

Nature's Greatest Moments Animal Antics - Desert (Series 3)

16 x 5 MINUTES

EPISODIC BREAKDOWN

1. Dusty Denizens

The Namib Desert stretching for 1200 kilometres along the north west of Namibia is one of the most inhospitable places on earth. Which makes it all the more remarkable is that the earth's largest land mammal, the Desert Elephant has undergone physiological and behaviour changes in order to survive in this rugged and hostile terrain. To find water here is a major challenge and is very seldom found on the surface. The desert elephants must dig for it, but how they know exactly where, remains a mystery.

2. Run Rhino Run

The Kunene region in Namibia is home to some of the most ancient fauna and flora known to mankind and perhaps one of the most ancient is the Black Rhinoceros. They have adapted well to desert life and their thick layered skin protects them from sharp grasses and thorns. Their thick padded soles are especially useful when running on the hot rocky desert ground. This large odd-toed animal which has been around for more than 30 million years ventured into this harsh desert to find and take refuge from those who would take its life and cut from its 1 ton body a prize weighing no more than 25 kilograms.

3. Ricky Ticky Tarvy

The Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa which is part of a large sand basin is home to the most successful of all the mongooses, the Surricat or as its better known the Meerkat. The sandy floor makes an ideal habitat for these little carnivores. They can dig themselves endless underground burrows to live in and it is the habitat in which they most like to hunt in. A sentry is always on the look out for predators such as the deadly puff adder and martial eagle - survival in this harsh terrain is largely dependent on watching out for each other.

4. Oh Rats!

The Damaraland Desert in Africa is very, very hot and the best place to be is in the deep shade, with the naked mole rat. Their habitat of choice is anywhere from 2 to 3 meters below the surface. They constantly expand their labyrinth of tunnels and at the same time searching for roots and tubers for the whole family to eat. The queen naked mole rat is in charge. She is the only one allowed to mate and by default the only one who gets to suckle the young. She uses the complex system of communal chambers to keep an eye on all her subjects and be alerted if other females

try and mate. Life for the queen is one long struggle between running a tight monarchy and the never ending job of raising a large family.

5. Desert Ungulates

Ungulates are by nature herbivores and depend on all sorts of vegetation to survive not only as a primary food source but also as a vital source of moisture. Ungulates that live in a desert have had to adopt various strategies in order to survive. Springboks tend to stay in the dry river beds where their preferred grass is more abundant. The gemsbok's brain is cooled by the blood returning from the white facial area above the nasal passages. The dainty klipspringer has hollow hairs to insulate their body, so when outside temperatures soar or plummet, its own body temperature remains unchanged. Ungulates that have been forced to live in the earth's harshest regions have an evolutionary choice, adapt or die.

6. Cold blood in a Hot Place

Reptiles are cold blooded which means that their body temperature changes with their surroundings. Reptiles need warmth in order to be active but can be in danger of over-heating as well. Reptiles adjust their body temperature by moving in and out of shade. Once their body temperature has reached its normal activity range the reptile darts about in search of food. All living creatures are considered prey and this communal weaver nest is no exception. An egg shell is punctured to swallow the yolk and liquid and the shell is unceremoniously tossed aside.

7. Whale Tale

A Southern Right Whale is 17 metres long and weighs in at 65 tons, about 800 times more than an average man. Unlike most other whales, Southern Right Whales have no dorsal fin but have a huge tail called a fluke, which acts as their calling card. They migrate twice a year from the frigid waters of Antarctica to the warm waters of South Africa to give birth. Calves are born with little blubber and need a warmer climate to help them survive.

8. Whale of a Time

To us humans, the underwater world is silent, but in reality it is alive with sound. Whales call each other over distances of 24 km, selecting the exact frequency window to carry their sound most effectively. It is thought that males use higher frequency notes to attract a female and show aggression towards rival males with lower pitched notes. Experts have differing points of view about the meaning of breaching. Some believe it is serious communication between whales while others believe it is just ridding its body of excess lice and barnacles.

9. Boomslang

Having larger eyes than any other snake in Africa, the highly venomous Boomslang, or Tree Snake, has earned its name by being a highly effective tree hunter. The flap necked chameleon has no defense against the Boomslang, as its long fangs sink deep into the chameleon. A brightly coloured male arrives on the scene and they writhe in battle until they both drop to the ground. The winner glides his way back up the tree to the female. He may think he's won but female

Boomslang could decide to retain his sperm without using it for a couple of seasons and in fact she might not use it at all.

10. Cobra

The renowned hood and its notorious spit are but two of the legendary characteristics that make the Cobra one of the most recognised snakes on earth. But hood and spit aside, the cobra has a lot more positive features than meets the eye. Most snakes are as mobile in water as out but being cold blooded and needing warmth to operate prefer being dry. The West African cobra is an agile, dangerous tree climber and is always on the prowl for a careless bird. The Cape Cobra likes nothing better than to feed on bird's egg and is a regular, but unwelcome, guest at a communal weaver nest. In a last gasp effort the birds gang up to try scare the snake away, but this is a cobra doesn't scare easily.

11. Long in the Neck

The name Giraffe comes from the Arabic word "Zirafah" which means "the tallest of all". Not only are giraffe's necks long but so are their legs which also help place their head further away from the ground. For this reason, drinking presents a whole new challenge to the giraffe. They must get their head to the water by spreading their legs precariously and lowering their body. Its long neck amazingly contains the same amount of vertebra as a human's, there are a series of one way valves that regulate blood flow to its head. Tick and parasites are some of the many hazards of living in Africa it's the job of the ox-pecker to keep the giraffe clean.

12. Relatively Speaking

The chimpanzee falls within the family group know as "Hominidae" which they share with gorillas and humans. The fact that a chimpanzee shares close on 99% of our genes makes it difficult to understand how they fell on the other side of the man, animal divide. The chimpanzee social organisation is the most complex of all the apes and to a point even comparable to human hunter gatherer societies. The great separator between man and beast is man's ability to use tools. In the past chimps were found across the full length of the African Continent and their population exceeded several million. Now there are not more than two hundred thousand left in the world.

13. The Power Brokers

Baboon society is an incredible web of politics and alliances. The first lessons in understanding it starts early in life. The females are the majority and centre of the web. Their place in society is fixed at birth and almost never changes. Males, on the other hand, live their lives in a power struggle – trying to climb the ladder to key positions. And the little guys must always make way for the big guys. Like so much that goes on in baboon society, play has subtle, hidden functions. It helps maintain friendships – and it reminds each individual of how important, or not, they are.

14. Designer Coat

The stripes of the zebra are completely unique, they act like fingerprints and serve as individual identification documents, especially helpful for young zebras to pick out their mother in a crowd. Contrary to how it looks to humans, Zebra stripes are perfect camouflage in the African bush, they

completely confuse their predators vision, especially considering its main enemy, the lion, is colour blind. So next time you call a zebra just a donkey with stripes remember there's a lot more to his designer coat than meets the eye.

15. Fat Cat

A male lion is supposed to be the King Of The Jungle but in fact it's the Queen who actually does all the work and should be chief contender for the crown. A pride of females have the responsibility of the caring for their cubs, the male's duty ended after mating. When hunting the lionesses are active, trying to go unnoticed, waiting for the right moment to attack. The King is resting, hoping she will catch him some lunch. Thanks to the lionesses the cubs feast hungrily. They do not waste time because they know that when the male decides to join them they will have to move away and let him have his fill. He is, after all, the King.

16. Sweating Blood

The river horse, or hippo as it is more commonly referred to, is the only ungulate that is a true amphibian. They are aggressive by nature and are not shy to exhibit this should a neighbouring crocodile venture too close. The hippo's sweat contains a red pigment, and when the pores on its skin exude moisture the light is reflected through these droplets and they appear red – like blood. The pink secretion is actually a very effective sunscreen. Dominant bulls are territorial, occupying territories in which they are assertive and where they have exclusive mating rights. Only the tough survive, there is no room for weakness.