



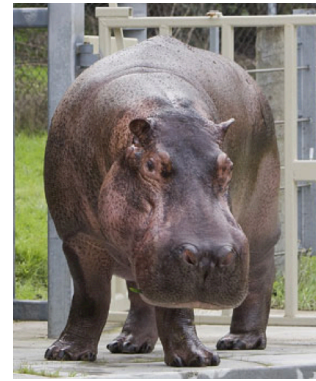
COMMON HIPPOPOTAMUS

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Family: Hippopotamidae

Genus: *Hippopotamus*

Species: *amphibius*



Range: South of the Sahara except along the Nile

Habitat: deep watered rivers with adjacent reed beds and grasslands, saltwater deltas and landlocked springs and lakes

Niche: nocturnal, aquatic during day, terrestrial at night, herbivorous

Wild diet: soft short grasses and other plants (rarely aquatic), fallen fruits, some cultivated crops

Zoo diet: alfalfa, vegetables and horse chow

Life Span: (Wild) 40 yrs

(Captivity) record 54 yrs 4 mo

Sexual dimorphism: M larger and heavier than F

Location in SF Zoo: Across from the Lion House, next to the Black Rhinos

APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

This huge, heavy animal has short legs, enormous head with extremely broad muzzle and a short neck. The body is barrel shaped with the belly carried only a short distance above the ground. Ears, eyes and nostrils are placed high on the head, allow the animal to breathe and keep watch while most of its body remains submerged. Skin, except for a few bristles on the muzzle and tail, is nearly hairless and forms folds on the neck and shoulders. Color is uniform brownish-gray, lightening to pink around the muzzle, eyes and throat. Toes are webbed.

Weight: F 3,000 lbs M 6,500 lbs
HRL: 15 ft
SH: 5.5 ft
TL: 1 in.

Ears and nostrils close when submerged thus allowing them to remain underwater for 3-5 minutes. Skin is glandular and exudes droplets of oily moisture containing a red pigment, which prevents the skin from drying and cracking. (thought by the natives to "sweat blood"). The stomach is complex and 3-chambered but non-ruminating. Incisors and canines are tusk-like and grow continuously with canines meeting inside the lips. Lower incisors are forward-directed spikes and do not meet the upper incisors or serve in clipping grass. These ivory tusks are more valued over elephant tusk since they retain their white coloration. The lower canines projecting upward and outward may reach 20" in length.

STATUS & CONSERVATION

Nile hippopotamuses were once common throughout sub-Saharan Africa, wherever there was enough water for wallowing and grass for grazing. Hunting for their highly prized flesh, their abundance of fat, the superior quality of their tusk ivory and for their hide along with habitat loss has combined to reduce many populations. In some areas where hippos are confined to certain parks have become overpopulated, causing erosion and the disappearance of certain grasses. Wetland protection, pollution control, and hunting restrictions can ensure a bright future for these large animals. They are also killed by farmers for the extensive damage they do to crops. Overall it has become rare in much of its range, but there remains a large population in the upper Nile Valley of East Africa. In 1995 it was listed on CITES Appendix II. One subspecies, *Hippopotamus amphibius tschadensis*, is listed as vulnerable on the IUCN 1996 Redlist.

COMMUNICATION & OTHER BEHAVIOR

Bulls have a loud roar that can be heard over great distances, cattle-like bellowing with open mouth as a threat and a horse-like neighing when alarmed.

The days are spent in water with most feeding occurs at night with animals traveling more than 5-miles from water when foraging. Their feces are deposited in the water, which nurtures abundant growth of tiny plankton that feed the fish that in turn feed humans, otters and crocodiles. Lions and crocs also prey on young hippos. Hippos are poor swimmers. They walk on river bottoms as specific gravity causes them to sink. They forage at night in pastures. When frightened, they run to water for safety.

COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

Adult males compete for control of a herd and the territory it occupies. Fights between bulls are vicious and may last several hours. The large lower canines are their primary weapons in these battles. The herd is basically a matriarchy consisting of 10-30 mothers and young. Older high-ranking bulls form a bachelor group outside the nursery and young males further out. Breeding can occur at any time of year, though there may be seasonal peaks in some areas. Mating and birth usually occur underwater, and the calf can nurse underwater. Calf can swim before it can walk. Females will mate within 12-16 days after weaning a calf. Calves may sun on the back of submerged female.

Estrous Polyestrous 3 days

Gestation: 227 - 250 days (8 mos short for large mammal)

of Mammae: 1 pr

of Young: 1

Sexual Maturity: F ~ 4 -11 yrs / M 7 - 15 yrs

Weaning Age: 8 months

Weight at birth: 60 - 100 lbs

MISCELLANEOUS

Hippos play host to several animals including a cyprinid fish that is sometimes attached temporarily, and may graze on algae and other deposits on the hippo's skin. Terrapins and young crocs may bask on a hippo's back. Hammer-headed storks and cattle egrets use hippos as a fishing perch while oxpeckers eat ticks. A parasitic fluke *Oculotrema hippopotami* is uniquely found attached to the eyes of 90 percent of hippos (up to 41 have been found on a single hippo though the average is 8).

Sources:

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