

Elephants Go Streaking

By Robin Cook

In today's society, the informal definition of the term 'streaking' refers to one who runs in the nude in a public place so as to shock or amuse others. However, a more formal and often forgotten definition of 'streaking' refers to a very fast movement in a specific direction. This movement behaviour has now been used to describe the movement of an animal in a supposed 'landscape of fear', where the animal's aim is to minimise its time spent exposed to danger, thereby moving through these regions as quickly as possible. In 2005 Iain Douglas-Hamilton and his colleagues were the first



Photo credit: Africa Geographic

scientists to record this streaking behaviour in elephants. The researchers observed that elephants were increasing their movement speed when travelling between protected areas, eventually slowing down once in the safety of the next reserve. Various studies since then have thus supported this observation that elephants increase their movement speed when travelling through a human matrix. In South Africa, David Jachowski and his colleagues have further found that streaking elephants are in an elevated physiological state, a possible evolved trait to the exposure of stressors (human settlements). Using our own collared elephants as examples, our research has shown that elephants from the Kruger National Park also increase their movement speed when leaving the Park's boundaries, either to crop raid or to move into reserves located in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Gila, one of our collared bulls, and Zingi, one of our collared cows, both showed increased movement speeds when travelling between the Kruger and Gonarezhou National Parks. Furthermore, two of our collared bulls in Mozambique's Limpopo National Park, Tercievo and Quinto, both increased their movement rates when travelling around villages within the National Park.

Therefore, it appears that elephants have learnt to handle their exposure to the human matrix surrounding them by simply minimising their exposure to the humans. If human settlements are seen as a threat, then why not minimise your exposure to them by increasing your speed? It seems as if elephants are taking streaking to a whole new level as habitats and reserves become more and more isolated with the forever increasing human population!