

Too tall to live: Death of two giraffes by lightning strike suggests increased height risk

September 18 2020, by Bob Yirka



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Ciska P. J. Scheijen, a conservationist at Rockwood Conservation, a nature park in South Africa, is wondering if giraffes are at greater risk of being struck by lightning due to their great height. In his paper published in the *African Journal of Ecology*, he notes that two giraffes in his park in South Africa were recently killed by a lightning strike.

After discovering the two dead giraffes, Scheijen discovered that he could find no previous research to determine whether giraffes are more likely to be struck by [lightning](#) than other animals due to their great height. Prior research has suggested that it is usually the tallest object in a vicinity that is likeliest to be struck by lightning.

Scheijen notes that only one of the giraffes was hit directly—a five-year-old female. The [strike](#) had broken off one of her ossicones—the knobby nubs on the heads of giraffes—and left her lying dead on the ground. Not far away was the body of a four-year-old [giraffe](#) that had also been killed—either by a side flash (by which electricity from the lightning bolt travels through the air and strikes something else) or by step potential (where electricity from the bolt travels through the ground and strikes something else). The two dead giraffes were part of a herd of eight giraffes living at the conservation park.

Finding the two dead giraffes has Scheijen wondering if giraffes are more at risk of being hit by lightning strikes due to their great height. He notes that very little research has been done on animal deaths by lightning strikes, though it is known that approximately 24,000 people are struck and killed by lightning strikes around the world each year—and hundreds of thousands are injured. The two deaths also have him wondering if giraffes have learned over generations to lower their heads during thunderstorms or to move to be near a grove of trees that are taller than they are. He notes that the giraffes that were struck at the park had no such recourse, as they were standing in the middle of a grassy field when the storm struck.

More information: Ciska P. J. Scheijen. Inferred giraffe deaths from lightning strikes, *African Journal of Ecology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/aje.12785](#)

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