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A Whoop for the World's First Hyena Emoji

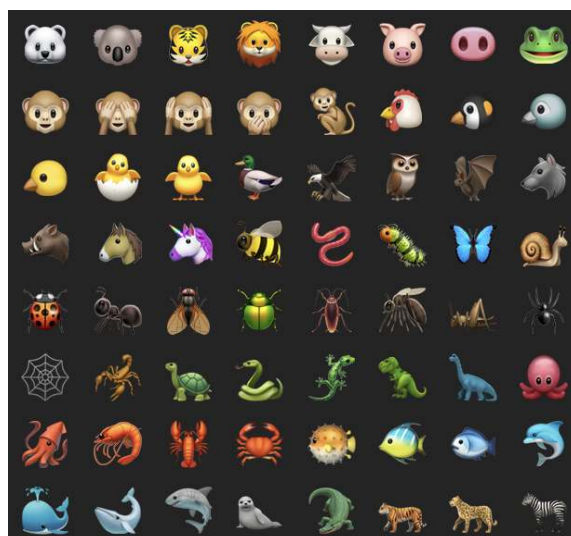
By

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A good picture is worth a thousand words, and animals, wildlife especially, have been mascots of human emotions from time immemorial. The use of symbols to represent animals in cave art was discovered to be at least [40,000](#) years old.

By the 3rd millennium BC, the first written languages evolved in the Near East, with explicit references to local wildlife and livestock. These precursors to modern-day emoticons and emojis tell us one thing : humans are lazy writers, and love concise, cogent, and cavalier symbols to conceptualize and emote their feelings.

In 1982, computer scientist Dr. Scott Fahlman proposed the use of “smileys” (e.g., ☺ and ☻), the first ASCII emoticons. From emoticons came emojis (e.g., 😊 and 😞), which first appeared on Japanese phones in 1997, as the age of the internet was afoot. They took off in use by the early 2010s, when smartphones became the norm. Ever since, emojis have played an important role in modern-day communication and even [pop culture](#).

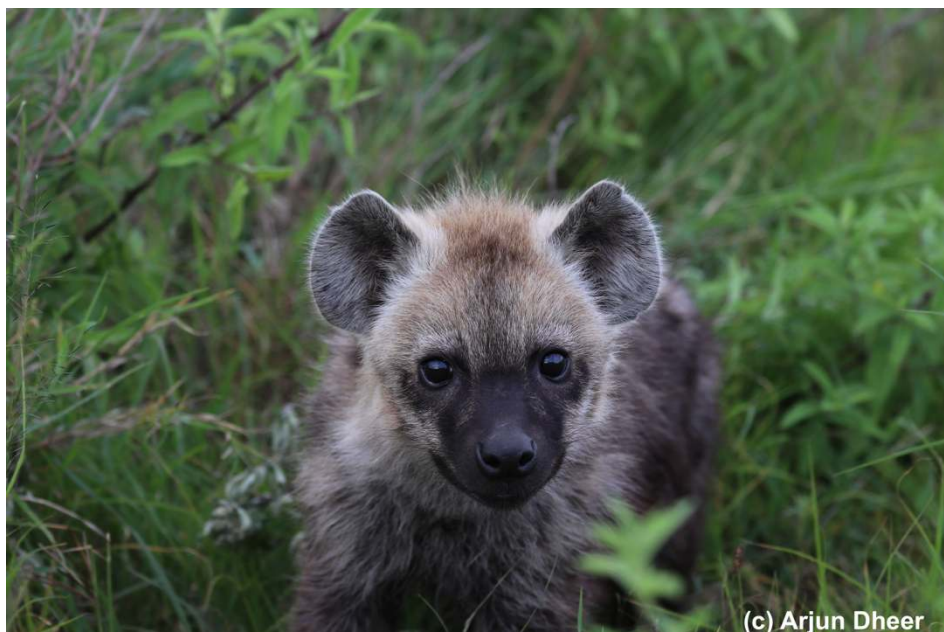


A selection of animal emojis (Pic Credit : Unicode)

So, who holds the key to unlock the emoji bonanza ? [Unicode](#) is the primary information technology standard for the encoding and representation of text in most the world's writing systems. The standard itself is curated and maintained by the Unicode Consortium, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization based in California, USA. Within the standard are almost 150,000 characters, 161 scripts, and 3,664 emojis.

Wildlife, including many of Africa's charismatic species are well-represented in Unicode's collection. You can find lions, giraffes, elephants, hippos, rhinos, leopards, crocodiles, zebras, gorillas, and many other familiar animals on your phones. Even the extinct (*Tyrannosaurus rex*) and mythical (unicorn) animals are represented. And it seems with each new software update received (on Apple or Android device), the selection of species continues to grow.

Yet, [some of us](#) feel there is one animal conspicuously missing : the hyena. Well, four animals, because there are four species in the family Hyaenidae : the spotted (*Crocuta crocuta*), brown (*Parahyaena brunnea*), and striped hyenas (*Hyaena hyaena*), and the aardwolf (*Proteles cristata*). Three of the four are limited to sub-Saharan Africa, with the striped hyena's range extending as far east as India and Nepal.



A spotted hyena cub in the Ngorongoro crater, Tanzania

Hyenas are among the smallest carnivoran taxonomic families, in stark contrast to Canidae (dogs) and Felidae (cats), which are comprised of well over 30 species each (numbers fluctuate as species get de- and re-classified). Yet, hyenas serve as keystone species, apex predators, and scavengers as well in the ecosystems they inhabit, ranging from savannahs, montane rainforests, bone-dry deserts, and urban areas. They keep prey populations healthy, [limit the spread of disease](#), and research on hyenas has contributed much to the advancement of ecology, evolution, and conservation biology. However, hyenas are much maligned. Research suggests that people view them [much more negatively](#) than their sympatric carnivores, and there is no dearth of negative portrayals in popular media (from *The Lion King* to *Life of Pi*). This makes hyena conservation more important and more challenging than ever before.

Silly as it may sound, having a hyena emoji could pave the way for more positive worldview towards these hapless animals. Studies suggest that people's emotions towards wildlife can [readily change](#), and having the hyena clearly represented and highlighted in our daily lexicon (not just via text, but through an appealing emoji), could have more influence than one might think. This could especially be true if the younger generation buys into the hyena emoji, enjoys its use, and emotes like a hyena !

Towards this end, a draft proposal is under preparation to Unicode for the addition of a new spotted hyena emoji to the brilliant collection (the draft is confidential as approval is awaited). The spotted hyena is the largest, most gregarious and well-known member of the family. Efforts to get emojis of all four species are in the pipeline. It is time for an unsung, unhonored, and unwept carnivore species to be in the limelight. What say, Unicode ?

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