

Dazzling Zebras

Do you know that a group of zebras is called a dazzle or a zeal? Learn more about these fast and beautifully patterned animals, including the latest research conducted to explain why zebras are striped.

Preparation & How-To's

- Print and post some [photos of zebras](#) or [display them on the TV](#).
- Ask participants if they have seen zebras at a zoo or in the wild, and to share their experiences.
- Read the program about zebras aloud.
- Share the fun information about other patterned animals in the More Markings section.



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Introduction

Zebras have long fascinated people due to their striking, unique, black and white stripes. This African animal is related to both horses and donkeys. These three types of animals make up the *Equidae* family of mammals.

There are three species of zebra living today. These include the Grévy's zebra (the largest and most threatened of the three), the plains zebra (also known as the common zebra), and the mountain zebra. All zebras have barrel-chested bodies with long faces, manes, slender legs, and hooved feet.

Zebra is an English name that began usage around 1600. The origin of the name is believed to stem from the Latin *equiferus*, which means "wild horse." Zebras are classified as an endangered species.

Diverse Habitats

Zebras are native to the plains of Africa. They thrive in a variety of habitats, including grasslands, savannas, woodlands, and mountainous regions. Zebras are grazers and eat a range of vegetation, such as grasses, bark, fruits, and roots. Their robust digestive systems allow them to cull nutrients from grasses with limited nutritional value. Because of this, they can eke out nutrition even when the pickings are slim.

The animals travel long distances each year—sometimes hundreds of miles—in their constant search for food and water. Research shows that zebras remember their migration routes from previous years and return to spots that offer ideal foraging. Zebras, particularly plains zebras, need regular water and aim to stay within several miles of the nearest water source. However, Grévy's zebras can go up to a week without drinking.

During the day, zebras sleep up to seven hours and do so standing up. At night, however, they sleep lying down.

Life in the Herd

These majestic creatures are herd animals. Grévy's zebras tend to live in more fluid social groups. In contrast, plains and mountain zebras tend to organize themselves with several mares (females) living with one stallion (male) and their foals (babies) in more stable families. Single males might also live together before they begin to seek out females for mating.

Foals are typically born with brown and white stripes, and the brown fur darkens to black as they age. A baby zebra stands, walks, and runs just minutes after birth. It needs to stick close to its mother's side to stay safe from predators.

Lions are a zebra's main predator. Zebras will typically deter attacks by running and pivoting to change direction. They are fast animals that can reach a top speed of 40 miles (65 kilometers) per hour. They also sometimes kick and bite, mainly when attacked by smaller animals like hyenas or wild dogs. Staying in herds helps them discourage predators. Those that stray from the pack are in the most danger from attacks.

How and Why the Zebra Got Its Stripes

Scientists have a variety of theories about why zebras evolved to be striped. Zebras' geometric lines might create an optical illusion for color-blind animals such as lions. When zebras are huddled in a group, their stripes blend, so they appear like one giant, intimidating creature. Launching an attack is challenging if a predator can't distinguish where one zebra ends and another begins.

Another idea is that the offset black and white fur might aid in temperature regulation. Their black stripes absorb considerably more heat, making them hotter than the white fur. This temperature differential may aid in cooling by promoting sweat evaporation. Additionally, some researchers believe that each animal's patterning differentiates it from all other zebras. Just like fingerprints, a zebra's markings are unique.

Another recent study proposes that zebras' stripes repel irritating—and disease-spreading—insects. Biting flies (which feed on zebras' blood) find high-contrast black and white lines unnerving and disorienting. The pattern creates an optical illusion that upsets the blood-suckers' vision and depth perception. Scientists have witnessed insects flying close to zebras but moving away just before landing.

More Markings

Below is a roundup of animals with distinct fur or skin and the reasons scientists think they have their spots, stripes, and other markings.

- **Boa constrictor:** Their skin is covered in various ovals, circles, diamonds, and other shapes. These patterns camouflage them.
- **Butterfly:** These insects have a variety of colors and patterns on their wings that might help deter predators and attract mates.
- **Cheetah:** These big cats have spots to help them blend into their environment. This allows them to surprise prey when hunting and nap during the day without being noticed.
- **Giraffe:** Giraffes use their spots for camouflage and to communicate. Studies show that giraffes recognize each other using these patterns, which are inherited from their mothers.

- **Jaguar:** The spots on jaguars are often called rosettes. They keep jaguars hidden, which helps them surprise their prey.
 - **Leopard:** Leopards also use their spots to camouflage themselves to better sneak up on the animals they want to eat.
 - **Tiger:** Stripes help tigers hunt by hiding them from their prey until they choose to attack.
 - **Turtle:** Marine and land turtles have a variety of patterns and colors on their shells. These patterns are thought to provide camouflage to protect against predators and play a role in attracting mates.
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