

YZC Animal of the Month, September 2012

African Elephant

Loxodonta africana



Go to the lower gallery of the museum and you can't miss this giant. Don't try to find it by looking for its trunk or ears though - these are made of skin, cartilage and muscle rather than bone so are not in the skeleton that we have on display. The African Elephant is the largest land-living animal alive today. The biggest animal on record measured a whopping 4m high and the shoulder and weighed in at a scale-breaking 10 tonnes! That is a lot of weight to carry around. Take a look at the legs – sturdy, tree-trunk like structures to hold this enormous animal up.

African Elephants live in a range of habitats, from forests to savannahs. They eat roots, grasses, fruits and even tree bark. Their food is very abrasive – this means that it wears down their teeth. Elephants have an interesting way around this.

If you look at your molar teeth (your cheek teeth), you have several on either side of your mouth. Once you have all your adult teeth, that's it. No new teeth for you! Elephants are different. Their molars are huge, and they only use one upper and one lower on either side at any one time. Over time these teeth move forwards in the mouth, eventually dropping out, and are replaced by new molars from behind. They have 6 molars that they can replace in this way. Take a look in the mouth of our elephant on display and you can see the next molar erupting at the back of the jaw.