



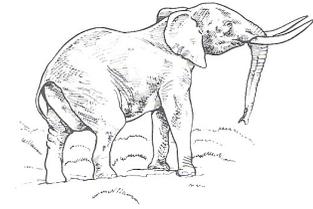
Elephant Communication: Postures, Stances and Gestures

What do they mean?



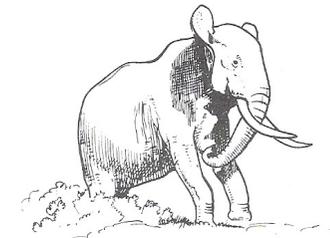
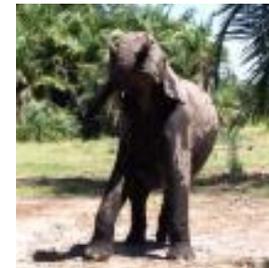
Standing-Tall (Threat behaviour)*^

Standing or moving with head held well above shoulders, chin is raised and the elephant looks down at her adversary over her tusks with Eyes-Open, and her ears maximally forward. The animal appears to increase in height and sometimes will deliberately stand upon an object such as a log or anthill in order to increase its height. Elephants normally stand or move about with their eyes cast down. A direct gaze with Eyes-Open is a component of many displays. (1) This posture, with the chin raised as opposed to tucked in (see Head-High), looking down over the tusks, is primarily used by females in threats toward non-elephant threats, such as predators and people, as in "I've got you in my sights, so watch it".



Head-Shake (Threat behaviour)*^

An abrupt shaking of the head, which causes the ears to flap sharply and dust to fly and is a sign of an individual's annoyance with or disapproval of an individual or circumstance. The Head-Shake usually starts with the head twisted to one side and then is rapidly rotated from side to side. The ears slap against the side of the face or neck making a loud smacking sound. Can also be used in play to feign annoyance. Head-jerking (a single, upward movement followed by a slower return) and head-tossing (the head is lowered and then lifted sharply so that the tusks make an arc) are also mild threat displays.



Ear-Spreading (Threat behaviour)*

Facing an opponent or predator head on with ears fully spread (at 90 degrees from body) presumably for the purpose of appearing larger. Elephants may also spread their ears when they are excited, surprised or alarmed.



Forward-Trunk-Swing (Threat behaviour)*

A swinging or tossing of the trunk in the direction of an adversary typically while blowing forcefully out through the trunk. Elephants swing their trunks at other smaller animals (e.g. egrets; ground-hornbills; warthogs, people) to frighten them away or simply for amusement. (9a) A high-intensity version of the Forward-Trunk-Swing, the Aggressive-Whoosh is made by musth males, who toss or swing their trunk in an exaggerated manner in the direction of an adversary while blowing loudly through the trunk with a loud "whooshing".

Throw-Debris (Threat behaviour)*

Lifting or uprooting objects and using the trunk throwing them in the direction of an opponent or predator. This display may also be observed in play. An elephant's aim can be very accurate even at some distance.



Bush-Bash (Threat behaviour)*

Tossing the head and tusks back and forth through bushes or other vegetation creating noise and commotion and demonstrating strength; probably an expression of "look what I can do with you!" (14a); also used in play.

Tusk-Ground (Threat behaviour)*

Bending or kneeling down and tusking the ground and uplifting vegetation as a demonstration of "look what I will do with you". It is usually seen during the manoeuvring between two males during an Escalated-Contest, but may also be directed toward people especially by musth males. In some cases tusking the ground may be a form of redirected aggression. A similar action is seen during play. In play, too, tusking the ground may be directed toward human observers. In females, a vigorous scraping/trampling or tusking of the ground following the birth of a calf may be observed.

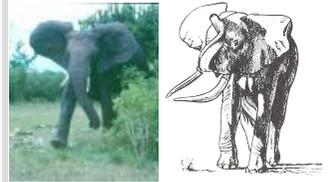


Real-Charge (Aggressive behaviour)*

Rushing toward a predator or other adversary while Ear-Spreading, head raised or lowered with the apparent intention of following through. The trunk may be tightly curved under so that tusks can make contact first. A Real-Charge is usually silent.

Mock-Charge (Threat behaviour)*^

A rushing toward an adversary or predator with **Standing-Tail and Ear-Spreading** that stops short of its target; an elephant may **Forward-Trunk-Swing** or aggressively Kick-Dust as it abruptly stops. A Mock-Charge is often associated with a shrill Trumpet-Blast.



Trunk-Twisting (Apprehensive)*

Twisting the tip of the trunk back and forth in situations where an elephant is apprehensive or unsure of what action to take.



Distant-Frontal-Attitude (Play or submission)*

In expectant or playful situations, pausing with the trunk up in a periscope or S-shape waiting for an adversary, duelling or play partner's next move. As two individuals approach one another with intent to Duel or Spar, one or both may raise its trunk above its head and curl the tip toward the other individual; except for context, this display appears very similar in form to Periscope-Sniff.



Displacement-Feeding (Apprehensive)*

Plucking at vegetation, as if foraging, but may not actually ingest any of the material and is obviously Monitoring. If it does eat, it does so in a desultory or distracted fashion; may slap vegetation against foot or other part of own body. Performed in conflict situations (e.g. during fighting or Sparring when an individual shows incompatible tendencies, such as fleeing vs. fighting). Can also be "defensive" or "despondent". Also very often displayed by young males near an estrous female who are "pretending" to do something else so as not to provoke aggression by the guarding male.



Above: Displacement grooming,
Right: Foot-swinging



Touch-Face (Apprehensive)*

Self-directed touching of the face apparently for reassurance, very often in context of interaction with another elephant but may be seen in any context where an elephant feels uneasy. Touch-Face includes self-touching of mouth, face, ear, trunk, tusk or temporal gland.



Foot-Swinging (Apprehensive)*

Raising and holding or tentatively swinging the foreleg intermittently when unsure of what action to take. Swinging of the hind foot may also be observed although this is less common than the forefoot.

Elephant Communication: Postures, Stances and Gestures

What do they mean?

How to approach an elephant sighting when driving a vehicle:

- ◆ Slow down as soon as you see the elephants—do not go “rushing” into the sighting.
- ◆ Assess the situation regarding escape routes, terrain and animal behaviour before settling into the sighting.
- ◆ The closest distance the elephants should be approached is 50 m. Switch the engine off. If the elephants are comfortable, they will walk approach you. If they choose to do so, do not switch the engine on, but sit quietly and enjoy the sighting.
- ◆ Do not to let the elephants approach to within 20 m of your vehicle. NEVER allow an elephant to touch the vehicle. If the elephants approach within this zone, switch the engine on, wait a few seconds and slowly back away from the elephant.
- ◆ In order to prevent the elephants feeling boxed/caged in, a maximum of 3 vehicles (although 2 vehicles are preferable) are allowed per sighting unless the driver in charge feels there should be less.
- ◆ As elephants are diurnal animals (active during the day), never shine spotlights onto them.
- ◆ When viewing the elephants, do not stand up abruptly or make sudden movements on the vehicle. This may frighten the elephant and cause a threatening or aggressive response.
- ◆ Never take fruit on a game drive.

To avoid apprehensive behaviour progressing to threat and aggressive behaviour:

- ◆ If the elephant seems uncertain, apprehensive or indecisive, slowly retreat from the sighting and give the elephant space.
- ◆ If the elephant is already within 20 m of the vehicle and shows apprehensive behaviour, switch the engine off and allow the elephant to retreat

What to do when an elephant displays threat behaviour:

- ◆ Except in the case of musth bulls, switch the engine on, wait a few seconds and slowly back away from the elephant giving him/her space.
- ◆ If when you switch the engine on it appears to aggravate the elephant even more, switch the engine off immediately, wait a few minutes and try to retreat again.

References:

^ESTES, RD (1997) The behaviour guide to African mammals. Russell Friedmann Books, South Africa. ISBN 1-875091-10-6

*www.elephantvoices.org A website and database on African elephants created by elephant specialist Joyce Poole.

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