

GIRAFFE



notes

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The giraffe (*Giraffe camelopardalis*) is found south of the Sahara desert, in the open woodlands and wooded grasslands of Africa. The giraffe is most commonly recognised for its height and its markings. The average height of a male giraffe is 5.3 metres but can range between 5-6 meters high. The females are smaller, standing about 4 metres high.

A unique feature of a giraffe is its elongated neck. Surprisingly it still has 7 vertebrae, like most other mammals. Each vertebrae is considerably larger, to support its extremely long and muscular neck.

If a person stands for long periods of time we can feel light-headed and dizzy. You may notice the giraffes in the Adelaide Zoo are constantly standing. They have a system of blood vessels equipped with valves so that sufficient blood reaches their brain. This allows the giraffe to remain standing for most of the day and night.

Another reason you might see the animal standing is because of its unusual sleeping habits. Humans need at least eight hours of sleep per night for their bodies to function effectively, however a giraffe can have short five-minute sleeps whilst standing throughout the day and night.

This means they never lie fully flat for any length of time. This enables the giraffe to remain alert for predators. If the ground is soft the giraffe will rest on it but will always keep its head raised. Due to its height, habitat and excellent eye-sight, the Giraffe has the greatest range of vision of all mammals. They have been recorded running at speeds of up to 56km/hr over open ground, that's faster than a race horse!

When giraffes are born, they have two skin coloured 'horns' that lie flat. During the first week of life these 'horns', also known as 'ossicones', move to an upright position, becoming bony and fusing to the skull. Male ossicones are thicker and heavier than those of the female. Male giraffes use their 'horns', head and neck when fighting for dominance.

If you watch a giraffe eating, you will notice it use its tongue a lot. A giraffe's tongue measures on average 45cm long. It is a dark blue-black colour to provide natural sun protection, very important if you have your tongue out as much as a giraffe does. Giraffes use this tongue to reach high into the Acacia tree to collect the leaves, one of their major food sources. The giraffe also has a long, muscular upper lip that is used to rip leaves from branches. The effectiveness of this lip means that the giraffes have no upper front teeth.

There are nine different subspecies of giraffe, each with its own distinctive coat pattern. Individually giraffes have their own unique pattern on their coat, much like the uniqueness of human fingerprints. The colour may change however the pattern remains the same throughout the animal's life. As a giraffe ages, the pattern on the coat becomes a dark brown to almost black.

Giraffes give birth to their young standing up, which means they usually have a 1.5 metre fall before touching the ground. When they are born the head, neck and front legs are presented first, almost

touching the ground when the final contraction occurs. The birth process usually takes about 3 hours, while the gestation period is about 15 months. The new born giraffe will drink its mother's milk for approximately nine months, but will be exploring adult food in addition.

The normal life span of a giraffe living in captivity is approximately 25-30 years. In the wild the life span of a giraffe is much shorter due to factors such as illness, predators and poachers.

Zoos SA has been very successful in breeding giraffes. Monarto Zoo has the largest herd of giraffes in the Southern hemisphere. Giraffes from this herd are displayed at Adelaide Zoo for short periods of time, then returning to the Monarto herd.

There are usually 2 Giraffes at the Adelaide Zoo at one time. They are secured in the Giraffe house each night to prevent them from falling into the moat in the dark. During the day the giraffes wander in their yard and feed on the many branches and baskets of hay that are hung from the trees and buildings. The giraffes' food is winched up high to encourage natural feeding behaviour. The branches usually consist of rubber tree, however other branches such as Ash, Elm, False Wattle and even Eucalyptus may be included.

In the wild giraffe's diet comprises of leaves, shoots, flowers, seed pods, fruits, vines and some herbs. At the Adelaide Zoo, along with the various branches, the giraffes are fed carrots, lucerne hay and high protein pellets to ensure their diet is nutritionally balanced. Two automatic water feeders are mounted on the walls of the Giraffe house at around 1.3 metres for the giraffes' use.

Giraffe tails are valuable to African cultures and are used to make good-luck bracelets, fly whisks and thread for sewing or stringing beads. Poaching continues today, now more often for their meat and hide. Giraffe are classified as conservation dependent.

