

The elephants of Queen Elizabeth

UNIQUE: Queen Elizabeth National Park is home to about 2,500 elephants, 5,000 hippos, 600 bird species and more than 10,000 buffaloes. This makes it a unique tourist destination.

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Most of my old friends including Charles Tumwesigye of Uganda Wildlife Authority who was present in the adventure know this story.

It happened in Queen Elizabeth National Park after we had broken some rule in pursuit of a good picture. We nearly paid with our lives.

We were doing a game drive when we spotted a six tonner bull elephant entering a small bush. I was riding on top of a pickup truck with two armed rangers. Charles (Tumwesigye) and the drive were in the front cabin.

To get a good shot, we decided to drive in front of the bush, turn the car around and wait for the giant to emerge. It never happened.

The bull wanted to move in a straight line. We had blocked its way. And it was determined to have its way. It gave us three charge warning calls. We ignored. It was a mistake.

The next thing we saw was an enraged monster with spread ears charging towards the car. The driver tried to drive off but the vehicle was not fast enough. First to abandon the moving car was the driver, followed by Charles (Tumwesigye).

600

THE NUMBER OF BIRD SPECIES THAT ARE BELIEVED TO BE INHABITED IN QUEEN ELIZABETH NATIONAL PARK.

To my horror, the rangers whom I had put all my hopes also jumped off the driverless moving pickup truck. "You would rather drop me in front of 100 lions than in front of an elephant," they swore as they jumped off.

I had nothing to do but abandon "ship" as well. The furious elephant reached the now stalled vehicle and was about to overturn it but changed its mind. Satisfied that it had scared us out of our skins, it instead continued its journey in a straight line. Later, we gathered around the car one by one where I collected pieces of my broken lens.

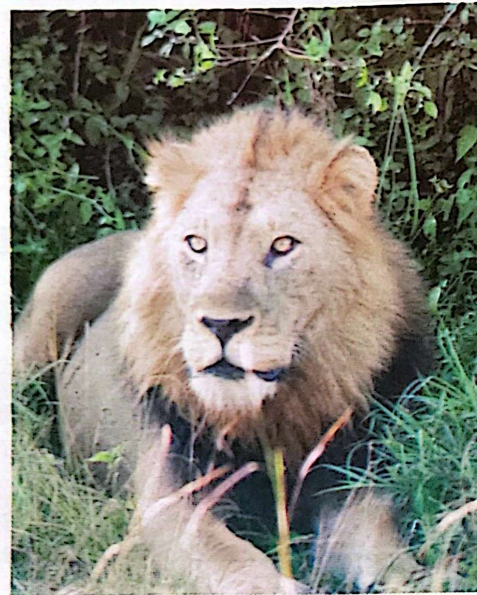
A visibly shaken Charles (Tumwesigye) asked if one of us had been a poacher.

"If you kill an elephant other family members will keep your scent and even pass it over to other generations. If you meet a member of that elephant family after many years, it will know you and revenge. Elephants have a super memory," he lectured us.

From that time, I respect elephants. They are intelligent creatures gifted



There are more than 2,500 elephants at Queen Elizabeth National Park. Despite their size, elephants can swim for long distances. PHOTOS BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA



Most of the lions in Queen Elizabeth National Park live in the southern sector of Ishasha. FILE PHOTO

by a super memory. If we go for numbers, Queen Elizabeth National Park is home to about 2,500 elephants, 5,000 hippos and over 10,000 buffalo. Other common herbivores include warthogs, waterbucks, Uganda kobs and topis, as well as the swamp loving but elusive sitatunga.

Queen Elizabeth, in western Uganda is the country's flagship National Park. It is gifted with diverse ecosystems. These include savanna, forests and sparkling lakes.

Large animals

The park is home to a variety of large animal species and was first declared a game reserve in 1906, in order to prevent unregulated hunting but was later gazetted as a National Park in 1952.

Animal species such as chimpanzees and more than 600 species of birds compose a section of the large animal varieties in the park.

Nowhere in the country can one find a park dotted with numerous craters than this park.

And then, there is the Kazinga Channel whose banks are lined with

KEY NOTES

Important information:

Elephants spend about 16 hours a day eating and can consume up to 300 kilograms of food per day. They have six sets of molar teeth and when the last set is lost, they are unable to eat. They will eventually die because of this. They can live up to 70 years.

National Park

hippos, buffalo and elephants and water birds. And in the south, lies the endless Ishasha plains, renowned for tree climbing lions.

The top dog among its 10 species of primates is the chimpanzee and thieving baboons. Never leave your car windows open. Your packed lunch will be stolen.

With more than 600 bird species, the park has the biggest number of birds of any protected area in East Africa.

For big cats, lions are found throughout the park though the most renowned live in the southern sector of Ishasha, where they are usually seen lazily resting in fig trees.

Once in a while, solitary leopards can be sighted. Cats such as leopards are nocturnal and are best spotted during night game drives.

Largest land mammal

But the elephant deserves more mention for it fears nobody and is the largest of all land mammals. Despite its size which can exceed six tonnes, it can swim for long distances.

Elephants have the largest brains in the animal kingdom and a super memory. It is said that an elephant never forgets. Their brain can weigh as much as 4.7 kilograms for an adult.

When it comes to communication, you can't beat elephants with bare hands and ears. In long distance communication, they use infrasound sounds, which are sounds emitted below the human hearing range.

An elephant can communicate with another 20 kilometres away using rumbles whose vibrations travel underground. The vibrations in the soil are transferred into the tips of

70

THE NUMBER OF YEARS AN ELEPHANT CAN LIVE.

the elephant's toe bones and then up the leg into the middle ear where the vibrations are read and translated into messages in the brain.

Strong sense

Using their feet, elephants can detect far off tsunamis and earthquakes hours before they strike. Many elephants survived the Asian tsunami in 2004 because they had advance warning due to their detection of seismic vibrations.

And the people who followed the elephants to higher ground also survived. Next time you see an elephant running, follow it. And their sense of smell is also mind boggling. Elephants detect water sources up to almost 20 kilometres away.

An elephant's trunk is a long nose used for smelling, breathing, trumpeting, drinking, and also for grabbing things. The strength of an elephant's trunk is capable of lifting weights in excess of 250 kilograms.

Elephants do not have sweat glands and use their thin but huge ears for cooling. One ear from a bull African elephant weighs more than 50 kilograms.

Elephants live in tight social units led by an older matriarch (female). Males leave the herd between the ages of 12 and 15. Elephants give birth every three to four years. Gestation period is almost two years. A baby elephant can weigh up to 125 kilograms.

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Queen Elizabeth National Park has more than 5,000 hippos. FILE PHOTO

