

# Giraffe - Africa's giants

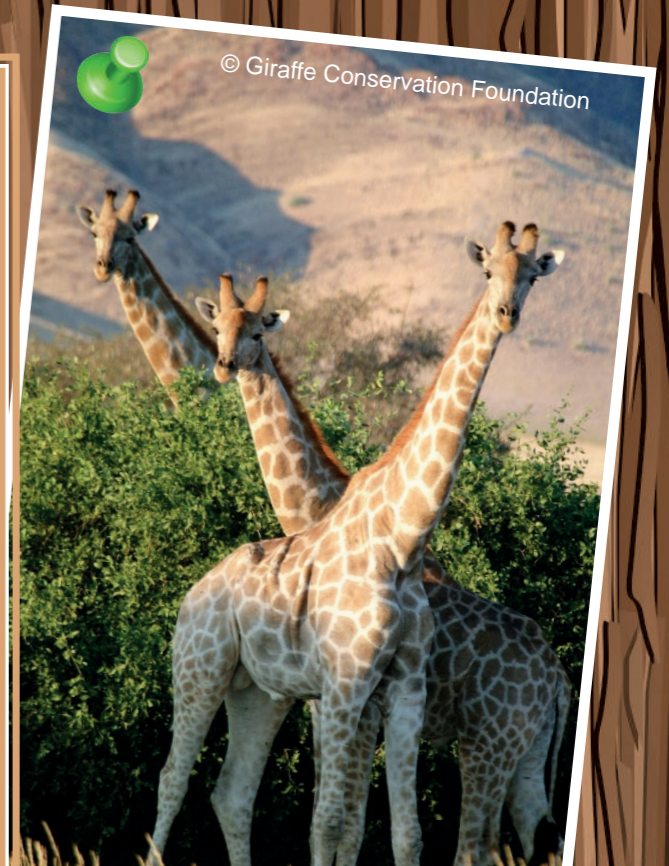
**H**ave you ever seen a giraffe? Don't they look amazingly weird with their gangly legs and long necks? They are easy to spot, sticking out between other animals and poking their heads above trees! Giraffe are in fact the tallest land animals – not only in Africa, but also in the world. Even at birth, they are taller than most humans and as adults they can be as tall as 5 metres!



**G**iraffe use their height to find food high up where no other animals can reach – a true competitive advantage. Their favourite foods are Acacia leaves and fresh shoots, but they also eat other leaves and branches, depending on where they live, the season and what is available. They can eat up to 70kg of food per day and use their strong teeth to chew it up. Their long tongue (approx. 50cm) helps them to strip leaves from branches and they don't mind thorns either.

**W**hat is pretty amazing though is that giraffe do not have to drink regularly. When water is available, they will drink, but if there is no water around they can still survive by getting all the moisture they need from food. Here in Namibia giraffe often eat in the early mornings when there is some dew on the leaves – basically free water.

**I**f you get a chance to check out giraffe poo, do! – It is very small, hard and dry and that's because giraffe have a very efficient digestive system that allows them to get the most out of their food – they take out all the nutrients and moisture and dispose of very little.



**L**ong ago, giraffe could be found all over Africa, but today their range has reduced a lot. Today you can find giraffe in a wide semi-circle starting all the way up in Niger in West Africa, arching through Cameroon, Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia and East Africa, and then down throughout Southern Africa. While all giraffe look quite similar there are nine different subspecies (or types), each with a distinct coat pattern.

**D**id you know that those 'horns' on their heads are not actually horns but that they are called 'ossicones'? Both male and female giraffe have them already at birth, but first they are made of cartilage and aren't attached yet so that they lie flat. This is that they don't injure the mother during birth. It's only later in life that they 'ossify' (this means that they turn into bone) and fuse with the skull. With their long legs, giraffe can run very fast – up to 50km/h, which is almost as fast as cars are allowed to drive in town.

**T**heir long neck is also an advantage when they are looking out for predators – they can spot them from far away and move out of their way. Male giraffe often use their neck for fighting – they swing their necks and can give each other hard knocks.

© Billy Dodson

Did you know that you can recognise a giraffe by its coat pattern? Just like a human fingerprint, no two giraffe have the same pattern. Have a look when you next see giraffe – you will be amazed!



**PAKO**