

Conversation With A Hippo

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(With tips and information from Taronga Zoo staff, Zookeeper Joseph Haddock)

Imagine that one morning when you woke up and looked into the mirror, you saw a big flat head, bulgy eyes and teeny-weeny rubbery ears. Not only that, but you were nearly totally bald, except for a few bristles around your mouth and ears.

When you looked down, you could see that your body was shaped a bit like a potato. When you looked lower still, you realised that you had short, thick, stumpy legs and big boofy four-toed feet (which *refused* to fit into any of your shoes).

Even stranger, you had developed an enormously round bottom, complete with an itchy-bitsy tail. There seem to be a few bristles around your tail as well.

Then, what if you went downstairs to breakfast, tearing the staircase apart with your newly massive body. And in the kitchen you discovered that you could fit entire boxes of cereal into your mouth because you had the most gigantic mouth of any creature in the whole world (besides a whale, that is).

Finally, when you tried to drink some juice, you couldn't get anywhere near the glass because you had a couple of thick, curved, sharp canine teeth jutting out of your lower jaw.

If these things ever happen to you, there's no need to worry. You've simply turned into a hippo! (That's short for *hippopotamus*.)

Few animals are as easy to recognise as a hippopotamus. If you ever meet one, here's some advice: never let a hippo sit on your lap. And I mean *never* - even if there are no more seats left in the cinema. Hippos are one of the heaviest land mammals on the planet (elephants are the heaviest). If a hippo sat on you for just one second, you'd probably be dead.

Think about this: the size of an adult hippo can be around the same size as a car. Not only that, it can weigh up to 3,200 kilograms (that's 3.2 tonnes). Think about how much *you* weigh. How many kids your size would it take to weigh as much as one hippo?

Anyway, the other day I was strolling along, and who should I meet? A hippo! That's right, I met a hippo and we had a little talk. And this is how the conversation went.

Mr Hippo, Where Do You Roam?

Well, it's pretty unusual to meet a hippo in an Australian street. You're more likely to find us in East Africa.

Hippos are sometimes alone while grazing (eating), but the rest of the time we prefer to be in a herd. That's our special group of about 10-15 other hippos.

Mr Hippo, Tell Me About Your Home.

I don't live in a cave like a bear, and I don't dig out a den like a wolf. Water is my home.

Most hippos live in rivers; others live in lakes or swamps. Hippos that can't spend their days in water are in danger of dying. Why? Hippos can't sweat. Staying in the water during the daytime is the best way for us to cope with the African heat. (We also have special glands in our skin that secrete a red sticky substance. This red stuff makes us look as though we're bleeding. In fact it protects us against the sun.)

Mr Hippo, Where Do You Sleep?

I sleep in the river (or lake or swamp) standing up. My nostrils poke out above the water so that I can breathe. I have a nice thick layer of blubber beneath my skin, which keeps me warm, no matter how cold the water gets. I can also sleep underwater and rise up to the surface to take breaths and then sink back down to the bottom - all without even waking up!

I don't sleep at night the way humans do. Instead, I snooze during the day. In between naps, I swim around. By the way, I'm a very good swimmer, thanks to my lovely webbed toes. Sometimes I run along the bottom of the river just for fun. How? I can close my ears and nostrils so that no water gets in, and I can also hold my breath a long time - for as long as 15 minutes. Impressive, don't you think?

Mr Hippo, What Do You Eat?

No sausages for me, thanks. I'm a *herbivore* - an animal that doesn't eat any meat. I stick to eating grass, around 40 kilograms of it each night.

And there's never any washing-up to do after a meal because I have all the cutlery I need built into my mouth. But I don't use my teeth like other grass-eating animals. I have hard muscular lips (not soft lips like yours), which I use to pluck grass out of the ground.

My mouth is so wide that I can pluck out lots of grass at one time - kind of like a hippopotamic lawn mower. Instead of using a fork, I shovel the grass into my mouth with my tongue. Then the molar teeth at the back of my mouth grind it into sweet, grassy mush.

Speaking of teeth, you might be wondering what a non-meat eater is doing with canine teeth as big as mine. These huge tusks are not there for decoration. We do use them, but not for eating. We use them for fighting.

Mr Hippo, How Do You Fight?

We don't like hippos from other herds visiting our home, so we put up fence to keep them out. But a hippo-fence isn't made of wire or wood. It's made from huge piles of poo deposited by the boss of the herd (the *dominant male*).

If you think that's strange, listen to what happens if a trespasser enters our territory. First, the dominant male and the intruding hippo face each other, eye to eye, for an angry yawning show. If the intruder lowers his head, the fight is avoided, but if he keeps his head up, they go into the next phase!

Phase two involves the hippos "facing" each other from the opposite end - that is, bum to bum. Then they do something with their tails that you won't believe. A hippo's tail is just a flat, short little thing with a few bristly hairs sticking out of it. It looks harmless, but don't be fooled. That tail is a weapon of mass stinkification!

They hippos start shaking it to and fro, so vigorously that it acts as a propeller and creates a spray of poo. At this point, the intruder may give up and go away (as you would if you had hippo poo being sprayed at you) but if it chooses to stay for the poo-shower, then it's on to phase three: the fight.

And when hippos fight, watch out! Our canine teeth are among the largest of all mammals. They're big and long and we keep them razor-sharp by rubbing them against the upper teeth. So beware: they can inflict horrendous injuries. Sometimes those giant canine teeth do so much damage that one or both of the fighting hippos end up dead.

Mr Hippo, Why Do You Bite?

We bite to protect our territory and our babies. If we sense danger, or if we are cornered, injured or afraid, we attack. We even attack humans who seem to be threatening us. Some people say that hippos are responsible for more deaths by an animal than any other African creature! But we only hurt when we think we're being threatened.