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JUNE 16, 2014

## Zebras on the Move

Scientists discover that a group of zebras makes the longest land migration in Africa each year

BY TYRUS CUKAVAC | FOR SCIENCE WORLD MAGAZINE

A herd of zebras has been making a really big move. Scientists recently confirmed that several thousands of these striped creatures in the African country of Namibia make an unusual annual journey of more than 300 miles to the nearby nation of Botswana and back. Researchers have been studying this zebra **migration** (a large movement of animals) for the past two years.

Many African animals make long migrations. But these zebras now hold the record for the longest migration by land on the continent. Plus, unlike other animals, these zebras don't zigzag. Their migration follows an unusual almost straight-line direction. The herd treks between Botswana's Nxai Pan National Park in the south and the Chobe River in Namibia in the north.

The scientists made the discovery after putting **GPS collars** on eight adult Burchell's zebras, a type of plains zebra. The devices were placed around the necks of the animals. The collars then transmitted the creatures' location to scientists. Because the collared zebras were a part of a larger herd, the researchers were able to track the relative movements of the whole group.

### FOLLOWING THE WATER

Animals migrate for many reasons. Some move to find food, while others travel to get to warmer weather when it gets cold. Scientists think that these zebras move for water.

This region of Africa has two primary weather patterns—a dry season and a rainy season. When the dry season begins, the zebras move to the Chobe River near the Salambala plains in Namibia. By the river, the zebras can find **abundant** (plentiful) sources of water. When the rainy season starts up again, the zebras

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migrate back south to Botswana.

### MYSTERIOUS MOVES

However, the animals do not have to go all the way back to Botswana during the rainy season. The zebras could stop at other similar **habitats** (or animal homes) along the way instead. These are closer to their dry-season destination at the Chobe River. Scientists don't know why these zebras travel such a long distance.

It is also unclear how the zebras know when and where to migrate. One idea is that older zebras teach younger zebras the migration path. Each generation of zebras could pass on the knowledge of the route to the next generation of zebras.

However, the zebras may have the migration route programmed in their **genes**. These are a part of a living thing's **cells** (the basic building blocks of life). Genes are passed from parent to child and act as a code that can determine an animal's physical qualities. Scientists also think genes affect how a creature behaves, so they may influence the zebra's migration patterns.

Researchers will need to spend a few more years studying the zebras to solve these mysteries. But they're excited to learn about this big zebra move. Robin Naidoo, a scientist who worked on the project, says, "This unexpected discovery . . . where we think we know most everything about the natural world, underscores the importance of continued science and research."

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