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Abstract: The Cheetah roamed once all over Europe, Asia, North America and Africa. Today the most shy and gentle of all the wildcats is on the track to extinction. Their hunting skill is speed. A cheetah is a very good mother, almost never letting her cubs out of her sight except to hunt. In captivity they always had difficulties in breeding. Only few places are left to hunt and as their natural prey gets more difficult to find, they may become hungry enough to kill domestic animals. Studies and research hope to prevent the extinction of cheetahs by conducting behavioral, physiological, medical and nutritional studies.

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# CHEETAHS

## *On The Fast Track To Extinction*

by Michele Burgess

Nearly everyone knows the cheetah is the fastest land animal on earth. In fact, with its ability to accelerate from 0 to 45 in two seconds, and to reach speeds estimated at up to 70 miles per hour, it could be cited for exceeding the speed limit on the interstate! Tragically though, the cheetah appears to be on the fast track to extinction.

Thousands of years ago, the ancestors of cheetahs roamed all over Europe, Asia, North America and Africa. At the turn of the century there were an estimated 100,000 cheetahs in Africa and Asia. By 1980 hunting and habitat destruction had reduced their number to around 10,000 in Africa and fewer than 250 in Asia. Today cheetahs have vanished from much of Africa and are almost extinct in Asia — a sad fate indeed for a species once prized as court pets by Egyptian Pharaohs and African emperors.

The most shy and gentle of all the wildcats, cheetahs have never been known to attack a human without cause. So gentle are they that people have kept them as pets for thousands of years. Many cultures, from the Sumerians in 3000 B.C., to the princes of India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century used cheetahs (often referred to as “hunting leopards”) for hunting. Akbar the Great, an emperor in India around the year 1550, kept 1,000 cheetahs for hunting black buck.



**Above: A mother and her cubs frolicking in the sun.  
Right: A cheetah surveying the plains for prey.**

### **Built For Speed**

An average cheetah is 7 feet long (a third of which is tail), about 2½ feet tall at the shoulder, and weighs a little over 100 pounds. One way you can tell it from other spotted cats is by the dark lines that run from its eyes to its mouth. Called “tear lines,” it is thought that these dark areas may help protect the cheetah’s eyes from the glare of the sun, much like the black grease football players rub under their eyes helps cut glare during games.

What makes a cheetah so fast? Every part of its body is built for speed, which enables it to catch and kill running animals. Like a greyhound, it is long and lean with plenty of leg. Nonretractable claws provide traction at high speeds. A flexible spine allows maximum stretching of the legs. The bones of its feet and legs are specially adapted to take the pounding of a hard run. Cheetahs run on their toes, which makes it easier for them to turn suddenly without losing their balance. The long tail also helps maintain balance while making turns at full speed. Heavy breathing during running is

aided by large lungs, bronchial passages and nostrils. An oversized heart pumps blood rapidly during the race, and large adrenal glands can kick the whole system into a rapid start. As the cheetah runs, only one foot at a time touches the ground. There are two points in its stride when *no* feet touch, as the legs are either fully extended or totally doubled up. When moving at top speed, a cheetah can cover as much as 20 feet in one stride!

Cheetahs do most of their hunting in the cool early-morning or late-afternoon hours. They are solitary animals and usually hunt alone. However, families of cheetahs — a mother and her cubs or a group of related males — may hunt together. Hunting is almost completely by sight. To look for prey — their favorites are gazelles, impalas and other small animals — they climb on top of a termite mound or other elevated place to get a good view of the plains. Once they've spotted a herd, they single out a victim and the hunt is on.

Kills are normally made on the run. Fleeing prey may be tripped, struck on the rump with a forepaw to knock it over or seized by the neck and brought down. The impact of the fall usually breaks the animal's neck and suffocates it. If necessary, the cheetah will administer a swift bite to the jugular vein to end the fight. Although cheetahs are very good hunters, they don't always catch the animals they chase. They tire quickly and will give up if they can't catch the prey within a few hundred feet. Consequently, only about half of all hunts are successful.

Cheetahs usually drag their kill into the shade of a bush or tree to hide it from other large carnivores. Lions, hyenas and leopards all help themselves to cheetah kills because the cheetah is no match for these animals. After a hard chase, a cheetah may need to catch its breath and rest for up to half an hour before beginning to eat. A mother with cubs will stand aside and let the cubs eat first, even moving the carcass to make it easier for them.



### Gentle By Nature

A cheetah is a very good mother, almost never letting her cubs out of her sight except to hunt. If they begin to stray, she calls them back by purring or making a soft chirping sound. Cubs are born in litters of one to eight babies, usually four. Blind at birth and weighing less than a pound each, cheetah cubs are darling little animals. Initially, they are gray with few markings; their fur is rough and stands straight out, giving their round heads the appearance of old dandelions about to blow away. This long, dark fur, called a mantle, protects against rain and sun, serves as camouflage by imitating dry, dead grass and helps the cubs to blend into the shadows. At about 3 months of age, the mantle begins to fall out making way for the familiar spotted coat.

Cubs subsist strictly on mother's milk for the first several weeks of life. After that, meat is gradually introduced into their diet. The mother makes a kill, then calls the cubs to come share it with her. When they are about 6 months old, the cubs start learning how to hunt, but it takes almost a year and a half for them to be able to hunt on their own. A mother leaves her cubs when they are 16 to 18 months old. The cubs stay together for several more months, usually until the females reach sexual maturity. Once this happens, male cubs are chased away by dominant breeding males. Male cubs stay together for the rest of their lives.

As a united force they are more able to acquire and hold territory against rival male cheetahs.

The cheetah is in a genus all to itself (*Acinonyx*), with only one species (*jubatus*). Subspecies (based on their regions of occurrence) are so much alike that they're almost impossible to distinguish. This lack of genetic variation may be one of the primary reasons the world's fastest land mammal is also one of its most endangered creatures due to reproduction problems, high infant mortality and disease susceptibility from a weakened immune system. Also, cheetahs aren't fighters by nature, therefore other predators steal their food, eat their cubs and even attack the adults. For this reason, cheetahs in the wild live only four to five years, whereas in captivity they may live up to 16 years. Adding to the cheetah's endangered status in the wild is infant deaths due to predation or the mother losing contact with her cubs (it is estimated that up to 50 percent of cubs die in their first year of life); loss of habitat and decline of prey species; poisoning, trapping and shooting by livestock farmers; and fatal encounters with poachers who know the black-market value of their beautiful, spotted fur.

### A Race For Life

Cheetahs have always had difficulty breeding in captivity. Because of this, many zoos have taken extra pains with their cheetah breeding programs and have been surprisingly successful. The San Diego Wild Animal



**Clockwise: Two friendly cheetahs welcome visitors to their plains; A cheetah rolling in the grass bears a striking resemblance to household felines; A young cheetah drinking water from a hole in a rock; A mother and cubs resting in the shade (notice the cubs' dark fur).**

Park welcomed another litter in June of 1992, bringing to over 100 the number of cheetahs born there. Wildlife Safari in Winston, Oregon has had 108 cubs born there since it opened in 1972 (starting with one male and three females), making it the number one cheetah breeding facility in the Western Hemisphere.

A Species Survival Plan put together by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquaria hopes to prevent the extinction of cheetahs by conducting behavioral, physiological, medical and nutritional studies to learn more about the animals, thus improving breeding programs by producing more viable pregnancies in captive animals through artificial insemination.

The Cheetah Conservation Fund, based in the sparsely populated southwest African nation of Namibia is headed up by Daniel Kraus and Laurie Marker-Kraus, formerly of Wildlife Safari and the Washington

book listing about 1,000 cheetahs in zoos and captive wildlife parks throughout the world. By referring to it, zoo curators can identify animals of the right age, health and genetic background to breed.

The largest number of wild cheetahs — about 2,500 — survives in Namibia. However, because natural grasslands have been mostly converted into farms and pastures, cheetahs have few places left to hunt (more than 95 percent of the cheetahs in Namibia actually live on private ranchland). As their natural prey gets more difficult to find, cheetahs may become hungry enough to kill domestic animals.

The Namibian government has given the Krauses full clearance for their research. The Krauses are attempting to educate Namibian farmers about cheetah conservation. They urge farmers to protect their herds with large dogs and biting, kicking donkeys rather than by killing

predatory cheetahs. Fortunately, local farmers are increasingly calling them when they trap a cheetah. The Krauses' long-range plans include instigating cheetah conservation efforts in other African countries using Namibian programs as a model.

Hopefully, with a little luck, and the determination and dedication of conservationists throughout the world, the cheetah's race toward extinction will, instead, become a race for life — with both the cheetah and mankind as the winners.

To support the Cheetah Conservation Fund's ongoing conservation, education, and research programs for wild cheetahs, and receive regular updates from Namibia regarding the work to save this endangered species, send a check for \$25 to Cheetah Conservation Fund/WILD, 211 W. Magnolia, Fort Collins CO 80521. A new program, "Adopt-A-Wild Cheetah," has been recently introduced. To request information on this program or the work of the Cheetah Conservation Fund in general, write to the above address, or call 303/498-0303.

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