

GIRAFFES: MORE THAN THE SUM OF THEIR PARTS

GIRAFFES ARE WONDERFULLY WEIRD. LET'S TOUR THEIR WEIRDNESS FROM TOP TO BOTTOM.

OSSICONES (HORNS)

The horn-like structures on the giraffe's head are called ossicones. Male giraffes use them when they fight with each other.



EYES

Giraffes have the largest eyes and field of vision of any hooved mammal.

Great vision combined with great height makes giraffes true living watchtowers: If a giraffe sees lions or other dangers and reacts, then its neighbors know that it is time to be watchful.

LEGS

Giraffes have legs that are as long as their necks, about two meters (6 or 7 feet.)

The long legs of giraffes give them long strides that can accelerate up to 56 km (35 miles.)

At the base of giraffe legs are sharp hooves. Giraffes can kick out their legs in all directions. The flying kick of a giraffe can be a lethal weapon to an attacking lion.



SCENT

Giraffes have been noted for their distinctive odor. Chemicals that can kill harmful microbes on giraffe skin cause this scent and may also help prevent mosquito bites.

TONGUE

Giraffes have prehensile tongues, meaning they can wrap them around food items. A giraffe tongue is half a meter (18 inches.)

Giraffes can weave this long, nimble tongue between the sharp thorns of an acacia branch and strip it of leaves.

The bluish coloration of the giraffe's tongue may provide it with built-in protection from the harsh African sun.

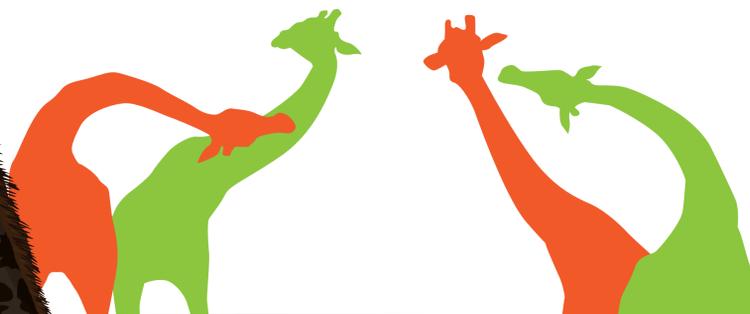


NECK

Giraffes have the longest necks of any animal, reaching two meters or more (six or seven feet.) Despite its long neck, the giraffe has only seven vertebrae, exactly the same number as you do!

A giraffe's neck has many functions:

1. Exclusive restaurant reservations: It allows giraffes to reach food that other herbivores can't.
2. Built-in room with a view: It gives the giraffe a view unparalleled by any other animal on the ground.
3. Built-in weaponry: Male giraffes spar by whipping their necks at each other in combat called "necking."



SPOTS

The spots of Masai giraffes are very pointy. Some are shaped like leaves. Some are shaped like stars.

Every giraffe has a different spot pattern. Scientists recognize individual giraffes by their spots.

Giraffe spots help them hide in shadows. The spots help break up the giraffe's shape. As shadows shift their spots help them "disappear" against the background of bushes and trees.

TAIL

Giraffe tails are about one meter (3 feet.) Their long black tail hairs make effective fly swatters to bat away pesky flies.

Researchers have found that giraffes with missing tail tassels often also have long claw scars on their backsides—souvenirs of failed lion attacks!

POOP

Giraffes digest most of what they eat. Their poop is very small relative to their size.



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