

Elephant struck by lightning meets a gruesome end (South Africa)

BY IAN DICKINSON OCTOBER 20 2017

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see original link for video on moving elephant

South Africa has been hit by some unusually violent weather of late. Recent storms surged through the country claiming at least 16 lives and leaving in their wake a trail of flooded homes and damaged infrastructure. But while Durban residents battled the deluge, further north, in the Kruger National Park, the stormy weather proved fatal for one of the reserve's tusked inhabitants.



The carcass of the elephant quickly attracted a crowd. Image: Lowvelder

Tourists out on a morning game drive earlier this month were met with the grim sight of a mutilated elephant carcass lumped in the middle of the road near Satara rest camp. While many speculated that the animal had been killed by poachers, evidence suggested otherwise. "It is suspected that the animal was hit by lightning," Reynold Thakuli, general manager for media, public

relations and stakeholder relations of South African National Parks (SANParks) told us via email. "On inspection nothing more was picked up suggesting another cause of death. This follows a violent storm the previous night."

Wildlife officials were quick to arrive on the scene and the massive carcass was hoisted onto a truck and hauled away for further investigation. "The tusks were removed, registered and stored according to the SANParks Standard Operating Procedure," explained Thakhuli.

While investigations were being carried out, the lively online community of Kruger regulars were left to speculate about the animal's untimely demise. Some were unconvinced that the elephant's wounds could have been inflicted by lightning, arguing that it must have been "lying with its belly up in the air" to sustain such severe stomach lacerations. Others were quick to point out that lightning strikes, much like gunshots, often have both entrance and exit wounds and can also result in ruptured organs.

The other big talking point centred around the absence of scavengers. The Kruger Park is home to a diversity of carnivores from big cats to raptors. So why were none of the park's predators tucking into the elephant buffet? One plausible explanation is that they had not yet discovered it. The inclement weather that ended the elephant's life would also have forced predators to seek shelter, and it's possible that eager tourists stumbled across the grisly remains before the scavengers did.

As the largest land mammals in the world, elephants have a hard time when it comes to dodging Mother Nature's electric wrath, and lightning does on occasion claim the life of an unfortunate pachyderm. One of the more well-known cases on record is that of an Illinois circus elephant nicknamed Norma Jean who was struck down in 1972 (visitors to the Midwest state can pay their respects to Norma Jean at her grave site in the Oquawka town square where she met her premature end). According to records, Norma Jean's trainer – who was nearby at the time – was knocked back 30 feet by the lightning blast.

Perhaps even more shocking are instances where entire herds are wiped out in single catastrophic lightning strikes. Such was the case in August last year when an electric storm in Norway killed 323 reindeer, including 70 calves. This sort of "electrification en masse" is not entirely uncommon as gregarious animals tend to congregate under trees for shelter during big storms.

However, not all animals that have come into contact with lightning have suffered a cruel fate. Back in 2013, a bison grazing on the grassy plains of Iowa's Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge was struck by lightning and lived to graze another day. Nicknamed Sparky (for obvious reasons), the resilient buffalo moves a little slower than his un-electrified kin courtesy of an exit wound on his back left leg. Despite the circumstances though, Sparky is doing just fine and even managed to bag himself a mate.