

# GIRAFFE



## notes

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## ZOO

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 body markings. The average height of a male 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 enough the animal only has 7 vertebrae, like most mammals. However, each vertebrae is considerably larger, to support it's extremely long and muscular neck.

We might find that if we stand for a long period of time, we begin to feel light-headed and dizzy.

You may notice the giraffes in the Adelaide Zoo are constantly standing. They have a system of blood vessels that is equipped with valves so that sufficient blood reaches the 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 just short

five minute sleeps throughout the day and night. giraffes are also able to sleep standing up. 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.

When giraffes are born, they have two skin coloured 'horns' that lie flat. During the first week of life these 'horns' move to an upright position and at this stage they become bony. The male's horns are thicker and heavier than those of the female. When fighting, to show their dominance, male giraffes use their 'horns', head and neck.

If you watch a giraffe eating, you will notice it use its tongue a lot. A giraffe's tongue can be extended up to 45 centimetres long and is a dark, almost black colour. This colour is a 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 obtain leaves, which is 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 eight 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 and almost touching the ground when the final contraction

takes place. The birth process usually takes about 3 hours, while the gestation period is about 15 months. The new born giraffe will drink its mothers milk for approximately nine months, while at the same time it will be exploring adult food.

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 and predators.

The Royal Zoological Society of South Australia (Monarto Zoological Park and Adelaide Zoo) has been very successful with the breeding of giraffes. Monarto Zoological Park now has the largest herd of giraffes in Australia. Giraffes from this herd are transported to Adelaide Zoo for some time until eventually returning to the group.

There are normally 2 Giraffes at the Adelaide Zoo at one time. They are secured in the Giraffe house each night to prevent them from falling in the moat in the darkness. 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 complete.

Two automatic water feeders are mounted on the walls of the Giraffe house at around 1.3 metres for the giraffes' use.

