

Newborn Elephant Takes Center Stage at Disney's Animal Kingdom

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla., Aug. 25, 2011 – The elephant herd at Disney's Animal Kingdom got just a little larger with the birth of a baby calf. Weighing 311 pounds, the male African elephant was welcomed into the group by his mother Vasha, 10 herd members and a team of animal care professionals assisting with the birth.

The 25-year-old mother delivered the herd's sixth offspring after gaining more than 800 pounds during a 22-month gestation. This latest addition, which has yet to be named, is the second calf for Vasha, who gave birth to a female calf, Kianga, in 2004.

With support from the animal care team, the newborn, whose first tentative steps are becoming stronger and more confident, is now successfully nursing from his mother. Vasha has been getting to know the calf, gently touching the young animal with her trunk and keeping a watchful eye on him.

"The natural bonding between mother and calf is fascinating," said Jackie Ogden, Ph.D., vice president of Disney's Animal, Science and Environment Programs. "The team is encouraged by the early interaction between mother and calf and will continue to monitor them closely for the next several weeks."

The next critical milestone is for the calf to continue the bonding process with his mother who will teach him important lessons and protect him as he gradually acclimates to the rest of the savannah herd over the next several weeks. With 12 elephants, Disney's Animal Kingdom has one of the largest African elephant herds in North America, including four males and eight females.

Vasha became pregnant through artificial insemination in October 2009 and received extensive pre-natal care throughout pregnancy. Since early August, animal care teams have provided round-the-clock monitoring, regular ultrasounds and daily hormone monitoring to more accurately predict the beginning of labor. In the past few years, Disney's animal care teams have been able to narrow the birth window to within four days, which enables them to better prepare for the delivery. With this birth, the team had been on heightened baby-alert since Monday.

This is the sixth elephant born at Disney's Animal Kingdom. Others include:

- Tufani, a male, born in 2003;
- Kianga, a female, born in 2004;
- Nadirah a female, born in 2005;
- Tsavo, a male, born in 2008; and
- Luna, a female born 2010.

Disney has been at the forefront of efforts to better understand and care for endangered elephants. Disney's Animal Kingdom is part of a breeding program coordinated by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) that is focused on sustaining the elephant population in North America. AZA's Elephant Species Survival Plan has called for a five-fold increase in African elephant reproduction efforts – using both natural and artificial breeding methods – in order to create a self-sustaining elephant population among North American zoos and wildlife centers.

Baby Elephant Facts

- Depending on the calf, it could take several days for the calf to coordinate trunk movements. Initially, it may only be able to wave it in the air, suck on it or trip over it. Typically within a week the calf has gained enough

control to begin picking up small objects and food.

- Suckling up to 12 liters a day, baby elephants may depend on mother's milk for up to three years, although they can be weaned at two years of age.
- Calves learn how and what to eat by watching the older elephants.