

# DETERMINING THE DECAY OR DECOMPOSITION STAGE OF AN ELEPHANT CARCASS (AGE OF CARCASS)

Photo by Felix N. Dorn



**MONITORING THE  
ILLEGAL KILLING  
OF ELEPHANTS**



## KEY FEATURES/SIGNS TO LOOK FOR:

- The general appearance/shape of the carcass
  - A very fresh body will have a rounded appearance, once the carcass is opened the appearance will become more sunken and lose the round shape.
- Condition of the carcass and the tissue/flesh
  - Are there signs of decomposition fluids (“wet carcass”) or is the carcass dry?
  - Presence of maggots and strong pungent smell.
- Presence of scavengers and vultures
  - How fresh are the signs left behind by vultures or are there no more signs of vultures and scavengers?
- Rot patch/death spot
  - Can the rot patch still be identified or is it half over-grown or totally over-grown by vegetation?
- Bone scattering
  - Are bones scattered widely around the death spot or is the carcass still intact?
- The colour and condition of the bones
  - Is there still tissue attached to bones?
  - Do bones easily detach from one another or not?
  - Are the bones white, green (in forest areas with high moisture), grey, cracked or brittle?

Note: Above features typical of carcasses found in savannah areas.



## 1. FRESH CARCASS (0 - 4 WEEKS OLD)



### KEY FEATURES:

Rounded body, fresh vulture scat, bodily fluids present, skin wet, no rot patch visible.



## 2. RECENT CARCASS (4 - 52 WEEKS OLD)



### KEY FEATURES:

No strong decomposition smell, still tissue on bones which does not easily detach, rot patch still visible, bodily fluids dry.





## 1. LATER STAGE OF FRESH CARCASS



### KEY FEATURES:

Signs of scavengers and vultures, body fluids still present in rot patch, pungent smell.

## 2. LATER STAGE OF RECENT CARCASS



### KEY FEATURES:

No fresh signs of vultures or scavengers, rot patch dry, no pungent smell.

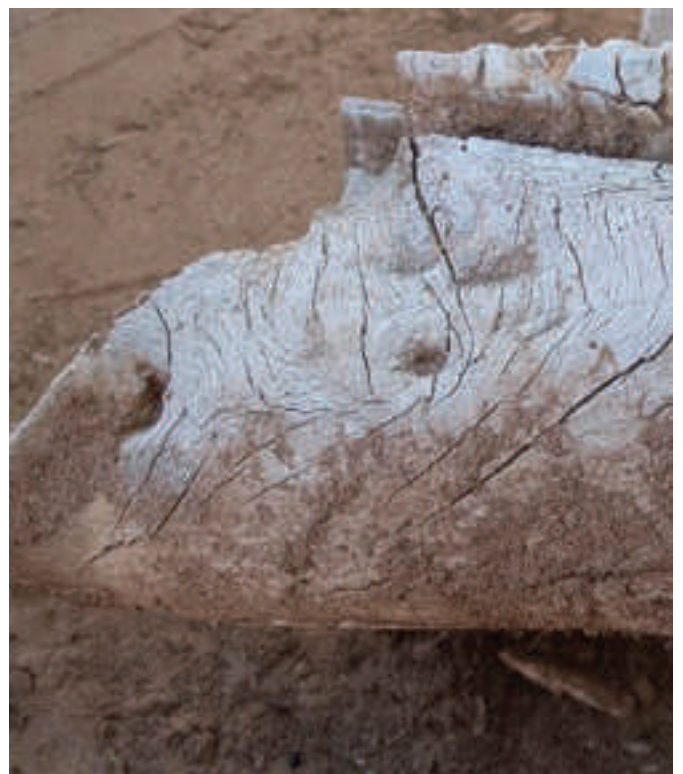
## 3. OLD CARCASS: > 1 YEAR



### KEY FEATURES:

Rot patch overgrown, bones scattered, no signs of vultures or scavengers, bones white, no flesh remains, bones shine in sunlight.

## 4. VERY OLD CARCASS: 10 YEARS



### KEY FEATURES:

Bones have a grey colour and are often cracked and stained. Bones will usually be widely spread around the death spot. If scavengers are present many bones might no longer be at the death spot.





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