

International Zebra Day 2022 by Walt Anderson

It seems like every day is a proclaimed holiday for something, but if any critter deserves a special day of attention, it is the zebra. Well, “the” zebra is a bit misleading, as there are three species: the Grevy’s in NE Africa, the Mountain in SW Africa, and the Common Zebra in patches throughout more of Africa. I like them all, but my photos will focus on the Common Zebra in Tanzania.



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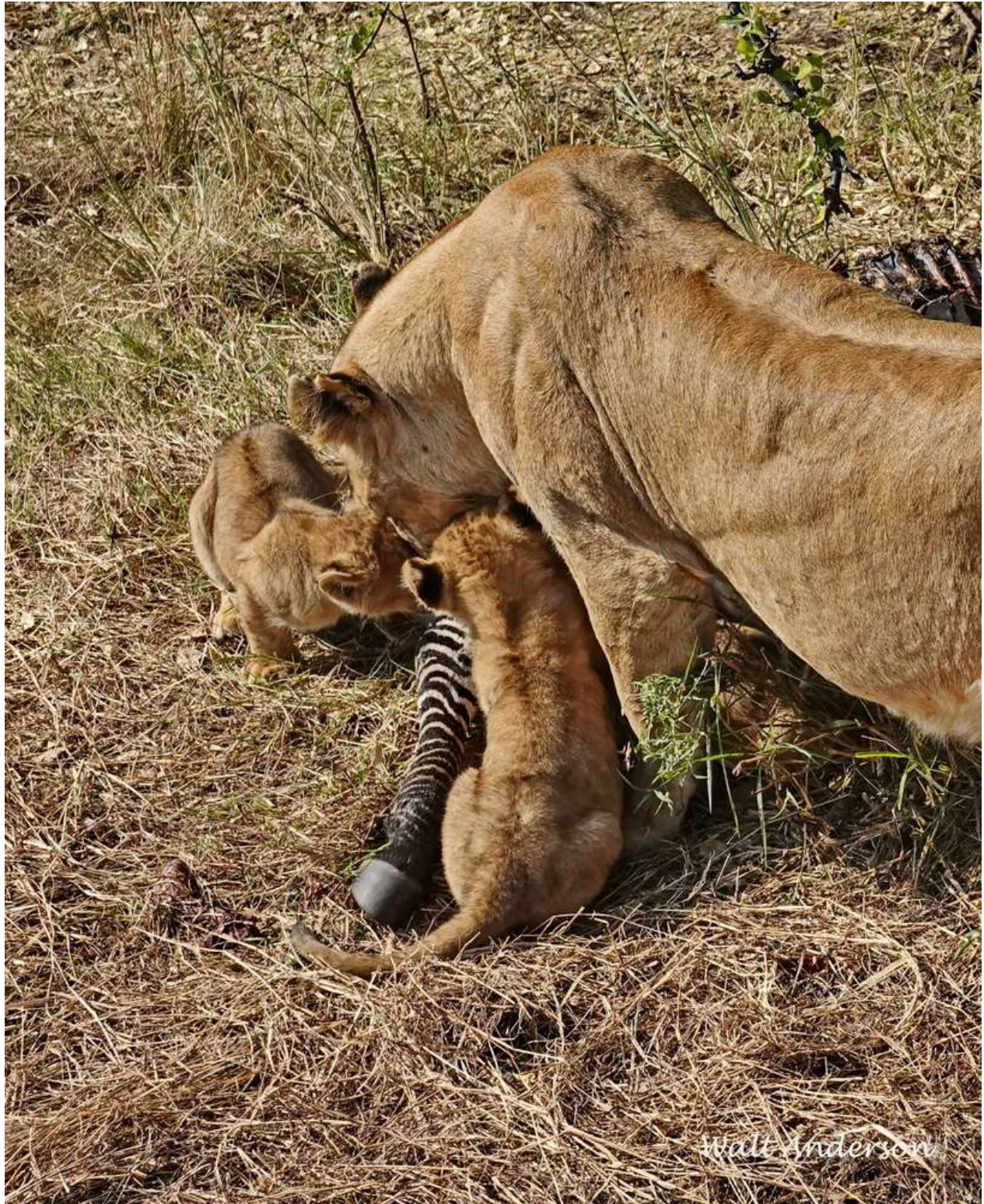
Zebras are among the modern horses, the genus *Equus* having appeared only about 2 million years ago in North America, of all places. Strong animals with plenty of endurance, some of them galloped out of our continent and spread across Asia, then trotted right down into Africa and colonized most of the grasslands and shrubby deserts while leaving the rainforests for other creatures. Well, it was more of a relay as the equids multiplied, and some dispersed, expanding the range gradually for thousands of miles. Meanwhile, the horse family went extinct in North America. To the ancient African lineage of elephants, for example, these striped immigrants must seem like newcomers, dressed as if straight from a prison yard. OK, I am extrapolating a bit too much there, but although zebras are often thought of as one of the iconic animals of Africa, we must remember that they have American roots.



Today we marvel at the Great Migration of the Serengeti ecosystem, where zebras, wildebeest, and Thomson's gazelles move in a great clockwise oval through the year seeking fresh grass and water and raising their young along the way. Serengeti comes from a Maa word that translates roughly as "land of endless space," and you can see that here—vast plains of grass punctuated here and there with Precambrian outcrops called kopjes (pronounced "copies"). The herds occupy these shortgrass plains from around January through March, heading northwest as things dry out, moving through woodlands and into the mixed environments near the Mara River in the north, where they make perilous river crossings as they seek better pastures on the other side. Then they move south again, usually to the east of where they came north, until they reach the productive shortgrass plains at its most favorable period.



Zebras are able to eat and process a large amount of coarse grass, but they also need to drink frequently, and visiting a waterhole is often a vulnerable time. It's best to imbibe with others (social drinking encouraged) and to be ready to dash away at the slightest sign of danger.



In addition to the hazards of rushing waters and hungry crocodiles, some zebras fall prey to lions. The carcasses can seem a bit grisly, so I am hiding most of this one behind some cute lion cubs and their mom, who must have taken down a full-grown zebra all by herself. Impressive!



To answer the question that I can almost hear you voicing, these are black animals with white stripes. The underlying skin is black pigmented with melanin, and the white areas simply lack the pigment. The two most likely reasons for stripes, perhaps operating together, are that (1) the stripes confuse tsetse and other biting flies so they miss their landings and (2) black and white heat differentially in the sun, creating air turbulence that might aid in cooling thermoregulation. The black-and-white patterns also trigger neuronal responses making zebras naturally attracted to each other. However, in Common Zebras, males control small harems of females and their young, so there is an in-crowd and an out-crowd, as harem masters can be very aggressive to males getting too close to their lady friends.



Zebras are very vocal, giving a variety of harsh barks (zebras are not neigh-sayers). When vocal warnings don't suffice, zebra males threaten with postures and facial signals (they have very expressive mouths); if a rival doesn't take the strongly worded hints, then it's down to tooth-and-hoof combat. Males (not females) have sharp canines (we should probably call them "equines") that can draw blood in combat.



But if you're in the in-crowd, then zebras are quite friendly and social, often resting their heads on another's back and standing head to tail such that each can brush insects away from the other's face.



After a 12-month gestation, a single foal (rarely twins) is born. This youngster is still not dry, but it can walk and follow the mother soon after birth.



Mother and child are closely bonded, recognizing each other by scent, sound, and sight. Mammals are pretty amazing, able to covert grass, twigs, flesh, or carrion (depending on the species) into nutritious milk to sustain the babies. It reminds me of that old tune, "Thanks for the Mammaries."



A foal stays close to its mother and learns which grasses to eat by copying her grazing patterns. The harem master is very protective of his group, often staying at the rear when the group flees a predator and even turning to fight off predators in many cases.



Most foals have some brown stripes when young, gradually becoming the more-typical black-and-white that we expect of a zebra. Zebra coats vary in different parts of their range such that a number of races are recognized based on general patterns. Within those races, there can be considerable individual variation, the raw material of natural selection. This is a particularly beautiful foal.



Another typical foal, a bit older than the previous one, clearly more black and white. Notice the stripe pattern, the bicolored mane, and the well-haired tail. The black stripes on the face are narrower than the white ones.



Imagine our astonishment when in August, we discovered this melanistic, spotted foal in the Serengeti! Here the white stripes on the face are narrower, stripes on the lush mane and back are absent completely, spots dot its body as if it had a little whale shark ancestry in there somewhere, and the tail is thin and ratlike. Holy horse! This is a one-in-a-million animal, and if fading anonymously into the herd is any advantage against predation, then this critter will stand out like a sore thumb. Does this flipped pattern make it negative? I am instantly reminded of another song: "What kind of foal am I?"



I've seen oddly patterned zebras before, but never a melanistic one. This individual from Tarangire National Park kept the black stripes but added a pleasing array of complementary dots. The big question: if a predator approaches a herd, is this one more easily spotted?



Hooves are great for running, but they are lousy for scratching an itch. This termite mound is just perfect for a belly-rub.



So my tribute to these magnificent animals has come to an end, and I wish you very happy International Zebra Day!