

African Lion

Panthera leo melanochaita

Cat

Scientific Name

Panthera leo melanochaita

Other Names

None

Range

Africa

Habitat

Forests, plains and savannas

Average Size

Male

Body length: 60 - 75 inches

Tail length: 35 - 42 inches

Weight: 330 - 550 pounds

Female

Body length: 55 - 68 inches

Tail length: 27 - 40 inches

Weight: 260 - 320 pounds

Description

A large cat with a tawny brown to tan coat and a long tail with a tuft of fur at the end. Males have a dark mane of hair encircling their head and extending to the neck and belly.

Cubs are born a tawny brown with spots.

Lifespan:

In the wild: 10 years

In human care: Up to 25 years

Diet

In the wild: Water buffalo, wildebeest, antelope, zebra and small herbivores

In the zoo: Prepared feline meat diet and bones

Gestation

110 days average

Offspring

Two to four cubs

Sexual Maturity

In human care: As early as 18 months

In the wild: 4 years of age average

Predators

Birds of prey, large carnivores and humans

Population Status

Threatened



Behavior

African lions live in large social groups called prides, consisting of a group of related females and their young and one to seven adult males. Males fight to secure a dominance hierarchy, then attach themselves to a group of females with only the dominant male or males mating with the females in the pride. Male lions, especially sibling or juveniles of the same age, often form "cohorts". These groups are sometimes maintained throughout their lives and they never join an actual pride.

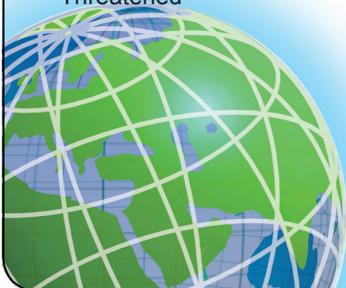
African lions are excellent stalk and ambush hunters. Although they are mostly crepuscular (active in early morning and early evening) with erratic activity periods, they are opportunistic and will hunt anytime, day or night. In prides, the males do not participate in hunting expeditions as they are too large and thick-maned to camouflage well in the grasslands. They also must remain behind to patrol the territory and defend the offspring from intruders. The group of females usually locates its prey by sight, zeroing in on a single individual that may be young, weak or simply separated from the main herd. Most of the lionesses encircle their prey, waiting in ambush for the remaining females to chase the herd into them. One or more lionesses will jump onto the animal trying to grab its neck for strangulation. African lions are also excellent scavengers, willing to push hyena clans away from their kills.

Reproduction and Breeding

African lions have no particular breeding season, but most of the mating in the wild occurs in the months of March through June. Females cycle throughout the year every 16 days, remaining in estrus for four to eight days. Females in a pride will often cycle together and the resulting youngsters are raised communally at times, in what is termed a "creche". This estrus cycle is important when new males take over a pride. If there are any offspring in the pride at the time of the takeover, the new males will kill them. The females will come into estrus soon, allowing the new males to father offspring. This ensures that male lions put their energy toward protecting cubs that carry their genetic material.

Just before giving birth, the female leaves the pride for a more secluded site. She will return with her cubs in a month to join the other females with offspring. The cubs' eyes open after the first week. Although they are not fully weaned until they are 8 months old, they may begin to accompany

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their mother on hunting trips at 3 months of age. Most cubs remain with their mother for two years or until she has her next litter. Daughters of the pride typically remain in the pride, but young males leave the natal group as they reach maturity.

Conservation

The main threats to African lions are indiscriminate killing (retaliation or pre-emptive killing to protect village livestock) and prey base depletion. Habitat loss and conversion of grasslands to farmlands have forced lions into fragmented populations. Lions are persecuted heavily in livestock areas across Africa. Their scavenging makes them vulnerable to poisoned carcasses put out to eliminate predators. Lion prey (large herbivores) are under increased threat from commercial bushmeat, leading to the collapse of prey across large portions of savanna Africa. Illegal trade of lion parts by Asian countries has added another threat to lion survival. Illegal and unregulated trophy hunting from first world nations also impacts this species. Lastly, diseases from dogs owned by neighboring humans such as rabies and canine distemper have also made an impact on lion survival.

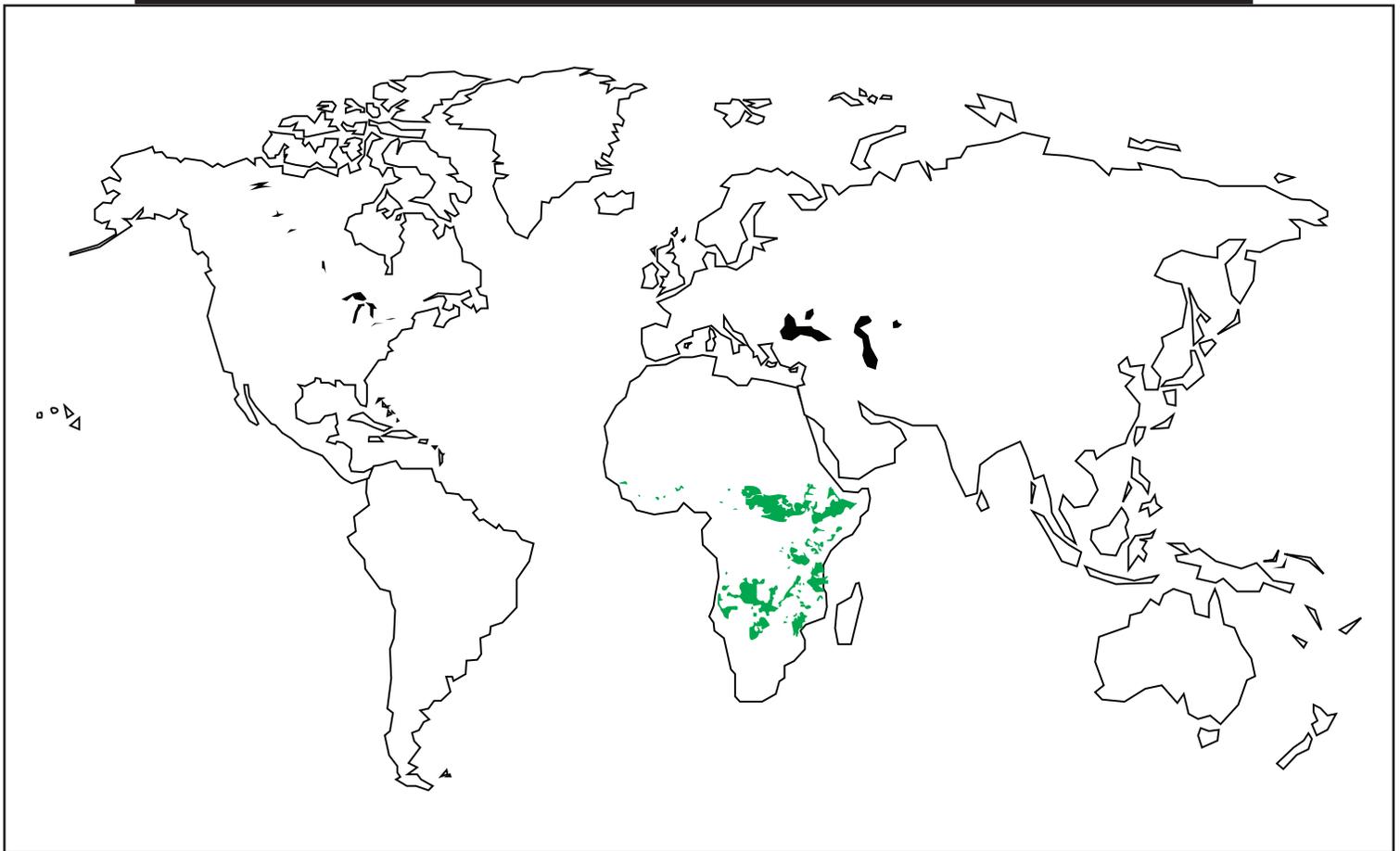
Amazing Facts

A lion's roar can be heard up to five miles away.

Lions are the only cats to have a tuft of hair on their tails. They use it to communicate.

Lions spend as much as 20 hours per day resting and sleeping.

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