

FACTS ABOUT *giraffes*



Classification:

Giraffes are the world's tallest land living animals. Giraffes have been classified into one species (*Giraffa camelopardalis*) with about eight to nine subspecies recognized by their unique coat patterns. Three of these subspecies are found in Kenya namely, Rothschild's giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis rothschildii*) commonly known as Baringo or Uganda giraffe; Masai giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis tippelskirchi*) and Reticulated giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis reticulata*) commonly known as the Samburu or Somali giraffe.

Conservation Status:

Giraffes had been classified by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as a species of Least Concern until 2016 when it was noted their population had declined by approximately 40% over the last few years; IUCN had to list them as vulnerable species.

Habitat:

Today giraffes are found in the African Continent south of the Sahara with most preferring savanna grasslands, bushlands and woodlands. To survive giraffes will require as small as 85 square km (33 square miles) in wetter areas but up to 1500 square km (580 square miles) in dry areas.

Social behavior:

Giraffes are social animals living in non-territorial groups of about 2 to 50 individuals. Males join bachelor herd once they reach maturity whereas the females remain within the maternal herd.

Diet:

Giraffes are herbivores (plant eating animals). They eat leaves of different tree species but their favourite is the acacia leaves. Adult males consumes approximately 35 kgs (75 pounds) of food per day and have been known to eat as much as 65kgs (145 pounds). The giraffe grasps leaves with their prehensile lips or tongues and pulls them into the mouth. The tongue is 18 inches (almost half a metre) long. The tongue and inner parts of the mouth are coated with tough tissues as protection against acacia thorn pricks. While drinking they spread their front long legs apart to lower their long neck.

Body Size:

Males grow to attain a maximum height of 5.0 – 5.5 metres (15 -18 feet) and can weigh 1500 - 1800kgs (3307 - 3968 pounds) while females grow to be as tall as 4.2 – 4.9 metres (14 – 15 feet) and weigh 800 – 1200kgs (1763 - 2646 pounds).

Life Expectancy:

Giraffes can live up to 25 years in the wild but a bit longer in captivity up to 28 years.

Reproduction:

Sexual maturity is between 3 – 4 years although males might take another 2 – 3 years to successfully start mating with females due to the hierarchical order. Giraffes can breed throughout the year. Normal gestation is 15 months but they can extend to 18 months when environmental conditions are not favourable. Most of the time, females give birth to a single calf as twins are very rare. The calf weighs approximately 60kgs (120 pounds) and can stand up to 2 metres (6 feet) at birth.

Enemies:

Predators especially the big cats (including lions, leopards and cheetahs) and hyenas can prey on young calves, with 75% of newborns being killed by predators during their first year. Predators can occasionally attack adult giraffes while drinking, seated down or vulnerable members who are sick, old or injured.

Defence:

Giraffes have a unique defence strategy due to height advantage and excellent vision. Their long legs are used as weapons of defense providing powerful kicks from both the front and the back legs which can kill an adult male lion. An adult giraffe can run at a Speeds of 50km/hr (35miles/hr) which can be maintained for several kilometres, hence they can outpace most of the enemies.

Circulation:

The heart of a giraffe measures approximately 2 feet by 1 foot (0.6m by 0.3m) and can weigh approximately 11kgs (24 pounds). The heart can pump 60 litres of blood every minute around its body generating a pressure twice that of an average human being. Thick-walled arteries in the neck have extra valves to counteract gravity when the head is up while special vessels at the base of the brain control blood pressure when the giraffe lowers its head to the ground.

Movement:

Giraffes have a unique way of walking; they walk with limbs of the same side of the body forward together (Pacing or ambling) but run by pushing the front legs forward first, followed by the paired back legs but the two pairs of legs almost touching down at the same time (galloping).

Vocalization:

Giraffes are quiet animals and they don't vocalize often. However they snort while alarmed, males grunt or rumble while challenging a rival or excited, whilst young ones moo to attract the attention of the mother and bleat if threatened.

Resting:

Giraffes rest during the hottest time of the day, usually standing up but will also lie down to rest with their legs tucked beneath the body and the neck and head held high. They sleep for a few hours in 24 hours during day and night time sometimes for durations ranging between 5 to 30 minutes.

Necking:

It is a common fighting behavior among male giraffes where they use their necks to fight with each other. During such fights they swing their necks and hit each other with their heads. This behavior is mainly used to determine their hierarch or who is the strongest.

Relatives:

The only living relative of the giraffe is the Okapi which lives in the tropical rainforest of Africa; it has legs like a Zebra, a body like an Antelope and it moves like a giraffe.

Future Conservation of Giraffes:

Giraffes are facing silent extinction with their population having declined by approximately 40% over the last few years yet nobody is talking about the sad plight of this iconic species as it would happen with other species of conservation concern.

Let's Act to help save giraffes from the silent extinction today as tomorrow might be too late!