

# Pygmy Hippo

(*Choeropsis liberiensis*)

**Kingdom:** *Animalia*

**Phylum:** *Chordata*

**Class:** *Mammalia*

**Order:** *Artiodactyla*

**Family:** *Hippopotamidae*

**NATURAL HISTORY:** Pygmy hippopotamuses are members of the family Hippopotamidae, along with the larger Nile hippopotamuses. Their next closest living relatives are pigs and peccaries.

In the wild, pygmy hippopotamuses are rare and it seems that there may never have been many of them in existence at any one time.

In 1927 Harvey Firestone (who owned a large rubber plantation in Liberia) gave President Calvin Coolidge a male pygmy hippo named Billy as a gift. Billy is the ancestor to almost all pygmy hippos living in American zoos.

**DESCRIPTION:** At first glance, pygmy hippopotamuses resemble their larger relatives, Nile hippopotamuses. But, on closer examination, several differences can be noted. Pygmy hippopotamuses are smaller. They weigh 350 to 550 pounds, stand about two and a half feet tall at the shoulder, and measure about five feet from head to tail. They are more pig-like in shape than Nile hippopotamuses, with proportionately smaller heads and proportionately longer legs and necks. Their tail hairs are branched, not unbranched as found on Nile hippopotamuses.

Pygmy hippopotamuses are more terrestrial than Nile hippopotamuses but are good swimmers and have strong muscular valves that close their ears and nostrils when submerged. They also produce a whitish secretion that moistens and protects their skin. Unlike Nile hippopotamuses, their eyes are placed on the sides of the head and their nostrils are low on the face. The four digits on each foot are more widely spread and have little inter-digit webbing, giving pygmy hippopotamuses more secure footing on land.

The pygmy hippopotamus is found in West Africa, mainly confined to Liberia, with small numbers in the neighboring countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and the Ivory Coast. They prefer dense, swampy forests near rivers, streams and creeks. On the map, the distribution of Nile hippos is shown in yellow, that of the pygmy hippo in orange.

Pygmy hippopotamuses are herbivores and feed on various vegetation, including succulents, tender shoots, leaves, roots, grasses, and fallen fruit. Unlike Nile hippopotamuses, pygmy hippopotamuses also feed on aquatic plants. They usually begin feeding in the afternoon, and continue until midnight.

Hippopotamuses have multi-chambered stomachs that function like that of ruminants, however they do not chew cud. They do enjoy some of the advantages of rumination, but are classified as pseudoruminants.

**SOCIAL STRUCTURE:** Pygmy hippopotamuses are solitary animals and live in