

Wildlife and Fauna of Gambia

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Introduction

The Gambia, though Africa's smallest mainland nation, is a tapestry of vibrant ecosystems and remarkable biodiversity. Bordered almost entirely by Senegal and anchored by the life-giving Gambia River, the country's limited geographic footprint belies the richness of its wildlife heritage. From the Atlantic coastline and tidal mangroves to the sweeping savannas and inland forests, The Gambia hosts a surprisingly broad spectrum of flora and fauna, making it an unexpected jewel for

naturalists, ecologists, and travelers alike.

Central to the nation's ecological wealth is its diverse network of habitats. The convergence of marine environments, estuaries, wetlands, grasslands, and gallery forests creates niches for a wide variety of creatures. These habitats support thriving populations of mammals, hundreds of species of birds, an array of reptiles and amphibians, plentiful fish, and a staggering assortment of invertebrates. While charismatic megafauna such as elephants and lions are no longer found in the wild, The Gambia remains vital for species such as the endangered western red colobus monkey, the spotted hyena, hippopotamuses, dolphins, and the intriguing West African manatee.

Birdlife, in particular, is one of The Gambia's greatest natural attractions. With over 560 recorded species, the country is revered by birdwatchers around the world. The seasonal rhythms of rain and sunshine transform the landscape and attract migratory birds from Europe and across Africa, turning The Gambia into a living aviary each year. Wetlands and coastal mangroves bustle with herons and kingfishers; savannas echo with the calls of raptors and rollers; forest edges come alive with sunbirds and hornbills.

Despite this abundance, Gambia's wildlife faces threats familiar across Africa: habitat loss, unsustainable hunting and fishing, climate change, and encroachment from agriculture and urbanization. The government's commitment to expanding protected areas is vital, as is the ongoing involvement of local communities in conservation efforts. The country's ambitious policies, including the Biodiversity Act, seek to balance human development with the safeguarding of irreplaceable species and habitats.

This book aims to guide readers through the fascinating tapestry of The Gambia's wildlife and natural areas, from its iconic national parks to lesser-known corners where rare amphibians or endemic skinks reside. Each chapter explores not only the creatures themselves but also the habitats that support them, the ecological challenges they face, and the efforts being made to secure their future. Finding hope in community-led conservation, scientific research, and international cooperation, The Gambia offers a powerful case study in the relationship between people and planet.

Whether you are a traveler planning your first birding safari, a student of West African ecology, or simply a lover of wild places, this guide invites you to discover The Gambia's remarkable fauna. Beyond its modest borders lies a living heritage of beauty, struggle, and resilience—a natural wealth that deserves both celebration and vigilant protection.

CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Climate of The Gambia

Tucked into the curve of West Africa, The Gambia presents a geographical curiosity: a long, slender strip of land hugging the banks of a single, dominant river. Surrounded on three sides by its larger neighbor, Senegal, the country stretches inland from the Atlantic coast, its borders mirroring the meandering path of the waterway that gives the nation its name. At its widest point, The Gambia measures less than 50 kilometers (31 miles) across, while its length extends over 300 kilometers (almost 190 miles) inland, a truly unique geographical footprint on the African continent.

The lifeblood of The Gambia, both geographically and ecologically, is the Gambia River. This significant West African river begins its journey far to the east, in the Fouta Djallon highlands of Guinea, before flowing through Senegal and eventually entering The Gambia. It traverses the entire length of the country, carving a path westward towards the Atlantic Ocean at Banjul. The river's presence is so central that it defines the very shape and landscape of the nation.

Within The Gambia's borders, the river is navigable for a considerable distance, historically serving as a crucial artery for trade and transportation. The river's influence extends inland, creating a dynamic environment where freshwater from upstream mixes with the salty embrace of the Atlantic tide. This tidal influence reaches surprisingly far inland, affecting the river's character and the surrounding landscape for a significant portion of its length within the country. The tidal variation at the river mouth is notable, contributing to the unique estuarine environment.

The topography of The Gambia is predominantly flat, a low plateau that gently decreases in elevation as it approaches the Atlantic coast. The highest point in the country is a modest 53 meters (174 feet) above sea level. While largely level, the landscape isn't entirely without variation; low, flattish hills and slight undulations break the $\square\square\square$ of the plains in places, particularly in the eastern regions where narrow valleys can be found alongside broader interfluves. Further west, nearer the coast, smaller sand hills alternate with sand-filled depressions, forming a flat coastal plain.

Complementing its distinctive geography is The Gambia's tropical climate, characterized by two well-defined seasons: a long dry season and a shorter wet season. This climatic pattern is typical of the Sahelian zone, a transitional belt between the arid Sahara Desert to the north and the more humid rainforests to the south. Temperatures generally remain warm to hot throughout the year, with variations depending on the season and proximity to the coast.

The dry season typically runs from November through May. During these months, humidity is considerably lower, and rainfall is scarce to non-existent. The skies are often clear, offering abundant sunshine, particularly in the earlier part of the season.

This period is often considered the most comfortable for visitors, offering a respite from the intense humidity of the wet season.

A notable feature of the dry season is the Harmattan wind, a dry and often dusty trade wind that blows from the northeast, originating from the Sahara Desert. The Harmattan is typically felt between December and March, sometimes extending into April. This wind can bring a significant amount of fine dust, creating a haze that can reduce visibility and coating everything in a fine layer of sand. While it can make conditions dry and sometimes uncomfortable, the Harmattan also brings cooler nights, especially in December and January.

Temperatures during the dry season vary, with cooler averages from November to February, typically ranging from 25°C to 30°C (77°F to 86°F) during the day, with cooler nights dropping to around 18°C to 22°C (64°F to 72°F), particularly inland. As the dry season progresses from March to May, temperatures begin to climb significantly, often reaching 30°C to 40°C (86°F to 104°F), with inland areas experiencing the most intense heat.

Following the dry, dusty months comes the wet season, also known as the green season, which generally lasts from June to October. This period is characterized by a dramatic increase in humidity and rainfall, brought by the West African monsoon. The landscape transforms, becoming lush and verdant under the influence of the rains.

Rainfall is most abundant during July, August, and September, with August often being the wettest month. While rain occurs, it often comes in the form of intense thunderstorms and heavy downpours, particularly in the afternoon and evening, rather than prolonged periods of steady rain. This means that even during the wet season, there can still be significant periods of sunshine.

There is some spatial variation in rainfall across the country, with the southern and southeastern areas typically receiving more precipitation than the northern parts. Average annual rainfall ranges between 700 mm and 1000 mm, though some sources indicate averages closer to 800 to 1,200 mm or even 1,000 to 1,500 mm depending on the source and specific location. The amount of rainfall can also vary year to year, contributing to the variability of the climate.

Temperatures during the wet season are generally warm, averaging between 23°C and 33°C (73°F to 91°F). While daytime highs might be slightly lower than the peak of the dry season, the increased humidity can make the heat feel more oppressive and uncomfortable. The coast tends to experience slightly milder temperatures throughout the year due to the moderating influence of the Atlantic Ocean, while inland areas can be significantly hotter, especially during the dry season.

The transition months between the two seasons can see shifts in temperature and the

onset or cessation of rainfall. May and June mark the transition from dry to wet, with increasing humidity and the first showers appearing in June. October sees the rains begin to taper off, leading back towards the drier conditions of November. This cyclical pattern of wet and dry seasons profoundly influences the environment, shaping the habitats and influencing the life cycles of the wildlife found throughout The Gambia.

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