Elephant attacked zoo keeper when he returned to stall second time
By CLAUDIA BOYD-BARRETT
BLADE STAFF WRITER

A zookeeper critically injured by an elephant at the Toledo Zoo earlier this month went into the animal’s stall twice before being attacked, a newly released video of the incident reveals.

Don RedFox, the zoo’s elephant manager, who suffered broken ribs and two punctured lungs in the attack, entered the stall first with treats for elephant “Louie,” who challenged the keeper and forced him to leave the enclosure.

The keeper then returned a few minutes later with a hooked stick to control the elephant and then was attacked, the video shows.

Wednesday was the first time the media and the public were able to view the video, which zoo officials released in the form of short clips from two camera angles. The zoo’s executive director, Anne Baker, said the zoo’s cameras record footage in that format. Mr. RedFox’s family initially blocked release of the video, citing privacy concerns.

Zoo leaders acknowledged for the first time that Mr. RedFox had been in the enclosure twice and that the elephant normally would have been outside the stall at the time.

WARNING: GRAPHIC VIDEO

In the first part of the video, Louie can be seen walking aggressively toward Mr. RedFox and flaring his ears after the trainer walks in with a bag of carrots.

It appeared both Louie and Mr. RedFox were startled. The trainer hesitated before approaching Louie and may not have expected to find the elephant there, Ms. Baker said.

Treats are normally distributed to animals in the afternoon, which is when the attack occurred, but the animals are typically not in their stalls at those times, the director said.

After the initial confrontation, Mr. RedFox quickly backed out of the stall.

Mr. RedFox re-entered the stall with the stick, a training instrument that zoo officials call an "elephant guide" and that is also known as a "bull hook."

Louie crouched and turned his back to Mr. RedFox, who touched the animal’s back leg with the guide. Ms. Baker said Mr. RedFox was trying to get him to line up for training. At this point, Louie turned around and lunged at Mr. RedFox, moving the trainer into a corner of the stall.

The elephant backed away and then attacked again. The elephant can be seen crouching in a corner with his head and tusks down over Mr. RedFox.

This photo taken from a surveillance camera shows Don RedFox using a bull hook on the elephant before the attack. (TOLEDO ZOO VIDEO)

After Louie backed away again, Mr. RedFox stumbled out of the stall and can be seen falling to the floor on his way out.

At a news conference to discuss the video, Ms. Baker said Louie - a 7-year-old male - may be experiencing turbulent hormones as he moves toward adolescence. She said Louie’s behavior during the attack mimics a type of sparring or "play fighting" performed by male elephants in the wild.
"It's not a very equal sparring match," Ms. Baker said, noting Louie's 4,000-pound weight. She said it appeared Louie did not intend to kill Mr. RedFox because he allowed the trainer to leave the enclosure.

Elephant expert Pat Derby, who runs an elephant sanctuary in San Andreas, Calif., agreed after seeing the video that hormones could be a factor in the attack, but said it did not look like Louie was playing.

"It looks like Louie was quite angry. He looked like an angry little bull to me," Ms. Derby said. "He doesn't look like he's sparring or playing."

She said Louie may have been frustrated because he was without his mother, Renee, who also lives at the zoo.

In the wild, male elephants are heavily dependent on their mothers until at least age 10, Ms. Derby said. Mr. RedFox's entry into Louie's stall alone, not once but twice, greatly surprised Ms. Derby. After the attack, zoo officials said Mr. RedFox broke zoo protocol by entering the elephant's enclosure without another trainer.

"The two-person rule is always critical. If anything happens, if you trip and fall and you're injured, there's nobody to know about it," Ms. Derby said. "To walk into a bull elephant [stall] at all is certainly foolhardy. When he dropped the bag of carrots and got out the first time, he really should have left it at that."

A team of Toledo Zoo and animal experts is still reviewing the incident, and Ms. Baker said she would not speculate as to why Mr. RedFox went into the stall alone. Zoo officials have not yet talked to the keeper.

"We really can't complete the review until we're able to talk to Mr. RedFox," Ms. Baker said. "It is certain that Don's description of the event is going to be incredibly important in our understanding."

Mr. RedFox has been removed from the intensive care unit at the University of Toledo Medical Center, the former Medical College of Ohio, zoo officials said yesterday. He remains in serious condition.

Release of the video brought immediate criticism from the animal-rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which said the use of the guide or bullhook is a cruel, dangerous, and antiquated training technique.

The group pointed to zoos across the country that have moved to a different style of elephant management called "protected contact" in which keepers attend to the animals from behind a protective barrier. The Toledo Zoo uses "protected contact" and "free contact." The latter involves use of the bullhook or guide because keepers work in the same space as the elephants.

Ms. Baker said keepers do not harm elephants with the guide and use it in a way similar to how elephants touch each other with their tusks to communicate.

Ms. Derby said it's obvious from the video that Mr. RedFox returned to the stall with the guide to discipline Louie.

"He's pulling him to get him to perform some behavior and at that point Louie, who is obviously already agitated, turns around and attacks him," she said. "That is what elephants do. It's totally to be expected."

She also condemned use of the bullhook and said Mr. RedFox was a "victim" of the free-contact management system.

"My one wish is that the administration at Toledo Zoo realizes how dangerous this is and goes to protected contact management so there won't be other incidents," she said.

The video was released after Mr. RedFox's family agreed to drop a temporary restraining order in Lucas County Common Pleas Court prohibiting its release, citing privacy concerns.

The stipulation to drop the order, which was signed by attorneys for the couple and the zoo, stated that the family initially opposed the release of the security video "in order to protect the privacy interests of plaintiff Donald RedFox while he recuperated from injuries suffered during the incident with Louie."

Although the couple said the privacy issue remains, the RedFoxes consented to the release of the video to dispel rumors "that the elephant in question was somehow mistreated."

"In an effort to end the speculation, the RedFox family hereby withdraws its objection to the release of the security tape," the document stated. "The RedFox family in no waiving its right to privacy and reinforces its continuing belief that releasing the security tape does nothing more than provide an opportunity to sensationalize a tragic accident."

Attorneys for Mr. RedFox and his wife, Wanda, filed the request July 6 for a court order stopping the release of the tape. Judge Linda Jennings granted a temporary restraining order with no objection from zoo officials. A hearing to determine whether the restraining order would be made permanent was set for Tuesday before the judge. The hearing was canceled after attorneys approached Judge Jennings with a proposed resolution.

In her order signed late Tuesday, Judge Jennings dissolved the restraining order. The judge further directed the zoo "to make the video available to local media within 48 hours of a proper request."

Staff writer Erica Blake contributed to this report.

Contact Claudia Boyd-Barrett at: cbarrett@theblade.com or 419-724-6272.