Fastest animal in the world: the peregrine falcon, and who comes next

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The fastest animal in the world is the peregrine falcon, diving at 322 km/h (200 mph). The cheetah on land, the sailfish at sea, and the source for every speed.

The fastest animal in the world is the peregrine falcon, which dives at about 322 km/h (200 mph), according to the National Park Service. On land the fastest is the cheetah, at 96 to 112 km/h (60 to 70 mph) by the Smithsonian's National Zoo. In the sea, NOAA says sailfish, swordfish and marlin can reach up to 113 km/h (70 mph).

That answer comes with a catch, and the catch is the interesting part. "Fastest" depends on how an animal moves. Here are the speeds on Peabody's Animals pages, each with its source.

Top speeds, fastest first

- Animal: Peregrine falcon · How it moves: diving · Metric: 322 km/h · Imperial: 200 mph · Source: National Park Service, Denali and Yukon-Charley Rivers
- Animal: Sailfish · How it moves: swimming · Metric: up to 113 km/h · Imperial: 70 mph · Source: NOAA National Marine Sanctuaries
- Animal: Cheetah · How it moves: running · Metric: 96 to 112 km/h · Imperial: 60 to 70 mph · Source: Smithsonian's National Zoo
- Animal: Hummingbird · How it moves: diving · Metric: 96.6 km/h · Imperial: 60 mph · Source: National Park Service, Northeast Temperate Network
- Animal: Pronghorn · How it moves: running · Metric: 88.5 km/h · Imperial: 55 mph · Source: National Park Service, Badlands
- Animal: Ostrich · How it moves: running · Metric: 69 km/h · Imperial: 43 mph · Source: Smithsonian's National Zoo
- Animal: Bald eagle · How it moves: level flight · Metric: 56.3 to 64.4 km/h · Imperial: 35 to 40 mph · Source: National Park Service, Upper Delaware
- Animal: Blue whale · How it moves: swimming · Metric: 32 km/h · Imperial: 20 mph · Source: NOAA Fisheries

Peabody's record breakers page and the fastest animals Top 10 are built from the same data.

A dive is not a flat-out flight

The falcon's number is for a dive, called a stoop. It folds its wings and dives, and gravity helps, the way you go faster down a slide than across the flat. The bald eagle's number, 35 to 40 mph, is for level flight, so it's the fairer one to set beside a bird cruising along. That doesn't

make the falcon's speed any less amazing. It just means you should say "in a dive" when you tell someone.

The cheetah: fastest on land

Peabody's cheetah page calls it the fastest runner on land, and the Smithsonian's range is the one I use. A top speed is a sprint, though. The cheetah can only keep it up for a short dash and then must rest. Peabody's pronghorn page adds the other half: a pronghorn is not quite as fast, at 88.5 km/h, but it can keep up a fast run for much longer than a cheetah.

The sailfish: a group figure

The sailfish number is the one I'm most careful about. NOAA's National Marine Sanctuaries page says that sailfish, swordfish and marlin are the fastest fish in the ocean, reaching speeds of "up to" 70 mph. That is a figure for the three of them together, not a stopwatch time for one sailfish, which is why I say so here. It's a good example of why every number gets a source.

Animals that aren't in the table

Peabody only lists a speed when a page I trust gives one. The lion has no checked top speed yet, so there's no lion in the table, and the cheetah vs lion question gets a sizes answer instead of a speed answer. Dinosaurs have no speeds at all, because nobody can time one.

Race them, never fight them

On the race page you pick two animals and Peabody races them to a tree over a short dash, by top speed only. The famous races include cheetah vs peregrine falcon, where the falcon wins and the page adds that it isn't quite fair, because one is diving and one is running. You can also try cheetah vs pronghorn, hummingbird vs peregrine falcon or bald eagle vs peregrine falcon.

Peabody's rule is "we only race". Real animals mostly avoid each other, so the race page never shows a fight and never has a loser get hurt. I explain why in why we race and never fight.

Try tonight

Ask your child to guess before looking: who is faster, a cheetah or a pronghorn? An ostrich or a bald eagle? Then check the table. The faster or slower quiz does the same thing with three big boxes and no typing, and the how fast is fast guide explains why a top speed is a sprint.

Questions grown-ups ask

What is the fastest land animal?

The cheetah, at 96 to 112 km/h (60 to 70 mph), from the Smithsonian's National Zoo. It's the fastest runner of the animals on Peabody with a checked running speed.

What is the fastest fish?

NOAA's National Marine Sanctuaries page gives "up to" 70 mph (113 km/h) for sailfish, swordfish and marlin as a group, so I'd say "one of the fastest fish" rather than naming one.

Why does Peabody use a short dash and not a long race?

Because a top speed is a sprint, and a longer race would favour animals with stamina instead. A short dash keeps it simple, and the result card adds a line when an animal can keep going longer.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026 and has no ads. When you've had enough of speed, the library has stories at your child's reading level.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/fastest-animal-in-the-world