

GIRAFFE

Giraffa sp.



Location: Giraffes are native to Africa, with pockets ranging from south of the Sahara to South Africa. These animals prefer to inhabit dry savannas and open woodlands.

Diet: The giraffe is a browser of various types of plants, but the leaves and shoots of various *Acacia* species form the bulk of the diet in most areas. Flowers, seedpods and fruits are also eaten when they are in season.

Thanks to their long necks and legs, giraffes are uniquely adapted to reach treetop vegetation that is inaccessible to other herbivores. Adult males stand about 15-17 feet; adult females range from 13-15 feet tall. Their height can be a disadvantage. In order to drink from a water hole, a giraffe spreads its front legs and bends down in an awkward position that makes it vulnerable to predators. When it visits a water hole, the giraffe drinks about 10 gallons at a time. This animal can survive for several days without water by getting most of its moisture from its food.

The prehensile tongue helps to gather plant material into the mouth. The giraffe's tongue is black to protect it from the blistering effects of the sun and extends almost 20 inches. Like domestic cows, giraffes regurgitate their food and chew it as cud.

Life Cycle: Giraffes are gregarious, banding together into herds of about 2-70 animals. Bulls (males) peacefully coexist together within overlapping home ranges. The reason for this harmony is the dominance hierarchy; each animal knows its relative status in the pecking order, which minimizes aggression. To determine dominance, young bulls participate in an elaborate ritual called necking. This ritual, in which 2 participants intertwine their necks in a slow-motion ballet, is to assess the relative status of the 2 individuals.

Giraffes can reproduce throughout the year. After a gestation period of about 453-464 days (roughly 15 months), a single calf is born in isolation; twins are extremely rare. Each newborn is approximately 6 feet tall and weighs about 100-200 pounds. Shortly after birth, the calf can stand up and walk around. The calf hides throughout much of its first week. The mother stays nearby, guarding and feeding the youngster.

After about 3-4 weeks, mother giraffes steer their young calves into crèche groups. The crèche is like a nursery and the mothers take turns babysitting the group. This allows mother giraffes to wander away from the calves to feed or drink during the day. These females return before nightfall to suckle their offspring. Although it is able to eat solid food after the third week of life, a calf nurses for approximately 15-17 months (about 1-1.5 years).

Remarks: Giraffes have a distinctive coat pattern that varies with their location. Distinctive coat patterns and color are unique to individual giraffes, like human fingerprints. Both sexes have prominent horn-like structures, called ossicones, on top of the heads that grow to approximately 5 inches in length. These structures are formed from cartilage and are fused to the skull. The ossicones help protect the head from injury and may have a role in thermoregulation.

The giraffe has 7 bones in its neck, the same as most mammal species, including humans. Each of the giraffe's neck vertebrae is roughly 10 inches in length, while a human's is approximately 1 inch long.

Because the giraffe is rarely heard, the giraffe was thought to be silent. This animal is able to communicate with others by way of low-frequency sounds, grunts and whistle-like cries. When alarmed, a giraffe grunts or snorts to warn neighboring giraffes of the danger. Mother giraffes can whistle to their young calves and cows search for their lost young by making bellowing calls. The calves return their mother's calls by bleating or mewing.