

Dunbar Brander AA, et al. 1934. The cheetah or hunting leopard (*Acinonyx jubatus* Erxleben). Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society 37(4 (Supplement)):147-8.

Keywords: 4IN/*Acinonyx jubatus*/cheetah/conservation/Felidae/hunting/Leopard/status/wildlife

Abstract: Aside biological, ecological and behavioural considerations, contemporary status of the cheetah in India is discussed.

SUB-FAMILY II: ACINONYCHINAE.

THE CHEETAH OR HUNTING-LEOPARD
(*ACINONYX JUBATUS* ERXLEBEN).

In India the Cheetah is all but extinct in the wild state. It once ranged from the confines of Bengal through the plains of the United Provinces, the Punjab and Rajputana, through Central India and the Deccan. It is not known to have occurred in South India and Ceylon. Evidence of its existence in recent years in some parts of its known range is seen in such records as the Society has been able to collect. A Cheetah was killed in 1918 and another in 1919 in the Mirzapur District of the United Provinces. Five Cheetahs are recorded as having been obtained in this Province during the previous twenty-five years. In the Central Provinces, the Cheetah appears to have been not uncommon at one time in the Berars. Three were shot in the Melghat Forest area in 1890 and one in 1894 and one at Wano in 1895. Rumours of their existence in parts of Berar, the Seoni Plateau and Saugor still persist. They were apparently once common around Hyderabad, Deccan. The only part of the Bombay Presidency where Cheetahs were known to occur recently is the tract of rugged country known as the Tanga in the centre of the province of Kathiawar. In 1884 it was estimated that there were not more than twenty of these animals in this area. A female and four cubs were shot at Rajkot in 1894.

Outside India, the range of the Cheetah is said to extend northwards to Russian Turkestan and Trans-Caspia. In South-Western Asia its range is believed to reach from the frontiers of Sind through parts of Afghanistan, Baluchistan and Persia and Mesopotamia to Syria and Palestine and thence into Africa, where cheetahs are, or were once found as far south as the Cape. To what extent it survives in these Asiatic countries is not known. There is a record of a female and cubs taken at Nasriyah in Mesopotamia in 1928, but the animal was not known to the local Arabs.

Certain peculiarities in the structure of a Cheetah differentiate it from all other cats. In size and form a Cheetah looks like a long-legged slender-bodied leopard. But its slimmness of body and length of limb are equalled by some cats such as the African Serval. Its head is rounded and relatively smaller than in any other form of cat—the facial region and particularly the cranium slopes steeply downwards and gives its skull a dome-like shape.

The Cheetah's most distinctive character is the structure of its feet. Its claws are usually described as non-retractile. The claws of cats are retracted and raised from the ground by elastic ligaments which pull on the terminal joints of the toes. Now the claws of a cheetah are approximately if not quite as retractile as in some species of cats. Their distinctiveness lies in this that the claws of cats are covered in varying degrees by sheaths of skin, while the claws of a cheetah are always bared owing to the entire absence of skin sheaths.

JOURN. BOMBAY NAT. HIST. SOC.

PLATE XLVI.



Photo by

The Cheetah or Hunting Leopard (*Acinonyx jubatus*, Erxleben).

F. W. Bond.

The colour of an adult cheetah varies from tawny to a bright rufous fawn. Its coat is pale below and spotted almost everywhere with small round solid black spots. The chin and throat are buffy white, a black line runs from the corner of each eye to the upper lip, and there is a less distinct line or row of spots from the corner of the eye to below the ear. The fur is coarse; the lengthening of the hair on the neck suggests an incipient mane. A pair of cubs taken in the Berars are described as having long grey silky hair, without spots, covering the head and back and reaching half way down the flanks, giving the cub an appearance of wearing a great coat. The remainder of the body was covered with short grey hair sprinkled with single black spots. A cub taken in Nasiryah in Mesopotamia is described as being fawn-coloured—the hair on the upper part of the body was 2-3 in. long and unspotted, while the limbs and lower part of the body showed a sprinkling of dark spots. The head and body of a cheetah measures about 4-5 ft., the tail 2-5 ft., its height is from 2 ft. to 2 ft. 9 in.

We know little about the habits of the Cheetah in the wild state. In India it is usually found in low rugged hill country bordering the plains; near Hyderabad it is stated to live in holes in rocks or among accumulations of rocks and boulders. It preys on antelope, gazelle and nilgai and such creatures as it can master. One was shot in the U.P. while stalking a sambhar. Unlike other cats, speed and not stealth of movement is the essence of the Cheetah's hunting. All those characters which distinguish the Cheetah from other cats have arisen from its distinctive method of pursuing its prey. The small head, narrow chest and body, long sinewy limbs, and powerful hind quarters are designed for speed; while its protruding claws, hard, pointed pads and larger hind feet are well-fitted for securing a firm hold on hard or sandy ground. Crouching low, a cheetah takes advantage of every inch of cover or inequality in the ground till it gets within a distance to make its rush upon its quarry. While it lacks the elasticity of gait and the suppleness of body so distinctive in the cats, not the fastest antelope can equal a cheetah's initial speed. Coming up with its fleeing quarry, the Cheetah fells it by striking its hind legs from under it. The animal falls and is then seized by the throat. This manoeuvre of tripping up its prey was constantly observed in the play of a pair of cheetah cubs. The pursuer going at full speed always attempted to upset its mate by striking at the hind legs and having felled it, made for and worried it at the throat. Failing to seize its prey in its initial rush the Cheetah appears to have no reserve of strength or breath and usually gives up the chase.

Nothing is known of the breeding habits of the Cheetah in India. There is a record of female with 4 cubs which was shot near Rajkot in Central India. The mother and one cub were away when the other cubs were discovered under a bush. A pair of cubs a week old were taken in the Berars in December.

The Cheetah has been for centuries the playing thing of princes, Asiatic, African and European. When taken young it is easily tamed and trained to show its wonderful speed. A couple