

KIDS CORNER

AFRICA'S UGLY FIVE

This document aims to teach you about the 'Ugly Five', which refers to the warthog, wildebeest, hyena, vulture and Marabou stork.

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Who are the Ugly Five?

Not all animals are cute and cuddly. In fact, some are considered downright ugly, but they are beautiful to us no matter what!

The Ugly Five are considered to be the ugliest animals in Africa. These are the warthog, wildebeest, hyena, vulture, and marabou stork.

People who travel to Africa typically hope to see the Big Five — the “must-see” animals that safari leaders are quick to point out. These are the leopard, elephant, buffalo, lion, and rhino. Without the Big Five, African photo safaris wouldn't be anywhere near as popular as they are.

The Big Five get most of the attention, but let's not ignore the Ugly Five, which represent some of Africa's amazing natural diversity.



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The Warthog

The warthog gets its unfortunate name from the “warts” on its large, oddly shaped head. They’re not really warts, but rather bumps that store fat and protect the male warthog’s head when fighting another male over a potential mate.

The warthog earns its spot among the Ugly Five not only for its warts but also for its mismatched tusks. The tusks on the bottom are sharp and straight, while the top ones are long and curved. The warthog’s scattered tufts of hair give it a rather mangy look.

You’ll probably notice some resemblance to pigs. In fact, warthogs are wild members of the pig family, and the same terms are used to identify them: males are boars, females are sows, and their offspring are piglets.

Though they look fierce and sometimes eat earthworms and other small invertebrates, warthogs prefer a diet of plants, grasses, berries, and tubers, which they dig up with their tusks. Warthogs are preyed upon by lions, cheetahs, leopards and hyenas and can run quite fast when trying to escape a predator. They are also hunted by humans for raiding agricultural crops. Warthogs live on savannahs in burrows that shelter them from heat and insulate them against the cold.



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The Wildebeest

It has been said that the wildebeest looks like it's made from spare parts, with a head like a buffalo, a body like an antelope, and a tail like a horse. Its slender back-end seems out of balance with its heavy front-end. It also makes some horrid sounds: loud snorts, grunts and moans.

Wildebeest are herbivores that graze on the grassy African plains, where they are preyed upon by lions, cheetahs, and hyenas. Most female wildebeest give birth within two or three weeks of each other. The fact that there are so many calves at the same time ensures that enough of them will avoid being eaten by predators to grow into adulthood and ensure the survival of the species.

The wildebeest are famous for their great annual migration which begins in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park and crosses into the Maasai Mara in Kenya. Over one million wildebeest (accompanied by zebra and gazelle) travel up to 1,000 miles in the largest animal migration on Earth. The wildebeest begin their journey when the calves are very young - at the beginning of the dry season - and conclude months later when the rainy season begins. They move from place to place in search of food and water, and many of them, especially the youngest and the oldest, will fall to predators along the way.



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The Hyena

The hyena has an oddly sloping back and hind legs that are shorter than the front legs. It looks somewhat like a dog but is actually more closely related to the cat. There are several hyena species, but the one that most people recognise is the largest of them, the spotted hyena. The spotted hyena is also known as the laughing hyena because of its loud vocalisations that sound eerily like human laughter.

It's not only the hyena's appearance that many people find ugly but also its carnivorous feeding behaviour. Hyenas are great hunters, but they prefer to scavenge kills left by other predators. The hyena's powerful jaws and efficient digestive tract enable it to consume and digest every part of the animal that they feed on except for hair, hooves, and horns. Whatever isn't fully digested gets regurgitated as pellets.

Hyenas are found in most African habitats and are very territorial. They spray a strong smelling substance around the borders of their territory to warn other hyenas to steer clear. They live in large dens, in clans of related individuals. Hyena cubs spend their first year in the den, with an adult hyena serving as the babysitter while the mothers hunt and scavenge for food. While the cubs are vulnerable, adult hyenas have no real predator to fear other than humans.



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The Vulture

Africa is home to numerous species of vultures, so they're found in just about every habitat, from woodlands to savannahs, semi-arid deserts, and mountains. Though the vulture can appear rather regal when soaring high above, when viewed up close, many people find it ugly due to its featherless head and neck. The lack of feathers is an adaptation that helps prevent the vulture from picking up bacteria and parasites while feeding on carrion.

Once again, the animal's feeding habits contribute to its "ugly" reputation. Vultures feed on dead animals and rotting meat. However, its scavenging plays an incredibly important role within ecosystems. The vulture's feeding habits actually help prevent the spread of disease among animal and human populations. Vultures are known to clean up about 70% of the carrion in their ecosystems.

There are numerous vulture species, and some even hunt for food, primarily fish and small animals like rodents. One species of vulture even eats fruit!



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The Marabou Stork

The marabou stork is perhaps the oddest looking bird in all of Africa. Its nickname is the “undertaker” because of its black-feathered body. It has a pink (or reddish), mostly bald head adorned with a few scattered feathers. There is a pink or red pouch at the base of its throat, and another less noticeable one at the back of its neck in its ruff of white feathers. Its large tapered beak and long skinny legs seem out of proportion to its body.

These unattractive features are all adaptations that help ensure the marabou stork's survival. Its featherless head and long beak enable it to feed on carrion without picking up bacteria or parasites from rotting meat. The reddish colour of its head protects it from sun-burn and blisters that could get infected when the bird sticks its head into a carcass. The pouches at the front and back of its neck inflate and the feathered ruff stand at attention when the male stork is courting a female or trying to scare off another male.

Like the vulture, the marabou stork plays an important role in cleaning its ecosystem and preventing the spread of disease. It nests and breeds in colonies established in large trees and is found throughout tropical Africa in a variety of habitats.



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Australian Curriculum Mapping

GRADE 6 SCIENCE (ACSSU094): The growth and survival of living things are affected by the physical conditions of their environment.

YEAR 7 SCIENCE (ACSSU112): Interactions between organisms, including the effects of human activities can be represented by food chains and food webs.

YEAR 9 SCIENCE (ACSSU176): Ecosystems consist of communities of interdependent organisms and abiotic components of the environment; matter and energy flow through these systems.

YEAR 10 SCIENCE (ACHGK070): Human-induced environmental changes that challenge sustainability.

SUSTAINABILITY (01.9): Sustainable futures result from actions designed to preserve and/or restore the quality and uniqueness of environments.



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