

Buzzing of bees makes elephants flee

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— The buzz of angry bees frightens African elephants into fleeing, according to a study in Kenya that provides evidence this type of sound could help keep the animals from trampling farms and threatening people.

Lucy King, a zoologist at Oxford University, who led the study, said on Monday that nearly all the elephants exposed to recordings of angry buzzing bees ran away immediately, in contrast to pachyderms who heard a recording of white noise.

"It was an extraordinary reaction," Ms. King said.

"They stopped immediately what they were doing, turned to the speaker and very dramatically turned their heads from side to side trying to locate noise. Their trunks were all up in the air until one signalled a retreat for the herd."

Internet Links

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- [Elephants and bees project](#) 



The study, conducted alongside Save the Elephants research group, is a step toward figuring out a way for elephants and humans to co-exist.

Kenya's elephant population is slowly recovering from the ivory trade, which the government outlawed in 1989, Ms. King said in a telephone interview.

But the country's human population has tripled in the past 30 years, resulting in new schools, houses and farms that have pushed into the elephants' wildlife areas, she said.

The growth of both has seen elephants trampling on valuable crops and angry residents responding with guns.

"We are trying to find out ways to control the elephants without shooting them," she said.

Building electric fences is not practical so the researchers decided to see if science could back up a Kenyan folk tale that buzzing bees terrify elephants, she said.

The researchers tested the response of 32 groups of elephants – about 284 animals – living in the Samburu National Reserve in northern Kenya.

Sixteen of the 17 groups left their resting places under trees within 80 seconds of hearing the bee sound with half scattering in less than 10 seconds, the researchers said in the current issue of *Current Biology*.

But of the other elephants in the groups that heard only the white noise, none had moved after 10 seconds and only four families had moved after 80 seconds.

"It shows elephants are aware of bees and can differentiate the bee sounds," Ms. King said. "What we are looking at is whether we can apply this to a deterrent system."

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