

Camel

There are six members of the family Camelidae. Two of these are 'true' camels; one living in Asia and the other in Arabia and North Africa. The other four members of the family are the South American 'camels', better known to us perhaps, as llamas.



The

Bactrian

or Asian camel has two humps, a dark brown, thick, long-haired coat and hard feet which enable it to traverse difficult rocky ground. Compared to the domesticated Asian camel, the wild Bactrian is much slimmer and less hairy. It also has a shorter muzzle and ears, smaller feet and smaller, upright humps.

The Asian camels we see in zoos and wildlife parks are the heavier domesticated variety, bred for centuries past as 'beasts of burden', so their appearance can be rather misleading.

It is believed that between 400 and 900 wild Bactrian camels still survive in the vast and inhospitable wastes of the Gobi Desert in Mongolia. The wild population of Bactrian camels has been seriously reduced in recent years because of intense hunting by Man, or the inability of the camels to compete with domestic livestock for the limited supply of food provided by the sparse vegetation of the desert.

Remarkably well adapted to extremes of climates though they are, the camel herds will move from the heat of the stony desert up into the mountainous regions during the hottest months of the year. Here they may be found at heights of 3,000m (10,000ft) or more before they descend back into the desert again with the onset of winter.

The Bactrian camel takes its name from the ancient land of Bactria that once existed to the north-east of Persia.



The one-humped

Arabian

camel (*Camelus dromedarius*) no longer exists in the wild state, although the domesticated form is widely used from North Africa to India as an almost indispensable riding or baggage animal.

This camel has a single hump, a pale yellow-brown coat, woolly hair, and broad feet which help to prevent the animal from sinking into the soft desert sand. The Arabian camel has a longer life expectancy than its Asian relative and may live to the age of 55 years or more.

A special form of riding camel developed from the Arabian species is known as the **dromedary**, but it is quite incorrect to label all one-humped camels as such.

There are probably about 3 million Arabian camels in the world today, and the majority of these live on African soil. In the past however, these camels were introduced to many other parts of the world and some feral Arabian camels may still be seen in Italy, Spain and the desert regions of Northern Australia.

All camels are well adapted to their difficult life in a desert environment. Their eyes have long lashes which protect them from the stinging, blinding, wind-blown sand; the nostrils can be fully or partly closed by the muscular valves to keep out the sand, and the animals are able to go without water for several days. One reliable record shows that a camel team went without water for eight days during a journey in North Africa. Another report tells of a terrible journey made by camels across the waterless deserts of Northern Australia, during which the animals were without water for 34 days! Although most of the camels died, just a few

survived this ordeal - probably by eating vegetation covered with dew.

During the long periods without drinking the camel demonstrates one of its remarkable physiological adaptations. It can lose water from its body tissues equal to a quarter of its entire weight! The emaciated and dehydrated animal will then need to drink at least 20 gallons of water in order to restore its body liquid level and at the same time slake its intense thirst. The amazing thing is that the water is very rapidly absorbed by the body tissues and the camel quickly loses much of its emaciated appearance!

The hump of a camel contains a store of fatty tissue which can be used as a source of food and energy when natural vegetation is in short supply or non-existent. Camels can be bad-tempered and untrustworthy animals capable of inflicting a vicious slashing bite. They can also spit a foul smelling 'soup' of regurgitated food at anyone who irritates them sufficiently. Despite all this, the camel can carry a load of around 181k (400lb) over considerable distances, while the dromedary or riding camel can travel up to 100 miles in one days, so it is not really surprising that camels are regarded as valuable 'beasts of burden'.

The camel family originated in North America, where fossils of many different kinds of camel 'prototypes' have been discovered. These early camels seem to have appeared in a wide range of shapes and sizes, with the smallest being only the size of a rabbit, and the largest standing 4.5m (15ft) at the shoulder!

Eventually, the American camels migrated, some into what we call South America, and others north-west towards present day Alaska. The northward bound animals crossed into Asia over the ancient land bridge which then existed between the continents of America and Asia, and gradually evolved into today's Bactrian camel. The Arabian camel only appeared just over 6,000 years ago. It is believed to have been specially bred from the Bactrian camel as a one-humped domesticated form by tribes in Asia who left no written records of their success. The earliest reference to a one-humped camel appears on a piece of Egyptian pottery dating back to about 3,000 BC.

The

South American camels

did not develop humps, but there can be no mistake about their family origin if the head of the llama is studied and then compared to that of the 'true camel'.

Of the four members of the camel family in South America, two are domesticated and two are wild animals. The domesticated forms are the

llama

and

alpaca.

The llama is used as a pack animal, but it is also bred for its wool and its tender meat. Its dung is used as fuel in areas where there is little timber. The alpaca is bred for its superb wool. Wool from the alpaca was once used to weave robes for the Inca noblemen.

The

guanaco

is a wild member of the South American camel quartet and it still survives in reasonable numbers in the mountains of Peru and Ecuador and in the hills and plains of Patagonia.

Smallest of all camels is the

vicuna.

This animal stands only 90cm (30 ins) at the shoulder and weighs no more than 50kg (110lb). Once widespread on the higher plains of the Andes, the vicuna has been seriously reduced in numbers due to over-hunting. Thanks to careful protection and conservation this species has been brought back from the very brink of extinction, but it must still be regarded as a threatened wild animal in need of full protection.

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