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ANGRY ELEPHANT'S ROAD RAGE RAMPAGE

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IF ONLY THE AMERICAN HAD REVERSED. The terrifying chain of events that followed – one car damaged, another almost totally destroyed, a newly-engaged couple shocked and injured, and headlines around the world – may well have been avoided.

It all began on a Monday morning in early November 2012 along the winding gravel road that follows the banks of the Crocodile River across a good part of the far southern section of the Park. It was nine o'clock, and my wife and I were heading back towards Berg-en-Dal rest camp when, around a bend, we came across an enormous bull elephant trudging along the road in front of us. Stopping some distance behind it, I reached for my binoculars and checked for any signs that it was in musth. While there were no leaky tear ducts or dripping urine, the elephant's demeanour looked suspect, and it showed no signs of wanting to move from the road. I wasn't about to take any chances with a bull of that size, so kept a safe distance and rumbled along slowly behind it.

The bull was not eating, not really pausing either, and kept up its march westwards along the road – the same direction as us. Keeping a safe 50-metre gap between the bull and our car, we followed it for a while. In the meantime, three other cars had fallen in line behind us and they too rolled along slowly, respecting the fact that, for now, the elephant ruled the road.

After about a quarter of an hour, the inevitable happened: a car approached from the other direction. The oncoming car was about 20 metres away from the bull when they saw each other. Instead of doing the one sensible thing in a situation like this – reverse and give the bull the space it requires – the driver instead turned off his engine, rolled

down his window and began taking photos. As the elephant lumbered closer and closer, dwarfing the car, the driver of the tiny Chevrolet Spark quickly pulled his camera back through the open window. This elephant was not one to be challenged, and we held our breaths as it loomed to within a whisker of the obstructing car. We only exhaled again when the elephant turned to the left and appeared to walk into the bush. But our relief lasted no more than a second. In a flash, the elephant spun around and mock charged the car, stopping just centimetres short of the driver's side. That should have been all the man needed to know about this elephant, but he decided to hang around.

The bull walked off into the bush again a few metres behind the parked car. Having seen its mock charge once, we didn't dare take our eyes off it. When it puffed itself up, standing tall and raising its head and flapping its ears out to make itself look bigger, we inhaled again. But still, the driver did not get the message and would not move. That was enough for the bull. It came crashing out of the bush from behind – and this time it did not stop. It stabbed one of its tusks straight through the car's boot. We could not hear the crunch through our gasps, but we could see plainly enough the elephant lifting the back of the man's car clear off the ground, then shaking it up and down, before dropping it.

We expected to see those wheels spinning as soon as they hit the ground again, but I suspect the driver was too scared to get his car started. It was only when the bull had turned and began walking away that the driver finally got his engine running and drove on towards us.

We could not believe what we had just seen. Had that elephant really just lifted a one-tonne car off the ground with its tusk and given it a shaking? The driver, who appeared to be an American chap on his own, had clearly had quite a scare. Pulling up alongside us, he asked whether we would check the rear of his car. When I told him that he had a great big tusk-hole next to the licence plate, he mumbled that the people at the car rental firm would not be happy. I imagine he was right. We gave him some advice about reversing next time, and with that, he drove off.

Suddenly we realised that while we had been talking to the driver, we had lost track of the elephant. I reversed to the *bakkie* behind us, where the friendly South African couple driving it explained that the bull had continued along the road and disappeared around the bend. With us being in a small Fiat Punto barely waist-high to that elephant,

they asked whether we were afraid to drive further. I told them no, but we would certainly drive slowly and be observant. The bull could be anywhere and was clearly in the mood for a fight.

Slowly we moved on, with the convoy behind us. As we rounded the bend in the road where the elephant was last seen, we were met with a shocking sight: not 50 metres further down the road, a small white car lay on its roof. There was no movement, no human, no elephant bull – just an overturned car lying on the grass verge. I stopped and reached for my binoculars again to see if anyone was still inside the car, but with the morning shadows so stark, it was impossible to be sure. Again, we discussed the situation with the South African couple behind us. We were all equally flabbergasted by the scene in front of us. Had the elephant just done this? We had to go and check; there could be someone in that car. Our fellow rescuers cleverly suggested we both reverse to the scene to allow a swift getaway should the bull be lurking in the thick bush nearby. Just as we began turning our cars around to prepare for our rearguard approach, the overturned car began hooting. So there was someone inside it. Having seen us evidently turning around, they must have thought that we were bailing out and leaving the scene.

The elephant bull was nowhere to be seen when we reversed up to them. Inside the cabin of the small Hyundai Atos, a British couple sat strapped in upside down, unable to get out. Keeping a keen eye out for the elephant, we got out, and the South African guy wrenched open their driver's side door and helped the couple out.

Apart from shock, the only obvious injury was to the man's knee. It turned out that they were in the Park celebrating their engagement and were heading towards Lower Sabie rest camp when they came across the angry bull just beyond a bend in the road. The elephant was so close that the only thing the driver could do was pull the car over next to the road. But it was already too late – the bull pierced the passenger door of their rental car, lifted it with its tusk and flipped it on its roof, before walking off.

While the man remained quiet, sipping on some Coca-Cola my wife had given him to help with the shock, his fiancée showed remarkable good humour under the circumstances, quipping that she was grateful

that they had fully insured their rental car. There would certainly be no deposit returned on this one.

I was only vaguely aware of it at the time, but with the injured man down on one knee, clutching his shoulder, and the rest of us standing in the road in front of the upturned car, a driver in a vehicle further back was snapping away at this remarkable scene. Within days the photographs had found themselves splashed across newspapers and on websites all over the world with headlines like 'Hellephant', 'No Entry – This is a Trunk Road' and 'Jumbo Takes Tourists to Tusk'. I am told the photos are also now hung prominently on notice boards in a number of the Park's rest camps as a reminder of how dangerous elephants in Kruger can be.

We had barely been in the road more than a minute or two when another car, driven by some American tourists, slowed down alongside us and, rather hysterically, told us to get back in our cars as there were probably lions around. I suppose that they felt they were somehow being useful, but our concern at that point was less for the vague threat of lions in the daytime than for the wellbeing of the couple who had just been on the receiving end of a rampaging bull elephant.

With the emergency number called, the couple were ushered into the back seat of the South Africans' large double-cab *bakkie* where they waited in safety for the Park's rescue team to arrive. We wished them well and headed on nervously back to Berg-en-Dal, keeping our eyes peeled for elephants.

What became of the bull? The rumour mill went into overdrive after the incident, and word spread that it went on to attack a family sedan a bit further north some weeks later and had to be shot. Thankfully, this was nonsense. In reality, the elephant unknowingly saved its hide by promptly joining a breeding herd, where it could no longer be easily identified, and now continues to roam southern Kruger. Whether or not it has forgiven and forgotten the American who should have reversed is anyone's guess – but we all know what they say about an elephant's memory...