

Fun Facts Friday: Elephant Tail Hair

Elephant tail hairs are thick, coarse, and wire-like, growing along the edges of the tail and concentrated near the tip, where they form a flattened, fan-like shape. Like all mammal hair, they are made of keratin, but their thicker, denser structure makes them much tougher than the sparse hair found elsewhere on an elephant's body, closer to tough keratin structures like rhino horn or horse hooves than soft body hair.

These stiff hairs can reach almost 100 cm, or about 3 feet, in length, adding reach and surface area that help make the tail an effective tool for swatting flies, ticks, and other pests. Most are black, but tail hair may also be reddish, brown, or blond.

Beyond insect control, tail hair preserves a biological record. Because hair grows gradually and becomes inactive once it leaves the follicle, different sections capture different points in the elephant's life, making a single strand a chemical timeline. Researchers analyze stable carbon and nitrogen isotopes along these strands to track shifts in diet, habitat use, and movement, including transitions between grazing and browsing and movement into agricultural areas, offering a non-invasive window into ranging behavior.

Photo: Tarra models her tail hair

