

The Perissodactyls or Odd-toed Ungulates

The Perissodactyls or Odd-toed Ungulates are large, herbivorous mammals which run on the tips of their toes, the toenails having become modified to form hoofs. Although their ancestors originally had five digits on each limb, this number has gradually been reduced in the course of evolution. The middle finger or toe is always the largest of those which remain.

tapirs

Tapirs are the most primitive surviving members of this group. They are forest animals. With their squat outline they are well adapted for pushing through thick bushes, while the long, mobile upper lip, not unlike a miniature elephant's trunk, is useful when its owner browses.

Unexpectedly, for odd-toed ungulates, tapirs have four toes on the forelimb, only the thumb being absent. On their hind feet, however, both the big toe and the little toe have been lost.

The Brazilian Tapir is found from the north of South America to Northern Argentina. It likes to live along the banks of lakes and rivers where it can escape from its only important enemies, Man and the Jaguar, by dashing through the undergrowth and diving into the water. The female normally bears only one spotted young at a time, which is able to trot at her heels soon after it is born.

rhinos

The rhinoceroses are odd-toed ungulates which have become adapted to escape the attacks of carnivores by virtue of their weight and armoured skin rather than by running. Once they were to be found in North America, Europe, Asia and Africa, but today only five species remain and rhinos are confined to Africa and Southern Asia.

The Indian Rhinoceros is the largest of the Asian rhinos. The single horn which it bears on its nose grows from the skin and is made of the

same substance as are human hair and fingernails. A rhino's horn continues to grow until the animal is quite old, but zoo rhinos often rub their horns against their bars, and because of this wear, rarely have horns of great length.

The skin is very tough and is, in places, an inch thick. In this species it is marked by many rounded tubercles like rivet-heads.

In its native territory of Assam, Bengal and Eastern Nepal, the Indian Rhino lives in swampy areas of tall grass. It was once abundant, but now only a few hundred remain. Over the years it has been ruthlessly hunted, mainly for its horn, which is believed in the Orient to have medicinal properties. The rarity of the Indian Rhino makes breeding successes at Whipsnade, where two young have been born and successfully reared, of great importance.

The Black Rhinoceros is the more common of the two African species but even this is decreasing in numbers. Perhaps ten thousand of the species still survive. In spite of its name it is not really black but grey-brown. It has two horns and is the most pugnacious of all rhinos. The upper lip is pointed, and with this it browses on the bitter and prickly branches of acacia bushes. The Black Rhino has been much hunted for its horns and is extinct over much of its former range. Most of those which survive are in East Africa.

The White Rhinoceros is perhaps a little lighter in colour than the Black Rhino, but may owe its name to the Boer word which describes its square, wide lips. Adults may weigh about as much as an Indian Rhino, and hunters in South Africa a hundred years ago mentioned specimens well over 6 feet tall at the shoulder. The head is elongated and the leading surface of the foremost of the two horns is flattened. A pronounced hump is apparent about the shoulder. White Rhinos are usually inoffensive and live in small family groups in grassy areas. They are found in two widely separated parts of Africa. Some live in game reserves in Natal, while the remainder live hundreds of miles to the north on the west bank of the Nile in Uganda, the Sudan and the Congo. In recent years members of this species have been introduced to a number of game reserves in areas in which they had become extinct or which were outside their former range.

horses

The wild horses and their relatives are odd-toed hoofed animals in which all digits save the middle finger and toe have been lost. Having long, slender legs and very light feet, these animals are admirably adapted for running. All living domestic horses are derived from the various kinds of

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