

Guidelines for Elephant Viewing on Khaya Ndlovu

Principles

The introduction of elephants by the Rietspruit Game Reserve (RGR), of which Welverdiend portion 6 (Khaya Ndlovu Game Reserve (KN)) is a member, will and has resulted in, these elephants coming onto the property.

It needs to be clearly stated that these are guidelines only and the management of risk lies definitively and absolutely with the individual member and/or traverse holder.

Rules at Elephant Sightings

- **Only persons with an approved radio will be allowed to view the elephants at any sighting. Persons not having a radio should not join a sighting and if they come across other vehicles at a sighting viewing the elephants, they are to leave the sighting immediately.**
- **The entry and exit of persons viewing the animals are to be strictly controlled by the person in charge of the sighting.**
- **A sighting will be limited to a maximum of two vehicles at any one time.**

Guidelines*

Elephants are gentle giants, intelligent and emotional, but in the wild they can be dangerous if you get too close.

As a member or a traverse holder you find yourself on the elephants' home ground. For your own safety, give elephants lots of personal space when you encounter them.

There is no substitute whatsoever for common sense so please use it.

How to approach elephants

- Always slow down as soon as you see elephants. Never rush up to them.
- Never drive for extended periods behind elephants.
- Never drive or park between members of the herd.
- Switch off the engine, sit quietly and enjoy their company.

- Elephants must be viewed at a minimum distance of 40 metres. This is the most comfortable distance for the elephants, therefore the safest for you.
- If you suspect that a bull is in musth (see below) the minimum recommended viewing distance is a 100 meters. Testosterone levels make them short-tempered.
- Always assess the elephants' direction of movement. Do not block them, cut off their escape route, or come between a mother and calf. Allow them a clear path away from the area.
- Never park your car over any elephant footpaths leading off from the road.
- Keep an eye on both sides and the rear of the vehicle for approaching elephants.
- If you accidentally drive into a herd, remain calm and quiet. Look for the first opportunity to retreat to a safe viewing distance.
- Give the elephants space to move off the road before driving past them.
- Retreat slowly if the elephants are showing any signs of unease or mild threat.

Be a patient game viewer

No matter how impatient or hurried you are, remember that elephants have right of way. They appreciate silence and slow, steady movements.

- Never drive for extended periods behind elephants that are walking along the road.
- Never rev the engine when elephants are present.
- Never try to push elephants off the road.
- Never make any noises or fast, jerky movements to attract their attention.

Do not endanger your own life, or that of other persons. Elephants responsible for damage, injury or death may have to be destroyed, whether or not they were provoked. Their future lies in your common sense.

Look out for signs of aggression

Assess the elephant's frame of mind by looking for signs of stress or aggression. Its posture, stance and gestures will reveal uneasiness when the elephant is deciding on a flight-or-fight response. There are early warning signs that an elephant is feeling uneasy:

- Swinging the front foot.

- Chin slightly up and ears slightly spread.
- Breaking vegetation without feeding on it.
- Coiling and uncoiling of the trunk.
- Twisting the trunk tip back and forth.
- Touching its own face with its trunk.
- Smelling in the direction of the vehicle.

The ideal situation is to pick up on these more subtle signs and to keep your distance or move away. If you don't, the elephant may become increasingly annoyed. If the animal displays any of the following signs, it's best to beat a hasty retreat:

- Turning towards vehicle with ears spread out 90 degrees from the body. Not to be confused with slow, gentle ear flapping which relaxed elephants do to keep cool.
- Throwing dust, branches or objects towards vehicle.
- Tail swished vigorously or held at right angles to the body and arched.
- Standing tall with head raised high, peering over tusks, ears cocked and trunk hanging at an acute angle.
- Vocalisations such as trumpeting.
- Head shaking abruptly so the ears flap and crack.
- Tusks pointing towards opponent with ears spread. This is more serious than standing tall.
- Threat display by bending down with front of body onto knees and pushing head towards the ground or uprooting vegetation.
- Bush bashing and tree pushing to demonstrate strength. Not serious when feeding on the roots or leaves.
- Ear fold, when the lower half of the ear is forced under and backwards so that a horizontal ridge appears across the ear
- Warning charges can often transition into real charges and should be taken very seriously.
- Real charge when the elephant rushes towards opponent or vehicle with ears not fully spread, which they do for greater speed. The trunk is usually tightly curled up, the head held low, and tusks pointing towards the opponent. It is fast, abrupt and silent, so pay attention and respond to early warnings.

What is the situation with a bull in musth?

Musth, a periodic state of dominance in bull elephants, can lead to unpredictable behaviour and increased aggression. Reverse if a musth bull is in front of you, don't drive past nor let him walk towards you. To recognise a bull in musth, look for:

- Profuse streaming of oily fluid down the cheek to the chin, from the temporal gland located between the eye and ear. Musth males often rub the glands against trees. Temporal gland secretions alone are not a reliable indicator of musth, they can also indicate stress or excitement, so look for co-occurrence with other signs.
- Swollen temporal gland. At the peak of musth, it will be at least the size of an orange. Musth males often drape their trunks over the tusks to relieve pressure on the tusks.
- Constantly dribbling urine or wet hind legs. Look for dark streaks running down the legs.
- A strong, musky odour, distinctly different from the typical elephant or dung smell.
- A swaggering gait, chin tucked in.

We are privileged to be able to view elephants in the wild. Make the most of any opportunity by treating elephants respectfully and enjoying their gentle presence. Happy elephant viewing!

* These guidelines have been compiled from

- Guidelines for Safe Elephant Viewing; a pamphlet produced and developed by ESAG (Elephant Specialist Advisory Group) , www.esag.co.za
- Wild Nature -Essential Tips For Safe Elephant Viewing.