

# Hippos create a dung whirlwind when they hear rivals roar

Tom Whipple Science Editor

No one likes being interrupted by the shouts of a stranger, but it takes a hippo to respond by spraying dung.

When the “wheeze honk” of a hippopotamus calls out across the African savannah, it is more than merely the sound of one of the world’s last mega-herbivores at play. It is also a call sign, scientists have found, communicating that particular hippo’s presence to its friends — and enemies.

That is the conclusion of a study in

which scientists hid speakers in a nature reserve in Mozambique and played the wheeze-honks of familiar and unfamiliar hippos.

They found that when hippos heard the sound of an individual in their immediate social group, they didn’t respond. Neither did they react much to those calls of near neighbours, with whom they were accustomed.

When, however, a stranger wheeze-honked into earshot, the response was markedly different. The hippo headed off in the direction of the unfamiliar

call, presented its behind and — while vigorously spinning its tail to produce the required sprinkling effect — defecated.

The scientists interpret this as a territorial marking exercise in response to a worrying external threat. They said the findings could also be of use to humans though.

In hippopotamus conservation it is sometimes necessary to move groups, in order to ensure populations are at a sustainable level. Doing so, though, risks incurring the animals’ wrath —

and their dung. Nicolas Mathevon, from the University of Lyon/Saint-Etienne, in central France, said that his research, published in *Current Biology*, pointed to a way to make the process less unpleasant.

“Before relocating a group of hippos to a new location, one

**Scientists went to Africa to study territorial marking**

precaution might be to broadcast their voices from a loudspeaker to the groups already present, so that they become accustomed to them and their aggression gradually decreases,” he said.

“Reciprocity, in which the animals to be moved become accustomed to the voices of their new neighbours before they arrive, could also be considered.”



ALAMY

## Chimps crack the secret of evolution

**G**ive a chimpanzee from Bossou, Guinea, a big stone, a small stone and a nut, and he or she will know just what to do: put the nut on the big stone, smash it open with the small stone and then feast (Tom Whipple writes).

Give a chimpanzee from Seringbara, Guinea, the exact same tools and they will be waiting a long time for lunch, a study has found. With no nut-cracking tradition in that troop they will have no idea what to do.

The difference between the two groups, who live only four miles apart, may reveal a clue to our own evolution.

The scientists behind the research argue that the inability of the Seringbara chimps to learn a task that comes



so easily to their neighbours shows that some jobs are so tricky that, just as in humans, chimpanzees cannot develop them from first principles. Instead they are forced to maintain the knowledge through teaching and culture.

“Nut cracking is pretty complex,” said Kathelijne Koops from the University of Zurich. “It’s a hard nut to crack, so to speak.”

The fact that in Bossou, in the Nimba Mountains, the skill is commonplace had led

some to suggest that it was an innate talent of chimpanzees, despite its complexity. Given the right environment, so the argument goes, any chimpanzee could use tools to crack a nut.

Koops’s research, published in the journal

*Nature Human Behaviour*, suggests that is not the case. Over the course of more than a year she and her colleagues gave the chimps of Seringbara stones, nuts and even cracked nuts so they could get the taste for

them. Not once did they put two and two together and use the stone hammers and anvils to smash the nuts. Koops said this implied that the skill needs to be passed on and learned.

The most likely explanation for the skill

Chimpanzees from Bossou in Guinea use stones to crack nuts but those just four miles away have no idea how to do it

being found in Bossou, Koops argues, is that either by chance, or through a highly intelligent chimpanzee, it happened once — then was learnt, maintained and refined.

There is a paradox to the experiment. On the one hand it shows that chimpanzees lack the very basic problem-solving skills of humans.

On the other, it shows that they have the crucial social skills needed for a key human trait — cumulative culture.

“With cumulative culture, technology accumulates and becomes more complex, and perhaps more efficient,” Koops said.

“The more complex the tasks the more advanced the social learning, so at some point you might get teaching and language and then, poof, space travel is next.” And that is the story of human evolution — in a nutshell.

# Jamie Oliver blames fast-food deliveries for surge in obesity

David Sanderson

Jamie Oliver has opened a new front in his healthy eating battle after claiming “there is no proof” that food delivery companies care about the nation’s diet.

The chef, broadcaster and author of 26 cookbooks said that a rise in childhood obesity recorded during the lockdown months of 2020-21 was unacceptable.

“I think everything, socially and technologically, is driving our kids away from taking a pile of ingredients and making a plate of food,” Oliver told *Radio Times*.

He said that a lockdown “spike” in cooking had misled the nation into thinking it was eating more healthily.

“We’ve been under an illusion over the last 18 months because we’ve been making banana bread and sourdough,” he said. “There was a spike in cooking but it was because we were forced.”

“The reality is a whole load of digitisation and delivery solutions. It’s never

been easier to order dinner on [a phone]. Those companies, none of them care yes yet. There’s no proof you can give me that they care.

“Convenience is the big driver and even cheap takeaways are expensive when you compare them to cooking.”

During the pandemic, delivery drivers working for companies such as Deliveroo and UberEats became a constant presence in some neighbourhoods.

Deliveroo has, however, invested money in developing “healthier takeaway brands” and UberEats highlights “healthy food delivery” options on its website.

The companies have massively increased their order book during the pandemic — Deliveroo alone took nearly 150 million orders in Britain in the first six months of last year — but they are still struggling to make a profit.

Oliver, 46, whose cookbooks have made him the biggest-selling non-fiction writer in British history, became

the country’s best-known advocate for children’s right to nutritious food with his 2005 series, *Jamie’s School Dinners*. One of his present projects is Food Revolution, which aims to halve child obesity by 2030.

November’s National Child Measurement Programme report found however that in 2020-21 a total of 14.4 per cent of children in Reception classes in England were obese, compared with 9.9 per cent the previous year.

In Year 6, 25.5 per cent of children were obese compared with 21 per cent the previous year.

Officials said that it was the highest single-year rise since the programme began 15 years ago. The report also concluded

**Jamie Oliver says healthy eating improves every area of our lives**



that children living in the most deprived areas were more than twice as likely to be obese than those living in the least deprived areas.

Anti-obesity campaigners said that data from the pandemic clearly showed increases in sales of sweets and fast food.

Oliver said that healthy eating made a difference in the lives of people and the wealth of the nation.

“I think it has everything to do with everything we talk about right now, culturally and historically.

Happiness, depression, mental health, health cost to the NHS, benefit or cost to the government, productivity, absenteeism from illness, educational attainment,” he said.

“Honestly, I know I’m biased, but ten recipes could save your life. The poorest communities die seven to ten years younger than the rich a mile down the road.”

## Blanc: Delia and I are two peas in a pod

David Sanderson

Delia Smith was right about frozen peas, according to Raymond Blanc. The leading chef, who grows 150 varieties of vegetables in the garden of his Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons restaurant, said that nobody wanted to pick and shell peas for two hours.

Blanc, 72, said that Smith, 80, had been “heavily criticised for using tinned and frozen food in her recipes,” adding in an interview with *Radio Times*: “But she was absolutely right.” The chef, whose restaurant in Oxfordshire has two Michelin stars, added: “All the nutrients are trapped in. Not quite as good as fresh, but nobody wants to pick and pod peas. If it takes two hours, you’re not going to want to eat it.”

There are other habits, however, that rile Blanc, a Frenchman who has lived in Britain for nearly 50 years. “Sliced white bread is still what most people serve. All the wheat is pulverised and whitened and vitamins added. It will keep for two weeks — and no wonder,”