



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The African bush elephant is the largest land animal still open for business. He goes by the street name of Loxodonta Africana, nzou in Shona, tembo in Swahili, and jumbo in the circus world. They are a remnant species, the last order of Proboscidea. He is probably the most misunderstood animal in all the world because of the Disney movies and the animal rights groups.

Most people who have not spent any time amongst nzou in their native lands tend to think of them as big, gray, happy, scared to death of mice, eating peanuts by the bushel, and remembering things. The elephant in the game preserve might come close to this description but run into one in the wilds and you will get a rapid education on the true nature of him. There is nothing on earth that will get your undivided attention faster than an elephant that has decided he does not like the cut of your hair. Among the big five of Africa's dangerous game, the elephant has no match. Usually, the big five attack when injured, but not jumbo. He attacks because he feels like it.

I have read dozens of books about elephants, but none have ever got across just how big they are. He reaches a height of over 13 feet, and can tip the scales at over 15,000 pounds, not bad for an herbivore. So much for the theory of staying slim by eating vegetables.

When in the bushveld, it is impossible to imagine how difficult it can be to see an elephant. One would think something as big as a delivery van would be easy to spot. Not so my friend. Under most close-range conditions, the nzou



THE AFRICAN ELEPHANT

This elephant did not like me standing so close (50 feet) and was getting ready to leave. He is a young bull, about 25 years old, visiting a water hole in Zimbabwe. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

appears as small patches of whatever color dirt they have been wallowing or dusting in. Keep in mind the dense brush they live in, where visibility is often measured in inches rather than yards. You almost never see the entire animal in an open place.

The elephant ear is probably the first thing you will see moving. They look like a sail on a schooner, over 5 feet long. The ears flap slowly, fanning air on the critter to help keep him cool. When he decides he is attacking, the ears will spread out in a threat display, making him appear larger yet.

The trunk is a unique feature on an elephant. It contains 40,000 muscles and can hold 2.5 gallons of water. They don't drink with their trunks as if it were a straw, but instead use it as a glass, holding water and pouring it

into their mouth. The trunk can be used as a snorkel to breathe when they are in deep water. Elephant drink 25 to 50 gallons of water daily.

When tracking an elephant, the big bull will have feet in excess of 24 inches wide, sort of like following trash can lid sized footprints. The soles of their feet are all unique, having their own sets of cracks, valleys, and ridges. African trackers are experts at following a track indefinitely by learning the individual characteristics.

Both male and female African elephants have ivory tusks, massive teeth that protrude well beyond their mouth. These tusks are used for digging, lifting objects, stripping bark from trees for eating, and for defense. Because of poaching and ivory hunting of the past, tusks

no longer reach the size they once did. Some tusks have reached over 250 pounds each in days gone by. Today, anything near 60 pounds a side is considered a large tusk. Poachers, not sport hunters, kill most of the elephant. Some estimates claim 20,000 annually are illegally killed worldwide for their tusks. These numbers include the Asian countries as well, where the demand for ivory to make trinkets is highest.

An elephant will consume up to 500 pounds of food in a single day, with only a 50% efficiency rate, as they defecate 200 to 250 pounds daily. They are browsing animals, eating trees, bark, leaves, branches, and fruit. A single elephant can ruin several acres of trees in a short time, considering they feed 16 to 20 hours a day.

Apart from the 2 tusks, elephants have only 4 other teeth in a set. These molars grow in from the back of the jaw and are replaced when worn down. An elephant will have 6 sets of 4 molars in his lifetime, and each set is larger than the last. A single molar can weigh up to 9 pounds. Considering the coarseness of the food an elephant consumes on a daily basis, it is not uncommon for an old animal to run out of teeth. Once that last set is used up, the elephant can and does starve to death. They can no longer move along with the herd, and spend their last days

around water holes, eating softer browse, until malnutrition runs its course.

Most elephant in the wild don't live much past 40 or 45 years. There are some that have reached 100, but it is rare in the wild. In the Parks, elephant live longer than in the bushveld. A mother elephant will be pregnant for 22 months before delivering the baby. The baby will weigh over 200 pounds at birth. Even elephants have a tough time with teenagers because a calf will stay with its mother for an average of 16 years before venturing out in the world. Elephants will gore and trample any human that gets in their way, knocking off around 500 people annually. When he trumpets, which can be heard 6 miles away, tucks his trunk up against his chest and flairs out his ears to the side, you had best be prepared to repel boarders, because he is coming.

I was once in a hunting car, moving down a path and minding our own business, when we ran into a pair of bulls around a corner. They did not like the car one bit and came steamrolling at us in a hurry. Through some serious reverse driving, we finally outran them, but not before all of us aged a few years. An angry nzou is nothing to trifle with.

There are around 400,000 elephant remaining in the world. Some countries, like Zimbabwe, take poaching very

seriously, and have large numbers of conservation officers in the field protecting them. Several countries have a "shoot to kill" order out for poachers, and sadly, some Asian countries do nothing at all. In Zimbabwe, the elephant is managed properly, allowing only 500 permits annually, with the money going to fund antipoaching and conservation. Zimbabwe hosts over 100,000 elephants, and in some areas, they are overpopulated because of their overeating. The elephant will literally eat themselves out of house and home. Habitat reduction often forces them into smaller areas where there is just not enough food. Maybe the solution is to convince the other countries of the value of these animals, curtail poaching completely, and give the elephant a bit more room to carry on.

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This is the thorn of an acacia tree, one of the elephants favorite food. They eat the entire tree, thorns and all, leaving only the bark stripped trunk behind. No wonder they run out of teeth. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

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