AWESOME stories

Utterly Fearless at One-Week Old - Nubian Ibex

If we wanted to find an utterly fearless one-week-old baby, who is capable of escaping capture by a wily fox, where would we look? For whom would we search?

This video clip, from the BBC's "Life" series—featuring Sir David Attenborough—answers those questions. We would go to a desert area of Israel, near the Dead Sea, and we would look for a goat-species known as the Nubian ibex (*Capra nubiana*).

These wild goats have been around for a very long time. Archeologists have found their images on cylinder seals and ancient pottery. They live in various parts of Africa and the Middle-East, including Israel, and are amazing climbers.

Able to go where few others can, ibex have feet which help them to reach unbelievably high, precipitous mountain ledges. (Stop the video at 00:15 for an amazing view of their cloven hoofs).

Vegetarians, they can also climb trees to nosh on leaves. They especially love acacias (which also grow in some parts of Israel).

Currently, around 1000 ibex live in Israel (according to the government's estimates). They live in four different areas:

- Around 500 live in the Judean Desert;
- Between 200-300 populate the Negev Highlands;
- Somewhere between 150-200 survive in the Eilat Mountains; and
- About 100 live in the Golan Heights.

Living high-up, on and near *really* steep cliffs, the ibex give birth to their young about five months after conception. The "kids" are protected for their first few days of life on isolated cliff-top places.

However ... they do not have access to food and water near their birth area. To survive, the ibex - including week-old kids - have to descend from the safety of the high cliffs to the gorge below. There they will find food, water ... and ... predators!

In this clip, we see the adults leading the way as the babies make their first trip to the gorge below. It is amazing to see how agile they are ... and how fearless! One bad jump, or one slipped footing, and the kid could have a fatal fall.

What helps these ibex to hold their ground is the shape of their hoofs. They are cloven and spread under load. Ibex also have an extraordinary sense of balance, allowing them to seemingly float in the air as they jump from one precipitous place to another.

From the Los Angeles Zoo and Botanical Gardens, we learn more about an ibex hoof:

> *The uniquely shaped ankle bone (astragalus) and suction-like hoofs allow this graceful ibex to climb rocky cliffs with ease.*

Most, but not all, of the kids closely follow the adults. That helps the older ibex protect the younger ones. But a single straggler, who is unaware of pending danger, lags behind. A hopeful fox hides from sight, waiting for the right moment to pounce.

Suddenly ... when the kid is quite alone ... the fox gives-up its cover. Too far from its mother, the kid must protect itself. What will it do? Where will it go?

Instead of going down to the gorge, to the relative "safety" of its mother, the kid reacts quite differently. Instead of continuing down, the kid flees the fox by going back up the mountain.

Why would it do that?

Watching the clip, we see that the kid's reaction to the danger occurs quickly. It immediately protects itself by turning back.

Instead of running down, it runs up. Able to negotiate really steep cliffs much better than a fox, it finds a very tiny ledge which the predator cannot reach.

If it can out-wait the fox, the ibex has avoided capture ... at least for the time being. Meanwhile, the fearless kid has learned a valuable life lesson (about staying close and avoiding capture).

Credits:

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