



## Lesser Kudu, *Tragelaphus imberbis*

**Legal Status:** Lesser kudu are not covered by the U.S. Endangered Species Act or regulated in international trade by CITES. The IUCN Antelope Specialist Group (1998) lists them as Lower Risk-Conservation Dependent, meaning that lesser kudu would qualify for one of the threatened categories in five years if conservation programs cease.

**Description:** Many spiral-horned forest antelope are considered to be the most beautiful of the antelope, and lesser kudu are no exception. Their white body stripes contrast with the chestnut brown of females and calves and the gray of the adult males. Only the males have a short mane and the open spiraled horns, which don't develop full 2 or 3 spirals until after the animal is three years old. Both sexes feature long legs and sleek coat. Males are typically larger than females and approximately 200 lb. (90.7 kg); females average almost 150 lb. (68 kg). Taxonomists traditionally recognize two subspecies: *T. i. imberbis*, whose range consists of Ethiopia and Somalia and *T. i. australis*, of Kenya, Sudan, southern Somalia and Tanzania; all captive lesser kudu originate from Kenya, making the North American population representative of the *T. i. australis* population.

**Distribution:** Lesser kudu live in the dry thorn thickets throughout northeast Africa. Aerial surveys indicate a large population from central Ethiopia to eastern Kenya. Smaller populations are found throughout the rest of Kenya, northern Tanzania, eastern Ethiopia, southern Somalia, southeastern Sudan and northern Uganda. Formerly lesser kudu occurred in Djibouti but are now extinct there.



**Habitat:** The dense bushland of east Africa provides lesser kudu with the thickets they prefer. Because lesser kudu rely on getting water from their diet, they may also live in the semi-arid thornbush well away from fresh water sources. As human settlement expands, lesser kudu will have habitat to depend on for cover. Although erosion and overgrazing are by-products of human encroachment, they may actually promote thicket growth, which in turn aids lesser kudu populations.

**Diet:** The woodland thicket of the lesser kudu's range supplies their diet of mainly leaves and shoots of trees and bushes although they will also feed on herbs, grasses and fruits when seasonally available. Permanent fresh water sources are not mandatory. In 1979, Walter Leuthold described 150 different food plants in the lesser kudu's menu. Lesser kudu feed in the early morning, retiring just after sunrise. They resume feeding after sunset.

**Social Organization:** Like other forest ungulates, lesser kudu live mostly in small groups comprised of a few adult females and their calves. Adult males generally live alone, associating with females temporarily for breeding. Occasionally, groups of over twenty individuals can be found. Male calves remain with their dams for 1.5-2 years, then form transient bachelor herds. Herds live rather sedentarily, moving only to find fresh browse. Lesser kudu exhibit little territoriality.



**Threats To Survival:** Lesser kudu are impacted by a continuing loss of habitat, poaching for meat and hunting as trophies. During the mid-1990s, an outbreak of rinderpest in the eastern regions of Kenya also caused a considerable decrease in numbers. While aerial surveys show that pockets of larger populations still occur in Ethiopia and Kenya, most lesser kudu populations remain diffuse throughout their range.

**Zoo Programs:** In North America, captive lesser kudu are managed through a regional studbook. Although uncommon in captivity, more North American institutions are realizing the beauty and versatility of lesser kudu, thus increasing their popularity and numbers. North American lesser kudu are managed through a PMP; the Antelope Taxon Advisory Group's Regional Collection Plan has a target population of 75.

**Conservation:** Because wild populations are not low, their future is not dire, especially if populations in Ethiopia and Kenya persist. Aerial surveys suggest a total population of over 100,000. The few preserves and sanctuaries found within their range include about one-third of the estimated total population. Densities range from 1.0 per sq. km where lesser kudu are more common to 0.05 per sq. km elsewhere. Improving these protected areas could strengthen long-term



survival. Their status could, however, change to Threatened if meat hunting and habitat loss continue.



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