

HOW MANY?

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How many different types of animals are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible?

If you were asked to name a book that mentions lions, cheetahs, crocodiles, hippos, and hyenas, your thoughts might turn to *Tarzan* or some other such exotic tale. Bears, jackals, monkeys, and panthers are the domain of *The Jungle Book*. All these animals are also found, however, in the Bible.

There are around a hundred different types of mammals, birds, reptiles amphibians, fishes, and invertebrates mentioned in the Bible. (It's difficult to give a precise number because there are several words that may be synonyms for the same creature, as well as words that scholars are not certain even refer to animals.)

Since the setting of the Hebrew Bible is the Holy Land and its environs, the animals described in the Bible are native to that regional confluence of western Asia and northern Africa. Thus, there is no mention of pandas, penguins, or polar bears in the Bible. There are some exceptions, however; monkeys and **peacocks** from the Indian subcontinent appear in the Bible.

The reason for this is that they were shipped in to adorn King Solomon's palace. There is also a possible reference to the **giraffe**, which was likewise sometimes exported from Africa and shipped internationally as gifts for kings. Aside from such exceptions, the animals of the Bible are from the region of Israel.



Giraffe, *Giraffa camelopardalis*
Nvassa 1921. Sc#108

However, one cannot read a modern book on the fauna of Israel to gain an understanding of Biblical wildlife. There are several species that live in the modern State of Israel that are introduced species and did not live there in Biblical times and, thus, do not appear in the Bible. Mynah birds, nutria (beaver-like rodents), and the ubiquitous brown rat are plentiful in Israel today, but they did not live there during Biblical times—or at least they are not mentioned in the Bible.

Conversely, many other species mentioned in the Bible lived there in Biblical times but subsequently disappeared from the area. These include **hippopotami**, crocodiles, hartebeest, cheetahs, bears, and lions. Some other such animals have been bred in captivity and were subsequently released back into the wild, such as ostriches, Mesopotamian fallow deer, and the magnificent **oryx** antelope.

Because the Land of Israel bridges Europe, Africa, and Asia, it was home to a unique combination of animals. It was the northernmost part of the range of many African animals, such as crocodiles and hippopotami; it was the southeastern part of the range of many European animals, such as fallow deer and wolves; and it was the westernmost part of the range of many Asian animals, such as the Asiatic cheetah.

In addition, due to its location on the eastern side of the Mediterranean, it is part of the migration route for countless birds passing between Europe and Africa. Thus, the range of animals found in the Bible is a unique combination that would not be found anywhere else in the world.



Indian Peafowl, *Pavo cristatus*
Bahrain 2003. Sc#590b



Hippopotamus amphibius
Maldives 1996. Sc#2183c

Since specific species are limited to particular regions of the world, historically people who did not live in Biblical lands were not familiar with the animals of the Bible. Consequently, they transposed the names of Biblical animals to their local equivalents. Thus, the *zvi* of the Bible is the **gazelle**, but in Europe, where there were no gazelles, the name *zvi* was transferred to the deer.

The *shu'al*, a species of which Samson captured 300 and tied fire brands to their tails, was identified in Europe as a **fox**, leading Bible critics such as Voltaire to mock the notion that it would be possible to find 300 members of such a solitary loner as the fox. However, as other verses indicate, the *shu'al* of the Scripture is actually the **jackal**, a relative of the fox that gathers in large packs. But because there are no jackals in Europe, people there had long transposed the name *shu'al* to the fox.

At the Biblical Museum of Natural History in Israel, the complex zoogeography of the Bible is fascinatingly reflected in the reactions of the visitors to the animals on exhibit. American visitors are familiar with bears and wolves, but they tend to confuse the **crocodile** with the **alligator**. Europeans are familiar with the fallow deer, but are often mystified by the mongoose.

South African visitors are very familiar with many of the animals on exhibit, including the **hyrax** (the Biblical “coney” or “rock badger,” an animal that bewilders people from Europe and America, but which is well known to those who have been to Cape Town), but they have never seen bears or wolves. And while everyone is familiar with the lion, cheetah, and hippopotamus, it comes as a shock to realize that these creature used to roam wild in the Holy Land—at a time when the country was much more densely covered in forests and swamps.

Perhaps the Bible can indeed referred to as *The Jungle Book*.



Oryx leucoryx & *Gazella gazella* ssp. *acaciae*
Israel 2018, Sc#2173b&c



Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*
USA 2002, Sc#3036a



Jackal, *Canis adustus*
Ifni 1957, Sc#82



Alligator mississippiensis
USA 1971, Sc#1428



Crocodylus niloticus
Liberia 19917, Sc#1240k



Rock Hyrax, *Procavia capensis*
Lesotho 1988, Sc#655