NT: Playing it cool key to camel courtship

By Tara Ravens

DARWIN, July 15 AAP - Men have long known it's best to play it cool during courtship but camels appear to have taken the advice literally.

Research from the University of Queensland has found the key to a bull's reproductive success could be a lowered body temperature.

"By starting each day cooler, a bull can postpone heat stress, compete for longer, win more contests and potentially sire more offspring," said Professor Gordon Grigg, from the university's School of Biological Sciences.

Working with a team of camel behaviourists and ecologists, the professor has been tracking camels in Central Australia.

According to the experts' research, male camels have the ability to drop their body temperature, which may help them last longer in rutting displays.

"Rutting involves a very energetic daily display of fighting during which bulls contest ownership of a herd of females," he said.

In the past it was thought camels would drop their body temperature in the mornings, bringing on hypothermia, as a mechanism to conserve water in hot, dry conditions.

But Prof Grigg said the behaviour of the male camels suggested there was another reason for their actions.

"What we saw cannot be for saving water. We saw it only in winter, only in bulls during rut and, anyway, they had water freely available and used it routinely," he said.

"So we speculate that by lowering their minimum temperature each morning during rut, bulls increase their chance of winning a harem ...

"By starting the day cool, a bull will enhance his capacity to store heat generated by the strenuous activity, thus prolonging the onset of heat stress."

During courtship, male camels compete intensely in elaborate and ritualised performances that range from posing to strutting, as well as jostling and running.

They will also inflate and expose their palate and curl their upper lip.

Prof Grigg said a bull that could sustain a contest for longer was obviously more likely to "win it and, so, control a herd of females".

"The daily hypothermias we observed could have a direct bearing on reproductive success."

Whatever holds the key to a camel's mating prowess, it appears to be working.

There are an estimated 1.2 million camels roaming outback Australia, with the population expected to double in nine years.

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