Fun Facts Friday: The Personalities of Bull Elephants

A 2024 study in Namibia documented distinct personalities in wild male African elephants. Bulls differed consistently in how friendly, aggressive, dominant, anxious, or calm they were. They also adjusted their behavior depending on who was around. Adult bulls, for example, showed more friendly behavior when younger males were present.

A 2026 study from Amboseli Trust for Elephants adds to that work. Researchers assessed 55 wild males, ages 11 to 55, using ratings from observers who had known them for at least a decade.

The study identified five personality dimensions: sociability, apprehension, irritability and aggression, even temperament, and playfulness. Sociability accounted for more of the differences among bulls than any other dimension, reflecting how attuned they were to other elephants, how readily they associated with other males, and whether others sought them out as companions. The authors caution that the sample was small.

Younger bulls generally scored higher for apprehension and playfulness, while irritability and aggression showed no clear link to age. At 55, Bad Bull, the oldest male in the study, still scored above average for playfulness.

After leaving their birth families in adolescence, male elephants form friendships, encounter rivals, and spend time in groups of other bulls. A bull's individual personality may help explain how he gets along with companions, responds to rivals, and adapts as those groups change.

Video: We bet Bo would score above average for playfulness. Volume up for this fan favorite!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LF33662kd7o