

Outdoors

Weird Wildlife III — Elephant

Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

Elephants are so familiar — as symbols, in cartoons, comics, advertisements, etc. — that they may seem unsuitable subjects for this series. But when you first find yourself in the presence of live wild elephants with nothing between you and these monsters but clear African air, I guarantee you'll be shocked by their otherworldly-ness.

First, sheer size.

Everybody knows elephants are big, of course, but most elephants in circuses or zoos are Indian females, hardly more than half the size of a big African bull. He may stand more than 11 feet tall and weigh seven tons.

His strength is appalling. He can yank up a 12-inch-diameter tree as easily as you pull a weed in your garden, or he can snap it off, or bulldoze it flat. A tree makes a lousy refuge from an angry elephant.

The elephant's trunk is the weirdest appendage growing on any land animal. It's a fearsome weapon and an organ of incredible dexterity, able to pick up a broom straw as deftly as you can. It's also a sense organ, with which the animal can trail as surely as a bloodhound, a drinking straw, an organ to caress a lover, and a portable shower head. Nothing else in the animal kingdom combines the versatility, delicacy of touch, and sheer muscle of an elephant's trunk.

His intelligence is downright creepy, too, giving one the feeling that he's reading your mind. In a forest he can move in uncanny silence, and you wouldn't believe how



Photos by John Wootters

This cow elephant in Mozambique charged Wootters' vehicle without warning, presumably to drive it away from her small calf (background), but she didn't stop when the truck departed hastily, chasing it for hundreds of yards.

difficult it can be to notice a motionless animal that huge a few yards away in that setting.

Among the weirdest of elephantine features is the ability to communicate with other elephants over distances of two miles or more, using very low-frequency sound waves inaudible to humans. I've witnessed this phenomenon in the wild, not understanding what I was seeing.

During such broadcasts the skin of the elephant's temples vibrates visibly, but the mechanism is not really understood. The only other mammals known to communicate over great distances with low-

frequency sound are whales.

When I described the African elephant in this column as one of the world's most dangerous animals, an anti-hunting reader chided me for sensationalizing this "peaceful vegetarian" to enhance my macho image. I appreciate his sincerity, but I fear he's been watching too much Disney Channel.

The Tanzanian government recently reported that wild elephants killed several dozen farmers last year while the latter were trying to defend their crops. A recent TV documentary detailed murderous assaults by killer elephants on Indian villagers. These animals actually stalked unarmed people at night and demolished some entire villages.

On a photographic visit to a Rhodesian national park (no firearms allowed) in 1976, my wife and I in our vehicle experienced repeated elephant charges. Some of these were from unusual distances by

animals that couldn't even see us when we were taking pains to avoid annoying them; they targeted the truck's sound.

One was a tuskless cow that tried to ambush us along a certain stretch of road every time we passed. Tuskless females are notoriously ill-tempered. I later heard that the same animal actually caught and destroyed the truck the following season, fortunately without injuring anyone.

A local native game scout who accompanied us on that jaunt was plainly terrified of those "peaceful" park elephants. We totally understood.

In Gorongoza national park, Mozambique, in 1972 my companions and I were charged by an elephant cow with a calf (see photo). This was not a bluff; the old girl meant business, chasing us hundreds of yards.

I have known two veteran professional hunters who were fatally attacked by elephants. One was killed before the horrified eyes of an American family that he was guiding on a game-viewing visit to a national park in Zimbabwe. The other was attacked by a young bull in Botswana that overtook his hunting car and crushed it, driving a tusk through the back of the cab which narrowly missed the pregnant wife of his hunting client — who was not hunting or otherwise harassing elephants. The PH managed to kill the elephant before anyone got hurt. Trouble is, Jumbo can hurt you worse by accident than most animals can on purpose.

Some of these episodes are admittedly untypical of park elephants, which are usually pretty tolerant of sightseers who obey the rules. But they do reveal the unpredictability that's also part of the very real weirdness of these "peaceful vegetarian" giants!

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.



Few Americans can comprehend the size of a really big African bull elephant, like this heavy-tusked Mozambique specimen, until faced with a wild one in the flesh.