

A TALL TALE

The leggy, long-necked giraffe lives life with hooves on the ground and head in the treetops.

BY HANNAH SCHARDT

When you are the tallest animal around, your life is pretty much all about being tall. What you eat, how you drink, the way you move, even how you fight: It's all thanks to your height. Just ask the giraffe, the tallest land animal on Earth. From hooves to ears, it's as tall as a two-story building! Its neck alone can be as long as an adult human is tall. But for the life a giraffe leads, tall is the best way to be.



Prickly thorns are no problem for a giraffe's nimble lips (left). And that tongue? (bottom left) It's almost as long as your arm!

WHOLE LOTTA LEAVES

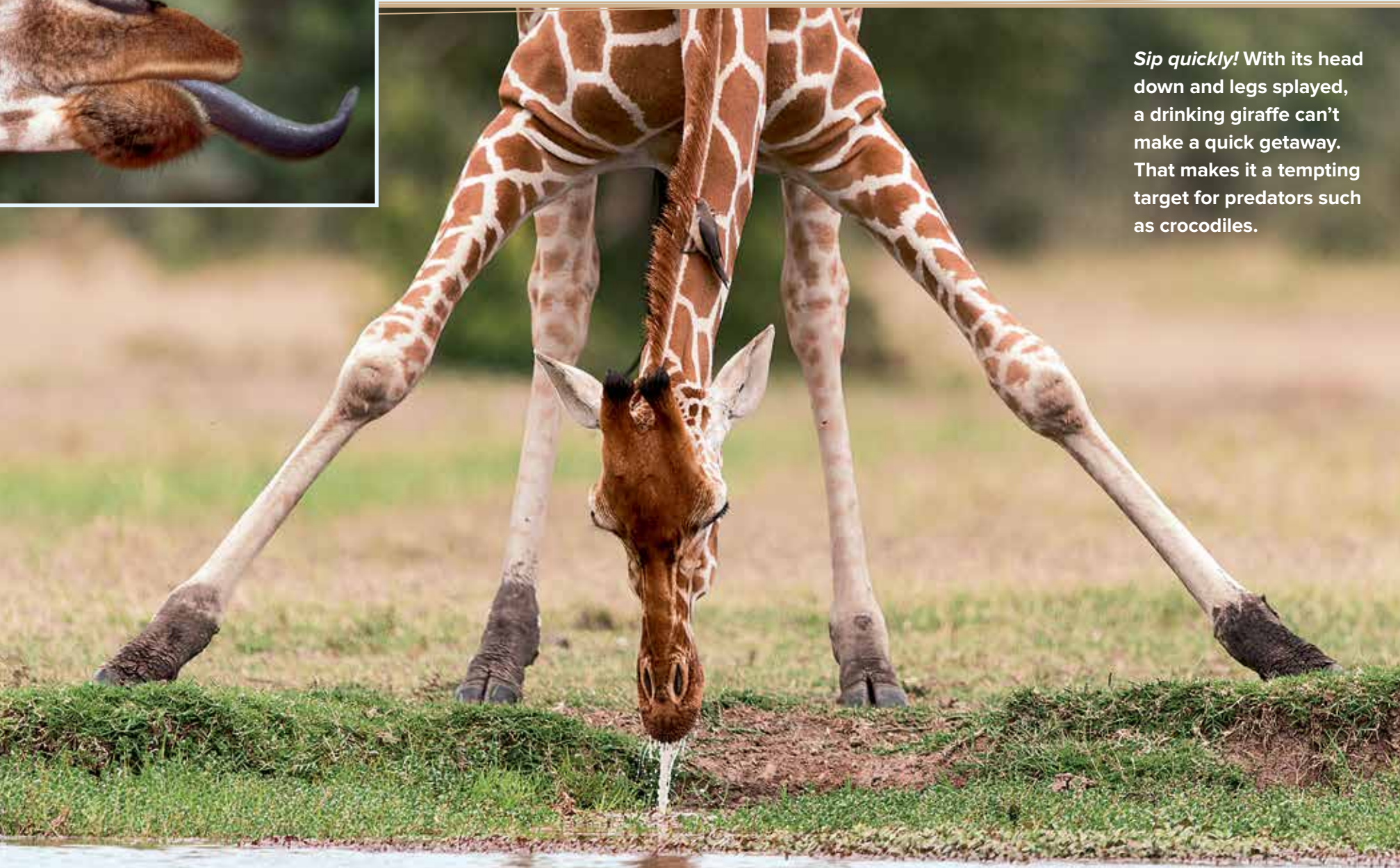
When you are as tall as a tree, it makes sense that your body is built for eating leaves. And that's what giraffes do—for up to 20 hours a day! Giraffes live in Africa's *savannas*, or grasslands, where the weather is often very

dry. They roam around, nibbling the leaves and tender shoots of thorny acacia (uh-KAY-shuh) trees. They sometimes stop to sip from waterholes, but they get most of the water they need from the leaves they eat.

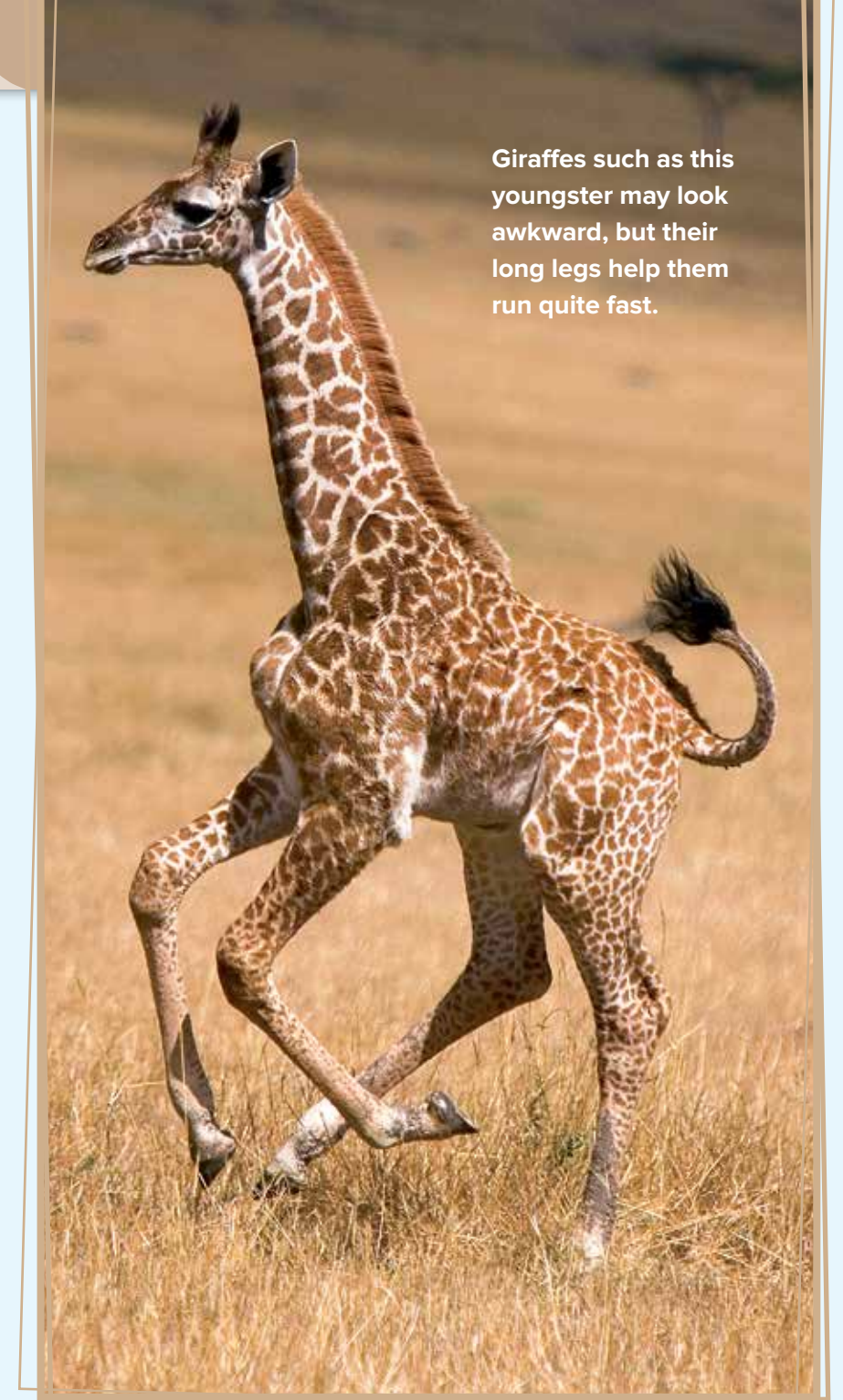
Giraffes are well suited to an acacia diet, and not just because they are tall enough to reach the treetops. Their flexible lips and super-long tongues are able to pick around the acacia's sharp thorns. Also, giraffes have

thick, slimy spit. Their spit coats any thorns they may swallow by mistake, and that keeps the sharp points from poking the giraffe's stomach. So to you, a prickly acacia tree may look like a plant to avoid. But to a giraffe, it looks like lunch.

Mealtime doesn't end when the giraffe swallows. That's because its stomach can't break down the tough plants it eats right away. So, like a cow, the giraffe coughs its food back up in



Sip quickly! With its head down and legs splayed, a drinking giraffe can't make a quick getaway. That makes it a tempting target for predators such as crocodiles.



Giraffes such as this youngster may look awkward, but their long legs help them run quite fast.

a ball called *cud*. Then it chews and swallows the cud again.

ON THE MOVE

Even though giraffes spend most of their time grazing, some-

times they need to run—fast—to escape a lion or other threat. A giraffe can run more than 35 miles an hour. That's probably faster than the speed limit in your neighborhood!



This may look like a hug, but the two male giraffes above are actually using their necks to fight.

FAMILY LIFE

Just a few hours after a baby giraffe is born, it can run. But it spends most of its first few weeks hiding under Mom's long legs. Many animals would love to catch a giraffe calf for dinner. So when a mother giraffe sees an approaching lion or hyena, she stands protectively over her baby. If the predator gets too close, Mom fends it off with a powerful kick.

Male giraffes get tough, too—



Almost from the moment it's born, a baby giraffe can follow its mom wherever she goes (below). The mom at left will protect, feed, and snuggle her baby for several months.

usually with other males. When two males both want to be "top giraffe," they face off in a battle known as "necking." They stand facing each other and lean in, pushing their necks together.

The one that stays more upright is the winner. If a fight gets really serious, the battling giraffes may stand a few feet apart and swing their necks, trying to knock each other off balance with the horn-like bumps on their heads. *Ouch!*

It may sound hard to believe: an animal with a neck that can be used as a weapon, a tongue that can slurp right through thorns, and legs that carry it as fast as a car. But when it comes to the giraffe, this tall tale is 100 percent true! 🦒

Hey, watch where you're pecking! The giraffe below may look annoyed, but two birds called oxpeckers are doing it a favor by nibbling ticks and other pests off its skin.

