

Spotted Hyena

Crocuta crocuta

Lick Your Plate Clean! - Spotted hyenas have massive heads with powerful jaws and specialized teeth that can bite through bone. Their efficient digestive system allows spotted hyenas to break down entire carcasses including skin, hooves, ligaments, horns, hair and bones. Any parts that are not fully digested are regurgitated in pellets (somewhat like owl pellets).

Females Rule! - Spotted hyenas live in female dominated groups called clans. The females in the group are related to each other but the males are unrelated. Females stay with their natal clan for life. Males disperse when they reach adulthood and join nomadic groups before settling in with a new clan. There is a separate dominance hierarchy for each sex. The highest ranking female and her descendents are dominant over all other members of the group.

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Family: Hyaenidae
Genus: *Crocuta*
Species: *crocuta*

Distribution

Spotted hyenas are found in the grasslands of sub-Saharan Africa and the forests of the Congo Basin.

Habitat

Open terrain such as the grasslands or semi-desert and brush areas where there are large numbers of prey animals. They can also be found at higher altitudes in Ethiopia.

Physical Description

- Spotted hyenas are 47-55 inches (119-140 cm) in length.
- They weigh from 110-176 pounds (50-79 kg); females are larger than males.
- Stand between 27-35 inches (69-89 cm) at the shoulder.
- They have yellowish-brown fur with irregular oval spots and a bushy tail.
- They have large ears and eyes with a short erectile mane on their neck.
- They have thick muzzles with short, powerful jaws and teeth.

Diet

What Does It Eat?

In the wild: Large ungulates, birds, reptiles, insects and carrion in the form of leftovers from lion kills.

At the zoo: Special canine diet and horse knuckle bones.

What Eats It?

Spotted hyena are top predators but are occasionally preyed on by lions or leopards.

Social Organization

Spotted hyenas live in female dominated groups called clans consisting of 30-40 individuals. The females in the group are related to each other but the males are unrelated. Females stay with their natal clan for life. Males disperse when they reach adulthood and join nomadic groups before settling in with a new clan. There is a separate dominance hierarchy for each sex. The highest ranking female and her descendents are dominant over all other members of the group.

Life Cycle

Spotted hyenas are sexually mature at around three years of age with females maturing later than males. Breeding occurs throughout the year. After a gestation of 110 days, females give birth to a litter of one to three relatively well-developed pups. At birth, their eyes are open and they have erupting milk teeth. The pups are covered with dark brown fur without spots. Females raise the pups in communal underground nurseries shared with other females in the clan who have litters. Pups come to the surface to nurse. The females do not regurgitate food for the young. After their first year, pups begin going out to hunt with the adults. They are weaned between 12 and 18 months. Spotted hyenas live about 25 years in the wild and up to 40 years in captivity.

Adaptations

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Calling All Clan Members

Spotted hyenas use a variety of communication techniques. Vocal communication includes whoops, yells, howls, cackles and some sounds inaudible to humans. Some of their vocalizations are loud enough to be heard several miles away. Communication also includes nonverbal behaviors such as body postures. A tail carried up high or over the back indicates a high level of social excitement. Tails down or between the legs communicates subservience or fear. Hyenas also use urine and feces to mark their territory boundaries.

Successful Predators

Although hyenas have a reputation as scavengers, studies indicate that they kill up to 95% of their prey. Lions often intimidate hyenas into relinquishing a kill so it is actually lions that are more frequently the scavengers! If prey is not abundant in an area, spotted hyenas will scavenge more often. Although a single hyena can catch medium sized prey up to 40 pounds without difficulty, cooperative hunting by groups of 10-15 hyenas can catch larger animals such as zebra.

Conservation Connection

IUCN Status: Lower Risk-Conservation Dependent.

The spotted hyena is not currently listed as endangered although their numbers have declined due to hunting, trapping and poisoning.

Fun Facts

- Their jaws are the most powerful in proportion to their size of any mammal.
- Spotted hyenas can eat up to 35 pounds of meat at a single feeding.
- Spotted hyenas are the largest of the four species of hyena.
- External genitalia of females so closely resembles that of males that a blood test is needed to verify the sex of a hyena.
- They are sometimes called "laughing hyenas" due to the unusual "cackle" sound, which is unique to spotted hyena.