



CHEETAH

Acinonyx jubatus

POPULATION STATUS

E Endangered

AZA PROGRAMS

 Species Survival Plan®

CONSERVATION

Although cheetahs have numerous conservation issues facing them in the wild, and even receive protection in many areas of their range, they are listed by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) as Vulnerable.

The main pressures are loss of habitat, loss of suitable prey and continued human-animal conflicts including poaching, illegal wildlife trafficking, and perceived threat to livestock. Cheetahs are more active during the day and are therefore seen more often than the nocturnal predators which contributes to a higher rate of persecution on the cheetah. Cheetahs are still viewed as status symbols in some countries which creates a high demand for them as pets for high end buyers and royalty.

During the last Ice Age, the population of cheetahs plummeted to just a handful of individuals, which caused an extreme reduction of their genetic diversity known as a population bottleneck. The entire population is so genetically similar to one another that they are vulnerable to disease and further genetic anomalies. This lowers their ability to adapt and overcome environmental changes and unexpected disasters.





SCIENTIFIC NAME

Acinonyx jubatus

RANGE

Sub Saharan Africa

HABITAT

Savannas, open grasslands and semi-arid brush

DESCRIPTION

A thin framed, narrow waisted cat with long legs, and a small head with wide set nostrils. Their coat is light tan to a deep gold covered in small black spots.

AVERAGE SIZE

Length: 44 to 53 inches, with a tail

Weight: 88 - 140 lbs.

LIFESPAN

In the wild: Up to 12 years

In human care: 17 to 20 years

DIET

Gazelle, impala, wildebeest calves, small mammals and birds

GESTATION

3 months

LITTER SIZE

1 - 8

SEXUAL MATURITY

20 to 24 months of age

PREDATORS

Lions, hyenas and birds of prey

BEHAVIOR

Cheetahs are diurnal but will rest during the hottest part of the day, leaving the hunting for early morning and late afternoon. In areas where the lion populations are lower, however, cheetahs have been observed hunting at night.

Cheetahs have a unique sprinting hunting strategy that is different from the preferred stalk and pounce style of most cats. The hunt has several components including target detection, stalking, the actual chase and then the prey capture. To maximize success, a cheetah will start its run when it is between 190 to 320 feet from its prey.

Because of this, cheetahs have special adaptations that allow them to thrive with this hunting style. Their claws are only partially retractable giving them extra traction at all times, their nostrils are wide set to allow extra oxygen to fuel their muscles, the absence of a collar bone enables them to take long strides (up to 21 feet) when running, and their long tail acts as a rudder for sharp turns.

While females grow up to lead largely independent lives, male siblings remain together for the rest of their lives forming a group called a coalition. This behavior increases hunting success and acts as a defense against other predators. This newly formed coalition may travel hundreds of miles looking for suitable, unclaimed territory where they can settle.

REPRODUCTION AND BREEDING

In the wild, cheetahs breed at any time of the year due to the climate in their habitat, although in some areas of their range more births occur in the rainy season to coincide with peak fawning season of Thompson's gazelle, the favored prey of cheetah. Receptive females urinate on bushes, trees and rocks to alert nearby males they are in estrus. When males come across these markings, they make a "stutter bark" chirping call that draws females in. Once mating has occurred the males and females separate, with the female raising the offspring completely on her own. The cubs are born blind and helpless weighing only 8 to 15 ounces. After a day, the mother will leave the cubs to hunt for herself creating a vulnerable time for the youngsters as they are left unprotected. They remain secluded until they are six to eight weeks old when they begin to follow their mother on her daily travels searching for prey. Unfortunately, fewer than 10 percent of the cubs survive during this time.

Between four and six months of age, the cubs are extremely playful as they hone the skills they will need to survive the rest of their lives. At one year old the cubs start participating in hunts with their mother and finally separate from their natal family at 18 months of age.

AMAZING FACTS

Cheetahs will climb onto termite mounds and lower tree branches (play branches) to get a better vantage point of their prey.

The fastest cheetah was clocked at 70 miles per hour, a speed that was reached in 4 seconds.

Young cheetahs have a thick, silvery mantle of fur running down their back to disguise them as an angry, aggressive honey badger.