

# AFRICAN WILD DOG



notes

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The African Wild Dog, also called the Painted Wild Dog, the Painted Dog or the Cape Hunting Dog is a member of the family *Canidae*. Other canids include the fox, wolf, Coyote and domestic dog, but not the Hyena. It inhabits the savannah woodland of central and southern Africa. It has also been recorded in semi-desert and alpine regions.

The African Wild Dog is large, weighing 27-45kg. It has a coat with a unique pattern of irregular brown, white and yellow blotches, which varies from smooth and short to long and shaggy. Coat length and patterns vary with the features of the habitat. The patterns of the coats differ from one individual to another and between populations with the only constant markings being the white-tipped tail and dark snout. Its rounded ears are very large and are used for controlling body temperature and in signalling other dogs.

The African Wild Dog has an unusual social system. There is a reversal of normal male and female roles; in most other mammals the female

looks after the young and competition exists between males. However with the African Wild Dog, males help raise the young and females compete for the dominant position in the pack and access to the dominant male. There is a lot of aggression between the competing females, which often results in the death of the defeated one.

Within a pack all males are related to each other and remain in the same pack all their lives. Female members of the group are related to each other, but not to the males. Young females leave their pack as a group of sisters when they are 14-30 months of age, and join an unrelated male pack to breed. Only one dominant female per group breeds successfully. Should any other females produce a litter, the pups will either be injured, killed in aggressive squabbles, or will be stolen and adopted by the dominant female. One way of identifying the dominant male and female is to pay attention when the dogs urinate -only the dominant pair are 'allowed' to cock their leg!

The dominant male and female usually stay close to each other and mate about once a year. After a gestation period of 70 to 73 days, the female selects a den where 6 to 19 pups are born, each weighing about 400 grams. Pups emerge from the den at 3 weeks, are weaned at around 10 weeks and rely on the pack until about 14 months of age. Older dogs from the pack often help the pups by teaching them hunting techniques and other behaviours. In the wild these dogs live for about 10 years.

The African Wild Dog is specialised in preying on the large hoofed mammals of the African plains. It is exclusively carnivorous and is equipped with a short powerful muzzle and an impressive array of shearing teeth. Prey species vary, but include Impala, Zebra, Gazelle, Wildebeest and even small herbivores such as Cane Rats.

The African Wild Dog is a pack hunter, with pack size ranging from 3 to 50 but usually numbering around 12 to 20 animals. Males in the pack will often out-number females by two to one. Being co-operative hunters, dogs work together in the hunt with each dog having a role to play.

Hunting usually takes place at dawn and dusk when it is cooler and there is sufficient light as these dogs rely mainly on sight. They may also hunt at night when there is enough moonlight to see. African Wild Dogs hunt at least once a day, and often twice when packs are large and prey is small. Hunting success depends on the pack's ability to select the young or weak animals from a herd.

Normally all the adults share the catch, but if there are pups present, adults will stand aside and let them eat first. The nursing mother and her pups are fed regurgitated meat on the pack's return if they are too young to venture out.

African Wild Dogs are regarded as Endangered, with less than 3000 mature adults remaining in

Africa. Habitat loss through land clearance, road kills, persecution by farmers and introduced diseases are all threats to African Wild Dogs.

Zoos SA has been successful in breeding African Wild Dogs. The animals that you see in the Adelaide Zoo were all born within the Zoo and are all related females. The Adelaide Zoo currently has no male dogs and the breeding program is focused at Monarto Zoo. Females from the Adelaide Zoo and other Zoos around the country will be introduced to the Monarto Zoo pack when necessary, to prevent in-breeding.

When you look at the African Wild Dogs at the Zoo you might see them displaying some of their natural behaviours. When they greet each other, they make a 'twittering' call and lick and sniff each other. In the wild they would do this every time they meet and before a hunt. These greetings confirm that all the members of the pack are present and no strangers are trying to sneak in!

You might also see the dogs scent marking - urinating on trees, bushes or on the ground. The dogs will scent mark any left over food to claim ownership of it for later.

To assist with the effective management of the African Wild Dogs, zoo keepers feed the dogs meat on most days but have two 'starve' days a week to simulate their diets in the wild. On these days they may be given smaller 'treats' or branches to tear apart.

Zoos South Australia will continue to exhibit African Wild Dogs as part of its commitment to the conservation of Threatened Species. The Royal Zoological Society of South Australia also funds research to increase our understanding of one of Africa's most threatened carnivores.

