

Tortoise and Hare

(a swazi story)



There is an ancient story that the Swazi people tell of how the humble Tortoise made a fool of the braggart Hare.

One day, during the early days of the earth, Hare came across Tortoise peacefully eating a lunch of young nettle leaves. Hoping to make fun of the dignified Tortoise, he challenged him to a short race, up to the Baobab trees next to Cheetah's house. After a long pause, Tortoise accepted the challenge but declared he would much prefer to run a LONG race, all the way to the pan! He also declared that the race would be run on Saturday, giving him 5 days to prepare for it!

Surprised, Hare agreed and went off well pleased with the prospect of making a great fool of Tortoise. Tortoise, meanwhile, lost not a moment of the time allotted for his "preparation".

He called on each and every one of his friends and family, asking for their help and explaining his clever strategy.

In a nutshell, each tortoise was to place himself along the race track at spaced intervals, and was to run as fast as he could, the moment Hare came into view. Once Hare had flashed past them, as he most surely would, they were free to go on their way again.

Having made these arrangements, Tortoise found a small calabash and started off immediately for the pan which was 6 miles away.

The journey took him all of the 5 days he had allowed himself and having filled his calabash with water, he thankfully sank down to await developments!

Hare, on the other hand was prancing in glee at the start of the race, poking fun at the Tortoise next to him, little realising that it was Tortoise's first cousin twice removed!

At last the race began and Hare was off in a flurry of gravel, leaving the tortoise in a cloud of dust.

Hare tore along, laughing wildly, but the laughter stopped abruptly as he rounded the first bend, for there was Tortoise, AHEAD OF HIM! Astonished, Hare began to run faster and faster, but nothing he did made him pass Tortoise "properly", for over every hill and around each curve on the track, there Tortoise was, still ahead!

Exhaustion started to take its toll and poor Hare staggered and fell, just a stone's throw from the cooling water of the pan.

To his horror and mortification, he opened his eyes to find Tortoise standing next to him with a calabash full of cool, sweet water!

"My dear fellow," said Tortoise, "have some water! I never thought you wouldn't have the stamina for such a race!"

Tortoise went home, well satisfied with his strategy, while Hare was incapable of understanding that in fact, all the animals were laughing at his stupidity!



FACTS ABOUT HARES

Species: Scrub Hare (*Lepus saxatilis*)

Solitary.

	Male	Female
Height	6 in	6 in
Weight	5 1/2 lb	4 _ lb
Age at Weaning	1 month	1 month
Age at Maturity	8 months	8 months
Gestation Period		1 month
Number of Young		usually 2
Lifespan	5 years	5 years

Identification: Very similar to the hares of Europe, America and other parts of the world. The scrub hare is one of many species common in Africa. It has long ears, strong hind legs which are longer than the front ones, and a white tail with a thick black stripe down the middle.

Habitat: Dry, open country and sparse woodlands.

Habits: The hare is usually nocturnal, hiding during the day in thick scrub or grass.

The hare is grass-coloured and, by lying very still, avoids being noticed. However, if you are about to step upon a hare it will suddenly burst out from cover and run, zigzagging, until it is out of sight; this makes it very difficult to catch. Hares are preyed upon by eagles, owls, pythons and many other animals, including cheetahs, which are the only animals fast enough to run a hare down. Other hunters have to creep up close and make a surprise attack.

In African folklore, the hare is often the star of the story. He is portrayed as a creature who is always playing pranks and causing mischief. He is a boaster, always saying how clever he is, especially at making the high-and-mighty animals look silly. Hare always seems to come out on top!

Diet: Hares feed on a variety of grasses, from which they also get enough moisture and so don't need to live near water.

Breeding: Mother hares usually bear only two young at a time. Unlike rabbits, they do not live in holes, but make a shallow nest in the middle of a thick clump of grass, where the babies are left, keeping as still as stones, while the mother is out feeding.