trip possible, I'd especially like to thank our patron, Christine Townend and her charity WFA