

GIRAFFE

Phylum: Chordata, Class: Mammalia, Order: Artiodactyla, Suborder: Ruminantia, Family: Giraffidae
Giraffa camelopardalis reticulata

People have marveled over the giraffe's height and beauty for thousands of years. When the first zoo was created by Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt some 3,500 years ago, a giraffe was transported 1,500 miles down the Nile River for the Queen's zoo. In 1827, when a giraffe was placed on public display for the first time in Paris, it nearly caused a riot. The arrival of the giraffe also started a fashion frenzy, influencing hairstyles, clothing, and accessories.

Giraffes are the tallest of all land mammals. But it is the giraffe's speed, not its height, that gave it its name. "Giraffe" comes from the Arab word xirapha (zee-RAF-ah), which means "the one that walks very fast".

Isak Dinesen, author of *Out of Africa*, once described a moving giraffe herd as "a family of rare, long-stemmed, speckled, gigantic flowers slowly advancing".

There is only 1 species of giraffe. However there are several different races or subspecies found in different parts of Africa including: Nigerian, Kordofan, Nubian, reticulated, Baringo (Rothschild's), Masai, Thornicroft's, Southern, and Angolan. The different subspecies have different markings.

Height: males - 17 feet (average), females - 14 feet (average)

Weight: males: 1700-4000 lbs., females: 1200 - 2500 lbs

Habitat: savannas and open woodlands

Range: Giraffes are found in various areas of Africa south of the Sahara desert. The reticulated giraffe is found primarily in Kenya.

Population status: Giraffes have been eliminated from much of their former ranges in western Africa and the southern Kalahari. Giraffe were nearly eliminated from East Africa at the turn of the century by non-native hunters and rinderpest, a disease believed to be introduced by cattle imported to Africa. Today, giraffes are found in national parks and areas outside of those parks.

Threats to survival: While it is illegal to hunt giraffe in most African countries, poaching still occurs. Giraffes are killed for food and for their long black tail hairs which are used to make fly swatters, trinkets, and bracelets. Some people feel that with continued human population growth, wild giraffes may some day be found only within the confines of Africa's national parks.

Diet in the wild: Giraffes prefer young leaves and the shoots of trees. Acacia trees are one of their favorites.

Special features:

- A group of giraffes is called a herd. Adult females are called cows. Males are known as bulls. A young giraffe is called a calf.
- The largest male giraffe on record was over 19 feet tall.
- Giraffes spend 40 - 60% of their time feeding. They are most active shortly after sunrise or sunset.
- Giraffes are able to obtain most of the moisture they need from the green leaves that they eat. This means fewer trips to the waterhole or stream. Waterholes can be dangerous places where predators lie and wait to attack animals as they drink.
- Even with its long neck, a giraffe's front legs are so long that it cannot touch the ground with its nose by simply bending over. In order to reach the water at a watering hole, stream, etc. a giraffe must splay its front legs. This position makes a giraffe more vulnerable to predator attack.



- Giraffes have very keen vision. Field observations have shown that they appear to be able to recognize herd mates at a distance of over one half mile. They also seem to have some color vision and are able to distinguish orange, red, green, yellow-green, blue, and violet as separate colors.
- Giraffes and humans have the same number of vertebrae in their necks - seven. Giraffes' vertebrae are just much larger.
- When giraffes walk, they swing both legs on each side of the body forward at the same time - both left legs, then both right legs. Giraffes must move this way because they have short bodies and very long legs. If they didn't walk this way, their rear feet would step on their front feet. A walking giraffe can take strides that are 15 feet long.
- Galloping giraffes can reach speeds of 35 miles per hour.
- When a giraffe raises its head, it is lifting about 500 pounds - the combined weight of the head and neck of an average male giraffe.
- Giraffes have big hearts. The heart of an adult giraffe may be up to 2 feet long and weigh 20 pounds or more. The heart can pump 15 - 20 gallons of blood per minute.
- Giraffes have special adaptations to help keep the flow of blood to their brains constant. The walls of the vessels inside the giraffe's brain are extremely elastic. This elasticity allows the vessels to expand in order to compensate for the increased pressure and blood flow that occurs as the giraffe lowers its head to drink from a waterhole. The jugular vein also serves as a reservoir for blood when the giraffe's head is down. The vessels in the brain are also able to retain sufficient blood so that all of the blood doesn't rush from the brain as the giraffe lifts its head. Valves in the large veins also help regulate blood flow.
- Giraffes are ruminants (cud chewers) and have a 4-chambered stomach like that of a cow.
- Giraffes are generally quiet, but are capable of mooing like a cow, bleating like a calf, and bellowing like a bull. They can also snort, whistle, cough, grunt, and growl.
- Each giraffe has its own unique spot pattern that can be used to distinguish one individual from another, much like a human fingerprint.
- The "horns" on a giraffe's head are different from most animal horns. They are bony bumps on the skull that are covered with skin and hair. The scientific term for them is "ossicones" (AH-suh-cones). Both males and females have them. Giraffes often have more than two.
- The tongue of a giraffe may be 18 - 22 inches long. The end of the tongue is dark - to help protect it from the hot sun.

Social structure & Behavior:

- Giraffe herds are rather loose social groups. Herd members are generally free to wander off and join another herd. There is no rigid social hierarchy or "pecking order", as with many other animals that live in herds. In fact, it is often hard to tell who the "leader" of a giraffe herd is.
- Males may move about more from herd to herd in search of females to breed. Generally giraffe bulls live together peacefully, but they may occasionally confront each other. These ritualized confrontations are sometimes referred to as "necking". There are different levels of confrontation between male giraffes. During a low intensity confrontation, the two males will begin by standing side by side and leaning on each other. Then they will rub and wrap their necks around each other. These actions may continue until one giraffe wanders away or until the interaction escalates to sparring.
- During less violent sparring matches, the bulls will stand side by side, facing the same direction, and slap their necks together. They may hit each other on the neck or shoulders with their horns. During more violent sparring, bulls may stand side by side, face opposite directions and strike each other with their horns on the flanks and hind legs. The fight will continue until one of the bulls backs down and steps away.
- "Once scores are settled, giraffes don't seem to hold grudges; moments after a sledgehammer fight, you'll see the two warriors grazing side by side or gently rubbing necks together" (Benyus 148).
- Observations of giraffes in the wild indicate that giraffes lie down only 5 - 6 hours per night. During most of this time, the animals remain alert with their necks erect and their eyes alternately open and closed. Giraffes may go into a deep sleep for only a total of 5 minutes each night. In one study, the longest uninterrupted deep sleep phase was just 2 minutes and 40 seconds. During deep sleep a giraffe bends its neck backwards in an arch and rests its head behind its back legs or on an extended back leg.
- The main predator of the giraffe is the lion. Lions may attack calves, subadults, and even adult giraffes. Because of their great height and excellent vision, giraffes can often spot stalking lions. If one herd member senses danger, it will generally stare off in the direction of the approaching



predator. Other herd members usually quickly take notice and turn to watch, too. Giraffes can defend themselves against lions by kicking with their hind legs or striking with their front legs. They may also be able to outrun a lion. However, lions are capable of killing even adult giraffes if they are able to attack the giraffe at the neck and suffocate it.

Breeding & Caring for Young:

- Female giraffes become sexually mature around 3.5 to 4.5 years of age. They do not reach full size until they are approximately 5 years old. Males become sexually mature between 4 and 5 years of age and do not reach full size until they are about 7 years old.
- Giraffes can reproduce throughout the year.
- Gestation = 15 months
- When a female giraffe is ready to give birth she will usually separate herself from the group and the “high traffic” areas of the savanna.
- A newborn giraffe may be over 6 feet tall and weigh 150 - 200 pounds. A young giraffe nearly doubles its height within its first year of life.
- In the wild, the mortality rate for young giraffes may be as high as 50% during their first month of life. Young animals are preyed upon by lions, leopards, African wild dogs, and hyenas.
- At 5 or 6 months of age, the calves will start to follow their mother on feeding expeditions.
- At 6 to 18 months of age, the young giraffes become more independent and begin to travel in groups of all females or all males. Young giraffes may nurse for up to 15 to 17 months.

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