

Oakland Zoo Tracks Elephants With GPS

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The elephant tracking is part of a nationwide study.

By Joe Rosato Jr. | Monday, Oct 22, 2012 | Updated 2:36 PM PDT

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The Oakland Zoo is tracking elephants with GPS devices. The information about where elephants go and what they do helps scientists. The study is part of a national effort to see how elephants fare in captivity. Joe Rosato Jr. reports...

The GPS device strapped around her ankle gave "Donna" the appearance of a Lindsay Lohan-esque character under house arrest. Except that Donna had roughly 9,000 pounds on poor Lindsay and her "house" was a bountiful, six-and-a-half acres.

Donna, an African elephant at the [Oakland Zoo](#), didn't even seem to notice the electronic gizmo as she wandered about her exhibit doing things elephants do – eating, eating and... well... eating.

She and her four exhibit mates were recently fitted with the GPS anklets as part of a nationwide study conducted by the [American Association of Zoos and Aquariums](#).

"This is really just a way to find out how elephants are moving in captivity," explained Jeff Kinzley, the zoo's elephant manager. "How much time they spend walking. How much time they just spend standing around."

For seven days, the four elephants were each fitted with a leather strap and GPS device around one ankle. Even before the study began, zookeepers slowly trained the elephants to accept the small leather ankle band without fuss.

Once the project was underway, the device recorded the elephants' movements as they sauntered about their domain, eating branches and exploring the reaches of their exhibit.

The study was aimed at understanding how much exercise elephants get in captivity, as compared to the wild. And with one of the largest elephant exhibits in country, the Oakland Zoo has plenty of room to roam.

“We have six and a half acres that our elephants walk around in up here,” Kinzley said. “We average about four or five miles a day per elephant, which is great.”

The zoo won't be privy to the results of the association's study until spring. It's expected the association, which accredits the nation's zoos, will use the results to fashion new guidelines for elephant care.

It's unlikely there will be many surprises for managers at the Oakland Zoo, who already conduct their own round-the-clock animal observation. More than 30 volunteers using small computers regularly log the activities of the zoo's elephants and other critters.

Cheryl Matthews, who has volunteered with the zoo for two decades, regularly takes a shift sitting on a bench in front of the exhibit, charting the elephants' every move. Some nights she works a swing shift to record how active the elephants are at night.

“We look around,” Matthews said. “We note where the elephants are, what their proximity is to each other, and what they're doing.”

The zoo plans to use its own studies to see if there's room for improvement in its care practices, which include a daily pedicure for each elephant.

“From there we can make management changes,” said Gina Kinzley, the zoo's animal behavior director who is married to Jeff. “Do they need to be walking more? Do they need to be grazing more?”

Jeff Kinzley said exercise is the key to keeping captive elephants healthy. One of the strategies managers use is to scatter food and branches across the exhibit to force the elephants to walk.

“Otherwise, they're constantly getting fed, so they're just going to get overweight,” Kinzey said. “They're going to wind up getting arthritis and things like that, and stop moving. “That's really the death sentence for an elephant.”