

Wildebeest

Fast Facts

Type:

Mammal

Diet:

Herbivore

Average life span in the wild:

20 years

Size:

Up to 4.5 ft (1.4 m)

Weight:

330 to 550 lbs (150 to 250 kg)

Group name:

Herd

Size relative to a 6-ft (2-m) man:

A wildebeest mother and calf graze on the grassy plains of Namibia. Calves can walk shortly after birth, and keep up with the herd within a week.

The ungainly gnu earned the Afrikaans name wildebeest, or "wild beast," for the menacing appearance presented by its large head, shaggy mane, pointed beard, and sharp, curved horns. In fact, the wildebeest is better described as a reliable source of food for the truly menacing predators of the African savanna: lions, cheetahs, wild dogs, and hyenas.

The gnu (pronounced "g-new" or simply "new") is a member of the antelope family, although its heavy build and disproportionately large forequarters make it look more bovine. Gnus can reach 8 feet (2.4 meters) in length, stand 4.5 feet (1.4 meters) tall at the shoulders and weigh up to 600 pounds (272 kilograms). Both males and females grow horns.

Their habitat comprises the grassy plains and open woodlands of central, southern, and eastern Africa, particularly the Serengeti in Tanzania and Kenya. They travel in large herds and are active day and night, grazing constantly.

Their spectacular northward migration in search of greener pastures is dictated by weather patterns, but usually takes place in May or June. It is considered one of the greatest wildlife spectacles on Earth, involving up to 1.5 million wildebeests as well as hundreds of thousands of other animals, including zebra and gazelle.

Up to 500,000 calves are born in February and March each year, at the beginning of the rainy season. Calves learn to walk within minutes of birth and within days are able to keep up with the heard. Gnus can live to be 20 years old.

Information and picture retrieved from

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/wildebeest.html>