

Fun Facts Friday: Born to Learn: The Elephant Calf Brain

After 22 months in the womb, the longest gestation of any land mammal, an elephant calf still arrives with most of its brain development ahead. A recent anatomical study confirmed that a calf's brain weighs about 3.3 to 4 pounds (1.5 to 1.8 kilograms) at birth and grows to roughly three times that size as the animal matures, one of the largest postnatal brain expansions known.

Many mammals are born with brains already close to adult weight and rely heavily on instinct. Elephants, like humans and great apes, must acquire much of what they need to survive through years of learning.

That learning takes time. Calves typically nurse for three to five years, remain closely bonded to their mothers for eight to ten years, and continue learning social behavior, communication, and environmental knowledge within the family group for ten to fifteen years. Calves that lose their mothers early often show lasting behavioral and social deficits, evidence that the developing brain needs guidance, not just time to grow.

Photo: A chain-free mother and calf in Chitwan National Park, Nepal, where Carol helped transition government elephants to chain-free living, and calves can learn alongside their mothers.

