How Are Woolly Mammoths and Elephants Different?

At a quick glance, woolly mammoths and elephants have many similar physical features. However, there are some significant differences between the two animals. But how exactly are they different?

The now extinct woolly mammoths roamed the earth beginning about 2 million years ago and ending 9000 years ago. They were large animals; approximately 3-5 metres tall and weighing anywhere between 5 and 10 tonnes. They lived in extremely cold climates such as Alaska and Siberia. Today's elephants live in the hot climates of Africa and Asia. They range from 2-3 metres tall and weigh anywhere between 3 and 6 tonnes. They are significantly smaller than the woolly mammoth.

Woolly Mammoths

The biggest difference between woolly mammoths and elephants is hair. Woolly mammoths lived during the last ice age, so they had thick hair and a dense layer of fat, up to 9 cm thick, which acted as insulation to keep them warm. The African elephant lives in a hot, dry area. The Asian elephant lives in a warm, moist area. Since elephants need to stay cool, rather than keep warm, sparse hair covers their bodies and they have evolved so that they no longer have the insulating layer of fat in their bodies.

African Elephant

Although woolly mammoths had large ears, they were not nearly as large as those of today's elephants. Elephants have large ears to dissipate body heat. Both male and female woolly mammoths had huge tusks that curved outward. Male and female African elephants also have long tusks, although they curve upward. Female Asian elephants don't have any tusks at all, and the males have significantly thinner tusks than their African cousins.

Asian Elephant

Even though the differences between the animals have been outlined above, illustrations of the animals show many similarities. It is easy to see why scientists have concluded that elephants and mammoths evolved from the same ancestors.