

Herbivores No More

What has fleece as white as snow...and a taste for blood? Read on.

NIGHT OF THE UNGULATES

An odd experiment took place in North Dakota in 1998. Biologists wanted to find out what was eating all the songbird hatchlings in the area, so they set up video cameras next to the ground nests. As expected, several squirrels raided the nests, as well as a few foxes—but what they saw next astonished them: in the middle of the night, a herd of white-tailed deer roamed through and gobbled up the little hatchlings like they were hors d'oeuvres.

But wait, aren't deer supposed to be *herbivores*—animals that only eat plants? It turns out that a lot of these so-called vegetarians aren't really that strict about their diets.

FOOD GROUPS

The group of mammals known as *ungulates* (“hoofed mammals” in Latin) includes cattle, deer, pigs, horses, sheep, goats, giraffes, hippos, elephants, and, according to some classifications, dolphins and whales. Despite the common perception that all ungulates are strict herbivores, they're not. For example, wild boars will hunt small mammals and reptiles, and some farm pigs have developed a taste for cats—which makes pigs (like humans and bears) *omnivores*.

Grazing animals known as *ruminants*—which include cattle, deer, sheep, and giraffes—have specially adapted teeth for chewing grass and a four-chambered stomach to help them digest it. So what could make them suddenly turn into meat eaters? There are a lot of factors involved—some natural, some not. Here are some ruminants, the meat they eat, and why they eat it.

- **Deer:** On the Scottish island of Rum, the red deer supplement their grassy diet with the legs, heads, and wings of Manx shearwater chicks. What are they supplementing? Calcium. The island's soil has a low mineral content, and over time, the deer have figured out that they can get calcium from bird bones. It helps their antlers grow (even though it's very difficult for ruminants to digest bones). And not just birds: deer have been witnessed eating dead fish that wash up on shore.
- **Cows:** There have been many scattered reports of cows eating birds. In India, for example, a cow named Lal ate dozens of baby chicks before she was caught in the act and separated from the chicken coop. This odd diet made her something of a celebrity in India (we even wrote

about Lal in our *Triumphant 20th Anniversary Bathroom Reader*). Her owner believes she was a tiger in a previous life, but biologists can't explain why a well-fed cow would suddenly develop a taste for chicken nuggets.

- **Sheep:** A seabird ecologist named Bob Furness has documented wild sheep eating arctic terns in the Shetland Islands north of Scotland. Just as with the red deer, the sheep are only interested in the birds' bones, not their bodies.
- **Giraffes:** On the African savanna, it's not uncommon to see the world's tallest ruminant chewing on an impala skull. Giraffes don't eat the whole head, they just gnaw on the bone to suck out the calcium. It may be a grisly thing to witness, but not as grisly as the habit that a giraffe named Tony recently took up at a zoo in Australia. "It just ruins your talk," lamented tour guide Goldie Pergl. "You'd explain to visitors how giraffes are herbivores...and then Tony would eat a dead rabbit."

OTHER UNGULATES

Though not technically ruminants, these "herbivores" have also been known to skip the salad from time to time.

- **Horses:** As most horse owners know, horses will eat almost anything they're given, including meat. But in the book *Deadly Equines: The Shocking True Story of Meat-Eating and Murderous Horses*, Irish journalist CuChullaine O'Reilly alleges that meat was once a staple of the equine diet and that there is evidence that horses have "slain lions, tigers, pumas, wolves, hyenas, and humans." Could it be true? Yes. Although it's not considered part of their normal diet, horses can and will eat meat. Animal behaviorist Sue M. McDonnell, PhD, polled her readers on thehorse.com to see what kind of meats their equines ate. The responses: "hot dogs, hamburgers, steak, bologna, ham, and fried chicken."
- **Hippos:** They may look serene floating along in a river, but hippos have a well-earned reputation as killers; they're responsible for at least 500 human deaths every year. That's usually for defense, though—hippos don't eat people. But they will eat each other. (Look up "hippo cannibalism" online to see the gruesome acts.) Hippos are also known to scavenge carrion, and there were reports from Ethiopia in 2002 that a pod of hippos hunted down and ate small farm animals.
- **Camels:** There isn't a lot to feed on in the desert, so over time camels' digestive systems have adapted to eat and drink all sorts of things, including thorny plants and brackish water. And birds. One quite disturbing YouTube video shows a camel nonchalantly devouring a full-grown dove. And unlike the deer and the sheep, the camel doesn't

Unlike other fish, shark meat is as salty as the ocean.

stop at the wings.

Ironically, goats, which are known for eating *everything*, are one of the few ungulates that won't eat meat (unless you count leather boots). Another strict vegetarian: the elephant. They may strip a forest bare to obtain all the nutrients they need, but (except for any unfortunate insects that don't get out of the way in time) elephants won't eat other animals.

And there's one ungulate—a domesticated ruminant, in fact—that has become a meat eater without even knowing it.

WHY U MAD, COW?

It turns out that some cows are fed...cows. Reason: grass is difficult to digest, even for ruminants and their specially adapted digestive systems, so nearly half of what they eat is excreted as waste (as anyone who's stepped in a fresh cow patty no doubt knows). So in the 1980s, to cut down on high feeding costs, some ranchers and dairy farmers started giving their cattle protein-rich "food pellets." The pellets have been made out of everything from dead farm animals, to leftover restaurant food, to expired pet food. This new diet made big news when cattle that had been fed the brains, eyes, spinal cords, and intestines of older cattle came down with *bovine spongiform encephalopathy* (BSE), also known as "mad cow disease."

This progressive neurological disorder has mostly been eradicated, thanks to improved farming techniques. However, the practice does still exist, even in the United States. Thankfully, the USDA requires that all "brain and spinal cord materials be removed from high-risk cattle—older cattle, animals that are unable to walk, and any animal that shows any signs of a neurological problem." However, according to the Humane Society, "Cattle remains are still fed to chickens, and the poultry litter (floor wastes that include the feces and spilled feed) is fed back to cows."

TIME TO HOOF IT ON OUT OF HERE

Now that you'll never look at Bambi (or a steak) the same way again, it's important to note that—in the wild, at least—animals are opportunists. Even if their systems have adapted to specialize in flora or fauna, in the battle for survival, nutrients are nutrients. And hungry animals will get them wherever they can. Does that mean that a cow might one day try to hunt *you* down for dinner? Probably not...for now.

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"For me, vegetarianism is about saying yes to things...even meat."

—Jane, *Coupling*

What's a "sugarplum"? Chopped dried fruit, nuts, and spices rolled into a ball and coated with sugar.