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Press release

A donkey in striped stockings?

Tierpark Berlin welcomes four of the rarest foals in the world

Within just one week this summer, no fewer than four Somali wild ass foals were born at Tierpark Berlin. Their names are Tabata, Savanna, Tini and Suri, and they are the first of their kind to be born at the Tierpark in four years. The two young females arrived on 14 and 17 July, followed by their male playmates on 21 July. The foals' father Stan seems mighty proud of his spritely offspring. "With the arrival of these four foals, a total of 70 Somali wild asses have now been born at Tierpark Berlin since 1979," reports Tierpark curator Dr Florian Sicks. "Our herd of eleven Somali wild asses is now one of the largest in Europe."

The Somali wild ass may look rather like a cross between a donkey and a zebra, but it is in fact the only living subspecies of the African wild ass – believed to be the ancestor of our domestic donkey. In the wild, the asses inhabit the dry scrub and grassland of East Africa. Only around 600 of the animals are estimated to be living wild in Ethiopia and Eritrea; it is not known if there are any at all left in Djibouti and Somalia. Their numbers have experienced a 95-percent drop in the last 35 years. The Somali wild ass is therefore classified by the IUCN as "critically endangered", and is currently the rarest equine animal in the world.

The greatest threats to the survival of the Somali wild ass are hunting and competition for water and food from livestock. Females with young are particularly vulnerable, as they are less mobile. Yangudi Rassa National Park (4,731 km²) and the Mille-Serdo Wild Ass Reserve (8,766 km²) both offer protected spaces for the Somali wild ass, but in both parks a large number of farmers and their livestock are also making intensive use of the land.

As the numbers of Somali wild asses in the wild are decreasing so rapidly, the "genetic reservoirs" held by zoos are becoming more and more important. There are currently around 160 of the asses living in Europe across 35 facilities, which are all managed by the relevant European Endangered Species Programme (EEP). Europe is therefore home to roughly two thirds of the animals living outside their natural habitat. "Tierpark Berlin has played an important role in building up this population," explains Zoo and Tierpark Director Dr Andreas Knieriem. "All Somali wild asses currently living in Europe descend from around 15 individuals that were fortunately brought to zoos from the wild. Now, more and more, it is zoos that are helping to boost populations in the wild."

Tierpark Berlin received its first Somali wild ass in 1976 from the Yotvata Hai-Bar Nature Reserve in Israel. Tierpark curator at that time, Claus Pohle, managed the international studbook for Somali wild asses for a total of 41 years from 1973 to 2014. That must be a record!