

Savannah

Introduction

The savannah environment is in the tropical and in the equatorial zones, which have seasonal rain that characterize two different seasons: the rainy season and the dry season.

This climate determines the ideal conditions for widespread grasslands that are typical of the savannah. The temperature is high all year round. The grass is more resistant than the trees and notwithstanding the dry winds, it loses less water than the taller plants and is the principal source of food for many animals of the savannah. In the grasslands of East Africa, the elephants, antelopes and giraffes eat only the leaves; gnus eat the higher grasses, zebras graze the low grass and the gazelles eat plants and grass that grow near the soil. Every year, at the end of the rainy season, many grazing animals start to migrate in search of water and food, and are followed by predators and "scavengers". Lions, leopards, cheetahs, wild dogs and hyena attack the herds, vultures and jackals clean up the carcasses, crocodiles and catfish await near the fords where the herds gather in large numbers to cross the swollen rivers.

Savannah biome An expanse of grass

All tropical or rain forests were originally woods located between the Tropic of the Cancer (23° and 27' N) and the Tropic of the Capricorn (23° e 27' S). This area typically has a mean temperature of approximately 25°C with oscillations of no more than 2-3 degrees and plenty of rainfalls (over 1,500 mm a year). In some forests, the annual rainfall may reach 11,000 mm, even if in most areas it is around 2,500 mm. The best word to describe this forest actually is "rainforest". In some forests it rains little but every day (rainforests or equatorial forests), while in others (in the south-east of Asia) dry and rainy periods alternate (tropical or monsoon forests). Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, the terms "rainforest" and "tropical forest" will be considered as equivalent.

The savannah in the world

Tropical forests, or rainforests, occupy the so-called inter-tropical area of the planet, that is the area between the Tropic of the Cancer and that of the Tropic of the Capricorn.

Large rainforests are mainly in Latin America (Amazonia) where they are called selva, in Africa (Congo, Cameroon, Madagascar, etc.), in the Indo-Malay area (Philippines, Indonesia, etc.) where they are called "jungle" (from the Sanskrit jangala) and in the Australian area (Australia, New Guinea); altogether, they cover 10% of the lands above sea level. Among these, the Amazonian forest makes up approximately one third of all the tropical forests and is the greatest freshwater reserve on earth.

Plants of savannah

The plants of the savannahs are mainly xeromorphic, i.e. adapted to the lack of water, including graminaceous plants, bushes and different species of trees. These adaptations are generally aimed at preventing water evaporating: falling of leaves during the dry season (such as the acacia) or reduction of foliar surface or development of leathery shells to protect leaves (sclerophyllia), such as the euphorbia.

Another form of adaptation to the lack of water is the development of very deep roots to go searching for moisture (such as the Cactaceae) or fleshy stalks or roots to trap water inside (such as the Cactaceae, Euphorbiaceae, Liliaceae or Leguminosae).

The typical trees of this biome are acacias with their typical umbrella-shaped foliage, but there are also plenty of other leguminous plants bristling with thorns whose purpose is to defend them from herbivores and prevent water from evaporating.

Animals of the savannah

A large amount of large-sized herbivores live in the savannah (gnus, zebras, antelopes, giraffes, rhinoceroses and elephants in Africa; deer, elephants and gaurs in India) and in the dry season migrate to more humid areas hundreds of kilometres away. Sometimes herds of different species form. Most of the offspring of the herbivores of the savannah are very precocious: a gnu, for instance, can walk a few minutes after birth. This is because they must not be left behind by their herd, which protects them from predators.

The carnivores of the savannah are also social: lions, hyena-dogs, hyenas and jackals hunt in groups according to specific strategies. The savannah is also inhabited by large birds, the Ratitae (ostrich, rhea) and other terricolous birds (great bustard, guinea-fowl, marabou).

Nevertheless, the savannah is mostly inhabited by insects, including ants, termites and grasshoppers, which migrate far away during the dry season. These animals feed on local vegetation to which these huge swarms of insects cause extensive damage.

African savannah

In Africa, the savannahs are classed according to the arboreal and shrubby species that live there. Generally the trees are 6 to 12 metres tall, apart from the peculiar African baobab. This tree can be up to 30 metres tall and have a circumference of over 40 metres and a diameter of 10 metres at the base of its trunk. The prevailing baobab in Africa is the *Adansonia digitata*, which lives to an impressively old age: between 1,000 and perhaps 6,000 years. It is shaped like a bottle and its trunk traps over 120,000 litres of water within its tissues. Acacias (*Acacia* spp.) are the most numerous trees in this biome, with approximately 40 species, i.e. one half of the trees that live there. One of the most typical acacias is the *Acacia tortilis* with its typical flattened, umbrella-shaped foliage. There are also other trees, such as the *Brachystegia*, which produces the so-called "miombo" woods or savannahs, where there are as many trees as in a wood, even if sparse and full of clearings.

Animals of the African savannah

In Africa, there are approximately 100 species of wild bovids, 72 of which are endemic; antelopes alone make up 55 species. The African savannah is inhabited by approximately one third of the world's felines, such as lions, leopards, cheetahs, servals, three different species of hyenas, three of jackals and hyena-dogs.

The savannah is also home to some terricolous birds (great bustards, galliformes, etc.), such as the ostrich which is the biggest and can reach 2.5 m tall, but cannot fly. A peculiarity is that the male lives in harems of three or four females, but mates first and most often with a favourite female (dominant or alpha female). Then all females lay their eggs together in a hole in the ground and the eggs of the favourite female are laid in the middle; the favourite female and the male will look after the eggs until hatched. The eggs in the middle of the nest will be best protected from predators, which are quicker to reach the outer ones.

Other birds living here are some weaver passerines (Ploceidae), which built nests hanging from acacia and baobab branches, and different species of vultures which are the main class of flying necrophagous animals (that feed on dead animals) specialised in finding carcasses of dead animals.

The savannahs play a key role in ornithology (the science that deals with birds). During the boreal and austral winter, many species of birds, especially insectivores (feeding on insects), fly away from the cold and migrate sometimes hundreds of kilometres away. Billions of birds move from Europe and western Asia to Africa, where they can benefit from the mild climate and availability of insects. Swallows and European swifts are a typical example of such migrations.

Bushveld

The African savannahs south of the Equator, i.e. in such countries as South-Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Kenya, etc., are known as bushveld and are home to the *Acacia*, *Combretum*, *Mopane* (*Colophospermum mopane*) and baobab trees. In the south, it is the *Acacia erioloba* or Giraffe Acacia that dominates the landscape. In the driest areas, the bushveld becomes the thornveld, which has fewer trees but plenty of spiny shrubs.

In this area, the fauna is the same as in the African savannah

Savannahs of Madagascar

Madagascar is an island inhabited by many endemic plants and animals (i.e. existing only in specific areas) because of hundreds of millions of years of seclusion. The northern mountain ridge and the central plateaux act as barriers against the wet winds, thus determining areas with different plants: in the north there is a tropical forest, in the north-west a thick but low and deciduous forest. Finally in the south we found a baobab savannah (seven different species of baobab) that turns into a spiny forest of strange trees with the most bizarre shapes, such as bottle-shaped trees, dwarf baobabs and thick thorny bushes. The climate caused leaves to turn into thorns to avoid transpiration and keep the herbivores at bay, especially the endemic Didieraceae family, which look like the succulent plants of the deserts (cactuses or euphorbias). These plants make the spiny forest one of the most bizarre and fascinating habitats in the world.

Madagascar is home to many particular animals, including: lemurs, chameleons, geckos, lizards and endemic snakes.

American savannahs

In Latin America, the savannahs are called *várzeas*; in areas with rocky basements and little soil, the savannahs are called *campo rupestre*; in Brazil they are very woody, look like dry forests and are called *cerrado*. The *tierra firme* are like the African savannahs even if they are rainier and wetter during the dry season and there are also fewer fires. In the Amazonian region, there are small savannahs, which become larger north of the Amazon. The *várzeas* are, instead, open savannahs which are situated between the Rio Negro and the Xingu and around the Orinoco and which are flooded during the rainy season. Later on, as the dry season arrives, the land dries up and herbs and shrubs (i.e. *Artemisia artemisifolia*) quickly spring up; there are also palms (i.e. *Mauritia flexuosa*) or trees that resist floods and long dry spells. This mass of trees and shrubs (*matas*) may look like islands in a sea of dry or half-buried grass. Between Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay, below the Mato Grosso, there is the Chacò region with abundant but irregular rains. Here grow the *Copernicia* palms that can resist long dry spells.

In this area the fauna consists of many birds (e.g. cockerel, rhea), pumas, jaguars, hares, bats and many insects (crickets, ants, flies, etc.).

Asian savannahs

In tropical Asia there are monsoons, bringing rain and humidity, so as well as savannahs, there are also "clear" woods and forests, i.e. having deciduous and less luxuriant trees than in rain jungles. In India and Indochina, these areas are inhabited by large herbivores, such as deer, elephants, gaurs and bantengs and large-size predators, such as tigers, leopards, cuons and wolves. In India there are also drier areas: one in the north-west, including part of the Indo basin, the other being the Deccan Plateau. These areas are called sub-desert and include sandy areas where acacias and *Zizyphus* bushes grow. They look less desolate than the near-by Sahara Desert but are not so full of plants as an African or South-American savannah.

Man and savannah

Peoples of the African savannah

The habitat of the savannah favours farming and breeding and this is why it has been remarkably altered. The people living in this biome are mainly farmers who grow cereals and other plants that can resist long dry spells, such as millet, sorghum, barley and wheat, as well as peanuts, cotton, rice and sugarcane, while breeding prevails in drier savannah areas. Farm animals are generally cattle (zebus), sheep, goats and donkeys;

Many peoples live in the savannahs: the Nubians in the upper Sudanese Nubia, the Kung and the Akan in the Ivory Coast, the Bushmen and the Hottentots in Namibia.

Tourists in the savannah

An important human activity related to the savannah certainly is tourism: the savannah and in particular the wildlife sanctuaries offer the opportunity to observe, film and take pictures of an exotic and particularly fascinating nature, thus becoming an important attraction for tourists and enthusiasts. The safaris, tours within nature reserves, offer the opportunity to capture with one's camera or just with one's eyes wonderful animals in the wild state. Tourism thus becomes an extremely important economical resource for these regions, which are often poor.

A precious biome

Mainly cereals (such as oat and maize), dates, olives and vegetables are grown in the savannah.

Breeding includes goats, sheep, horses and cattle. The savannah can be economically useful not only for farming and breeding but also for the natural resources it offers. The baobab for instance is used for different purposes: as a drug to treat a number of diseases, for the light wood used to make music instruments and pirogues. Its fruits can be eaten raw or used to make drinks; its roots are eaten like asparagus.

The savannah is also very important for birds, whose survival depends on migrations to avoid the harsh winters of temperate areas.

The wildlife sanctuaries of the savannah are indispensable for the protection of dying species and for scientific and ethological research in a wild environment.

The origins of the savannah

Before the last glaciations, the Earth certainly looked very different from the way it looks today. In the past, the areas where there are deserts and savannahs now were covered with forests, while an expanse of ice covered the medium and high altitudes. As the climate got drier, the forests slowly disappeared and the savannahs got in.

In particular, geological events occurred in the African forests, approximately 7 or 8 million years ago, which can now be explained by plate tectonics and which caused savannahs and man to appear on Earth. The **rift valley**, that later on would cause the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, etc.) to come off the continent, began to form. This area, that extends north to south along the Great Lake line, was tormented for a long time by an intense volcanic activity, which brought along significant climatic changes. The west winds, loaded with rain, no longer reached the inland, which as a consequence dried up. The forest thus disappeared and was replaced by the savannah, a new environment, unsuitable for the tree monkeys and favourable therefore to those species that began able to use their back limbs, thus getting on their way to walk on two legs. Conversely, the bigger monkeys kept evolving as the forests retreated. In the grassy areas, to walk upright was useful to explore the environment and quickly locate dangers. New forms of life, better suited to living outdoors, began to appear, goaded by the new life style, and originated the evolutionary line of the hominids. In addition to these geological events, the savannah has been developed in more recent times by man, who cut trees for timber, put lands to pasture and burnt down the forests. Man's action has actually extended what was the natural area of this biome and still keeps it like it.