

CREATURE FEATURE

the spotted hyena

by Cyril Brass



They hunt and kill, scavenge and steal.

Spotted Hyenas are the most abundant carnivore on the African continent establishing territories wherever plentiful animal resources are suitable for eating; dead or alive.

Spotted Hyenas are named for the black and brown spots dotting their reddish brown to tan short hair. With a sturdy build, high shoulders, sloping back and long muscular limbs, these animals have the physical appearance of dogs and wolves but are more closely related to mongooses and meerkats. They have a distinctive bear-like gait due to their front legs being longer than their hind legs.

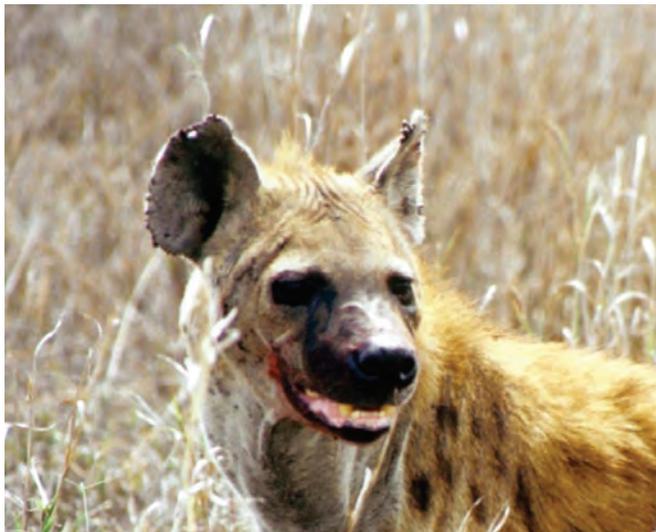
These carnivorous mammals are powerful predators hunting mostly at night for small to large ungulates such as impala, zebras and wildebeest. They will chase their prey until the animal is exhausted for an easy catch.

Possessing a highly acidic digestive system, the hyenas are able to consume all parts of the animal; flesh, teeth, horns and hooves. They have powerful jaws with razor sharp teeth adapted for cutting and ripping the flesh of their kill and premolars for crushing bones. Any non-digestible parts like hair are vomited back up in the form of pellets. Hyenas are also scavengers. As well as being able to eat carrion their amazing digestive system is able to handle the bacteria found in the rotting carcass.

Scavengers are extremely valuable in the African wild because they clean up dead animal remains, preventing diseases from spreading throughout the wildlife species in the area. You might call the hyenas the garbage collectors of the African savannas.

Spotted Hyenas are skillful opportunists, taking the path of least resistance. They prefer to scavenge over hunting for food. Possessing an acute sense of smell, they are able to detect decaying carcasses or fresh meat which can be several kilometers away. Their nose leads the way to their next easy meal.

Hyenas are intelligent creatures, not at all like the cowardly creatures shown in the movie, "The Lion King". In the daytime, hyenas use vultures circling in the sky as a "GPS" spotting system, pinpointing where the kill is located. When they see the vultures volplaning to earth, the hungry hyenas race to that spot.



I have witnessed this interesting phenomenon take place in the Serengeti plains of Tanzania. While on an afternoon excursion, we spotted a cheetah, which had made a

recent kill. The cheetah was dragging the small antelope, probably a gazelle, into a thick patch of tall grass to hide its precious catch.

Within minutes, vultures began appearing high in the clear blue sky circling over the fresh meat. One by one, they descended to the ground landing close to the cheetah and its meal.

Annoyed by the feathered intruders, the cat made several short movements towards the vultures, pushing the scavenger birds further from the scene.

Then someone in our vehicle spotted a hyena approaching in the distance, with a quick pace and focused direction. Not hesitating, the hyena moved right in taking away the fresh kill from the cheetah. Surprisingly, the cheetah made no attempt to defend its prey and backed away watching its hard earned food slip away. After watching the hyena eat the prey for several minutes, the cheetah walked away in defeat.

Spotted Hyenas will take the kills from cheetahs and leopards at every opportunity, but they have a much more difficult time with lions, usually resulting in defeat. So the hyenas wait until the lions devour what they can, and then they move in to clean up the remaining scraps.

Hyenas are social creatures, communicating with one another through distinct calls and postures. Spotted Hyenas are also referred to as Laughing Hyenas due to their haunting vocalizations resembling a hysterical human laughter.

The Spotted Hyena ... an intelligent creature ... a skillful hunter ... an opportunistic scavenger. **ca**

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