



Hyaenas

Spotted Hyaena:

Crocuta crocuta



Description:

Short, dirty yellow to reddish coat. Irregular dark brown spots. Short erectile mane.

Habitat:

Grassland and flat open terrain

Distribution:

Africa - South of the Sahara.

Length:

1.37 - 1.67m Shoulder height: 76 - 91cm.

Weight:

45.3 - 79.3kg.

Life Span:

About 25 years.

Diet:

Zebra, antelope and carrion.

The Family Hyaenidae consists of three 'true' hyaenas and one closely related species known as the aardwolf (earth wolf). In fact, it is a small and insect-eating member of the hyaena family and it is found on the plains of southern Africa.

The three other species are the spotted hyaena (illustrated), brown hyaena and striped hyaena. The striped hyaena has a wider distribution than the other species as it is found in northern Africa, southern Asia and India.

The hyaena is a fairly large carnivore, heavily built and hairy, with large powerful jaws and sloping hind quarters. Although somewhat dog-like in appearance, the hyaenas are placed in a family of their own and are more closely related to cats than dogs!

The hyaena's reputation is particularly unsavoury - and this is not helped by its shifty look, sneaky habits, hobbling gait, scruffy coat and evil smell! Its reputation for cowardice is not justified however, and both the brown and spotted hyaena are quite capable of making a kill for themselves even though they feed chiefly on carrion.

The well known 'laugh' belongs to the spotted hyaena, although it also has a number of other calls including a particularly blood curdling howl. All hyaenas are fairly noisy animals with a range of sounds varying from grunts to screams.

Of the three 'true' hyaenas it is the spotted species which is most likely to attack humans, and there are many cases of humans maimed or horribly killed by these animals. It usually hunts in a pack and will attack even a large animal like a zebra. The hyaena will seize the leg or flank of the prey, then hold on with its powerful jaws until the animal is brought down. The rest of the pack help in the attack and it may take ten minutes or so for the prey to be killed.

The striped and spotted hyaenas have very strong front limbs, well adapted for digging. Often, if the hyaena has killed or scavenged more food than it can eat, it will bury it and dig it up at a later date. This habit of

digging up caches of meat has often attracted them to graveyards and native burial grounds, where they will dig up and consume recently buried bodies.

Equipped with its tremendously powerful jaws, the hyaena has little difficulty in cracking even the strongest of bones. It is not at all fussy about its food and will eat the vilest of rotting flesh. They have been known to gorge themselves until violently sick and then, after a brief rest, to return to lap up their own vomit!

The fact that the hyaena is such an unfussy eater is good for its chances of survival and it is therefore not currently threatened as a species. Much of its success is also due to its ability to work within a team, both when hunting and when sharing food. It lives in groups of up to 100 animals, with a dominant female presiding over the group.

Despite all its failings and unpleasant habits, the hyaena serves nature's purpose by helping to dispose of animal bodies. This not only cleans up the terrain but helps to prevent the spread of insects and disease. Even an animal as unsavoury as the hyaena has its uses and provides a 'service', so perhaps we should overlook some of its less loveable characteristics!

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