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HARSH CLIMATE: The Namibian desert-adapted elephants have adapted to survive in a difficult arid environment. Photo: Elephant-Human Relations Aid
(https://cdn.nmh.com.na:2083/S3Server/mynamibia-eu/nmhwebimages/2024/5/21/20240521308745.jpg)

REP AGRIMONITOR

LEARN ABOUT NAMIBIA'S DESERT-ADAPTED ELEPHANTS

Ellanie Smit

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It is estimated that there are around 150 desert-adapted elephants in Namibia, who mainly live around the dry riverbeds in southern Kunene and the north-west of the country.

Wildlife Vets Namibia, in its latest newsletter, aimed to explain the fascinating physiology of Namibian desert-adapted elephants and how these giants survive in harsh climates.

"It is important to know that desert-adapted elephants are not a subspecies," it said. Wildlife Vets explained that just like all other elephants in Namibia, they are also African Savanna elephants.

"What makes the desert elephants so special is the fact that they have learnt to survive in an extremely harsh climate. The long distances they have to travel, together with a high learning capacity, made them develop small physical and behavioural adaptations to cope with the extreme temperatures, low rainfall and difficult terrain."

To get enough food, these elephants walk hundreds of kilometers to get high quality vegetation, the newsletter read.

"Their diet is very varied and depends on the season and food availability." For example, during the rainy season, they eat more grass, while during the dry season they browse more.

The elephants usually travel at night when it is cooler. "Since they have to walk such vast distances to get enough food, they travel at night when it is cooler." Since they have to walk such vast distances to get enough food, they travel at night when it is cooler.

Wildlife Vets explained that fewer elephants in the herds means fewer mouths to feed.

Bigger feet

“They also have to develop bigger feet with extended footpaths due to the long distances they have to walk and soft sandy terrains they cross.”

It added that desert-adapted elephants are about the same size as other Namibian elephants, but they appear to be less bulky and taller, probably due to their lower food intake.

“The desert-adapted elephant can survive days without water. If no open water sources are found, they are known to dig into the soil with their feet or trunk to access water beneath the surface.”

If no water can be found, they usually rely on vegetation in riverbeds that contain more moisture.

Wild Vets further explained that all elephants - and therefore also desert-adapted elephants - have a pharyngeal pouch. This pouch, which is situated at the base of the tongue, plays a role in producing low-frequency sounds and also acts as an emergency water source, which can hold almost four litres of water.

“When it is hot and there is no water nearby, elephants insert their tongue into the pouch and spray themselves.”

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