



Guide to Driving with Elephants Safely

Each elephant is an individual, with real moods and feelings – and there's no substitute for years of experience to tell you what mood they're in. However, a few basics are worth noting.

Firstly, keep your eyes open and don't drive too fast. Surprising an elephant on the road can be utterly terrifying, and dangerous for both you and the elephant. Always drive slowly in the bush.

Secondly, think of each animal as having an invisible 'comfort zone' around it. (Some experts talk of three concentric zones: the fright, flight, and fight zone – each with a smaller radius, and each more dangerous.) If you actively approach then you breach that zone, and will upset it. Pay attention to the animal's body language. (See descriptions below.) So don't approach too closely: keep your distance. How close depends entirely on the elephants and the area. More relaxed elephants having a good day will allow you to get within 25m of them, bad-tempered ones that aren't used to cars may charge at 250m! You can often approach more closely in open areas than in thick bush. That said, if your vehicle is stationary and a relaxed, peaceful elephant approaches you, then you should not have problems if you simply stay still.

Thirdly, never beep your horn or flash your lights at an elephant. Either is guaranteed to annoy it. If there's an elephant in your way, just sit back, relax and wait; elephants always have right of way in Africa! The more sound and fury – like wheel spins and engine revving – the more likely that the elephant will assume that you are attacking it, and this is especially the case with a family herd.

Finally, look carefully at the elephant(s):

- Are there any small calves around in the herd? If so expect the older females to be easily annoyed and very protective – keep your distance. Try not to get in between a herd.
- Are there any males in 'musth' around? These are fairly easy to spot because of a heavy secretion from penis and temporal glands and a very musty smell. Generally these will be on their own, unless they are with a cow on heat. Such males will be excitable; you must spot them and give them a wide berth.
- Are there any elephants with a lot of seepage from their temporal glands, on the sides of their heads? If so, expect them to be stressed and easily irritable – beware. This is likely to have a long-term cause – perhaps lack of good water, predator pressure or something as random as toothache – but whatever the cause that animal is under stress, and so should be given an extra-wide berth.



Elephant Body Language clues:

Relaxed:

- Ears rhythmically flapping (Indicates they are trying to keep cool)
- Tail relaxed or wagging
- Eyes focused downwards
- Natural behaviors – feeding, drinking, playing.

Nervous/Unsure:

- Sudden change in behaviour. E.g. Stopping feeding to stand still and listen to approaching vehicle before moving away slowly
- Sniffing the air.
- Mock feeding/displacement behaviour. The elephant may use its trunk to pluck vegetation but then doesn't chew and swallow it. It's deciding whether you are a threat.
- Foot swinging. The elephant is likely thinking and making up its mind about whether there is a threat.
- Tail up.

Warning Signs:

- Standing tall with ears held out stiff. Eyes focused at threat.
- Headshake, slapping ears on side of the body. Mild and common, but serious warning.
- Trumpet.
- Lunging at threat with a forward movement of the head and/or trunk.
- Throwing objects with trunk.
- Warning charge – usually loud and finishes with standing tall.

All these warning signs need to be recognized and heeded.

- If your engine is still running when the signs are displayed, switch off unless you're very close and let the animals relax. Otherwise, slowly move away, either forward or backwards, whichever offers the clearest path and doesn't get you any closer to the elephant(s).
- If your engine is off when you see a warning sign, stay still and let the elephants move off until there is space to slowly move away.
- A charge is rarely unprovoked – if any of the warning signs are seen, don't get closer or overstay your welcome.
- If an elephant approaches your vehicle and you don't have an immediate clear path away, sit still and stay calm.
- In the unlikely event that an elephant charges you and you haven't got a clear escape route, try distracting the elephant with a tap to the side of the car or by raising your voice slightly. It might break the elephant's charge, giving you the opportunity to depart.

Elephants are generally very peaceful animals, and we hope that you enjoy spending time observing them in Kimana Sanctuary.