



Wildlife Notes

Oryx (*Oryx gazella*)

Identification

Also known as gemsbok, the oryx is visually striking antelope with distinct markings and long, straight horns (30–40 inches) grown by both sexes. Approximately 46 inches at the shoulder and six feet in length, oryx often weigh near 500 pounds.

The thick tan-colored hide covering the oryx is marked on the face with symmetrical black and white triangular patches and broad stripes from the horns over the eyes to a white muzzle. Black stripes continues down the neck and around the underbody, forming bands around all four legs. A black stripe also extends along the spine from the short black mane at the neck to the black tasseled tail.

Natural Habitat

Oryx are found in desert, steppe and savanna ecosystems of Africa and the Middle East at elevations between 3,500–4,800 feet. The Chihuahuan Desert in White Sands Missile Range is remarkably similar to the arid, native habitats where oryx subsist with very little water.

History in New Mexico

It seemed an idea that's time had come—to create a sustainable population of big game where hunting opportunities in New Mexico were limited.

The idea originated in the late 1940's when Frank C. Hibben, an avid big-game hunter and then chairman of the New Mexico State Game Commission, remembered hunting the African oryx in arid deserts similar to regions of southern New Mexico.

Subsequently, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF) from 1969–1977 released 93 captive bred oryx onto White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) in the Tularosa Basin.

Similar to Africa, the Tularosa Basin has a large predator, the native mountain lion, that was expected to prey on oryx and help maintain a localized and healthy population—hopefully of about 600 animals. But lack of predation and rapid reproduction by this exotic species quickly established a population that spread into surrounding areas, peaking at 4,000–6,000 animals by 2001.

Already by the mid-1990s, the overabundance had prompted NMDGF and WSMR to develop a management plan to address the spreading population. Working with private landowners and public-land managers from the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, USDA Forest Service and BLM, population management hunts now are conducted regularly and licenses issued periodically to hunt oryx beyond the boundaries of WSMR.



Current oryx populations are estimated at 3,000–4,000 animals, more toward the planned target of 1,500–2,500 animals now in place.

Behavior

Oryx primarily live in herds of 10–40 animals, comprised of one dominant male, a harem of females and a few nondominant males. Many males remain solitary and defend a sole territory by marking it with dung deposits.

Smaller herds of females with young (nursery herds) or of males only (bachelor herds) also occur and vary in size, depending on the water and forage available.

When large areas of fresh vegetation become available, oryx frequently form large herds with a dominant hierarchy based on age and size.

This hierarchy extends to calves that also test one another in games of strength to establish dominance.

On occasion large numbers of the herd participate in what is termed a 'tournament'—running in circles, galloping suddenly for short bursts and clashing horns.

With excellent hearing and smell, oryx are believed to communicate using sounds and scents, including olfactory messages from scent glands in the hooves and sniffing urine (to determine the fertility of cows).

When threatened, oryx often throw the head back and extend horns over the back to appear larger. If this intimidation fails, the horns are sometimes used to gore and 'forklift' (pierce) foes. As a result, most predators avoid the risk of being impaled and pursue the young or infirm instead.

Diet

Oryx usually feed in the early morning and late afternoon when dew on vegetation provides moisture, enabling them to survive days or even weeks without another water source.

Oryx have teeth adapted to cut coarse desert grasses, but during drought or when grasses are scarce, oryx will browse shrubs and dig for succulent roots or bulbs.

Oryx in New Mexico primarily eat desert grasses, yucca, buffalo gourds, mesquite bean pods, and tumbleweeds.

Breeding

Alpha bull Oryx mate with multiple females when receptive, while solitary males attempt to herd cows into their territory if possible.

Although breeding in Africa is annual and timed to calve during the wet season — the rut in New Mexico's less harsh climate is year round. Females sexually mature young (1–2 years) and can become fertile soon after giving birth. Given the frequent estrus cycle females produce calves regularly at nine-month intervals.

Gestation lasts 8-½ months, after which the female leaves the herd to give birth to one calf. Newborns weigh 20–30 pounds and are inconspicuously colored brown at birth. The calf is hidden in grasses or bushes for a few weeks, and the mother returns 2–3 times daily to nurse. Calves develop dramatic markings at 4 months and are weaned at 6–9 months. At that time, most young males will leave the birth herd.

The average life span of an oryx is approximately 18 years in the wild.

Conservation

In Africa gemsbuck (*Oryx gazella*) are considered threatened over much of its range. Although the current population of approximately 375,000 animals may not seem alarmingly low — encroachment by humans, overgrazing by livestock, unregulated hunting, habitat destruction and climate change pose considerable threats.



New Mexico Department of Game and Fish www.wildlife.state.nm.us
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