

Walia Ibex and Mountain Nyala profile

Walia Ibex: Guardian of the Ethiopian Highlands

In the rugged and majestic landscapes of Ethiopia's Semien Mountains, the Walia Ibex (*Capra walie*), also known as the Abyssinian Ibex, stands as a testament to the delicate balance between wildlife and its environment. This resilient and endangered species occupies a unique niche in the region's biodiversity.

The Walia Ibex is easily recognized by its impressive, backward-curving horns and robust physique, showcasing nature's exquisite craftsmanship. As the southernmost representative of the ibex family, it adds a touch of rarity to the already captivating wildlife of the area.

However, the Walia Ibex faces numerous challenges that threaten its existence. Once abundant, the population has dwindled to a mere 500 individuals, primarily due to poaching and habitat loss. The rocky terrain they inhabit, characterized by steep cliffs and craggy outcrops, is now home to the few surviving members of this species.

In the late 1990s, the Walia Ibex's status changed from endangered to critically endangered, highlighting the urgent need for conservation efforts. The shrinking population puts additional pressure on the limited mountain habitat, making sustainability a precarious challenge.

Adult Walia Ibex are formidable creatures, but they face natural predators such as hyenas, while vulnerable young ibex are at risk from various fox and cat species. As custodians of the Ethiopian highlands, their survival is crucial for maintaining the ecological balance in the region.

One significant threat to the Walia Ibex comes from the encroachment of domestic goats into their territory. With a limited distribution range and a fragile mountainous ecosystem, the presence of domestic goats poses a serious risk to the survival of this already endangered species. This situation underscores the need for effective conservation measures and increased community awareness.

Efforts to protect and preserve the Walia Ibex are vital for maintaining the rich biodiversity of the Semien Mountains. Collaborative initiatives involving local communities, wildlife organizations, and government bodies are essential to ensure the survival of this iconic species. By addressing the challenges it faces, we can work towards a future where the Walia Ibex continues to thrive in its natural habitat.

The Walia, Ethiopia's iconic mountain goat, is facing significant danger. In the Horn of Africa, known as "the five giants" due to its remarkable wildlife—African buffaloes, elephants, lions, leopards, and black rhinos—the Walia stands out as a threatened endemic species of the Simien Mountains. Alongside it, other unique animals like the Somali donkey, Abyssinian wolf, mountain nyala, Swayne's buffalo, and gelada baboons inhabit this rich ecosystem.

Ethiopia's diverse wildlife includes antelopes, zebras, kestrels, and more, found in national parks around the Rift Valley, Lake Tana, and the Blue Nile River. The Walia is distinguished by its chestnut-brown coat, grayish nose, and white belly, thriving in the grasslands, cliffs, and forests of its mountainous habitat. They primarily feed on lichens, grass, bushes, and leaves, typically forming small herds, although females tend to be more solitary outside the mating season (March to May). Their lifespan ranges from 11 to 15 years, with some living up to 20 years in the wild.

While hyenas pose a natural threat, the Walia faces greater risks from illegal hunting and habitat loss. Most of the remaining population resides in Simien Mountains National Park, where rangers have worked to create favorable conditions for breeding, which lasts 150 to 165 days, usually resulting in a single calf.

Population estimates have fluctuated; in 1996, there were around 250 Walia, which grew to about 500 in less than a decade. Although thousands are thought to exist today, precise numbers are lacking, and human encroachment continues to threaten their survival.

The Walia is not just a biological treasure but also a national symbol of Ethiopia. It appears on currency, is featured in branding for a transportation company and a beer label, and represents the men's national soccer team—despite calls for it to be named after the Black Lions. The future of the Walia remains a pressing concern for Ethiopia, highlighting the urgent need for conservation efforts.



Mountain Nyala (*Tragelaphus buxtoni*)

The mountain nyala, also known as balbok, is an antelope species endemic to the high-altitude woodlands of central Ethiopia. First described by English naturalist Richard Lydekker in 1910, this monotypic species lacks identified subspecies. Males typically stand 120–135 cm (47–53 in) at the shoulder and weigh between 180–300 kg (400–660 lb), while females are smaller, standing 90–100 cm (35–39 in) and weighing 150–200 kg (330–440 lb).

Their coat ranges from grey to brown, adorned with two to five poorly defined white stripes and a row of six to ten white spots. Males feature a short, dark crest along their back and are the only ones with horns. Shy and elusive, mountain nyalas form small herds of four to five individuals and are non-territorial. Primarily browsers, they occasionally graze on available vegetation.

Mountain nyalas reach sexual maturity at around two years of age, with a gestation period of eight to nine months, typically resulting in a single calf. They can live for 15 to 20 years.

Their preferred habitat consists of montane woodlands at altitudes of 3,000–3,400 m (9,800–11,200 ft). Due to human encroachment and large livestock populations, they have been pushed

to occupy heath forests at higher elevations. The species is found in the Ethiopian highlands, primarily east of the Rift Valley, between 6°N and 10°N. Notably, up to half of the mountain nyala population resides in a 200 km² (77 sq mi) area of Gaysay within the Bale Mountains National Park.

The mountain nyala is classified as Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and holds cultural significance in Ethiopia, being featured on the obverse of Ethiopian ten-cent coins.

