GIRAFFE · TAXONOMY, DISTRIBUTION & ECOLOGY

Giraffe in the Zambezi Valley

The new four-species giraffe family tree, Zimbabwe's giraffe today — and why there are none in the Zambezi Valley.

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> Guests on a Mana Pools or Lower Zambezi safari often ask where the giraffe are. The short answer is that surveys have found none — and the likely reasons tell you a lot about what a giraffe needs from a landscape.

01 One giraffe species — or four?

For decades, all giraffe were treated as a single species, *Giraffa camelopardalis*, split into **nine subspecies** based largely on coat pattern and where they lived. That is how the IUCN assessed them in 2016.

In 2016, the **Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF)** and the **Senckenberg Biodiversity and Climate Research Centre** in Germany published a genetic study of skin samples from 190 giraffe covering all nine subspecies. It found four genetically distinct groups and proposed **four species**. Further work followed, and in **August 2025 the IUCN formally recognised four giraffe species**, which will now guide new Red List assessments.

SPECIES	SUBSPECIES	APPROX. NUMBER (2025)	EXPECTED IUCN STATUS
Southern giraffe *Giraffa giraffa*	South African giraffe (*G. g. giraffa*) Angolan giraffe (*G. g. angolensis*)	~69,000 (incl. ~30,000 South African giraffe in South Africa; ~14,000 Angolan giraffe in Namibia)	Least Concern
Masai giraffe *Giraffa tippelskirchi*	Masai giraffe (*G. t. tippelskirchi*) Luangwa / Thornicroft's giraffe (*G. t. thornicrofti*)	~43,900 (Luangwa ~764)	Vulnerable
Reticulated giraffe *Giraffa reticulata*	—	~20,900	Endangered
Northern giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis*	Nubian, Kordofan and West African giraffe	~7,000 (Nubian ~4,000; West African 669+)	Endangered

Total: about 140,000 giraffe in Africa (GCF, State of Giraffe 2025). "Expected status" is GCF's summary of the anticipated species-level Red List assessments.

02 Zimbabwe's giraffe today

WHICH GIRAFFE?

Southern giraffe

Zimbabwe's giraffe are southern giraffe. GCF's 2020 country profile counted both Angolan and South African giraffe plus hybrids, but a later GCF genetic assessment found **all giraffe in Zimbabwe are South African giraffe** (*G. g. giraffa*).

HOW MANY?

Fewer than before

GCF estimated a minimum of about **8,000** in 2020, against a 1998 estimate of about 26,000 (which left out private farms). The national population has fallen by **more than a third in the last decade**, largely through lion predation on the biggest population.

The main populations are in the south and west: **Nuanetsi, Bubye Valley and Savé Valley conservancies, Hwange National Park, Gonarezhou National Park, Malilangwe and the Matetsi complex**. Numbers are stable or rising in several conservancies but still falling in Hwange and Bubye Valley. Between 2009 and 2013, 34 giraffe were moved into Gonarezhou from lowveld ranches.

03 The Zambezi Valley gap

Surveys in **2001 recorded no giraffe** in the Zambezi Valley or the neighbouring Sebungwe region, and a 2006 aerial census again found none in the Sebungwe. We found no reliable record of giraffe living on the Zimbabwean valley floor in historical times either — but the written record is short, so we can't say they never did.

Meanwhile, just across the border in Zambia, the **Luangwa Valley** — another rift valley with an escarpment and similar heat — holds its own giraffe: the Luangwa giraffe, about 764 animals found nowhere else. That makes the comparison a useful one.

04 Why no giraffe? Weighing the explanations

No study has settled why giraffe are absent from the Zambezi Valley. These are the explanations guides discuss, with how well each holds up:

EXPLANATION	FOR AND AGAINST	VERDICT
The escarpment	The valley is part of the rift system, walled by a steep escarpment. But Luangwa is also a rift valley with an escarpment, and it has giraffe.	UNLIKELY ALONE
Tsetse fly	Tsetse were historically abundant in the Zambezi Valley (control campaigns have since reduced them). But Luangwa has high densities of tsetse and still has giraffe, and wild animals are generally tolerant of trypanosome infection, though not immune.	UNLIKELY ALONE
Food	Giraffe eat many trees, but acacias (now *Vachellia* and *Senegalia*) are a mainstay. Most of the valley floor is **mopane woodland on sodic soils** and dense deciduous **jesse thicket**; the acacia most associated with the valley, the winterthorn *Faidherbia albida*, is mostly confined to the alluvial river banks.	PLAUSIBLE

EXPLANATION	FOR AND AGAINST	VERDICT
Habitat & terrain	Jesse thicket can become impenetrable. Before Kariba, seasonal floods covered the floodplains; the dam largely ended them, although its spillway gates are still opened in very wet years. Guides report giraffe elsewhere (e.g. Gonarezhou) moving off wet clay floodplains in the rains.	PLAUSIBLE
People	Tsetse kept human settlement low, which helped protect wildlife. Totems may have protected some species; European arrival brought heavy hunting. None of this explains why giraffe were absent when other large game was present.	UNLIKELY ALONE

THE MOST LIKELY ANSWER

Probably a combination: a valley floor dominated by mopane and jesse thicket offers giraffe little of the browse they prefer, in country that is hard to move through — behind an escarpment that adds to the barrier rather than causing it.

ON THE GAME DRIVE — HOW TO SAY IT

"You won't see giraffe here — surveys haven't found any in the Zambezi Valley. It isn't the tsetse fly or the escarpment on their own: the Luangwa Valley in Zambia has both, and it has its own giraffe. The likeliest difference is food. This valley is mostly mopane and dense jesse thicket, and giraffe prefer acacia-type trees. To see Zimbabwe's giraffe, you need Hwange, Gonarezhou or the southern lowveld."

05 Key terms

Southern giraffe	*Giraffa giraffa*, the species found in Zimbabwe; two subspecies, South African and Angolan.
Luangwa giraffe	*G. tippelskirchi thornicrofti*, formerly Thornicroft's giraffe; a subspecies of the Masai giraffe found only in Zambia's Luangwa Valley.
Jesse	Dense, mixed-species deciduous thicket of the Zambezi Valley, with an understorey that can be impenetrable.
Sodic soil	Soil high in sodium; in the valley it mainly supports mopane woodland.
Trypanosomes	Parasites carried by tsetse that cause nagana in livestock and sleeping sickness in people.

In summary

- The IUCN recognised **four giraffe species** in August 2025: southern, Masai, reticulated and northern.
- Zimbabwe's giraffe are **southern giraffe** — all South African giraffe, according to GCF's genetic assessment.
- Zimbabwe's giraffe have **declined by more than a third** in a decade; strongholds are the southern conservancies, Hwange and Gonarezhou.
- Surveys have found **no giraffe in the Zambezi Valley**; the most plausible reasons are food and habitat, not tsetse or the escarpment alone.

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