



A Natural History
— of the —
Fantastic



Stoll



A Natural History of the Fantastic

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Dear Reader,

*I know you don't believe me when I say there is nothing to fear.
We were raised on tales of monsters, death, and terror, told to ignite childish
imagination.*

*I see now much to my regret, that we were wrong to be afraid of dark tales and
deep places. As I have come to discover, truth is often hidden in the dark and
unexpected.*

*Many of the things you will see in this volume are familiar to you, but despite what
you were taught to believe, you must not be afraid.
There is danger, but a keen mind is a match for any manner of flesh and fang,
known or otherwise.*

*The world is full of nameless things, and mysteries yet unanswered.
It is the duty of this book's bearer to question and explore. Though there is an ache
in my heart for adventures yet unhad, I pass this collection onto you and hope you
will use its knowledge responsibly.*

Go now, and learn what you can.



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Our Fantastic World

What makes a creature fantastic? Though the definition is controversial, a "fantastic" creature is generally considered to be one about which myth and legends were based.

Dragons and their miraculous flying abilities, for example, were a mystery that continued to perplex well after birds, bats, and insects were well understood. The myth that dragons are magical beings and set apart from other animals in the natural order, continues to the present day. What makes a creature fantastic, and worthy of inclusion in this collection, is its longstanding deviation from our understanding of natural law. For some of these creatures, questions have persisted for centuries: Do werewolves attack on the full moon? Why do mermaids look like human women? How did so many species of unicorn manage to avoid discovery for centuries? All of these questions, and more, baffled humanity for centuries and are now contained safely within this collection.

It was not until the modern era that we began to understand the mechanisms behind beasts that once terrified and befuddled. Writers from the past were often unreliable sources, basing their knowledge of these creatures on a wild mix of myth, conjecture, and fear.

Although these creatures are explainable, they remain fantastic. The purpose of this collection is to demystify, but not to devalue. There is always more to learn, and every day thousands of scientists, explorers, and researchers discover more. Things that were once terrifying and mysterious are transformed, sometimes overnight, by the forward progress of science.



The Earth and its creatures are not all as they were millions of years ago, the evolution and subsequent technological development of intelligent species like orcs, minotaur, and humans has led to the extinction of many creatures, while the domestication and specialized breeding of others has caused their populations to explode. Whether for food, transportation, or companionship, many species are tamed or trained to become a part of daily life. Domesticated organisms (like the common behemoth below) may become dependent on humans or human activities, since they sometimes lose their ability to survive in the wild. Mermaids (pg. 61), goblins (pg. 35), cyclopes (pg. 19), and wyverns (pg. 34) have all been heavily affected by the presence of intelligent humanoids in their natural habitats.



The Evolution of Life

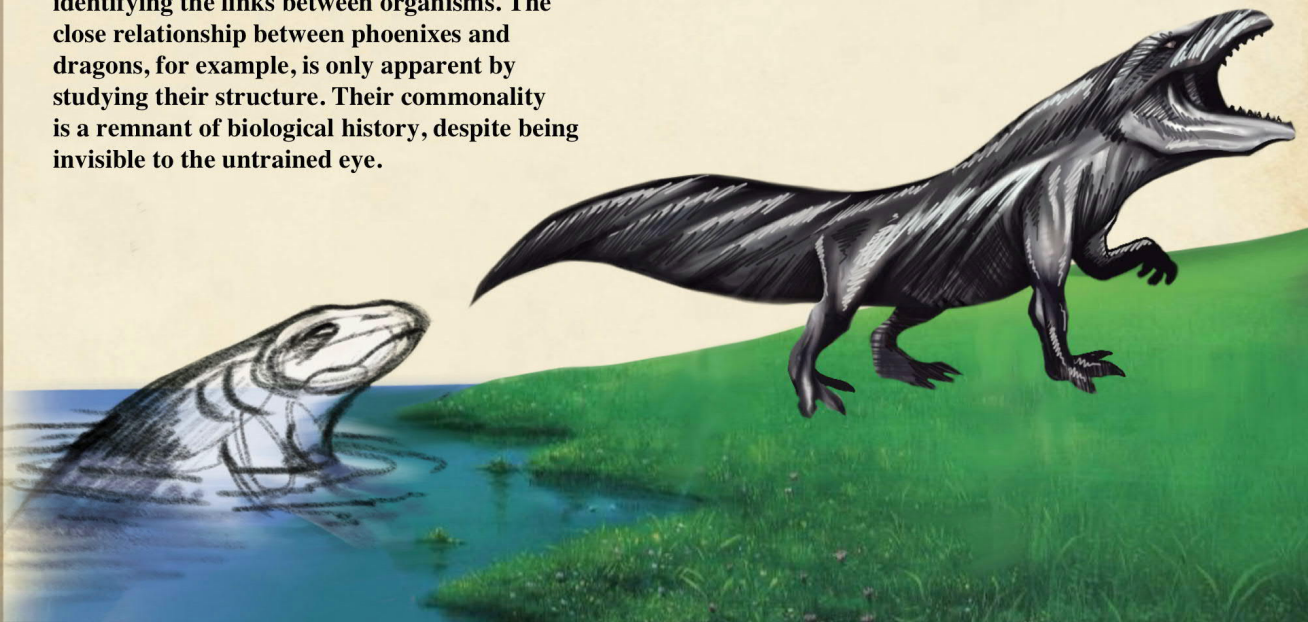
Nearly 500 million years ago in the brackish waters of an ancient shallow sea, one successful species of fish-like vertebrate took the first steps onto land. This species would eventually evolve into a lineage of tetrapods (four limbed) animals, a group that includes humans, minotaur, orcs, kappa, cyclopes, goblins, and even harpies.

For centuries it was assumed that hexapods (six limbed) animals like dragons, centaur, griffins, and phoenixes had evolved from this same vertebrate ancestor. However, fossil evidence now suggests that these creatures evolved from a separate prehistoric species of fish-like vertebrates with three fins on each side of their bodies. This separate ancestral lineage makes hexapods quite unique, and forms the basis for much of modern vertebrate biology.

Understanding evolution is key to the biology and behavior of modern species, as well as identifying the links between organisms. The close relationship between phoenixes and dragons, for example, is only apparent by studying their structure. Their commonality is a remnant of biological history, despite being invisible to the untrained eye.



It is a testament to the complexities of evolution that the survival of a single variety of six-finned fish dramatically altered the course of life on earth. Conceivably without this original species many of the creatures you know today may never have existed. As hard as it may be to imagine, the world would instead likely be dominated by four-limbed vertebrates.



Life progresses on a continuum. Ancient bodies modify over time and are tested by natural selection on an ever-changing battlefield.

The pressure to survive pits predator against prey in an endless struggle, with adaptations as the weapons of choice. The armored skin of dragons has been tested against the piercing talons of harpies for millions of years. Each organism adapting new tactics and tools, powered by competition, and accruing every possible advantages to ensure that they endure to pass along their traits to the next generation.

The environment has an enormous influence on the development of life, and over the past several hundred million years our world has undergone many changes. There have been cataclysmic asteroid strikes, environmental changes, and even the arrival of intelligent super-predators like humans and orcs.



Angel

Bizarre and poorly understood beings, angels typically appear in the form of female humanoids with distorted forms and missing eyes. Circumstantial evidence suggests that they are drawn to moments of tremendous change or significance. Though this is unconfirmed, sightings have occurred during or immediately before natural disasters. More troubling, sometimes an angel's presence cannot be accounted for until years later, leaving the locals terrified about the potential significance of the sighting.

Several notorious historical figures had angels nearby during their birth or formative years. Further investigation is warranted, and whether the angels cause these events or merely observe is the subject of much debate.

Accounts of angels performing tasks, killing, or responding to stimuli of any kind are infrequent and unsubstantiated. They appear to be silent observers, manifesting at will and vanishing without a trace.

Angels have been on the planet for at least as long as humans, but their evolutionary origin is unknown. No record of an angel giving birth, eating, or speaking with another of its species exists, despite their recurring presence throughout the recorded histories of humans, minotaurs, and orcs.

This notorious rock painting, dated from over 70,000 years ago, is believed to be the first recorded instance of an angelic appearance. The angel's role as an observer is apparent in the figure's eye-like design; and, the creature's otherworldly nature is likewise hinted at by the twisting lines arching down from the sky. It seems that even prehistoric cultures understood that these beings, whatever their origin, are more than they appear.

It is thought that angels exist only partially in our reality, and their various human incarnations are much like a shark fin emerging from murky water; an aspect of the creature that gives little indication of what lies unseen.

Occasional recorded instances of substantial breaches in the fabric of reality indicate that angels more closely resemble architecture than animals, often described as huge ever-shifting geometric forms of organic matter.

Ancient texts suggest that angels are not themselves intelligent but rather everything they do results from a guiding species-wide instinct unfathomable to humans.

The origin of angels is shrouded in mystery and misinformation as every major religion claims them as one thing or another. Despite their peculiar nature, in the modern era angels are regarded by most with caution and curiosity rather than outright fear.



The Eastwitch Angel

Discovered - 1920

Disappeared - 1922

Height - 3 meters

Weight - Unknown

Origin unknown

Intelligence unknown

Speed unknown

"Despite our modern understanding of the world, there are those who continue to argue that angels bear the mark of the divine...

But there is a distinction to be made between a *miracle* and a *mystery*. These creatures do not discredit the natural world, they are a part of it. Whether that thought is chilling or comforting is for each to decide for themselves."

-Tahu-no'la
(Minotaur Philosopher 9th century)

Dearest daughter,

Ariana, by the time this letter reaches you I will be laid in my grave, and it will be my final shameful act to pass a terrible burden onto you.

I have dedicated myself to the study of angels, and although it is clear they are beyond our current scientific means, I believe them to be a minuscule portion of an extradimensional creature.

Consider a being that exists within two dimensions, flat like a piece of parchment, it has no "depth" and its perceptions of the world would be extremely limited.

Any three dimensional object entering its plane of view would appear as a straight line of varying width. To such a limited creature, a three-dimensional human being would seem a curious thing, similar to them in appearance (since they can only see the tiny section of our bodies intersecting with their world) but possessing extraordinary properties.

We would appear to slip in and out of their sight at will, though in truth we have just lifted our three-dimensional bodies out of their two-dimensional plane.

Angels, I believe, are a similar phenomenon, and our only glimpse of their whole being is a sliver of flesh that slips into our world and back out. The troubling implication of this theory is that the angels do not truly "disappear" they merely hoist themselves out of view. I believe it likely that we are under their constant surveillance. The true creature, that which resembles a human to the same degree that a human resembles a line segment, watches from their higher vantage unseen.

Be vigilant,

Scott Thomas



Dawnsburg Angel

Discovered - 1689
Disappeared - 1694
Height - 2.8 meters
Weight - Unknown

Based on multiple angel sightings, this illustration shows the connection between the visible humanoid components and the rest of the organism.

It is not clear where the fleshy upper portion of the angel ends, and some accounts claim that the tendrils continue hundreds of feet up into the sky before vanishing into the clouds.

The humanoid components are suspended from fleshy ropes like a puppet, and (whatever the source of these bizarre organs) it seems that angels do not float under their own power.

Basilisk

Large, swamp-dwelling, nocturnal predators that spawn masses of toxic eggs from their flesh to hurl at potential prey, basilisks have earned a reputation for carnage throughout the known world. Their eggs contain a powerful toxin that travels through the bloodstream, causing intense pain, internal bleeding, and paralysis when absorbed through the skin.

Technically blind, basilisks navigate with a set of heat sensitive pits that sit where eyes would otherwise be on a human face. These pits are only effective at a short range, but give the basilisk a distinct advantage when hunting for warm-blooded creatures in total darkness.

Notable for their interlinked method of hunting and reproduction, basilisks use their powerful forelimbs to throw eggs filled with a cocktail of paralytic toxins at potential prey. If the egg is unfertilized the basilisk will feed normally, waiting until the poisonous slime begins to soften the victim before slurping them up with their long tube-like tongue. This process occasionally begins while the prey animal is still alive and may continue for many hours.

However, if the egg is fertilized the offspring bursts out and begins to attack the helpless target, earning its first meal. After the newly hatched basilisk young have eaten their fill they slither off on their own, likely never to see their parent again.

Basilisks may live to be nearly seventy years old and grow continuously throughout their life, stretching to over seven meters long. They tend to hunt as ambush predators, seldom venturing far from the water and waiting for prey to approach before launching their poisonous barrage.

Among the last in a lineage of large serpent-like predators that were once populous across the prehistoric world (Gobbler Wyrms pg. 97), basilisks are relatively rare and were hunted nearly to extinction by fearful humans during the early 20th century. In recent years a highly successful breeding program has reintroduced these creatures back into much of their former territory, and public safety education has reduced the number of annual attacks to almost zero.



Basilisk eggs are spherical and emerge tumor-like from the outermost skin of the parent, growing in asymmetrical bunches. The "yolk" of a basilisk egg contains a high concentration of paralytic toxin and an attacking basilisk will hurl its offspring at potential prey, paying no apparent attention to the condition of the egg. Most often eggs are unfertilized or underdeveloped serving only to paralyze the target. However, fully-grown and fertilized eggs will burst upon impact freeing the young wyrms to immediately begin devouring its now helpless victim.

Southern Brown Basilisk

Length - 6 meters

Age - 28 years

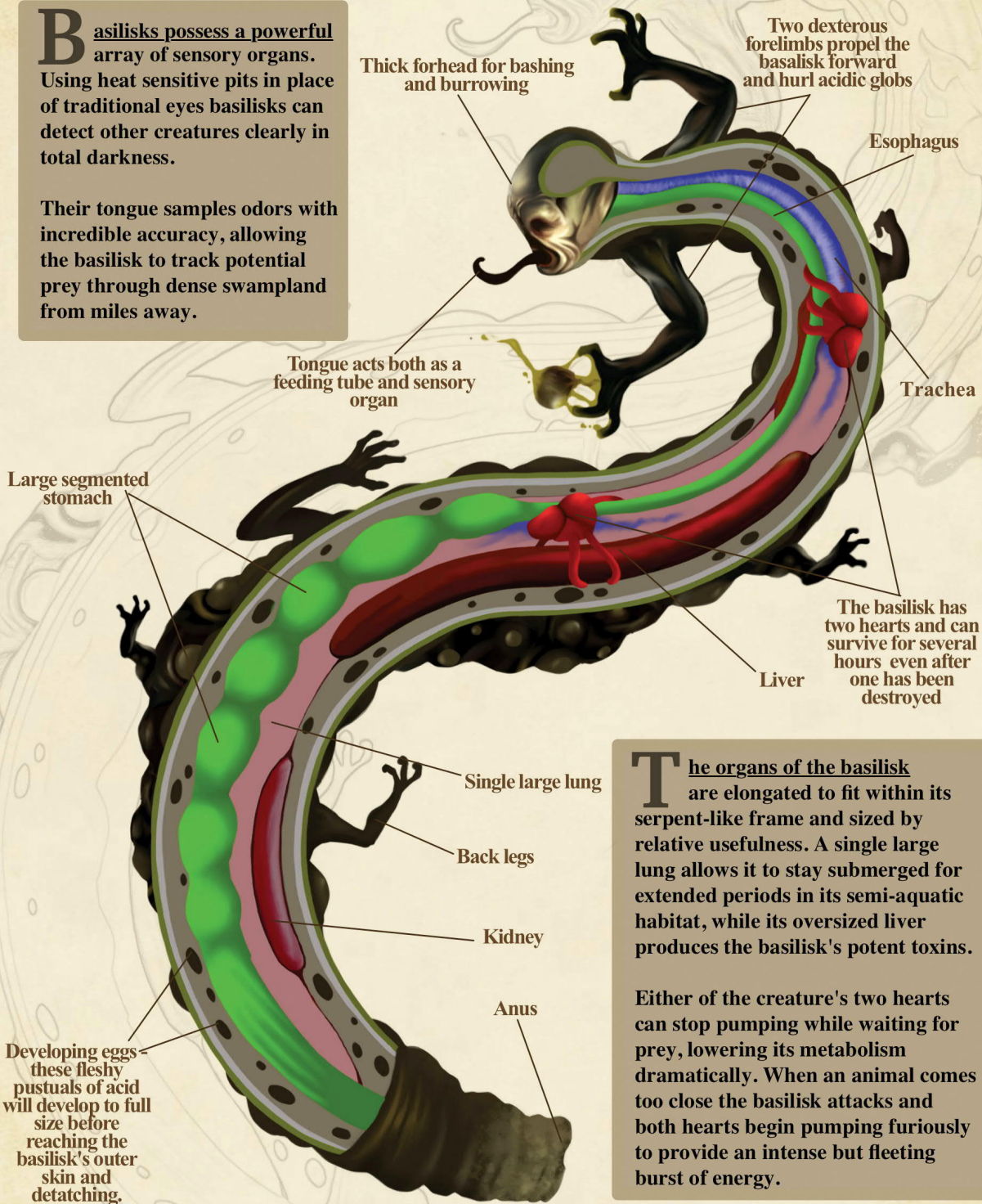
Heat seeking pits

Up to 12 limbs

Dexterous fingers

Basilisks possess a powerful array of sensory organs. Using heat sensitive pits in place of traditional eyes basilisks can detect other creatures clearly in total darkness.

Their tongue samples odors with incredible accuracy, allowing the basilisk to track potential prey through dense swampland from miles away.



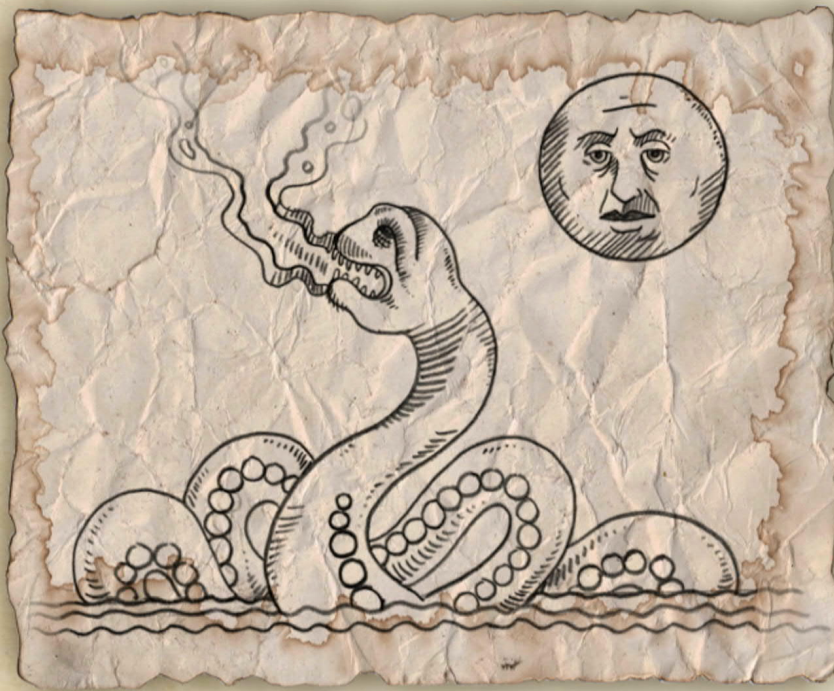
The organs of the basilisk are elongated to fit within its serpent-like frame and sized by relative usefulness. A single large lung allows it to stay submerged for extended periods in its semi-aquatic habitat, while its oversized liver produces the basilisk's potent toxins.

Either of the creature's two hearts can stop pumping while waiting for prey, lowering its metabolism dramatically. When an animal comes too close the basilisk attacks and both hearts begin pumping furiously to provide an intense but fleeting burst of energy.

The basilisk's reproductive system, located primarily in glands down the length of the body, continuously synthesizes toxins that harden when exposed to air. The ducts from the glands converge at the surface of the creature's skin and expand as more and more material is added.

All basilisks are hermaphroditic, possessing both male and female sexual organs, and during mating both partners expel sperm and have their outermost layer of eggs fertilized. Once pregnant the eggs develop over several months, and are eventually hurled at prey by the parent.

It is useful to think of a basilisk's developing eggs as gigantic clogged pores, swelling and hardening as their precious cargo grows before finally bursting and resealing once the pressure has been released.



This drawing of a mysterious serpent-like creature is widely regarded as the first written account of a basilisk encounter. An accompanying manuscript's vague allusion to "toxic breath" and the circular structures running the length of the creature are in line with a modern understanding of the basilisk's biology. The disapproving moon peering down from heaven implies the basilisk's nocturnal nature.

Early expansion brought humans into contact with many previously unbelievable forms of life, and initial interpretations by explorers and settlers were colored by a fearful and pre-scientific understanding of the world.

Centaur

Centaurs are large nomadic mammals that resemble half-human/half-horse hybrids despite being physically distinct from both. Voracious herbivores, centaurs feed on tough fibrous foods such as grasses and roots through grasping mouths on the ends of their feet. Utterly militant and disdainful of so-called lesser species, nomadic tribes of centaurs occupy a large stretch of land that grows and shrinks with frequent wars of extermination and conquest waged against neighboring species.

Centaur history (what little is known of it) consists of nothing more than a long string of temporary empires formed under charismatic leaders. During periods of expansion, tribes mobilize, wage prolonged wars against neighbors who offend the centaur's much vaunted piety, and finally collapse due to internal dissent and questions of succession.

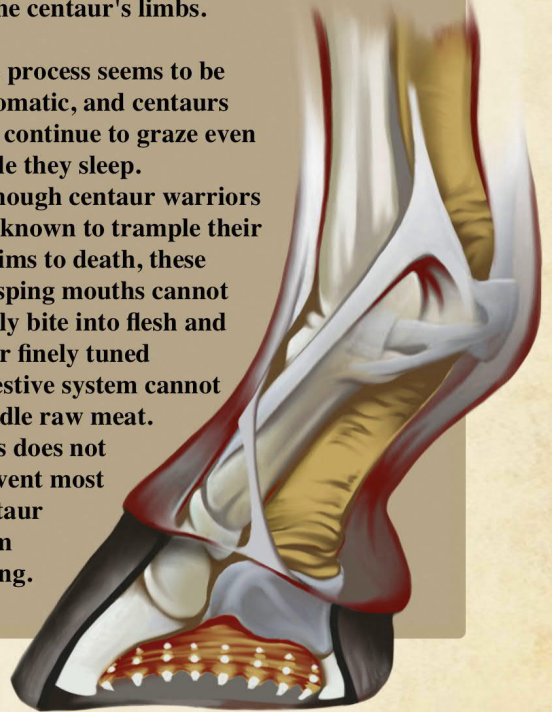
Centaur construct no cities, record no culture, and seldom answer to any authority outside of their immediate tribe. They have comparatively little resources, industry, or technology. Elite troops use bronze armor, but most centaurs do battle in thin leather garments. Centaur territory is a sea of open grassland, and while their lack of industry makes it difficult for hordes of centaurs to invade into mountainous terrain, the centaurs martial superiority over open ground has likewise kept their land out of human hands for thousands of years.

Centaurs bear live young, and because birth is frequent among traveling tribes, newborn children are expected to keep up with their mothers just moments after taking their first steps. Tribes deal harshly with offspring who are not aggressive or robust enough to keep pace with the herd.

Centaurs are intelligent, and can occasionally be reasoned with, though deference and constant self-debasement are required to receive even the most basic cooperation. A humanoid riding a horse is the gravest of insults to centaurs, who perceive it as a jealous and unnatural attempt by lessors to imitate their perfect form.

Since centaurs cannot easily stoop their upper body to reach low lying plants they rely on a peculiar method of ingestion in order to eat on the move. Centaurs graze through grasping mouths on the base of their four hooves. These toothed orifices are attached to a length of esophagus-like tissue that runs the entirety of the centaur's limbs.

The process seems to be automatic, and centaurs will continue to graze even while they sleep. Although centaur warriors are known to trample their victims to death, these grasping mouths cannot easily bite into flesh and their finely tuned digestive system cannot handle raw meat. This does not prevent most centaur from trying.



Centaur Trooper

Height - 3 meters

Weight - 500 kg

Weapon - Recurve bow

Armor - Beaten bronze

*Bow draw strength
20 kg*

Top speed - 64 km/hour



While the upper section of the body may look human, the internal anatomy is quite different. With the stomach, kidneys, liver, and intestines all lower down, the man-like torso is instead filled mostly with large lungs and a powerful heart.

Efficient oversized hearts allow centaurs to keep running for days without rest. Their "human mouths" more closely resemble the blowholes of dolphins, detached from their digestive systems and functioning only for breathing and speech. A close examination of a centaur's face will reveal a lack of teeth, instead the mouth constricts to a tight orifice directly behind the gums and connects immediately to their lungs.

The centaur's lower-half houses a complex multi-stage digestive system designed to extract nutrients from tough prairie grasses. Centaur leg bones are relatively thin in order to make room for their leg-length esophaguses, as a consequence they must be wary of falls or injury to their lower "horse" halves. A centaur that sustains a broken leg will often be abandoned by the herd and left to die of infection, starvation, or else take their own life in a redemptive act of ritual suicide.

The Fable of the Travellers and the Centaurs

Two men, an honest and a dishonest one, were traveling together and by chance came upon a pillaging tribe of centaurs.

One of the centaur, who had raised herself up as their leader, commanded the men to be seized and brought before her so that she might know what they thought of her kind.

She arranged her host of warriors magnificently, for centaurs are proud by nature.

After these preparations she laid out the two men at her feet and greeted them, 'What manner of splendid lord do I seem to you, to command so glorious a host?'

The dishonest man replied, 'You seem a most magnificent leader, a mighty example to your fellows.'

Pleased, the centaur asked, 'And what of my companions?'

'These' he answered, 'are worthy companions of yourself.'

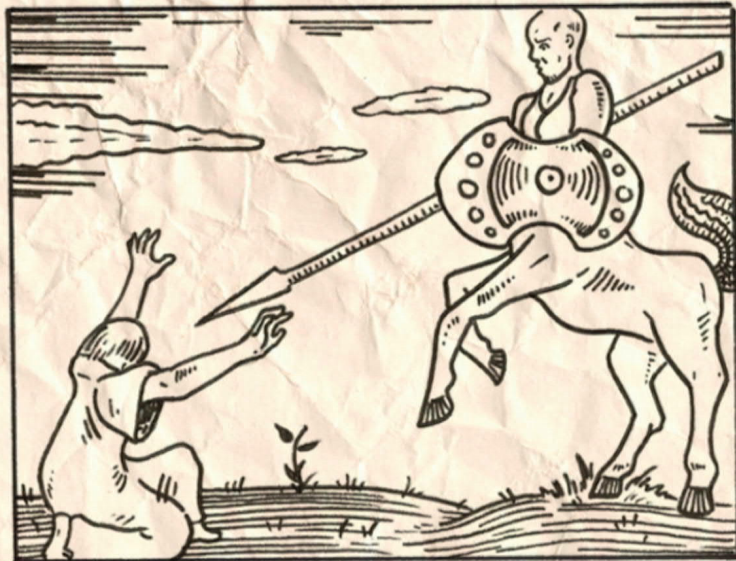
The centaur queen and her host of warriors, most pleased with the lie, let the dishonest man go.

On this the truthful man thought, 'If freedom is granted for a lie, what gracious prize might I receive for the truth?'

The centaur then turned to him. 'And how do we seem to you?'

'You are' he replied, 'terrible beasts to behold, all of you are terrible beasts skilled only in death and plunder.'

The centaurs, enraged at hearing these truths, promptly trampled him under their sharp hooves.



Cyclops

Huge slow-moving humanoids with a single large eye in the center of their chest, a fully-grown cyclops can reach nearly 10 meters tall when standing upright on its two trunk-like legs. Despite their size, the cyclops has been domesticated for hundreds of years and used as beasts of burden and, by the wealthy, as transportation.

Fully grown cyclops have thick bones, large feet, coils of sturdy musculature, and a single chest-sized skull. These adaptations help support the animal's vast weight but cyclopes are slow moving and are prone to injury if toppled. They are covered in fine hair, generally shorter on the body, but forming a "mane" of curlier, wooly hair on the shoulders and back. Males are usually about the same height as females but often weigh far more due to additional muscle and bone mass.

Cyclopes are voracious herbivores, eating constantly to support their large bodies. They are known to rip small trees completely out of the ground and consume them whole. A group of hungry cyclopes can eat through a forest in a few days, leaving a barren swath in their wake.

Their anatomy is similar to most other humanoids with the notable exception of their multiple hearts which are needed to pump blood efficiently across their large frame, as well as an incredibly efficient digestive system. Plant matter is digested with the aide of symbiotic bacteria, causing fermentation to occur in the large intestine and rectum.

Captive cyclopes have a reputation for sudden bouts of anger; and therefore, must be kept in specially reinforced cages and have their eye masked when handled. Their immense size means that outbursts can easily kill humans and even damage nearby buildings.

While many cyclopes are domesticated, most remain in the wild where they travel vast distances in tight-knit family herds while searching for food. At the turn of the 20th century, there were fewer than 100,000 wild cyclopes in existence. Today, there are an estimated 450,000 but habitat loss remains a threat to these wild herds, resulting in poorer foraging conditions and threatening calf survival.

During mating season, female cyclopes give off a powerful, musky scent to attract mates. This potent aroma attracts the larger males who engage in competition for her attention. After a male is victorious he will join the family unit and travel with them until he is defeated by another male.

Cyclops family units are composed of a complex social hierarchy with females at the top and the larger males as temporary members breeding with the group and protecting the children alongside the mothers. Most male cyclopes leave their family groups in late adolescence and lead solitary existences, occasionally competing for entry into a group and returning to their roaming if rebuffed. Only a select few manage to prove themselves and take their place permanently within a family unit.

*Ball and socket
shoulders*

Arm length - five meters

Slow and steady walk

Northern Cyclops

Height - 10 meters

Weight - 8 metric tons

Age - 43 years

Three main varieties of cyclops, Pygmy, White, and Northern, exist throughout the known world. While the Northern cyclops is commonly domesticated, the pygmy and white cyclops are seldom seen species that make their home in mountains and open savannah, respectively.

The White cyclops is extremely rare, and easily identified by its pale yellow coloration and wide circular mouth. Unlike the two other living species, the white cyclops' large characteristic eye is below its pectoral muscles.

Pygmy cyclops are more common and most often found in dry open grassland and feed on short bushes and overhanging branches. They stand only 4 meters tall and are protected from thorns and stinging insects by their thick hide of overlapping leathery plates.

Both species are natural

wild and are rarely seen outside their habitat, unlike their Northern cousins.

White Cyclops

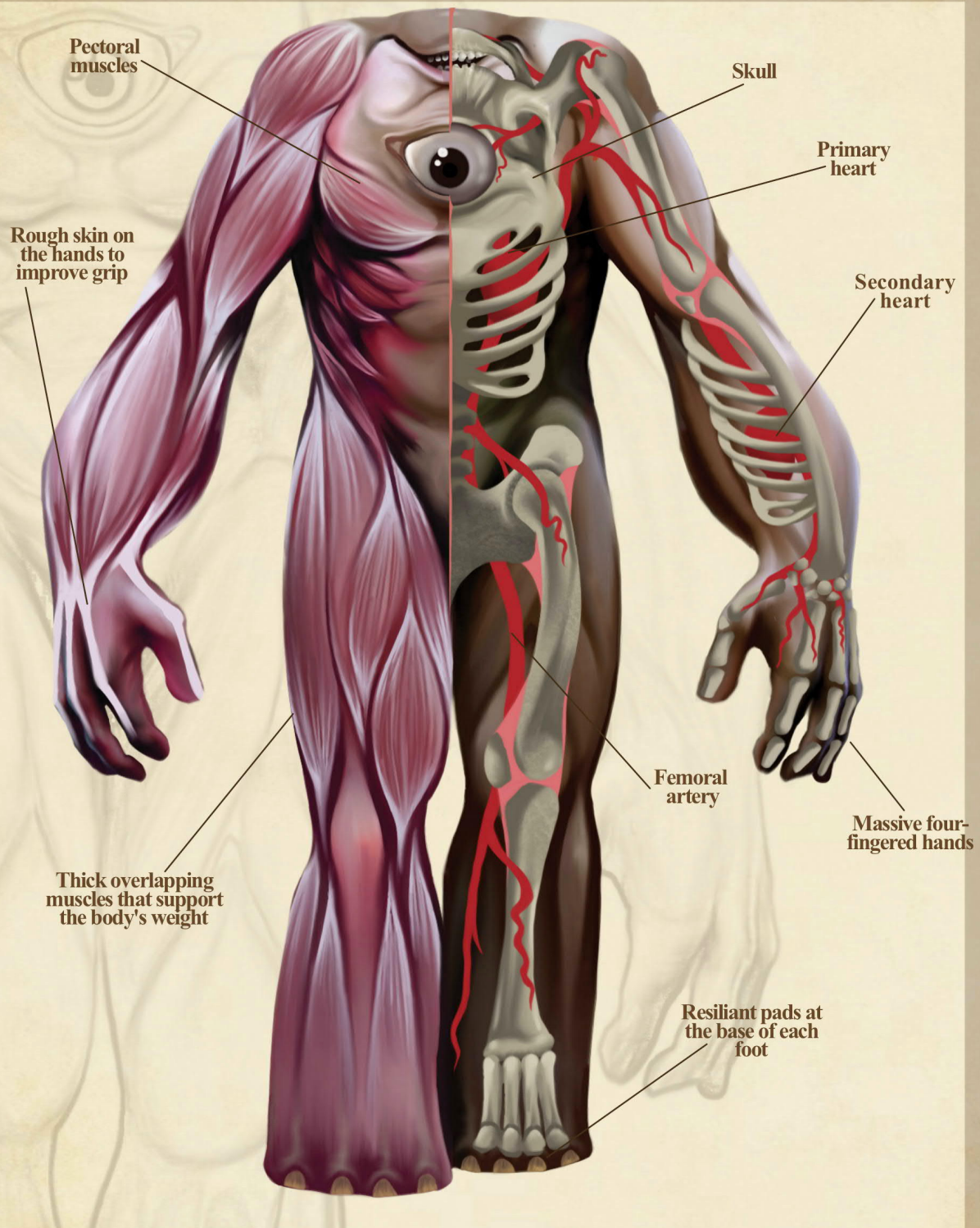
Height - 6 meters
Weight - 4 metric tons
Age - 15 years



Pygmy Cyclops

Height - 4 meters
Weight - 2 metric tons
Age - 22 years





Pandriki

An aggressive creature from a frigid realm of howling terrors, pandriki are known to attack isolated villages during cold winter nights, arriving with snow storms of peculiar ferocity.

Often called "ice-wolves," their alien nature makes intellectual reference points difficult to establish, but the ratio of brain to body mass in dissected pandriki indicates a high degree of intelligence.

Their motivations, origins, and abilities are shrouded in mystery. What little is known of them has been gleaned from their peculiar physiology and begrudging revelations by the most ancient of sphinxes.

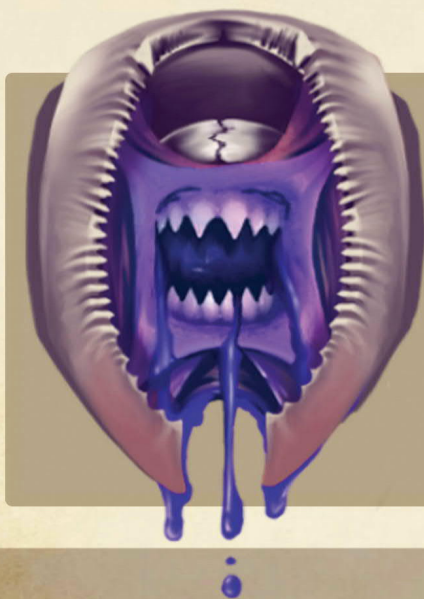
Though technically blind, pandriki navigate with a peculiar ability to sense and track temperature changes. These creatures are so acutely attuned that they can track prey for miles by honing in on their warmth. Though they produce no audible sounds pandriki are capable of hunting and coordinating in pitch blackness.

Because of their sensitivity to heat, mammals and other warm-blooded life forms are believed to be physically offensive to them much like a powerful smell would be to a human.

The storms that accompany pandriki attacks are thought to be a side effect of their presence in our reality, and these tempests often disguise their presence until the last possible moment.

According to deciphered sphinx riddles, the pandriki are an extremely ancient race, having erected and lost innumerable civilizations in the past several hundred thousand years. Physical similarities between pandriki and sphinxes seem to indicate a similar evolutionary lineage, and it is assumed that they originated in the same environment.

Although pandriki attacks span back to the beginning of recorded history, over the past several decades these creatures have begun to appear more frequently and in greater numbers. Pandriki territory seems limited to cold climates in the northern hemisphere, but their tendency to appear without warning and vanish before help arrives leaves very little evidence.



Behind the pandriki's bony facial plate is a large sharp-toothed mouth attached to a membranous web of tissue. When attacking, the horizontal pieces of bone grip prey tightly while the inner mouth bites repeatedly.

Pandriki emit a constant stream of thick blueish saliva from their bony heads. This substance evaporates quickly and dramatically cools whatever surface it touches. Splashes of the saliva will instantly numb living tissue and freeze it solid with lengthy exposure. Prey will often die of hypothermia long before blood loss, leaving the "ice-wolf" to swallow its fill of stiff frozen flesh.



Sensory ridges

Facial plate

Top speed - 40 km/hour

Pandriki (Ice Wolf)

*Height - 1 meter
Weight - 30 kg
Age - unknown
Origin - unknown*



Dragon

Large, carnivorous reptile-like creatures, dragons are equipped with unique anatomy designed to facilitate flight. They have two swiftly beating wings, strong back legs, and a tail nearly the length of their body that gives them balance in the air.

Though there are many varieties and subspecies, true dragons fly by producing hydrogen as a byproduct of digestion, storing the buoyant gas in special expandable chambers, and rising slowly into the air with rapid flaps of their short wings. The skin covering their hydrogen sacks is extremely tough and flexible, swelling dramatically as the dragon's store of buoyant gas increases. This gives them the rather peculiar appearance of a large bumble bee thrumming its way through the air. They descend by releasing hydrogen and stay grounded by gripping tightly with their strong back legs.

The flammable gas is also the source of the dragon's notorious fire-breathing ability. A threatened dragon will vent hydrogen through openings in its lower jaw and ignite the gas by scraping a rough flint-like tongue across its many teeth. Though this is a formidable ability, a dragon can expend its store of gas in a single encounter and be grounded and relatively defenseless for the several hours it takes to replenish its supply.

Dragons are well armored, and the plates that cover their skin have sensory nodes that facilitate a finely tuned sense of touch. This sensitivity keeps flying dragons aware of minor wind and temperature changes and allows them to control their speed and direction easily while in the air.

Dragons lay eggs in dug-out holes, and protect them for several months until they hatch. Juvenile dragons are very shy and will flee quickly if a human approaches, whereas mature dragons will often attack and eat solitary travelers or livestock.

Most of a dragon's life is solitary and spent high above the ground. Large dragons come together only to breed or compete against other members of their species for territory. They have been observed engaging in male-male combat, in which one male pins another until the trapped dragon surrenders and departs the victor's territory.

Dragons are among the world's largest flying creatures. They dominate most ecosystems in which they live, hunting and ambushing prey across hundreds of miles of territory. In the modern-era, deadly encounters with dragons have been minimized through a series of isolated nature reserves designed to contain these majestic creatures far from human civilization.

Dragon's teeth are serrated like knife blades and nearly 15 cm in length. Though ascribed many mystic abilities, claims that they can cure ailments or raise armies are untrue. However, the teeth of adult dragons have a few practical and impressive properties.

The rough layer at the tooth's base creates a shower of sparks if struck (the source of the dragon's seemingly miraculous flame). Because of their dense composition these teeth are also incredibly difficult to bend or break, prompting their use in a variety of weapons and tools amongst tribes of humans and industrious goblins.



Over 60 teeth

30 wingbeats/min

Tail length -
4 meters

Sectioned belly
plates

Eastern Ironback

Height - 5 meters

Weight - 250 kg

Age - 22 years



Dragon anatomy is structured around the limitations of flight for large creatures. Their bones are hollow and despite the buoyancy of their hydrogen sack they require constant effort and powerful wings to stay in the air.

Their relatively small brain links into a semi-spinal column that runs the length of their neck before connecting into the thick segments that compose the dragon's torso. The spine then resumes at the base of the tail and continues to its tip.

Dragon hearts connect directly into a sturdy sheet of wing muscles via a large network of arteries. A single array of muscles connects to both wings. This means that dragons are incapable of moving their wings independently of one another and must rely on motions of their head and tail to steer during flight.

Finally, dragons have a relatively short intestinal tract, relying on a constant diet of easy to digest meat in order to support their large bodies. Cooking their food before eating is a common habit of dragons and aids digestion, allowing for easier extraction of nutrients.



Wing muscles

Primary hydrogen storage

Spinal nerve

Bladder

Thick musculature for steering

Intestines

For much of human history, dragons posed a significant threat to settled society. Livestock, pets, and even children were often stolen away in sudden aerial attacks.

It was common throughout the ancient world for "dragon slayers" to travel hundreds of miles and ensure that farming communities were safe in exchange for payment. Though dragon slayers typically used poisons, traps, and barbed nets, the more inaccurate (but exciting) image of a sword wielding adventurer fighting against these huge creatures has captured the popular imagination and persists to this day.

Below is an early dramatized account of a dragonslayer at work, fighting what was likely a large Eastern Ironback.



In earlier centuries it was common to display dragon skulls in homes and castles as evidence of bravery or physical prowess.

The Dragon Slayer (4th century)

*Soot and scale eclipse pitiless sun, and the tyranny of nature befalls us.
Ivory claws rake the ground with cruel grace before bounding back into untrespassed sky.
Arrows pepper the air, then burn to ash and scatter under the hurricane beat of iron wings.
The archers along with them.*

*A man stands, decked in steel. Glittering with scale to rival the beast above,
not king, nor lord, nor noble knight, he calls...
The beast swings low to meet this unworthy challenge. Spiked breast to spiked breast oppose,
the champion's heart as hard as his armor.*

*He fights on foot against the sky, slashing, leaping, hurling,
and is dragged up into the delirious air.
Astride the head of a titan, grappling with death itself amongst a field of burning blue.*



Pygmy Dragon

Diet - nectar, flowers, and fruit

Length - 25 cm

Weight - 224 grams

Not all species of dragons are as terrifying or dangerous as stories might suggest.

The pygmy dragon, pictured here at its actual size, is a distant cousin of its fire-breathing namesake. They can be found in abundance in warm dry climates, drinking nectar with their long tongues and laying small clumps of eggs on the underside of leaves.

They are occasionally mistaken for bats, but are identifiable by their rapid, sustained flying.

Their narrow wings and streamlined abdomens are adapted for quick maneuverable flight.

These small creatures hover in midair while they feed from flowers and move rapidly when startled.

Pygmy dragons are considered good luck by most cultures and some gardens will put out dishes of honey water to entice them. Most fly only during the day and sleep in tiny colonies in attics or treetops while they wait for sunrise.

Cave dragons are pale white and roost in rocky outcroppings with colonies of up to sixty individuals. They are notorious for thick expandable skin and a lack of overlapping plates along their midsections that characterize most large dragon species, leading to their more commonly used title: "leatherbellies".

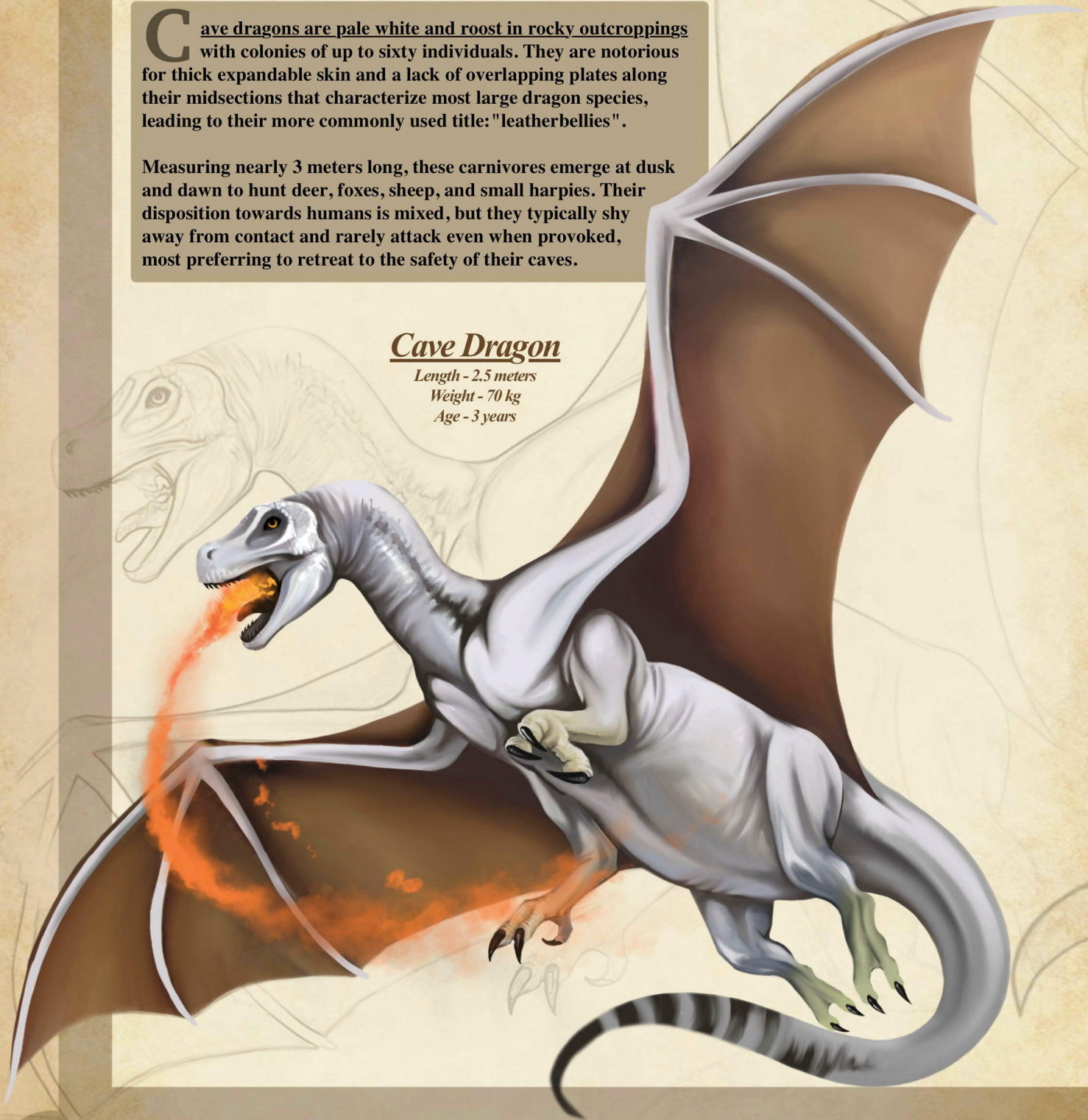
Measuring nearly 3 meters long, these carnivores emerge at dusk and dawn to hunt deer, foxes, sheep, and small harpies. Their disposition towards humans is mixed, but they typically shy away from contact and rarely attack even when provoked, most preferring to retreat to the safety of their caves.

Cave Dragon

Length - 2.5 meters

Weight - 70 kg

Age - 3 years



Notorious scavengers, dreg-dragons are often the first creatures to arrive when fresh carrion is available. Using their keen sense of smell these dog-sized dragons will congregate from miles around to feed, often drawn to the kills of their larger cousins and sneaking in to steal mouthfuls of meat.

In modern times these creatures have become common pest animals and can be found in huge colonies at city dumps and waste disposal facilities. Dreg dragons are among only a few animals, like direwolves and some small goblin species, capable of thriving in an urban environment. Dreg dragons sometimes come into conflict with humans, as these animals will open garbage bags in search of food, eat food left out for pets, and even attack unattended pets themselves. Hungry adult dregs can pose a risk to small children, who should not be left unsupervised in areas dreg dragons are known to inhabit. They are large enough to easily kill a child and lack wariness of humans, unlike most wild dragons.



Dreg Dragon

Height - 5 meters

Weight - 250 kg

Age - 14 years

False Dragons

Aquatic dragons are distant relatives of true dragons, and use their rubbery "wings" to propel themselves through shallow ocean reefs in search of prey. Lacking the hydrogen production and firebreathing abilities of their cousins, these playful creatures are regarded as their own distinct species.

Well suited to their environment, thick skin and muscular bodies help to insulate them from the cold of their aquatic habitat and their bluish color provides camouflage in the cresting waves.

Aquatic dragons live in colonies of up to a thousand individuals and breed prolifically in the winter months. Young are born live and capable of swimming only a few hours after birth. Young aquatic dragons will quickly grow to nearly two meters in length, and despite their formidable strength, are preyed upon by sharks and adolescent kraken.

Though the survival rate for newborns is relatively low, the tremendous birth rate of the colony keeps their population stable and their predators outnumbered.



Water Dragons

Length - 2 meters
Weight - 46 kg
Age - 19 years

W yvern are reptilian relatives of phoenixes, distinguished from true dragons by their lack of grasping front limbs. They fly using a second pair of wings instead of hydrogen sacks, and can soar for miles on powerful winds in search of prey.

Most wyvern produce venom in modified salivary glands, but lack the musculature to forcibly inject it. They must bite and grind their teeth into a wound in order to introduce venom. Because wyverns eat mainly eggs, small animals, and otherwise "helpless" prey, their venom is thought to have evolved for defensive purposes rather than hunting.

Wyvern mate for life and can form a bond with humans if raised from the egg and carefully trained. *Wyvernry* is the centuries-old art of hunting wild game with a bonded wyvern and is still practiced in many cultures around the world.

Some smaller varieties of wyvern are kept as pets, and can be very affectionate and cute when immature, though they often become aggressive as they grow (partly due to mishandling and poor training) and may bite, causing serious injury.



*Eastern, Beaked, and
Crested Wyvern*

Height - 0.5 meters

Weight - 10 kg

Age - 8 years

Goblin

Goblins are aggressive by nature, living out their short lives in the company of their pack. These cunning predators live complex social lives and coordinate to bring down large prey. A single pack of 30-40 members can control a territory of up to 100 square km, hunting everyday to sustain their numbers. In their marked hunting ground there are few creatures safe from the goblin's keen senses and sharpened stone tools. A large pack can prove a formidable threat even to grounded dragons, trapping and outmaneuvering larger creatures through clever coordination.

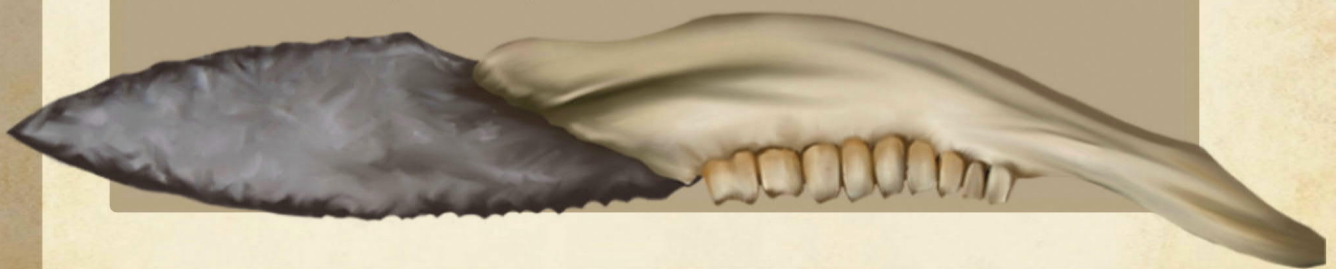
Goblins produce an enormous variety of sounds at frequencies above those heard by humans, but are well known for their cackling, laugh-like scream. Each member of a pack produces a signature high pitched cackle or whine that identifies the individual. They communicate with a descriptive language, understood across multiple subspecies, and it has been repeatedly shown that they can convey complex instructions to one another.

There are many known types of goblins including the Eastern Green, the Great Plains Goblin, the Mountain Greyback, and the Redbrook Goblin (featured here). Of all recorded species, only Redbrooks are known man-eaters.

Goblins have a single row of razor sharp teeth, and despite their carnivorous reputation will eat almost anything available. Goblins tend to breed in pairs during periods of abundance and give birth to litters of live young. Babies will cling to their mothers for the first months of their lives. Adolescent goblins separate from their parents after nearly a year of close contact.

In some urban areas successful packs of goblins have managed to eke out an existence, keeping the city's population of stray dogs and feral cats under control and avoiding capture by authorities.

Despite their clumsy forearms and limited dexterity goblins have nevertheless mastered the use of simple tools. Often crafting spears and knives out of beaten stone, a tribe will keep well built weapons for generations, passing items of quality to their children upon old age. This goblin knife was fashioned from the jawbone of an unidentified herbivore and was recovered after an attack on a group of human settlers. It is believed that knives hold a particular ritual significance to goblins, and that much of the goblin's primitive culture revolves around their production, preservation, and mastery.



Crested "Redbrook" Goblin

Height - 1 meter

Weight - 40 kg

Speed - 43 km/hour

Advanced tool use and
spacial reasoning

Top speed- 45 km/hour



Eastern Green
Goblin
22 kg



Mountain
Greyback
30 kg



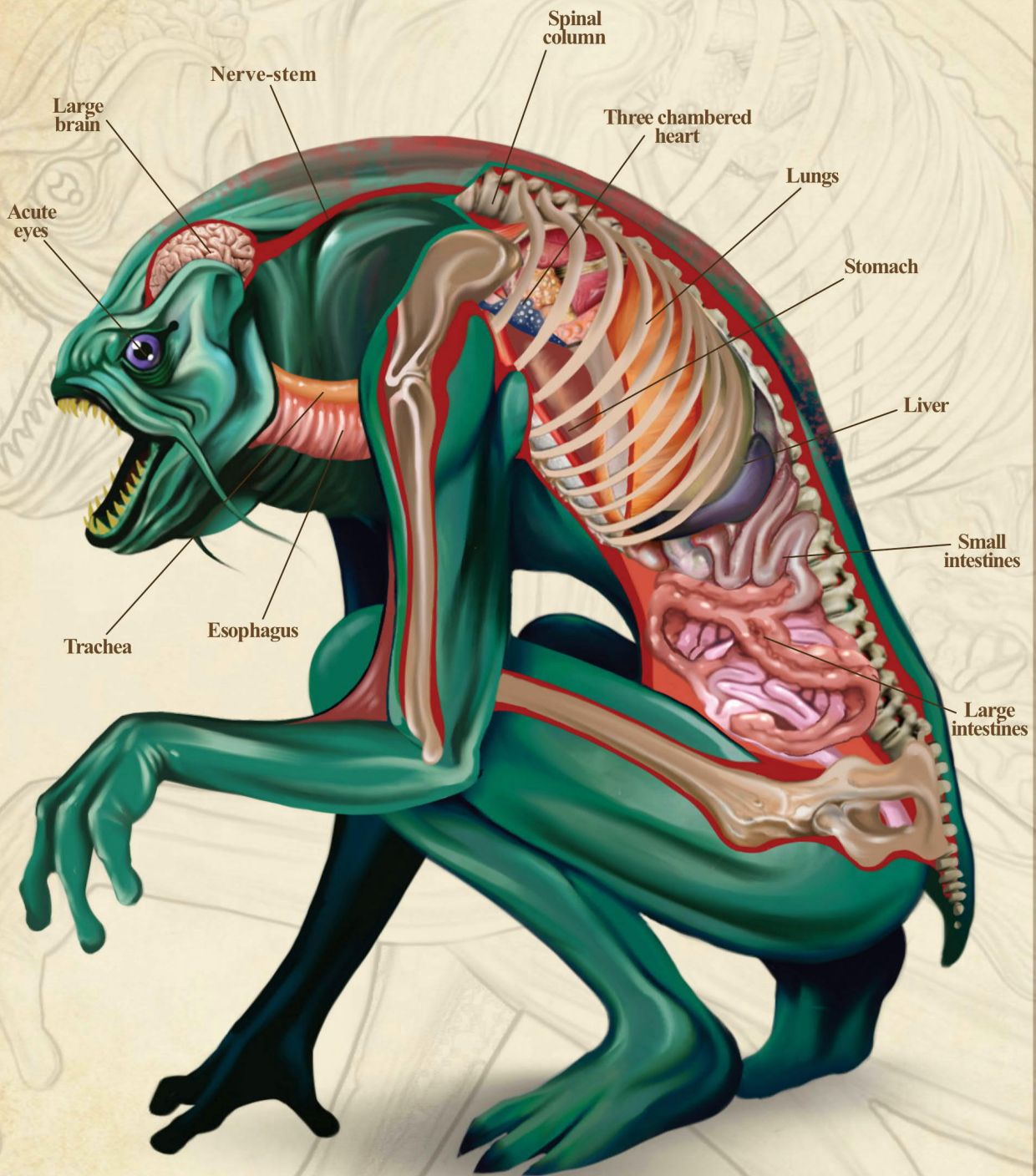
Redbrook
Goblin
40 kg

Many goblin sub-species are known to science and vary wildly in size and coloration. All are predatory, while the smaller Eastern Green lives a semi-aquatic existence hunting frogs and kappa, larger Redbrook goblins will coordinate to hunt and kill humans, horses, and other large land predators such as dragons and manticore.



*Jaw opens
nearly 145 degrees*

Goblin skulls are thickly built and anchored to the body with an overlapping base of muscles designed to endure powerful impacts. Hunting goblins charge head first and mouth open, attempting to cling to and drag down their prey. Their interlocking teeth are lost and replaced at a constant rate and broadly shaped to ensure maximum damage. Despite these adaptations it is not uncommon to see goblins with broken jaws or badly injured skulls, which are the result of too many hard blows while hunting. These injured goblins will often become the most dangerous. Forced from their packs when they lose their penchant for hunting, these goblins will choose to stalk easier prey. Cautionary tales are told among wary travelers of solitary goblins stalking humans and slitting throats with a desperate cunning born of their disability.



"*An Account of the Redbrook Maneaters*" is a book written by hunter-naturalist Corbett James. It details his experiences in the 4th century while working for local governments to defend against goblin attacks. For several years Corbett trapped and hunted a notorious tribe of goblins near the town of Redbrook, which were responsible for nearly 400 human deaths. These goblins were particularly notable for their use of human-forged metal weapons, and to this day Crested Goblins are referred to casually as "Redbrooks".

I don't suppose it is really true that goblin's eyes burn in the dark; but as the pack lunged I could have sworn that those brutish eyes flashed bright with prehistoric menace.

That terrible shine is the last thing I remember before a ferocious impact swept me off my feet and knocked the air from my armored chest. Something clamped around my forearm and shook the dagger from my grasp with unnatural strength. At least two of the beasts had me in their jaws while another struck me with a dull dented broadsword, ringing my metal chestplate again and again like a great gong.

My impulse was to strike back with my free hand, but the raining blows inhibited my motion. When I felt the stubby fingers slip under my helmet and begin to tug it free, all thoughts fled from me leaving behind only mindless terror.

I would have died then, pinned to the dirt, if not for the quick thinking of my companion who struck at the beasts with a long spear and chased them off of me before they could pierce my defences. Together we hobbled back to camp, scanning the dark underbrush for shining eyes and listening to distant piercing goblin calls.

I was fortunate to escape with only a few broken bones and minor cuts, and found myself newly wary of their cunning. I had killed a half dozen in the previous week with crossbows and poisoned baits, and the remaining goblins had evidently taken it upon themselves to exact revenge.

The patience with which they must have surveyed my routine before striking is unsettling, and their iron weapons made them more formidable than any pack of ordinary goblins. Thinking quickly, I posted a guard around the hut in which I recovered. Over the next couple of days three more attacks were rebuffed. The creatures had developed a grudge against me, and I was all too happy to return their dislike. When we met again, I promised myself, I would not be so easily subdued.



Goblin packs

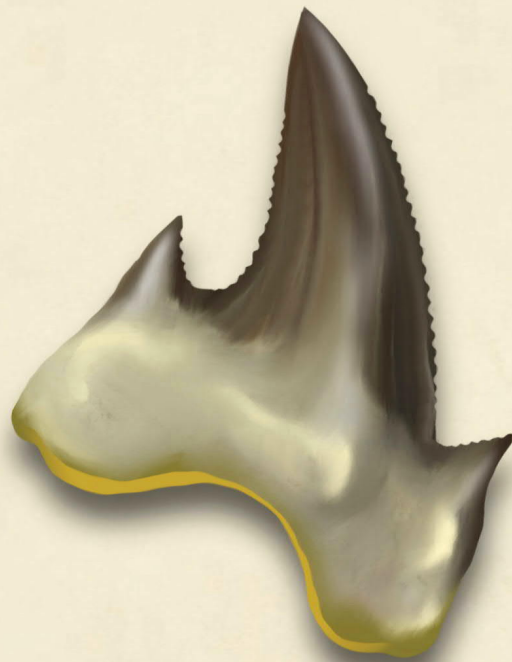
At the center of the goblin's lifestyle is the pack, a rigidly enforced social structure that demands cooperation and communication. A pack can be composed of up to 60 individuals, including a number of dominant females, male and female subordinates, and offspring of various ages.

The pack cooperates to provide food for the entire group, protect the young, and secure their territory. At night, male goblins patrol the pack's territory, spraying urine to mark the boundaries of their domain and calling loudly to frighten away potential trespassers. Since much of the pack's food is gathered within their territory, ensuring that a wide area is free from competing predators helps guarantee a steady supply of prey animals.

Goblins hunt daily to sustain their numbers and despite their small stature, can outmaneuver and overwhelm small cyclopes by using their cooperative tactics. Before a hunt, a special screeching call is given by a lead female which energizes the pack into a frenzy of anticipation. Then the lead female (or females) heads out in search of prey while the rest of the pack follows behind. Once potential food is spotted the pack fans out, communicating with high pitched calls that fall outside of human auditory range. Some goblins flank the prey while the leaders coordinate from behind. If the prey animals are in a herd the goblins will give chase, attempting to scare a single target out into the open where it can be overwhelmed and brought down by strong jaws and stone knives.

The largest of all known goblin species is the Crested or "Redbrook" goblin. They are ideal pack hunters, highly intelligent, curious, and communal. Ruled by a single matriarch that can weigh up to 70 kilograms, this rare subspecies achieved notoriety (and its namesake) in the infamous village of Redbrook where a single goblin pack took to hunting humans and decimated the local population over the course of several years.

There is a long mythology associated with the goblin, their nightly howling has inspired fearful fables throughout human history. Children's stories like *The Little Goblin Girl* are a part of contemporary culture, and some horror stories involving goblins are not without foundation. Centuries ago goblin attacks on human settlers were frequent and efforts to prevent them, more often than not, were futile.



Griffin

Griffins are large winged beasts that inhabit high mountain peaks and perilous cliffs. Explorer's initial descriptions of the griffin were vague and contradictory. However, all accounts seemed to infer the same noble attributes - kindness, bravery, and intelligence.

The creature, in fact, has none of the regal qualities initially described, having more in common with vultures and goats than eagles and lions. Griffins are aggressive and territorial with a violent nature that becomes apparent during mating season. During this time their stunted and vestigial wings are put to use to attract mates and intimidate rivals.

Griffins have no voice-box and are thus mute, emitting only weak hisses. They feed voraciously and indiscriminately on mountain goats and carrion.

Their beak is large, strong, and sharp-edged, with the upper mandible terminating in a hook. The feet are powerful and well suited for climbing and digging. Griffins can easily scale a vertical rock face, and are capable of negotiating the otherwise impassable crevices that comprise their mountainous domain.

A breeding season lasts for several months in early autumn, with a single egg laid after a successful mating. If the egg is lost to predators or accidentally broken, no additional breeding attempts will be made during the season.

Griffins are relatively rare and tend to kill each other when forced into overlapping territories. They come together only to mate and occasionally feed on large dragon or cyclops corpses. Such feasts are uncommon but can draw griffins from up to 50 kilometers away.

Over the last century wild populations of griffins have dropped dramatically, and a wide variety of causes have contributed to the griffin's decline. Its low clutch size (one young per nest), combined with a late age of sexual maturity, make griffins vulnerable to changing climates and human development within their territory.

Although no longer capable of true flight griffins evolved from a six-limbed relative of dragons and were once capable of soaring great distances.

Today's griffins retain only small feathered stumps where their wings once were, and instead depend on strong limbs to navigate their treacherous high-altitude habitat.

Griffin feathers are considered good luck by many cultures and were once used as a form of currency by certain mountain tribes due to their rarity and perceived beauty.

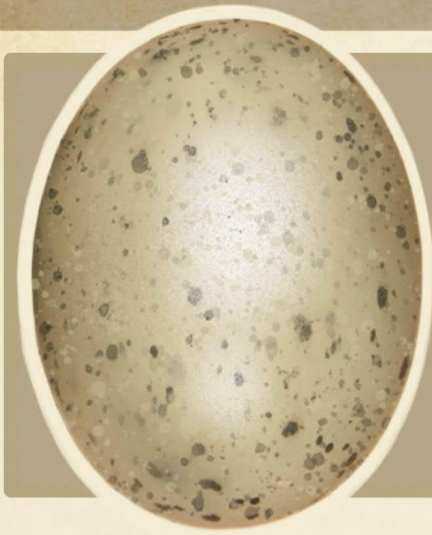




Common Griffin

Length - 3 meters

Weight - 90 kg



Egg shells are hard and mottled, nearly the size of a human head, and hidden away in cliff-side nests. They typically take several months before hatching and require little tending other than protection from potential predators.

Much of a griffin's adult life revolves around eggs. In the barren mountain landscape where they make their home, eggs and hatchlings require a great deal of energy and effort to produce and for rivals they represent a tremendous source of potential nutrients.

Griffins seem pathologically predisposed to attack and consume any eggs or egg-like objects they encounter, other than their own.

Young griffins grow fast, independent of their mothers after just a few months. In their harsh mountainous habitat, the babies need to be able to hunt on their own before winter arrives and food becomes scarce.

During this vulnerable stage of life, young griffin require shelter and food from their mother and are in danger of starvation if not properly cared for. A growing chick can eat more than half their own body weight every day, and needs to be tended to and protected from potential predators.

Initially dependent upon the mother for body heat, after a few weeks the young griffins grow a thick white down which they will keep until they've survived their first winter. Almost 50% of griffins die in their first year of life, most due to hypothermia.

Griffin mothers are also at risk of death by exhaustion as they hunt every day to feed the chick's rapidly growing appetites.

Fledgling Griffin

Weight- 1.3 kg



Griffin Anatomy



Harpy

There are harpy on every continent: nearly 30 flightless species, and 62 varieties capable of sustained flight. Highly successful predators, most harpies kill prey with their long humanoid legs and sharp claws.

Harpies tend to live in rocky or heavily forested areas, where they can leap from high vantage points onto unsuspecting prey. A few varieties occupy stretches of savannah, and ambush smaller animals by leaping from tall grass. Because of their extremely varied habits and habitats, harpies are difficult to study or categorize and their astonishing diversity has only come to be fully understood in recent decades.

Some large species, like the house-sized Great Harpy, are legendary for their size and power. Early explorers in the new world were astonished to see great migrating herds of harpy that numbered in the tens of thousands, but unfortunately human expansion has dramatically reduced their populations in the modern era. As a result, Great Harpies are now nearly extinct.

Some harpies will eat anything, while others are specialized feeders. Kite Harpies (No. 1) eat only insects; the enormous Great Harpy (No. 2) is known to hunt and kill centaur, dragons, and small cyclopes. Most harpies are "top predators" and dominate their ecosystems, but some like the Bearded Harpy (No.3) are scavengers easily capable of digesting bone and hooves. Many species must hunt and feed on large prey daily in order to sustain their strength.

No. 1



No. 2



No. 3



For centuries naturalists and explorers have known that the most important difference between harpy species is the shape and size of their beak. Some harpy beaks are designed to spear fish; others are lengthy and serrated for cutting chunks off of captive prey; still other beaks are suited to grabbing and breaking eggs.

Varying beak characteristics can be used to chart distant populations and study the development of new species as they evolve and adapt to new food sources.

Tropical Harpy

Height - 1.3 meters

Weight - 18 kg

Age - 4 years old

Knife-like crest

Powerful feet

Backward facing
limbs

Approximate speed - 75 km/hour



Wing length- 8 meters

Great Harpy.

*Height - 3 meters
Weight - 130 kg
Wingspan - 8 meters*

Can lift up to 100 kg

The largest variety of living harpy, Great Harpies are extremely rare and require vast territories to support their hunting habits.

These giants are unable to lift off from the ground, but will climb cliff faces and fall from great heights to achieve flight. Once grounded they are vulnerable to attack and must climb back up to their perch to eat and prepare for their next flight.

Great Harpies attack from above, diving onto unsuspecting prey from their high vantage points. When attacking, Great Harpies draw back their wings and tuck in their legs to gain speed. As it approaches the ground the wings are unfurled and the hind legs brought forward to meet the front facing wing claws, with the prey caught in the middle. The harpy's enormous talons impact the prey with the creature's full weight behind them, piercing organs and shattering bone.

First hand accounts of hunting harpies reveal that they can overpower even the largest of dragons with their surprise attacks.

Most harpies are capable of rudimentary flight but prefer to run along the ground using their long powerful legs, which can carry them at speeds of up to 60 kilometers per hour. While in pursuit of prey harpies will maintain balance using their strong wings.

Thick muscles in their chest make harpies top-heavy, causing them to lean forward as they sprint and flap their wings to leap over obstacles.

The ratio of brain to body weight of the average harpy indicates higher cognition, pattern recognition, and spatial awareness. Their keen eyes allow them to track prey through dense jungles, and navigate through complex environments with ease.

Anatomical adaptations make harpies formidable predators; tracking and killing goblins, small unicorns, and occasionally centaurs with ease.

Harpies have an extremely efficient respiratory system to supply their muscles with oxygen while on the run. Their digestive system is capable of easily dissolving fur, feather, and bone. The larger breeds of harpy require enormous amounts of energy to maintain their strength, and eat constantly in order to avoid starvation.



Prairie Harpy.

Height - 2 meters

Weight - 32 kg

Human

A daptable, intelligent, and cooperative, humans are the most common species of humanoid on the planet today with a population of nearly 3 billion. Modern humans are biologically similar to minotaurs and orcs, and once coexisted with other (now extinct) hominid species like giants, yeti, and even fairy-folk.

Humans are characterized by their erect posture, dexterous five fingered hands, lack of horns, and relative intelligence. The first humans arose nearly 500,000 years ago and quickly spread across the entire planet in an exodus popularly referred to as the "Great Expansion."

During this period humans displaced or destroyed several other sentient species, and came into sustained conflict with orcs and centaurs. The Great Expansion also had significant positive effects on many creatures that could coexist symbiotically with humans, like mermaids and goblins.

Humans are highly cooperative beings and tend to live in large complex social groups. The largest group of this type is the nation-state, a distinctly human social structure that sets this species apart from the tribal societies, of orcs, the global racial-harmony of minotaurs, and the nomadic solitude of kappas. At present, hundreds of human nations exist and prosper in nearly every environment on Earth. Humans tend to excel in large scale altering of habitats by means of technology, through irrigation, urban planning, construction, transport, and deforestation. Their technology is generally advanced and highly specialized, second in sophistication only to that of the minotaur.

Humans are omnivorous, capable of consuming a wide variety of plant and animal material. They need to eat several times a day, and for much of recorded history populations of humans were limited primarily by their proximity to sources of food. However, with the advent of large-scale trade and transportation infrastructure, humans no longer need to live near natural resources in order to support large populations and several cities have managed to grow their population to over a million individuals.

Human language, social organization, traditions, and religious beliefs vary dramatically from nation to nation. The most popular religious practices are polytheistic, though sects of nature-worshippers are common among most large human populations. Humans are the most likely of all sentient species to worship sphinxes and angels.

Human societies are historically patriarchal (with rare exception), and males and females have been marked culturally by a corresponding division of norms, roles, dress, behavior, rights, status, and power. Gender roles among humans have varied throughout history, and challenges to predominant gender norms have recurred in many societies. In the modern day, women in most human societies have taken steps towards achieving equality with the males of their species.



Forward facing eyes

Adult Male Warrior

Height - 1.6 meters

Weight - 70 kg

Age - 32 years

Steel tools

Lacking hooves, humans wear leather foot coverings when travelling.

Imp

Consisting of little more than living flame encased in segmented armor, these mischievous and mercurial beings are drawn inexorably to flammable materials. They are a race of diminutive fire-worshippers that make their home deep beneath the earth, in volcanic mountain ranges, and occasionally in man-made furnaces. Immature imps will often leave their high-temperature habitats in search of burnable material upon which to feed and grow.

Imps are chaotic and destructive, seldom spotted alone and easily identified by the jets of fire that issue from every crack in their frame. They are most powerful in their natural form but without a metal or stone casing they extinguish quickly in the open air.

The origin of fire imps is shrouded in mystery, but their elegant and decorative armor, presumably forged in the extreme heat of their volcanic habitat, indicates intelligence. Imps are accomplished smiths, bending and mixing metals into fantastic varieties and forms with the heat of their bodies.

Imp armor is highly prized for its durability, and the metals scavenged after an incursion of fire imps are often reclaimed and shaped into swords of singular sharpness.

Imps have a hermit crab-like tendency to shell themselves against the elements. This makes them impervious to most conventional attacks.

As imps grow, they require larger shells. Since suitable intact shells are sometimes a limited resource, vigorous competition has been known to occur between immature imps. Imps trapped outside of their natural high-temperature environment may fight or kill a competitor to gain access to the shell they favor.

Legends tell of a primordial creature of terror and flame that roamed our young world until it was finally brought down by a grand army of the first-men. As the great beast lay dying it cursed mankind swearing to return our realm to the ancient cataclysmic age of fire from whence it came. From his withered corpse the first imps emerged and scattered themselves to the corners of the world, pledging always to be a scourge to the decedents of man.



Young imps start out the size of a small candle flame and grow quickly, requiring new shells at regular intervals. They will often hollow out stones or inhabit iron cookware in an attempt to fashion a small makeshift home. Only when an imp reaches full size will they construct their characteristic ornate armor.

Humans most often stumble upon imps during their youthful nomadic period, and are occasionally shocked to discover that their tea-kettle has acquired a mind of its own and is suddenly attempting to burn down the house.



Core temperature -
324 degrees °C

Armor comprised of over
30 individual plates

Top speed -
30 km/hour

Adult Imp in Armor

Height - 1.5 meters

Weight - 60 kg

Kappa

These legendary creatures creep their way slowly along the damp canyon valleys of isolated mountain ranges. Kappas usually live alone hunting fish, gathering fruit, and fashioning simple tools to support their contemplative lifestyle. The "water" in their bowl-like heads is actually a viscous serum not dissimilar to human cerebral-spinal fluid that when spilled can temporarily reduce the creature's intellect.

Immobile kappas with a full store of fluid are amongst the wisest creatures on the planet. Stories tell of specimens sitting in meditation for weeks as they fixate on perfecting their thoughts and inner peace.

Kappa serum is highly prized for its numerous medicinal properties, but rather than rendering the kappa immobile as legend suggests, too much drained fluid will cause the kappa to go feral and violently assault any nearby humans. Afterwards the creature will always flee to a safe place where it can regenerate.

Any movement on behalf of the kappa is sure to reduce its intelligence by spilling precious fluid, and any running or fighting will leave the creature a hollow shell of base animal instinct.

Interacting with a kappa is a careful balance of matching wits with a slow moving creature of immeasurable cunning or combatting a quick predator of savage rage.

Those interacting with a kappa must remain aware of how much fluid spilled while dealing with the creature or they may find that it is either too smart or too violent at any given moment.

Kappa are dedicated parents, tending carefully to clusters of small eggs that hatch into tadpole-like creatures. These small "tadpoles" swim within the head bowls of their parents while they develop. Eventually the young will leave the protection of their mother and live a semi-aquatic existence, feeding on fish and river plants, until they are fully grown.



For decades monks and scholars have taken kappa fluid as a temporary intelligence enhancement. It is not uncommon to see holy men with a vial of the thick serum hanging from their neck, but negotiating for this precious resource is difficult as it must be collected fresh and can produce a variety of unpleasant side effects if over-consumed.

The serum itself is integral to the kappa's circulatory and nervous system, and is critical for higher cognition. It interacts with oxygen to function, and is produced by a special organ located just below the kappa's ribcage.



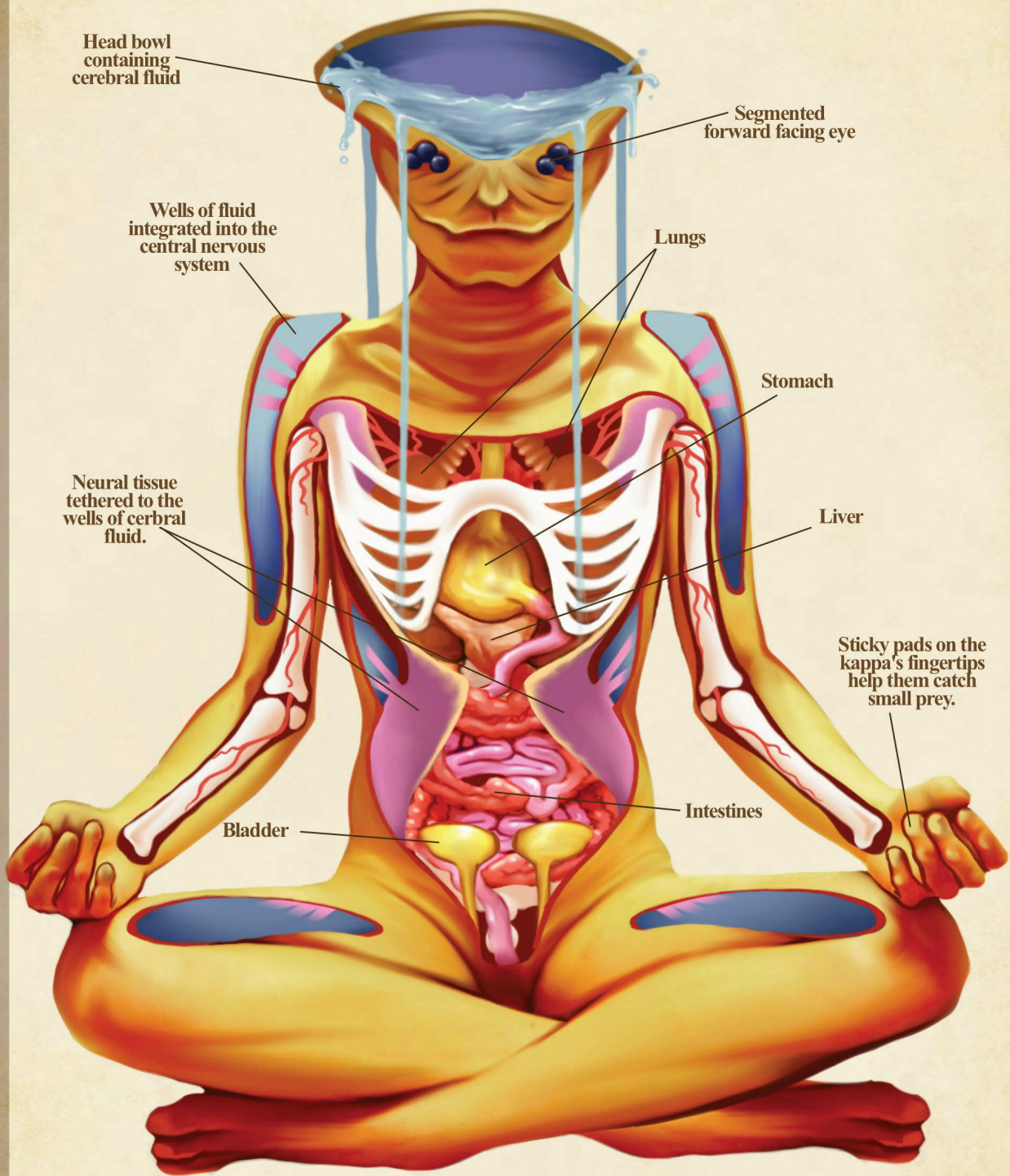
*Open pools
of cerebral fluid*

*Top speed
14 km/hour*

Sticky finger pads

Common Kappa

*Height - 1 meter
Weight - 34 kg*



Head bowl containing cerebral fluid

Segmented forward facing eye

Wells of fluid integrated into the central nervous system

Lungs

Stomach

Neural tissue tethered to the wells of cerebral fluid.

Liver

Sticky pads on the kappa's fingertips help them catch small prey.

Intestines

Bladder

Kappa & Society

Kappa (like sphinxes) play an important ritual role in the religions of several sentient species. Orkish society in particular holds kappa in high esteem and features them prominently in their creation myth, while some fundamentalist sects believe that the entire world is held within the head bowl of a giant meditating kappa.

Kappa lack any kind of formal culture, traditions, or unifying philosophy. They live a hermit-like existence and are seemingly unconcerned with the role that they play in the religious rituals of other intelligent beings.

On several occasions throughout history rulers have come to kappa, seeking weapons, weaknesses, or battle strategy. These attempts have never been successful. Kappa universally refuse to council other humanoids in any field of knowledge that might be used to cause harm. Depending on the individual kappa, this prohibition may include discussions of biology, applied physics, and even sociology.

Kappa seem to possess a species-wide disgust of organized violence and a preference for self-dependency and isolation. Many human nations have declared neutral spaces within their own borders where kappa may thrive in relative peace. These reservations have on occasion served as meeting places for disputes amongst tribes, nations, and even whole species. Kappa are frequently willing to facilitate discussion and act as negotiators (sometimes at great personal risk) if they believe peace to be a possibility.

Below is a famous (and frequently reproduced) statue of a kappa. Kappa figures are often designed into bowls, banks, plant pots, and miscellaneous ornaments, as well as large statues. These are seen as good luck, and symbolic of self-knowledge and intelligence.



Kraken

Tremendous sea creatures that dwell in dark ocean depths, growing hundreds of feet long and ambushing whales for sustenance, kraken are the largest living creatures currently in existence. The biggest of these elusive giants ever found measured 20 meters in length and weighed almost 100 metric tons.

Despite their immense size the kraken's inhospitable deep-sea habitat has made them uniquely difficult to study, and most of what is known about them is from carcasses that have washed up on beaches or been hauled in by brave whalers. Krakens have six thick arms with sensitive pads on the tips that help them bring food to their beak-like mouths. Their diet consists primarily of whales, large squid, and the occasional school of mermaids.

They maneuver by pulling seawater into their body cavity through gaps around their beak, and expelling it back out with movements of their tentacles. This propulsion system is also used to suck large groups of fish or dolphins into their mouths, creating an inescapable pull by suddenly vacuuming up several tons of water in a few seconds.

Kraken have a rigid two-part beak, surrounded by a muscular head appendage. Composed primarily of chitin and hardened cartilage, beaks are the only identifiable remains of a kraken's soft body after death. They are often kept as trophies or affixed to the front of ships for decorative purposes the beaks can be used to estimate the original creature's length and total body weight.


Huge fossilized beaks have been discovered across the world's oceans indicating that prehistoric kraken could reach lengths of nearly twice their modern cousins.

Krakens are notorious for causing shipwrecks but typically only destroy vessels in the case of an accidental collision. The kraken has adapted itself to remaining still for long periods while waiting for whales to surface. In this position, the kraken is sometimes struck by human ships that are also drawn to the surfacing whale pods.

Because of their huge size krakens breed slowly and require massive supplies of food. Minotaurs have long opposed the hunting of Kraken in their territorial waters, and have occasionally withheld trade in protestation.

Even with their formidable size and natural defenses these majestic creatures are in danger of extinction due to over-hunting and dwindling food sources.





Beak opens
nearly 180 degrees

Tentacles stretch over
12 meters

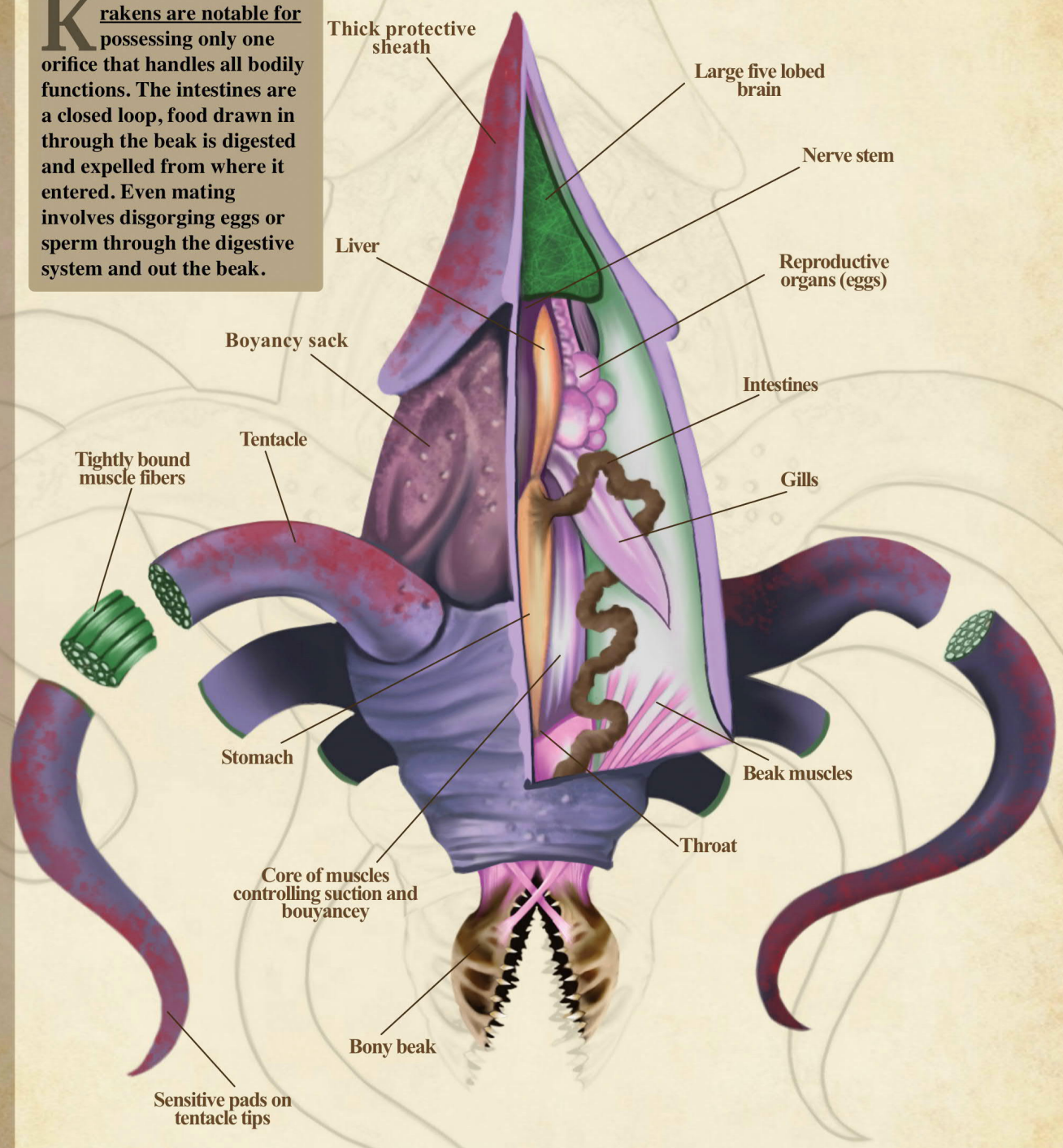
Top speed
60 km/hour

Adult Kraken

Length - 18 meters

Weight - 82 metric tons

Krakens are notable for possessing only one orifice that handles all bodily functions. The intestines are a closed loop, food drawn in through the beak is digested and expelled from where it entered. Even mating involves disgorging eggs or sperm through the digestive system and out the beak.



Thick protective sheath

Large five lobed brain

Nerve stem

Liver

Reproductive organs (eggs)

Boyancy sack

Intestines

Tightly bound muscle fibers

Tentacle

Gills

Stomach

Beak muscles

Throat

Core of muscles controlling suction and bouyancey

Bony beak

Sensitive pads on tentacle tips

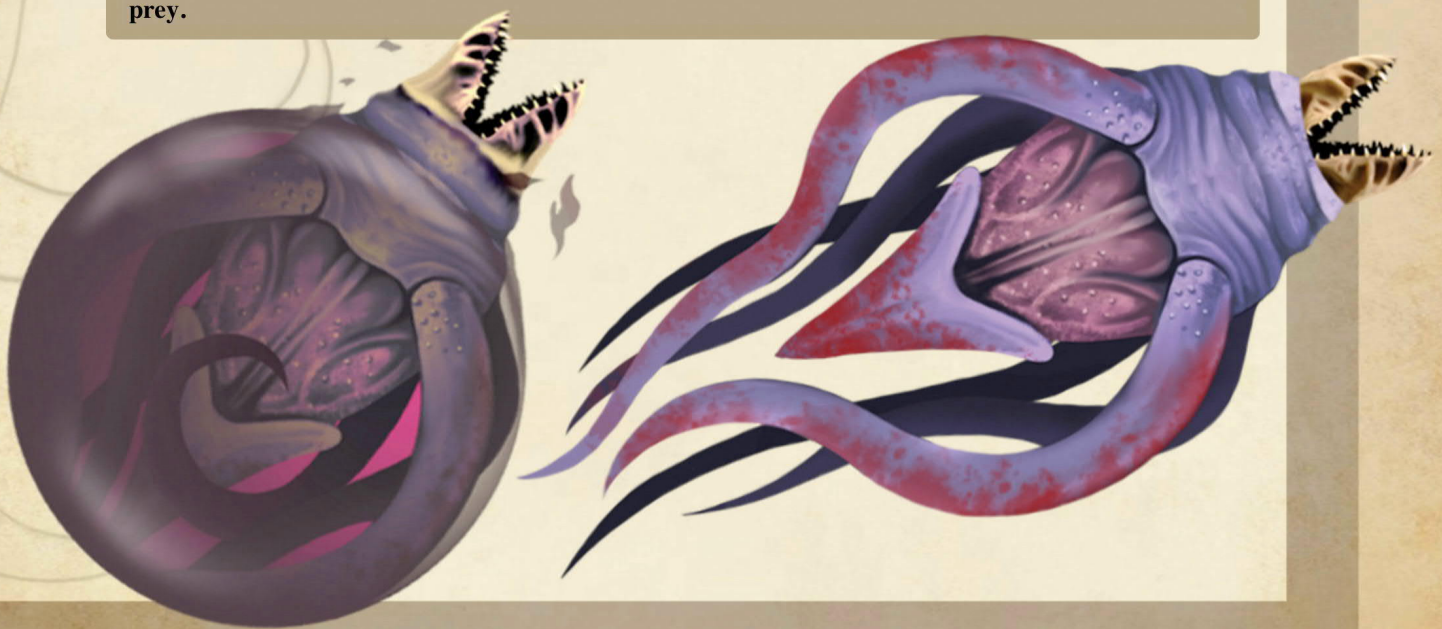
On moonlit nights in early spring, adult kraken enter their breeding phase and gather, en masse, near the water's surface. The males find partners as quickly as possible since the presence of so many other competitive males creates a dangerous environment. Males seize the females and cling tightly to them until they relent and release their eggs.

These coconut sized eggs are disgorged by the hundreds into the open water. Quickly dropping their partners, the males swim after the eggs and fertilize them before heading back into deeper water. The exhausted females float on the surface for several hours before slowly dispersing. Ravenous, they will gobble-up any sea creatures unlucky enough to cross their path as they retreat into the depths.

Eggs float freely for weeks before hatching, with only a small percentage surviving this period of directionless drifting. After hatching, the immature kraken make their homes in shallow holes and rock crevices. Occasionally, they even dig protective gravel nests in order to secure their lairs. At night, young krakens emerge to hunt crabs, mollusks, fish, and mermaids.

Like their parents, young kraken wait patiently for food to pass nearby before grabbing it with muscular tentacles, using rough rows of tiny suckers to grip the slippery prey. Prodigious hunters, their tentacles pull prey towards a hard toothed beak where it is torn into digestible chunks and eaten. Kraken are entirely without fear once they reach their full size; however, adolescent kraken fall prey to sharks, toothed whales, sea serpents, and even diving harpies.

Though relatively large and well armed, young kraken, when confronted by a potential predator, will often flee rather than risk fighting. Unlike their adult counterparts, young kraken are swift. They suck water in through a pair of valve-like vents on either side of their muscular body for rapid propulsion. These vents serve as a quick escape system for young kraken allowing them to compress their body and jet away backwards. As they age this system develops into a method of sucking up prey.



Mermaid

One of the strangest creatures in existence, mermaids are aquatic omnivores that closely resemble stereotypically attractive human women with fish-like tails. Even today, their uncanny resemblance to humanity perplexes and beguiles those who encounter them, and our understanding of these creatures is colored by myth and misunderstanding.

Their social structure is poorly understood, but they appear to travel in pods like dolphins and use scavenged tools as a defense against kraken and coastal harpies.

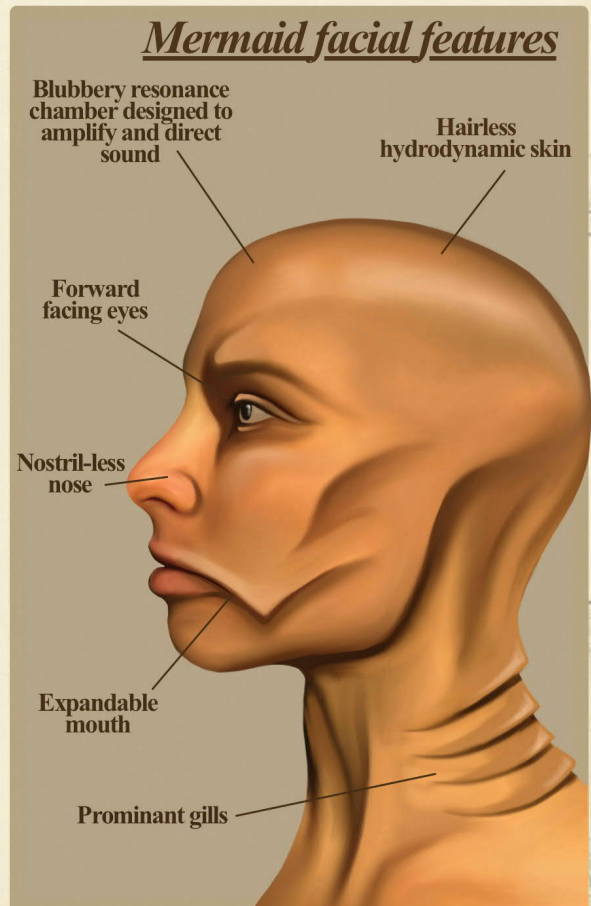
Mermaids are relatively intelligent, but due to their aquatic lifestyle mermaids cannot advance beyond early human Stone-Age culture. They lack access to fire for metal-working or even fibrous plants for the production of woven goods.

Although mermaids are widespread, most species prefer the warmer waters of the tropic zones, only a few larger varieties are adapted for colder climates.

All mermaids, male and female, resemble human women but can be distinguished by the pattern of scales around their primary fin. Male mermaids typically mate with multiple females every year, but females only mate every two to three years. Calves are typically born in the spring and summer months and females bear all the responsibility for raising them. Mothers of some species protect their young for almost a year. Mermaids produce a variety of vocalizations, usually in the form of clicks and low hums designed to communicate with other members of their pod.

A mermaid's brightly colored scales are actually rough plates of overlapping skin designed to protect them from the immense pressure and corrosive salt of their ocean habitat.

Female mermaids deposit eggs in long strands of mucus and males fertilize them by passing near and ejecting sperm. There is a collection of rougher scales surrounding a fin near the bottom of the illustration, this is the cloaca-like opening for their reproductive and waste disposal systems.





Efficient gills

Thick skin for insulation

Cloacal opening

Common Mermaid

Length - 3 meters

Weight - 77 kg

Age - 12 years



Mermaid Evolution

Mermaids are non-mammalian, belonging to a category of warm-blooded aquatic animals adapted for foraging in shallow seas. Their resemblance to human women is the result of tens of thousands of years of sustained unintentional artificial selection by sailors across multiple continents and cultures.

Originally, their hairless streamlined bodies more closely resembled other more familiar sea creatures, with the notable exception of two dexterous forward appendages adapted to pulling open shellfish, and a bowling pin shaped body that gave the vague impression of a human "head". They were, at least initially, only vaguely and incidentally humanoid in appearance.

Due to cultural taboos against cannibalism, early cultures fishing for the mermaid's ancestors would toss back those that looked the most human. This tendency, combined with the creature's brief lifespan and prolific breeding began to heavily influence the appearance of surviving mermaids. As human populations expanded across much of the known world mermaids followed and continued to adapt. Gradually mermaids moved into new ecosystems, overtaking other coastal aquatic species less favored by humans.

This sketching of a prehistoric mermaid is based on accounts of sailors from the era. Though varieties of "unattractive" mermaids continue to exist in populations far from human influence, the original species from which the more familiar feminine mermaid sprang is long extinct.

The only remaining descriptions are found in oral histories and improvised reconstructions of pre-modern sources. It is likely that we may never fully understand what motivated early humans to spare these creatures in such great numbers.

Soon speed and power became less important to mermaid survival than traits that appealed to the aesthetic preferences of the humans whose company they kept. In the modern world most humans no longer hunt or eat mermaids specifically because of their unsettling humanoid appearance and the species has continued to thrive.

Both male and female mermaids now resemble stereotypically attractive human women. The "breasts" are a favorable accumulation of insulating fat without nipples or function other than buoyancy.



Minotaur

A cultured race most commonly found on island chains and in a few isolated coastal cities. Minotaurs are thickly built herbivores with horned bull-like heads, stocky limbs, and thick leathery skin.

They are relatively short lived, with a life span of only about 20 years and maintain an efficient preservation of culture and history from generation to generation. Minotaurs thrive through an entrenched caste system that places the goals of the many over individual needs. Unlike other intelligent humanoids, minotaur are not divided amongst various tribes or nations and instead recognize a global society based on their shared heritage.

Much of minotaur society is dedicated to ancestor worship and completing the unfinished tasks of their forbearers. There is a widespread religious dedication to completing the vast projects of previous generations, and preparing the world for their own children.

Minotaurs hold their pacifism in high regard and claim to be a peaceful race whenever possible. However, if their peaceful overtures are refused or their home territory threatened minotaurs can leverage their considerable cooperation for a powerful armed response.

Despite their capable navy, minotaurs have little in the way of a standing army and are often powerless against assaults by centaurs and human mercenaries on land. Renowned for their shipbuilding and seamanship, they maintain comfortable alliances with other seafaring races and strive to live relatively peaceful lives within their well-ordered society.

M inotaur ships are sturdy and swift, designed to survive impacts from kraken and enemy artillery alike. These vessels are typically beaten bronze over a wooden frame and rely on a combination of wind power and rowing to negotiate the many shallow seas that minotaurs call their domain. Larger ships are seen as indulgent and inefficient, so of the thousands of vessels in the minotaur fleet the vast majority are small and versatile like the one pictured here.



Minotaur Captain

Height - 3 meters

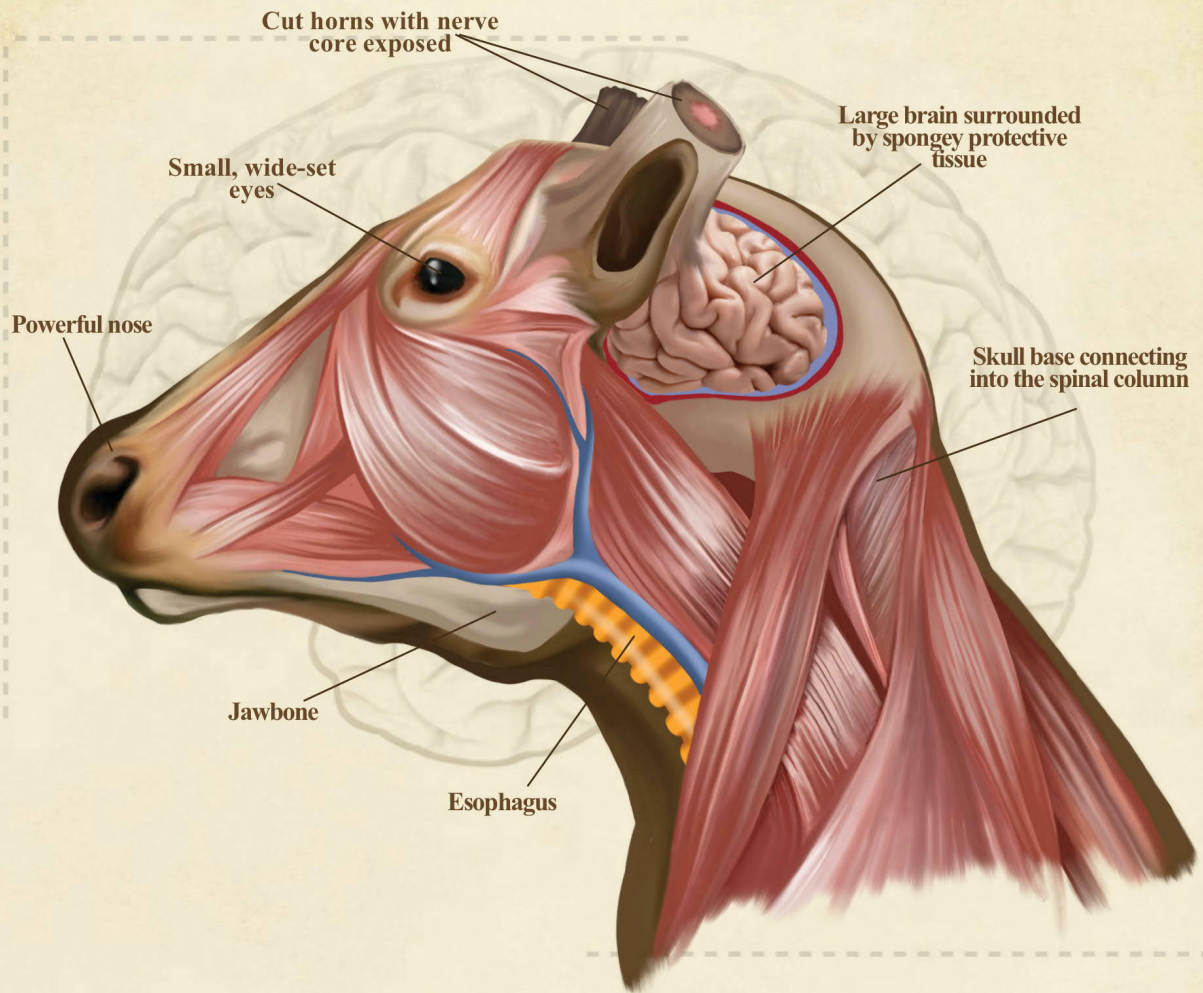
Weight - 113 kg

Age - 16 years

Colored armor for
easy visibility

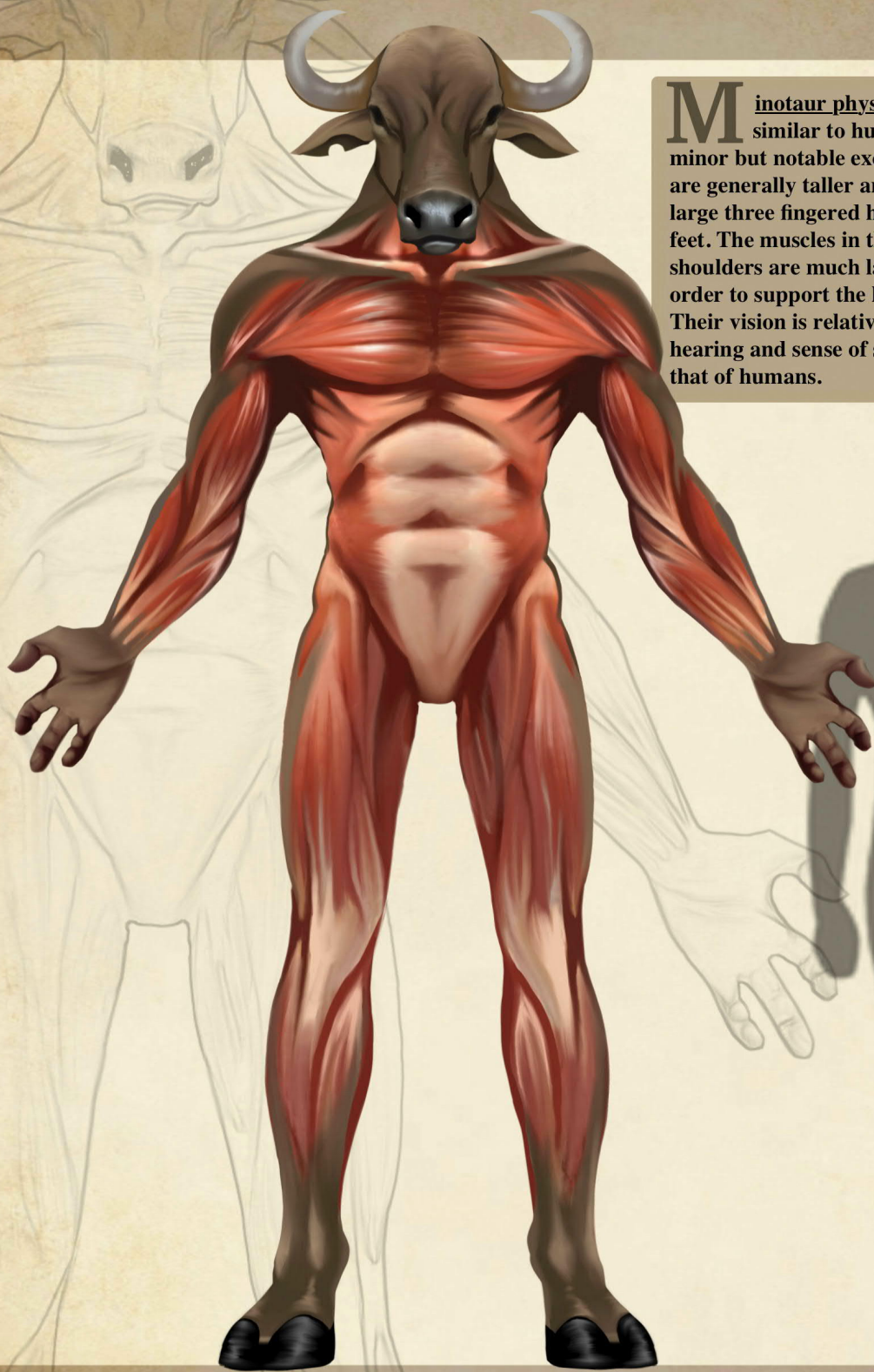
Steel horn
caps

Thick supportive
limbs

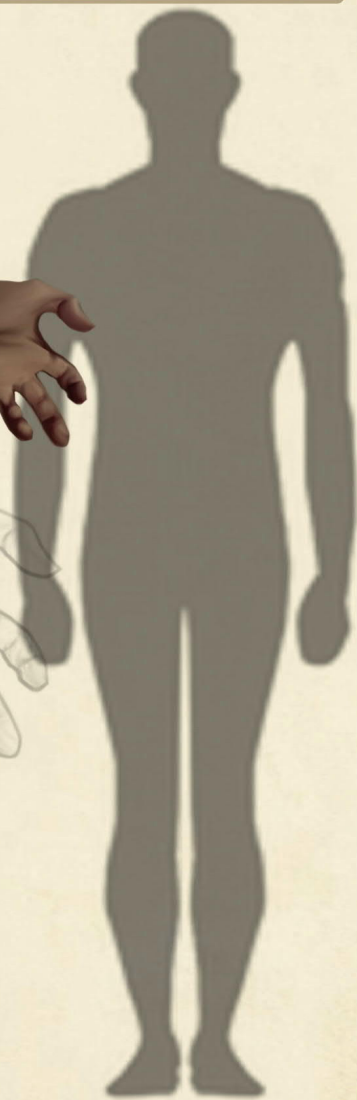


The long noses, horns, and widely spaced eyes of the minotaur sets them apart from other intelligent humanoids. Their resemblance to cows is incidental, minotaurs are closely related to humans. They evolved from a common ancestor of orcs and humans nearly 5 million years ago and spread across the known world. Minotaur managed to outcompete other closely-related hominid species like giants, yeti, and fairy-folk, to survive until the modern day.

Their heavy facial muscles and elongated jaw give them a slow pitched speech, and the minotaur's natural language is difficult for humans to replicate. Minotaur horns grow throughout their lives and their size and shape is a cultural symbol of health and physical attractiveness. These horns do not recover if damaged, and are sometimes notched or branded to indicate an individual's social caste. Any minotaur exiled from their collectivist society has their horns cut in a painful ritual intended to permanently identify them as an outsider.



Minotaur physiology is extremely similar to humans with a few minor but notable exceptions. Minotaur are generally taller and stockier, possess large three fingered hands, and hooved feet. The muscles in the neck and shoulders are much larger and sturdier in order to support the heavy, cow-like head. Their vision is relatively weak but their hearing and sense of smell far outstrip that of humans.



Orcs

Orcs are horned humanoids, heavily muscled, with broad noses, and distinctive grey skin. Male orcs are slightly smaller than humans, around 1.3 meters tall when standing straight. Females, which seldom reveal themselves to outsiders, are dramatically larger than humans and generally more aggressive and well-muscled than orc males. The horns of female orcs are very tall, and sometimes shaved to fine points as a symbol of social standing.

Among orcs there are no nation-states, instead tribes of several thousand individuals live in self contained communities and develop their own law and customs. Because of this, orcish society is incredibly diverse with artistic traditions and technological development varying greatly from group to group.

Despite being close relatives, orcs have had a historically antagonistic relationship with humans and (to a lesser extent) minotaurs. Orcs once practiced a form of polytheism shared by most of humanity, but in the 4th century, orcish society began to emerge from a violent period of tribal warfare under a new harmonious philosophy called "Unma", which advocated empathy and self knowledge. This period was known as the *Great Awakening*, and much of present-day Orcish philosophy emerged at this time.

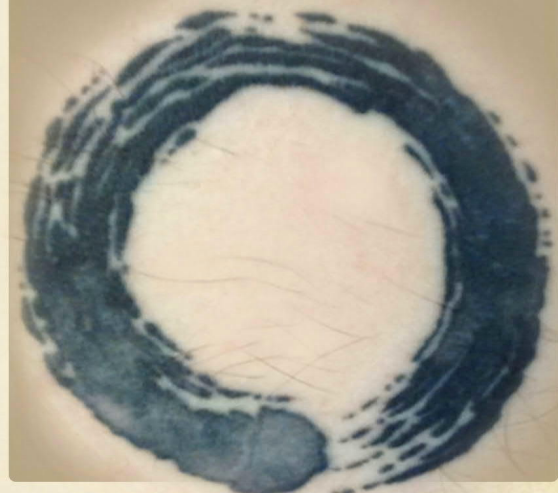
In response to this religious upheaval, several massive military campaigns were sanctioned by human nations against neighboring orc tribes that had abandoned their religion. Ostensibly these crusades were to enforce the will of the gods, but generally served as cover for the taking of orc lands. This began nearly 200 years of conflict that resulted in the near destruction of

several prominent orc tribes. Relations between the two species have mended in the modern era, but to this day many orcs consider humans backwards, violent, and dedicated to self-enrichment to the detriment of all.

Traditionally, orc diets consist of raw meats, milk, and blood from cattle. Some orc tribes have introduced fruits and vegetables into their diet, but still depend heavily on protein as their main form of sustenance.

Piercing and stretching of lips, sharpening of horns, and tattooing of limbs are common forms of body modification in orc society that vary from tribe to tribe.

Often tattoos are symbolic of an individual's accomplishments and social standing. This symbol, for example, adorns priests who dedicate themselves to the philosophy of Unma. It is meant to symbolize enlightenment, elegance, and minimalism.





Horned head

Ceremonial shield

Leathery feet

Male Orc Warrior

Height - 1.4 meters

Weight - 70 kg

Age - 32 years

Orcish Society

Sociable and intelligent, orcs take great pleasure in the company of other sentient species. Their society is tribal, and typically involves a few family groups living together in relative harmony. The size of a tribe may vary; it is unusual to see a grouping of more than fifteen families together. Orcs are similar to humans and minotaurs in many ways, originating from the same evolutionary line of intelligent four-limbed humanoid.

In contrast to the more patriarchal societies of the aforementioned species, females are several times larger than their male counterparts and take a dominant position in the social hierarchy. Male orcs are more numerous than females, outnumbering them by nearly three to one. Because of this lopsided trend in the population orcish society is matriarchal and rigidly polyamorous, with multiple males “bonded” to a female and expected to compete for her attention.

In recent decades some affluent and strongly-established orc tribes have relaxed these social norms and reduced the pressure on males competing for female influence. Despite these gradual changes many conservative tribes still hold their members to rigid gender roles and social expectation.

Female orcs are only distinguished from males by their broader faces, taller horns, and heavier musculature.

These characteristics have led some humans to mistakenly assume that there *are* no female orcs. Although this antiquated belief is seen as offensive by orc tribes and has been patently disproven it remains a common misconception to this day.

In addition to gender, a powerful influence on orc society is their complex animistic religion “Unma” (often translated as “awareness of impermanence” or “universal empathy”). This widely practiced spiritualism encourages the recognition of one's limited time in the world and ultimately, the impermanence of all things.

"Even the great do not endure, they are like a dream of smoke; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind."

- Uramna Hau

5th century orc poet and scholar

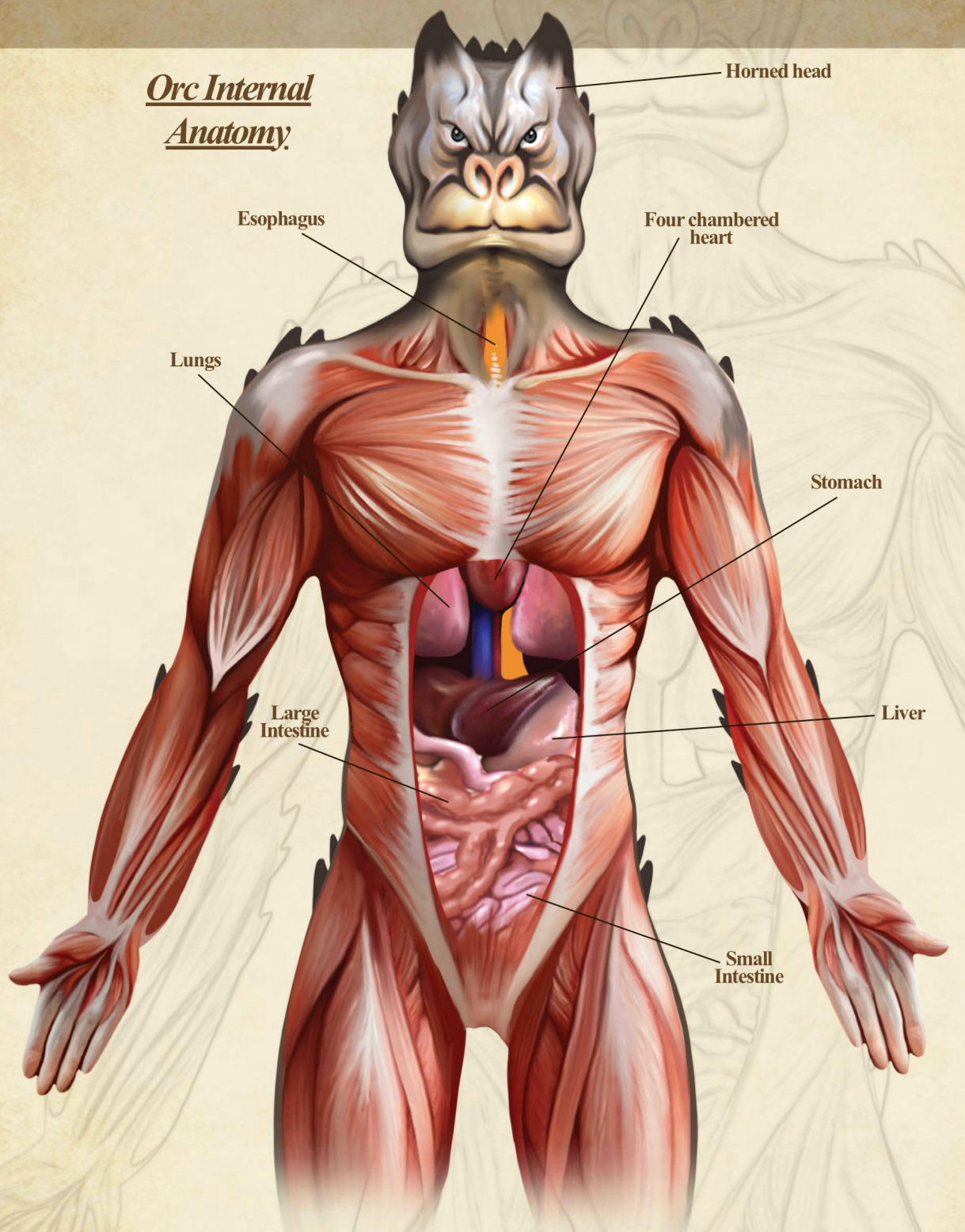
"Empathy with an indifferent universe is an afternoon of meditation. Empathy with an enemy is the work of a lifetime."

-Ara Moora

Orcish ambassador and activist



*Orc Internal
Anatomy.*



Horned head

Esophagus

Four chambered heart

Lungs

Stomach

Large Intestine

Liver

Small Intestine

Phoenix

These rare bird-like creatures, famous for their explosive natural defense mechanism, have become universal symbols of destruction and rebirth.

According to early human myths the phoenix was an envoy of the sun itself, and so beautiful that only one could exist at a time.

In truth, phoenix are plentiful but tend to inhabit heavily forested wilderness areas far from human interference. Omnivorous, but preferring to eat meat, their diet consists mostly of rodents, small birds, and occasional fruits and berries. In the wild, phoenix live solitary lives and gather only occasionally to mate.

Breeding season lasts three months every winter, and is timed so that the hatching coincides with the most abundant food supplies. Phoenix mate for life and use the same nest every year. They build a huge nest on rocky cliffs and increase its size year after year. The female lays two eggs and takes turns with her mate to incubate them over the next few weeks until they hatch.

Both parents feed the young: each brings food back and carefully tears it into edible strips with their sharp beaks. Competition between the hatchlings is fierce, and one chick typically starves their sibling to death.

Phoenix are distant relatives of the dragon, having evolved from the same lineage of six-limbed flying predators. Both species have limited fire-breathing abilities, though the phoenix lacks the propulsive flame of its cousin. Instead, this incredible creature detonates itself in a fiery plume when attacked.

Phoenix feathers are highly flammable, and can be ignited by chemical reaction triggered when the phoenix feels threatened. Despite this impressive display, this defensive mechanism rarely means the death of the bird. The phoenix's flesh and organs are fireproof and explosions leave them naked but unharmed, allowing them to scurry back to the safety of their nests where they can regrow their plumage over several weeks.

Like certain variety of brightly colored toxic frogs and venomous manticore, the phoenix deters predators with its colorful plumage and a guarantee of destruction. If its plumage is burnt away it is vulnerable to attack on the ground, but while in the sky there are very few creatures willing to risk triggering the explosive abilities of an adult phoenix.

For centuries this phenomenon led naturalists to assume that the phoenix killed itself when under attack, and that the pink and bare-feathered creature that emerged was in fact a reincarnation of the adult bird. It was not until the development of high-speed photography that this defense mechanism could be studied, and its true function revealed.

Mountain Phoenix

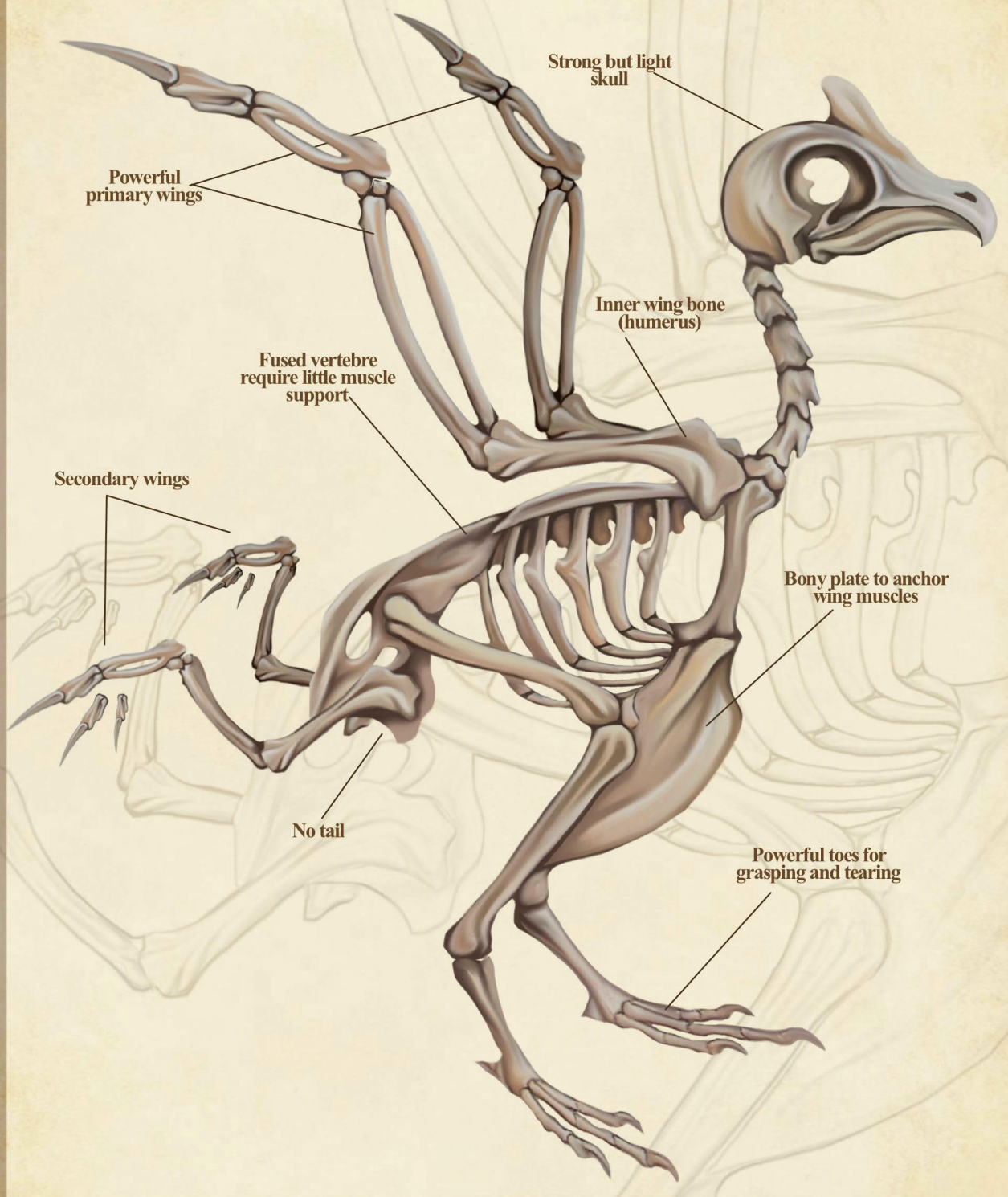
Weight - 18 kg
Wingspan - 2 meters
Age - 73 years

Vibrant warning
plumage

Magnesium deposits
in feathers

Grasping talons







Phoenixes produce hydrogen as a byproduct of digestion and retain a constant supply in their bodies allowing them to soar great distances without tiring. This reserve of hydrogen is also the source of their explosive defense, and must be replenished after a phoenix has burnt away its feathers.

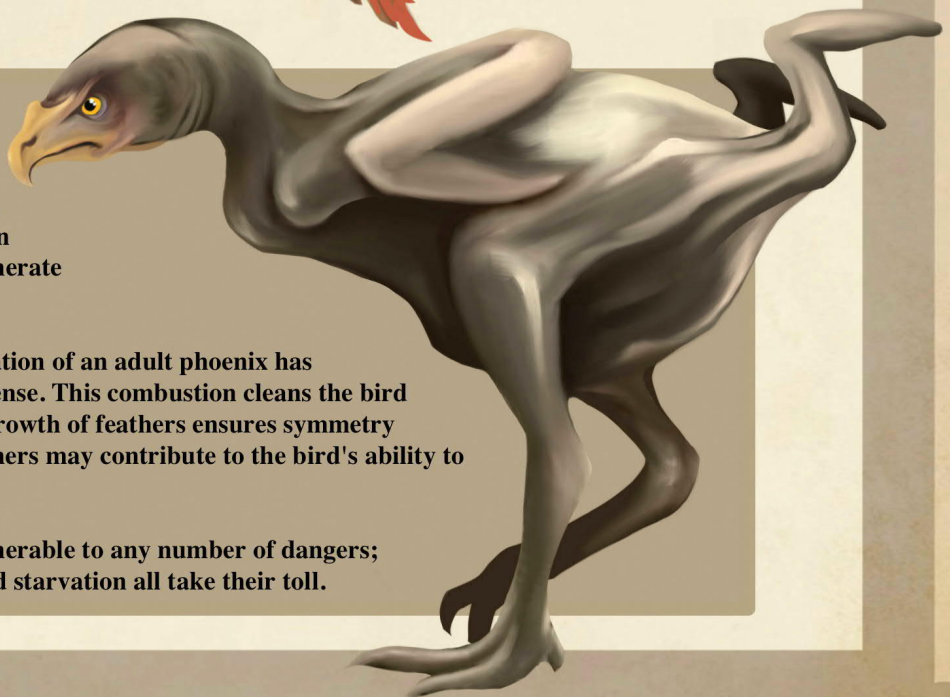
Their back wings can move independently of one another and offer superior maneuverability. Phoenixes are capable of changing directions quickly, diving, spinning, and stopping suddenly while in flight. These majestic birds rely on their expert flying to hunt prey. Adult phoenix can chase down or outrun nearly any other species of ariel predator.

Despite their relative intelligence, phoenix have never been successfully domesticated. They are considered too aggressive and are prone to exploding when confined to a cage or improperly handled.

When threatened a phoenix will burn away its feathers, leaving it grounded and vulnerable. The naked creature will then navigate back home to regenerate and fly again.

It is believed that the detonation of an adult phoenix has benefits beyond natural defense. This combustion cleans the bird of parasites and routine regrowth of feathers ensures symmetry and newly-regenerated feathers may contribute to the bird's ability to attract a mate.

A featherless phoenix is vulnerable to any number of dangers; predators, hypothermia, and starvation all take their toll.



Spore lord

Lords of the spore stand over two meters tall and have the appearance of huge, brightly colored mushrooms with two prominent armlike appendages. They move through expansion and contraction of a thick rubbery layer at the base of their cylindrical bodies. The "head" of the mushroom is adorned with multiple sensory organs ending in hundreds of tiny cilia used to sense their surroundings without light.

These creatures spend their lives cultivating, protecting, and ultimately worshiping large, immobile, spore-producing, parent mushrooms which is the final reproductive phase of the spore lord's life cycle. Spore lords exhibit characteristics of both flora and fauna, and reproduce by spreading the reproductive spores of the parent mushroom that birthed them.

Though slow, the bodies of spore lords are incredibly tough and capable of withstanding injuries that would easily kill an adult human. They will only engage in violence in order to protect their parent mushroom, and otherwise express no interest in interacting with other species. They possess a rudimentary intellect and will create basic tools and even religious artifacts to use in service of their parent mushroom.

Since they reproduce through budding spores there is no biological basis for the formation of families or interpersonal relationships. Each group is linked only through their dedication to the parent mushroom that birthed them, but do not recognize other allegiances.

Fully grown spore lords consume organic matter by drawing nutrients up through their base, and prefer decaying meat over any other food source. Organic matter is also gathered and becomes the substrate upon which a new generation of parent mushrooms grow, and in some rare cases spore lords will begin stealing the dead from graveyards or nearby battlefields and ritually casting fungal dust onto the rotting remains.

In times of abundance, spore lords will continue to grow their colony and plant parent mushrooms in larger and larger quantities, stripping forests bare and eventually pressuring nearby settled areas to react. Fire is often seen as an effective weapon against these slow fungal beings, but immolation only spreads their reproductive spores further. Burning a colony of spore lords guarantees further infestation in the future.

A few small but dedicated sects of human mushroom worshippers exist. These fanatics believe that the "sporemen" are harbingers of an ancient fungal god that seeks to blanket the world in its glory. These cultists live alongside the spore lords, breathing their fungal fumes, working tirelessly to tend the parent mushrooms, and living simple isolated existences.



Eyeless sensory bulb

Drifting spores

Religious tools

Spore Lord

Weight - 50 kg
Height - 2 meters
Age - Unknown

Although the spores spread by the parent mushroom do not infect or take root in living flesh, inhaling spores in large quantities is known to cause blissful euphoria, memory loss, and docility in other intelligent species.

It is common to find humans cooperating alongside spore lords to cultivate and protect parent mushrooms against those who might bring them harm.

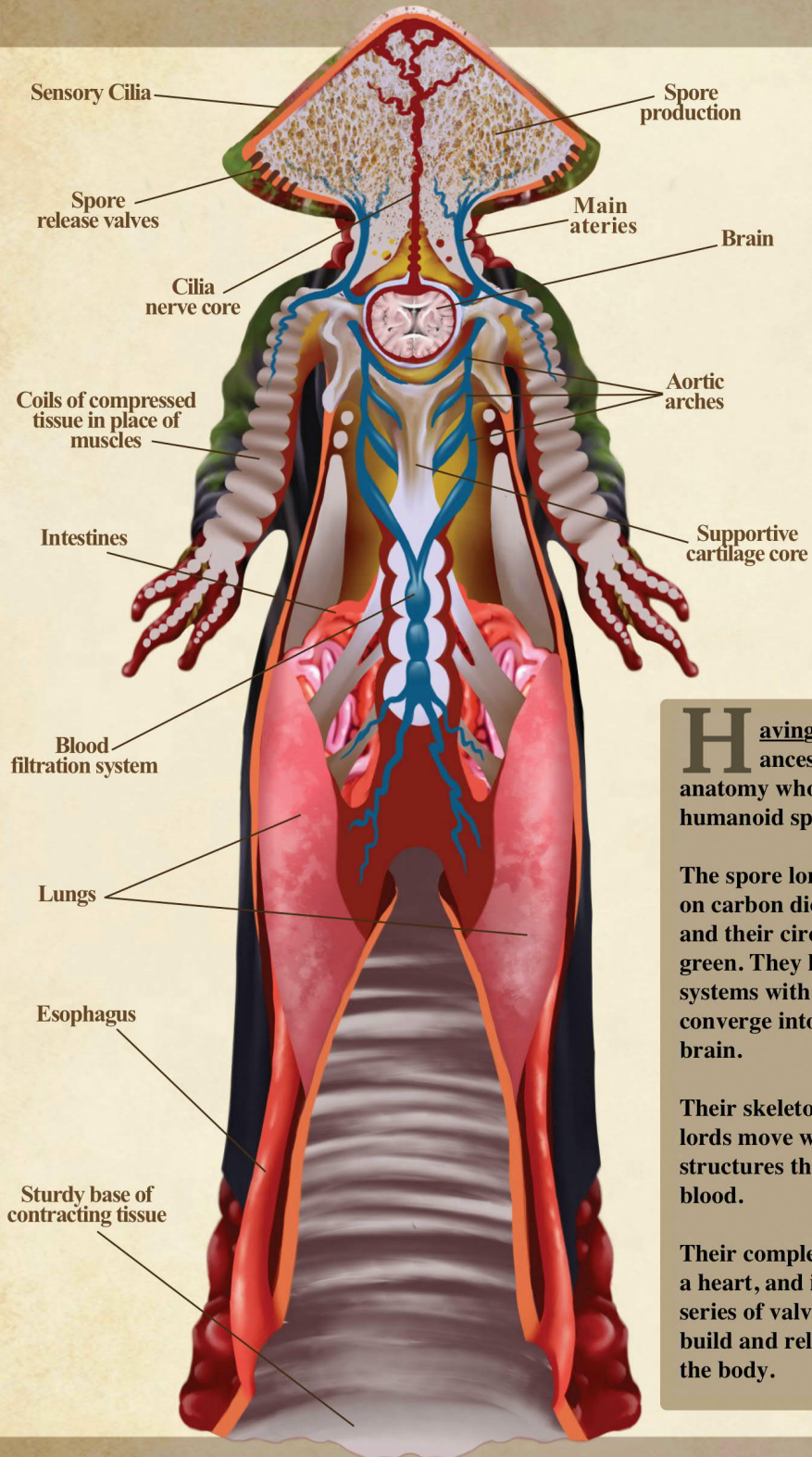
Parent mushroom

Height - 7 meters

Age - 320 years



Spore Lord Internal View



Having evolved from fungus-like ancestors, Spore lords possess anatomy wholly unique among all known humanoid species.

The spore lord's metabolism is based on carbon dioxide rather than oxygen, and their circulatory fluid is bluish-green. They have complex nervous systems with multiple sensory stems that converge into a single cluster near the brain.

Their skeleton is cartilage and spore lords move with accordion-like structures that expand when filled with blood.

Their complex circulatory system lacks a heart, and is instead dependent upon a series of valves and muscular arches that build and release pressure throughout the body.

Sphinx

Sphinxes are large winged eyeless creatures that bear mammalian, avian, and reptilian characteristics. They are capable of speech and reason, often acting as enigmatic arbiters of higher order and claiming moral imperative as the reason for their actions.

Despite these claims of transcendent purpose, studies demonstrate that they bear significant physiological similarities to the pandriki and it is considered likely that they immigrated to our reality many millennia ago from the same alternate plane of existence.

Sphinxes bear live young and will only produce one set of triplets in their lifetime, contributing to their relative rarity. They have limited powers of flight, which they use to escape or intimidate potential foes. They lack claws and rely on their large size and intelligence to deter predators.

Sphinxes are known to guard objects of great importance such as libraries, treasures, or graves of heroes often without being asked. Sphinxes are highly intelligent (if mysterious) creatures. They show great affection for puzzles and games and will often demand answers to esoteric queries about life or the nature of reality. Older sphinxes will often compose their own riddles and respond to wrong answers with disdain or violence.

Many civilizations hold the sphinx in high regard, some even worshiping the enigmatic beasts. Sphinxes seldom acknowledge or appreciate this dedication, but enamoring a sphinx with interesting questions and responding properly to the creature's riddles will grant you a chance to ask questions of your own.

Conversations with sphinxes are highly informative though it's hard to hold their attention for long. These ancient creatures often claim to have been at many monumental historical events. This can seldom be verified.

They are also highly knowledgeable of many diverse scientific and social disciplines, and if coaxed to answer queries can speak authoritatively on almost any subject.

They react fearfully to angels, and questions about this instinctual fear are always troublingly ignored.

The sphinx's sensory organs are contained within a rigid carapace that resonates like a bell to facilitate speech. This chambered head contains the creature's large brain, respiratory apparatus, and esophagus, and is nearly impervious to harm. It has also been theorized that this sectioned dome acts as an antenna that links all living sphinxes telepathically through unknown means.





Adult Sphinx

Height - 5 meters

Weight - 230 kg

Wingspan - 17 meters

Age - 748 years



Rigid outer carapace

Spongy neural tissue

Resonant chambers for amplifying speech. The source of the sphinx's booming voice

Stiff hollow wings

Respiration tube

Bundles of nerve tissue

For thousands of years sphinxes have been sources of knowledge for those willing to answer their enigmatic riddles. Considered by some to be divine, there are many legends in which sphinxes are protectors of mankind and even the source of agriculture, architecture, and medicine.

Their intelligence and mysterious benevolence has made them objects of reverence across the known world, and opulent shrines are not uncommon in the areas sphinxes choose to inhabit.

It has been theorized that sphinxes possess some form of collective intelligence or genetic memory that any member of their species can access. This would seem to explain why even relatively young sphinxes have access to diverse and comprehensive knowledge.

It is known, however, that the best way to receive information from a sphinx is to enamor with a new piece of knowledge or to answer one of their cleverly devised riddles. Although there are exceptions, if a sphinx has one of their riddles answered correctly they will answer a single question in return.

In many societies where sphinxes are present, clever individuals are identified early and groomed specifically to solve the riddles of the sphinx, in exchange for useful pieces of knowledge.

Riddles can be abstract, threatening, or humorous depending on the disposition of the individual sphinx, and are seldom repeated.

Notorious Riddles

*Thousands lay their gold
within this house,
but no man made it.*

*Spears past counting
guard this gold,
but no man wards it.*

*Lives to spare
bound to each spear,
but no man wields it.*

-Beehive

*Only you may have it.
Take it and you'll lose it.
Answer and you'll keep it.
Forfeit and you'll rue it.*

-Your life

*I have a beak in front,
feathers on the end.
I kill without thought,
and fly without wings.
Hungry for nothing,
but a killer of men.*

-An arrow

What am I?

-The Sphinx

Troll

These mindless creatures burrow blindly through the earth searching for coal, oil, and other petrochemicals to consume. Often described as the bane of dwarves and dragons alike, cave trolls have been known to gnaw into vaults filled with wondrous riches in search of food. After gorging they leave behind only black crystalline shedding that will eventually congeal, fungus-like, into adolescent trolls.

Their penchant for carbon fuels has practical uses and mining groups will often keep several trolls under their control in order to sniff out valuable wells. Though slow moving their granite-like skin can repel even the most determined attackers.

Although they are attracted to gems and soft metals such as gold, it is believed that this is merely to aid digestion. The creatures eat soil, stone, and minerals indiscriminately and have diamond hard teeth to facilitate this.

Trolls dislike direct sunlight (despite being unable to see) and it is believed that the heat affects their silicon-based physiology. Any rise in temperature slows their biological processes and encourages them to retreat into the cool earth.

Trolls are theoretically immortal but often starve after depleting an area of digestible minerals and failing to reach more fertile grounds in time. Dead trolls crumble into mounds of minerals, grey bones, and semi-digested stone.

Trolls are well adapted for the limited light and oxygen in their subterranean habitat. Their lungs are small and troll blood has a strong affinity for oxygen. Symbiotic bacteria in their digestive system allow otherwise indigestible minerals to be turned into nutrients.

Troll skeletons are composed of dense carbon fiber, making their bones *harder* but less *resilient* than those of humans. Troll bones lack the absorbent quality of other species, but are better suited to intense (but gradual) pressure. Without the shock-absorbent qualities of calcium-based bones even the sudden impact of a relatively small fall may shatter their skeletons.

These dense bones help account for the troll's slow movement and incredible weight. This feature also makes them formidable adversaries when agitated.

Though typically indifferent to the presence of humans in their territory confronting trolls is a dangerous proposition due to their prodigious strength and nearly impenetrable skin.





Cave Troll

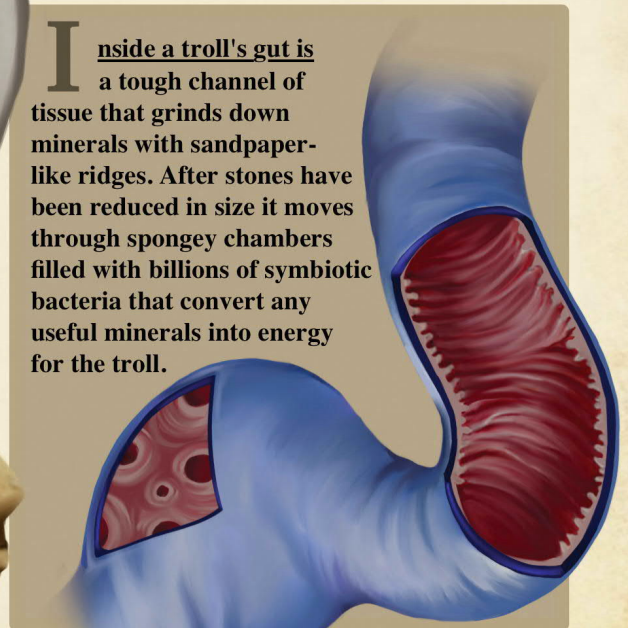
*Height - 4 meters
Weight - 2 metric tons
Age - Unknown*



Trolls use a potent filtration system to strain through soil for hydrocarbons that are consumed by symbiotic bacteria in their gut. Row after row of teeth grind stone and hardened soil into small digestible chunks to be pulled into the stomach for dissolution. Fermentation chambers in the stomach contain billions of bacteria that convert petrochemicals into energy for the troll. After soil has been sifted of digestible chemicals, the remaining material is quickly expelled.

Trolls can easily be tracked by following the coiled mounds of tightly packed waste that they leave in their wake. These stony spirals, known as "coprolite," are sometimes used as decoration in homes and businesses.

Inside a troll's gut is a tough channel of tissue that grinds down minerals with sandpaper-like ridges. After stones have been reduced in size it moves through spongy chambers filled with billions of symbiotic bacteria that convert any useful minerals into energy for the troll.



Trolls lack body fat and instead store their nutrients in the crystals growing along their spines. When enough nutrients have accumulated these break off and grow into new trolls

Troll blood is based on copper and lacks hemoglobin giving their flesh a bluish tint



Although separated evolutionarily by hundreds of millions of years, trolls have four fingered hands like minotaur

Despite their humanoid appearance trolls lack mammalian reproductive organs and gender

Trolls generally stoop but may lift themselves up to strike a threatening pose

Thick feet with gripping pads on the base give trolls traction in their rocky underground habitats

Unicorn

Named for the long spiral horn on their foreheads, unicorns are white horse-like creatures so exceptionally rare that many consider them extinct.

Their elusive nature is due in part to their horn, which acts as a powerful sensory organ able to detect the presence of humans from miles away. Unicorns will almost always flee rather than risk discovery, death, or capture.

The unicorn's horn grows as an extension of their central nervous system, covered in a highly vascular spongy tissue and hard outer casing. During mating season, unicorn horn grows additional layers of bony outer covering and males compete for female attention by striking their horns together. After mating, this shell falls off and the soft tissue is fully exposed, dramatically increasing the unicorn's sensitivity to danger.

Most unicorns dwell in secluded habitats, far from human habitation. Experts at avoiding predators, these elusive creatures utilize a bizarre and wholly unique sensory system to perceive their surroundings.

All unicorns feed by grazing upon shrubs and grasses; live in open country; and depend on speed and wariness to avoid predators. Highly social animals, unicorns live in large family herds which travel together for great distances in search of food and water.

Unicorns give birth to one well-developed young after a gestation period of nearly 11 months. This period ensures that the mother will produce healthy offspring that are capable of keeping up with the herd. On the open plains, younger unicorns lack the sensory prowess or speed of their parents and are threatened by large predators.

Today, unicorns inhabit nearly every climate on earth and fossilized remains have been found all over the world. These successful herbivores first diverged from a horse-like ancestor nearly 60 million years ago, and were originally much smaller and swifter. As their skulls elongated to contain their rows of grinding molars room was made for a larger brain and more acute sensory organs developed as a result.

Despite their diversity, today's unicorns represent just a fraction of what was once an immense family tree spanning millions of years. Early in the unicorn's biological history hundreds of species coexisted, from the carnivorous aquatic kelpie to the magnificent flying pegasus.

Changing climate conditions caused forests across the planet to shrink, while grassland and desert expanded, and 20 million years ago many ancient unicorn breeds died out. Some became smaller and developed the familiar sensory horns and grazing diets that we associate with unicorns today. These species survived to the present, by outcompeting their larger and less sensitive cousins.



Shire Unicorn

Height - 4 meters

Weight - 200 kg

Age - 12 years

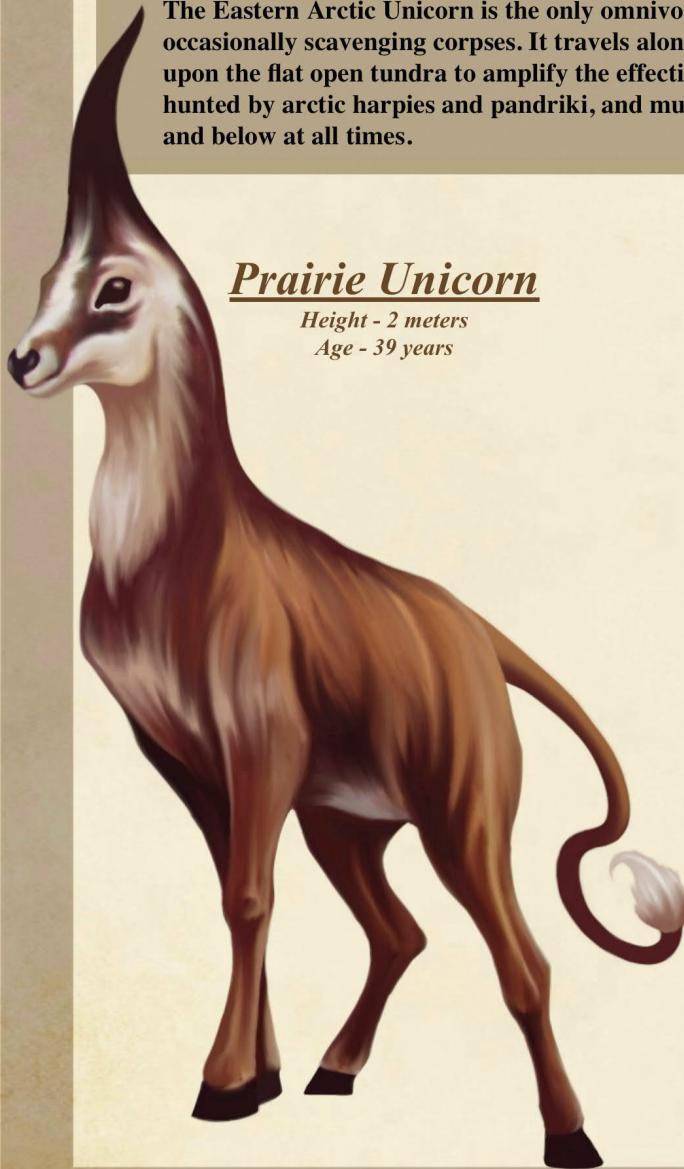
Every ecosystem has its own breed of unicorn well-adapted to its particular climate. These subspecies are often divided by size and coloration, from the smallest unicorns in the world, the Eastern Arctic which measures no more than (90 cm) tall, to the largest of all breeds, the Shire Unicorn. An adult Shire Unicorn can weigh up to one metric ton and stands far taller than the average human at its shoulder.

The most populous variety is undoubtedly the prairie unicorn which migrate by the thousands every year in a stunning natural display. Prairie unicorns eat grasses and shrubs moving with the seasons to ensure an ample supply of vegetation.

The Eastern Arctic Unicorn is the only omnivorous species, eating lichens, small insects, and occasionally scavenging corpses. It travels alone (except during mating season) and depends upon the flat open tundra to amplify the effectiveness of its senses. These small unicorn are hunted by arctic harpies and pandriki, and must remain vigilant against attacks from above and below at all times.

Prairie Unicorn

Height - 2 meters
Age - 39 years



Eastern Arctic Unicorn

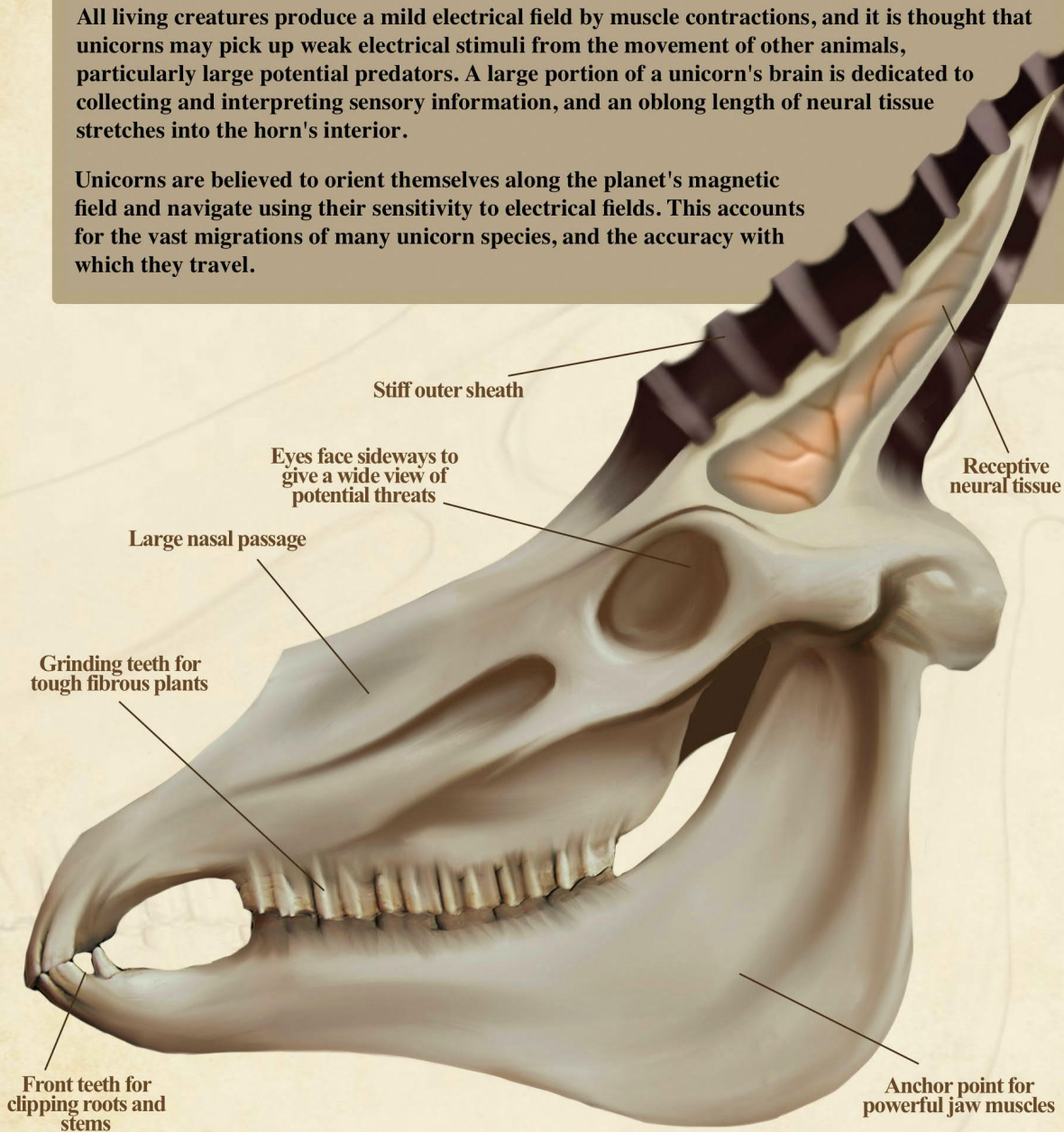
Height - 1 meter
Age - 17 years



In addition to keen eyesight and hearing, the unicorn's horn is an antenna-like organ that detects the electrical fields given off by other living creatures. It consists of a jelly filled canal open to the air that wraps the length of the stiff horn, clustered near the base and linked directly to the brain.

All living creatures produce a mild electrical field by muscle contractions, and it is thought that unicorns may pick up weak electrical stimuli from the movement of other animals, particularly large potential predators. A large portion of a unicorn's brain is dedicated to collecting and interpreting sensory information, and an oblong length of neural tissue stretches into the horn's interior.

Unicorns are believed to orient themselves along the planet's magnetic field and navigate using their sensitivity to electrical fields. This accounts for the vast migrations of many unicorn species, and the accuracy with which they travel.



Werewolf

Lycanthropy is a very rare genetic disease that dramatically transforms an infected human physically and mentally over the course of several months. It is almost always inherited, but can also develop spontaneously through mutation. Lycanthropy has no known cure and if allowed to progress to its final stage will leave the afflicted individual as little more than a brutish carnivorous beast known commonly as a "werewolf."

The average survival span for patients diagnosed with Lycanthropy ranges from 4-6 months before hallucinations, delirium, and dementia render the sufferer unable to communicate and unsafe to approach.

The age of transformation varies dramatically, ranging from 18 to 60 years, with an average of 50. Because transformation tends to occur after the infected human has given birth, lycanthropy propagates easily through generations despite its lethality. The presentation of the disease (and the final bestial form the sufferer takes) varies considerably from person to person, even among the same family.

The disease follows a predictable course during the first several months, with insomnia that increases to cause panic attacks, paranoia, and phobias. As the disease reaches its peak, hallucination and aggression become noticeable, and continue for several weeks.

Physical and mental changes begin. Inability to digest most cooked meals causes severe intestinal distress, and is typically followed by rapid weight changes (depending on the food sources available). Finally hair begins spreading across the sufferer's body and physical changes quickly take hold.

Early myths linked werewolf activity (infection and appearance of fully infected beasts) with the lunar cycle. It is now understood that, although werewolves may prefer to hunt by moonlight, there is no direct link between the disease and the phases of the moon.

The disease starts when proteins in the musculoskeletal system begin folding abnormally. When one of these lycanthropic protein strands touches normal tissue it forces it to refold to match the abnormal structure spreading the effect across more of the body. Given enough time this process will "overwrite" the host's human form.

The mutated protein is found frequently dozens of families worldwide, affecting about 5,000-10,000 people at any given time; if only one parent has the gene, the offspring have a 50% risk of inheriting it and developing lycanthropy during their lifetime.

Due to the tremendous cultural stigma around the disease, many families prefer to hide their risk of infection and cover up instances of lycanthropy. This has made it difficult for authorities in many human nations to monitor potentially infected individuals. Every year, dozens of people are allowed to fully transform into dangerous carnivorous killing machines by loving relatives, despite strong public safety warnings to report infected individuals.



Werewolf Final Stage

Height - 2.3 meters

Weight - 93 kg

Time since infection - 9 months

Excerpts from the Diary of Myra Shaw

Cries and thumps from outside, the villagers are throwing stones again. Why is it that every moment of silence, every opportunity to complete my work, is swallowed up by more hatred, more madness, more violence? I've ordered my husband, Nathaniel, to bar the doors and leave.

He protested, insisting that I tell the village of my research and beg for more time to find a cure. He told me he would never leave my side. He is naïve.

The crowd suspects, but they have not yet had their worst fears confirmed. If I emerge from the manor in my present state they will no longer have any reason to postpone our destruction.

No, hope lies only in continuing my work.

*I must be strong. I studied for 15 years to become a physician. Top of my class, an expert in my field.
This sickness will not take me.*

Time is running out.

I begin to lose track of my own actions, my impulses.

Every day my search for the cure is eclipsed a little more by the need to suppress my symptoms. Pills and potions of every imaginable combination, and iron tools to pluck the tufts of hair from my chest and arms.

I have gained nearly 20 pounds in the past week. Hardly surprising, each night instead of sleep I gorge myself on the stores of salted meat in the cellar and listen to the bones creaking in my chest.

My husband happened upon me last night while I ate. He stood in the doorway and cried for what seemed like hours. I did not pause to comfort him.

Time is running out.

Nathaniel has gone. So much the better. I catch myself rambling, chasing bright little thoughts to impossible conclusions. Every so often outside my door I hear a growing murmur of voices and great trampling of feet and expect to feel a blade at my throat. Yet here I write.

Perhaps a tipping point has been reached, the moment where those fools beyond my walls felt they could overpower me has passed. Their hesitation has turned to true fear. They know I will not be so easily killed.

What I am can no longer be prevented. Contained... Yes, perhaps. But for how much longer?

A werewolf will cause quite a stir for our little town, I expect. I have mixed a bottle of basilisk venom with night's wreath, and set it beside my bed.

If I cannot stop this transformation I will destroy this diary, swallow the poison, and burn this manor to the ground. It is preferable to the alternative.

This ailment is an enigma, dancing and breeding through dense blue veins.

I am not being killed, just replaced... bit by bit.

My ankles.... walking on two legs feels like running uphill.

Alone in the tight corridors of my home now, food gone, lab abandoned, pounding in my ears. The bread is moldy, but I can't eat it anyway.

Only meat.

All this searching and I've found the cure.

It sits there now, a bottle on the dresser... Painless amber-colored death.

Do I take it?

Wyrm

Huge subterranean carnivores with massive gaping mouths and multiple stomachs, these creatures live the first portion of their lives as solitary ambush predators until they reach breeding age. Wyrms then burst from their isolated territory and travel as far and fast as possible consuming all animal life in their path as they do. The corpses consumed during this journey are packed undigested into the wyrms multiple stomachs. Finally, these stomachs fill and tear away from the body, packed with food. These discarded stomach sacks each contain the eggs that will hatch into new wyrms.

While young wyrms are immobile, conserving energy before they reach their adult stage, mature wyrms are powerful predators and will attempt to attack and devour any living thing that approaches them.

Fossil evidence suggests that these gobblers are the last in a long lineage of large snake-like carnivores that were common across most of the known world before falling prey to human activity and changing climates.

Each of the worm's multiple stomachs doubles as a digestive system and a self contained reproductive organ. Once stomachs have filled themselves with meat they seal shut and drop away in order to become a source of food for the young worm inside.

Because wyrms do not have centralized digestion each stomach pouch includes its own intestinal system and waste disposal. Fecal matter oozes constantly from the stomach's outer skin to provide lubrication for adult worms as they move beneath the ground and repulsing potential predators from the stomachs after they detach. Despite this defensive adaptation, few egg pouches manage to survive into adulthood.

Only the worm and the basilisk still exist today, likely due to their erratic breeding tendencies.

The kingdom of Tordania was famously wiped out by a series of concurrent worm attacks engineered by a rival kingdom, who (at great cost) deposited stomach sacks from a captive worm in Tordania's local mountains and guaranteed them a steady supply of meat. Seven worms reached sexual maturity within a year of each other and their combined rampaging destroyed the Tordanian economy.

It was not until nearly a decade later when the increase in worm activity had resulted in the destruction of several nearby kingdoms that the folly of harnessing nature as a weapon became apparent.



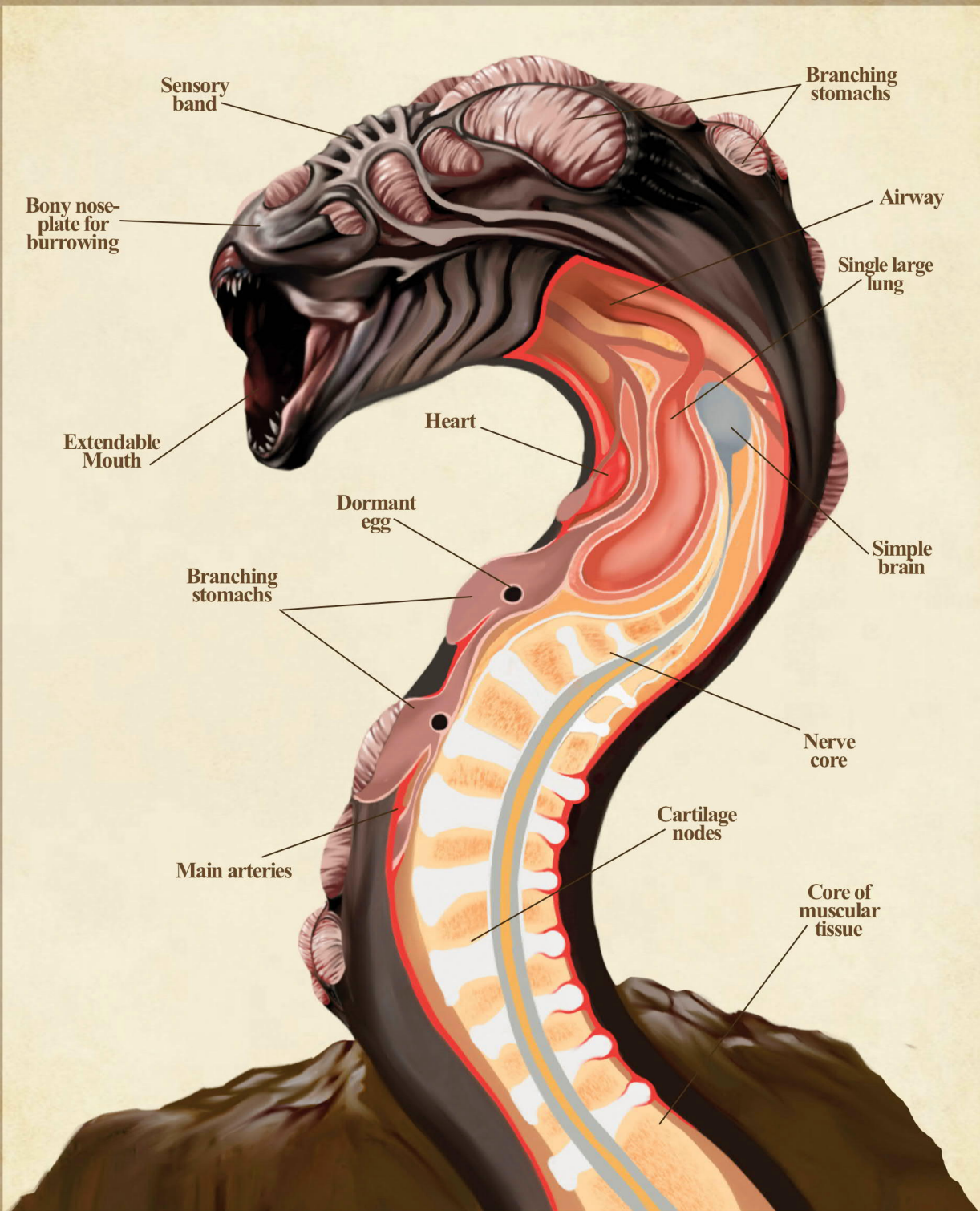


Gobbler Wurm

Length - 10 meters

Weight - 5 metric tons

Age - 52 years



Adolescent wyrms spend the first half of their life as ambush predators, living in a U-shaped burrow in soft soiled or sandy regions. The burrow is lined with mucus, and waste is pressed to the surface by the side to side motions of the young worm. Once it digs into this position, the worm will not leave until it has fully matured.

Young wyrms attack any moving thing that approaches their burrow, propelling a sticky tongue up to 6 meters to seize unsuspecting prey and drag it back to the lair. Their indiscriminate eating habits are well noted, and once a worm's burrow has been found they can be tricked into consuming balls of jagged iron or explosives simply by rolling them across the creature's field of vision. This form of extermination is common in civilized regions where a young worm's presence poses a danger to unwary children or livestock.





Sincere thanks to all the people
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