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Conservation update

FEATURE: GIRAFFE - *Giraffa camelopardalis*

The giraffe is the tallest land animal and largest ruminant. Once seen over a vast range in Africa, wherever trees were found, giraffes have been eliminated from most of the west and southern Kalahari range. They are found in savannas, coastal forests, and open woodlands. Although their numbers have decreased in the past century, overall giraffe populations are currently considered stable and they are not covered by the regulations of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

However, several giraffe subspecies are rare, including the Kordofan giraffe of Sudan and the Nigerian giraffe, which is now found only in Chad and is extinct in its namesake Nigeria. The Rothschild's giraffe is the rarest of the three subspecies found in East Africa (the others being the Reticulated giraffe and the Masai giraffe.) Studies show there are only about 445 Rothschild's giraffes left in the wild.

Lions, hyenas, and leopards are the principal predators of calves. Hunting for tourist souvenirs and habitat loss have driven giraffes to extinction in a number of countries. When farms border giraffe habitat, the animals often raid crops and may be shot by irate farmers. However, many cattle ranchers don't mind these high-level browsers, which do not compete with their livestock for food. The future of giraffes, and Africa's other famed plains animals, lies in careful conservation of extensive habitats, both in protected areas and on private lands.

OBSERVE THE WILDLIFE CODE AND DO YOUR PART TOWARDS HELPING US CONSERVE WILDLIFE...

- Respect the privacy of animals – minimum viewing distance is 20 metres.
- Remember that animals are wild and can be dangerous.
- Do not disturb the animals with sudden movements or loud noises.
- It is an offence to feed wild animals.
- Stay in your vehicle except at designated places.
- Respect the speed limit of 40 kilometres per hour in parks.
- Never drive off road as it degrades habitat.
- Do not leave litter or discard lighted cigarettes.
- Respect the culture of the people – never take photographs of local people without their permission.
- It is illegal to collect any living or dead item from a protected area.

Giraffe Facts



GIRAFFE – *Giraffa camelopardalis*

STATUS: Vulnerable.

DESCRIPTION: Giraffes are one of the world's tallest mammals. They are well known for their long necks, long legs, and spotted patterns. Giraffes have small "horns" or knobs on top of their heads that grow to be about five inches long. These knobs are used to protect the head in fights.

SIZE: Male giraffes are larger than females. Males weigh between 1,100 and 1,400 kg and stand up to 6 metres tall. Female giraffes weigh between 700 and 1200 kg and grow to be 5 metres tall.

LIFESPAN: Healthy giraffes live about 25 years in the wild.

RANGE: Giraffes can be found in central, eastern and southern Africa.

HABITAT: Giraffes live in the savannas of Africa, where they roam freely among the tall trees, arid land, dense forests and open plains.

FOOD: Their long necks help giraffes eat leaves from tall trees, typically acacia trees. If they need to, giraffes can go for several days without water. Instead of drinking, giraffes stay hydrated by the moisture from leaves.

BEHAVIOUR: Giraffes are non-territorial, social animals. They live in small groups and sometimes join each other to form large herds which are generally less rigidly structured than those of some other group-living mammals. Herds may consist of any combination of sexes or ages, and are usually led by a male whose authority is rarely questioned. Giraffes have only two gaits; an ambling walk and a gallop.

OFFSPRING: Female giraffes typically give birth to one calf after a fifteen-month gestation period. When a calf is born, it drops to the ground head first, about a 1.8 metre drop. The fall and the landing don't hurt the calf, but they do cause it to take a big breath. The calf can stand up and walk after about an hour. During the first week of its life, the mother carefully guards her calf. Young giraffes are very vulnerable and cannot defend themselves. While several mothers feed, their young are kept in small nursery groups, under the watchful eye of one of the mothers.

THREATS: Giraffes are hunted for their meat, coat and tails. The tail is prized for good luck bracelets, fly whisks and string for sewing beads. The coat is used for shield coverings. Habitat destruction and fragmentation are also threats to giraffe populations.

PROTECTION: No current protective laws.

GIRAFFE SUBSPECIES...

Giraffes are nowadays regarded as members of one single species. However, there are a lot of differences, especially concerning the markings of the fur. The species is divided into several subspecies, but also the members of a certain subspecies differ individually in their fur markings. There are nine recognized subspecies of the giraffe in different areas of Africa.

1. Angolan Giraffe
2. Kordofan Giraffe
3. Masai Giraffe
4. Nigerian Giraffe
5. Nubian Giraffe
6. Reticulated Giraffe
7. Rothschild's Giraffe
8. Southern Giraffe
9. Thornicroft's Giraffe

Three of the above subspecies are found in East Africa: Masai Giraffe, Reticulated Giraffe and Rothschild's Giraffe.

Reticulated Giraffe, *Giraffa camelopardalis reticulata*

The reticulated giraffe is the most handsome of all the subspecies of giraffe. They have a coat of reddish brown well defined polygon markings, separated by white lines. The coat darkens with age. The hide is thick and the tail is tufted and used as a fly swatter. They are smaller than the other giraffe subspecies, with the males being 4-5 metres tall and the females being up to 4 ½ metres tall. Reticulated giraffes are found in the open woodlands and wooded grasslands of northeastern Kenya, eastern Sudan and Eritrea.

Masai Giraffe, *Giraffa camelopardalis tippelskirchi*

Masai giraffes have yellowish-buff coat with the characteristic patchwork of irregular star-shaped markings. Most Masai giraffes have two horns, though occasionally animals are seen with three horns. As with all giraffes, the spots on the coat act as human fingerprints and can be used to identify an individual. The males grow to a height of up to 6 metres, and the females up to 5 metres. Masai giraffes live in small groups and are found in the savannas of Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Somalia.

Rothschild's Giraffe, *Giraffa camelopardalis rothschildi*

The Rothschild giraffe is sometimes known as the Uganda giraffe. It has the basic appearance of any giraffe subspecies: long legs, a long neck with seven vertebrae, and a leopard-like coat. The main trait that distinguishes the Rothschild's giraffe from the others is the colour of its coat. The coat is pale and thickset when compared to the Masai giraffe, the patches are less jagged and anywhere below the knee is usually unmarked. Rothschild's giraffes can have as many as five horns, although more commonly three, and reach heights of up to 6 metres. Rothschild's giraffes are found in wooded plains or shrubs and thickets in a few countries south of the Sahara, including western Kenya and northern Uganda. They have been exterminated throughout much of their former range

GIRAFFE FACTS...

- Remains of early ancestors of the giraffe have been found in Greece, Hungary, Spain, China, Japan, India, as well as several countries in Africa.
- The giraffe's prehensile tongue can be up to 18 inches long and is used to remove leaves from the thorniest acacia branches and to keep ears and eyes clean.
- Giraffes are related to the rare okapi, found only in a small rainforest region within the Congo Basin.
- The giraffe, and the okapi, must straddle its legs or bend its forelegs to drink, making it vulnerable to predators.
- No giraffe is alike. The markings of the fur are like fingerprints among giraffes.
- Giraffes are not mute, as is commonly believed. Calves bleat and adults can make a variety of vocalizations.
- The giraffe's neck has the same seven vertebrae as most other mammals, although each of these is greatly elongated.
- Giraffes have specialized valves in their necks and very elastic blood vessels that enable them to lower and raise their heads without sudden drop in blood pressure. To help with blood circulation, the giraffe's heart is large at 10 kg, and it beats twice as fast as a human's.
- Giraffes have acute senses of sight, hearing, and smell.
- Giraffes have very powerful hind legs, and when they have to, they can defend themselves with a deadly kick.
- Giraffes sleep for only 20 minutes in a day, though they can lie down for seven to nine hours a day. They can sleep standing or sitting down.
- The record running speed of a giraffe is 56 kilometers per hour.
- A giraffe's feet are the size of a dinner plate – 30 centimetres across.

CONSERVATION STATUS...

The good news for the giraffe is that their populations are fairly stable. They are not feared by humans and they are not killed for any folk medicine remedies. They do not compete for food with livestock such as sheep and cows. They do not eat farmers' crops. Finally, they are admired the world over for their enormous size, natural beauty, and mild nature.

However, it should be noted that although giraffes are not listed as endangered, they are still vulnerable, and require habitat protection.

“Take nothing but photographs & leave nothing but footprints.”

Global Interlink Conservation Update compiled by: MOHIT K. ADVANI

Credits: Animals! The Animal Information Center www.angelfire.com/mo2/animals1; Defenders Of Wildlife www.defenders.org; East African Handbook (second edition); Smithsonian National Zoological Park nationalzoo.si.edu; San Diego Zoo www.sandiegozoo.org