

## BACTRIAN CAMELS (*Camelus bactrianus*)

The Central Asian camel, known as the Bactrian, exists in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China. Fossil evidence indicates that camelids, early ancestors of true camels, migrated across the Bering Strait land bridge to Asia, three to four million years ago and disappeared completely from America ten thousand years ago. Bactrian camels were found in southern Russia from 1700 to 1200 B.C and even in Western Siberia by the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Bactrian camels (*Camelus bactrianus*) have two humps, are about seven feet tall and weigh up to fifteen hundred pounds. They can live 40 - 50 years, although the average lifespan is 30 - 40 years. It is believed that Aristotle first described the two-humped camel as "Bactrian", when it was first sighted in a country called Bactria (today's north Afghanistan), to define the difference from single-humped "Arabian".

Bactrian camels provide fine, warm wool, milk, cheese, meat, hides and offer transport. As pack animals they are unrivalled, able to carry up to 250 - 600 lbs at a rate of twenty five miles a day. On two broad toes and undivided soles, over sand they do not sink and dexterous movements allow them to move gracefully. With a rolling gate similar to a giraffe, a camel can sprint 40 mph, level out at a 12 mph gallop and even outrace a horse over long distances, moving hours without stopping. Camels are also known to be good swimmers. A young camel, difficult to break in, may afterward become obedient and loyal - even answering to its name.



Bactrian camels endure temperature extremes, from -40 degrees in winter to +40 in the summer and can survive up to three days without food or water and up to one week in very cold weather. When a camel drinks, he may take in up to 57 litres (15 gallons) in less than 15 minutes.

The double humps, filled with plump, gristle-like fat when the camel is well fed, shrink and sag when resources are low. New-borns have empty pockets of skin. The kidneys concentrate fluids to reduce water loss, so their urine becomes as thick as syrup and contain twice the salt of sea water (~7% salt).

Camels differ from all other mammals in the shape of their red blood cells which are oval instead of circular. These special blood cells store fluids and keep them healthy, even when dehydrated. Oval red cells are not found in any other mammal but are present in reptiles, birds and fish. Camels sleep at night and forage for branches, leaves, shrubs and grasses in the daytime. They easily ingest the thorns, dry vegetation and salty plants most other animals avoid. If they feel threatened, camels do not spit but project vomit.

The female usually has her first calf at five years of age after a gestation of fourteen months. Mating takes place in December, January and February calves are born thirteen months later. Camel milk is more nutritious than cow's milk, being low in fat and lactose and high in potassium, iron and Vitamin C. Bactrian camels have a double row of long eyelashes, hairs in their ears, an extra membrane over their eyes, and the ability to shut their slit-like nostrils in sandstorms. Bushy eyebrows keep out the sun. Pads on their knees protect their skin when they kneel. Their ears are small but their hearing is acute. The mouth is large, with 34 sharp teeth. The food is first gulped without chewing and then regurgitated to be re-chewed in the form of a cud. The upper lip splits equally into two sections; because both sides of the mouth can move independently, such manoeuvrability allows the camel can pick up plants growing close to the ground.

Bactrian colours range from dark brown or light beige. Hairs up to ten inches long are taken from the neck in March, to make scarves. Underbelly wool cut in April is used for sweaters, before the camel moults. Hairs on the back, gathered in June, are used to make blankets. Their shaggy winter coat is shed quickly, almost peeling off in huge sections.

Large numbers of domestic camels were slaughtered in 1932 when Soviet advisers introduced collective farming. Collectivisation also hindered the movement of herdsman accustomed to moving freely across the desert to follow rich grasslands. If there was a drought, herders were not allowed to move, therefore the animals were also forced to stay put and died of starvation.

A group of camels is called a herd or a caravan.