

Emanoil M. 1994. Cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus*. In: Emanoil M, editor. Encyclopedia of endangered species. Detroit: IUCN / Gale Research Inc.; p 191-192.

Keywords: 1Afr/5AF/*Acinonyx jubatus*/characteristic/cheetah/conservation/distribution/ endangered species/habitat loss/threat

Abstract: 5000 to 12000 cheetahs are estimated to live in Africa south of the Sahara, and 200 in Iran and possibly in northwest Afghanistan. The loss of habitat is assessed as the most serious threat for this species.





Encyclopedia of Endangered Species

Edited by Mary Emanoil
In Association with IUCN-The World Conservation Union

IUCN
The World Conservation Union



 **Gale Research Inc.**

DETROIT • WASHINGTON, D. C. • LONDON

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ISBN 0-8103-8857-X
ISSN 1077-1352

Printed in the United States of America
Published simultaneously in the United Kingdom
by Gale Research International Limited
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Cheetah

Acinonyx jubatus

..... Chordata

..... Mammalia

..... Carnivora

..... Felidae

..... Vulnerable, IUCN

..... Endangered, USFWS

..... Appendix I, CITES

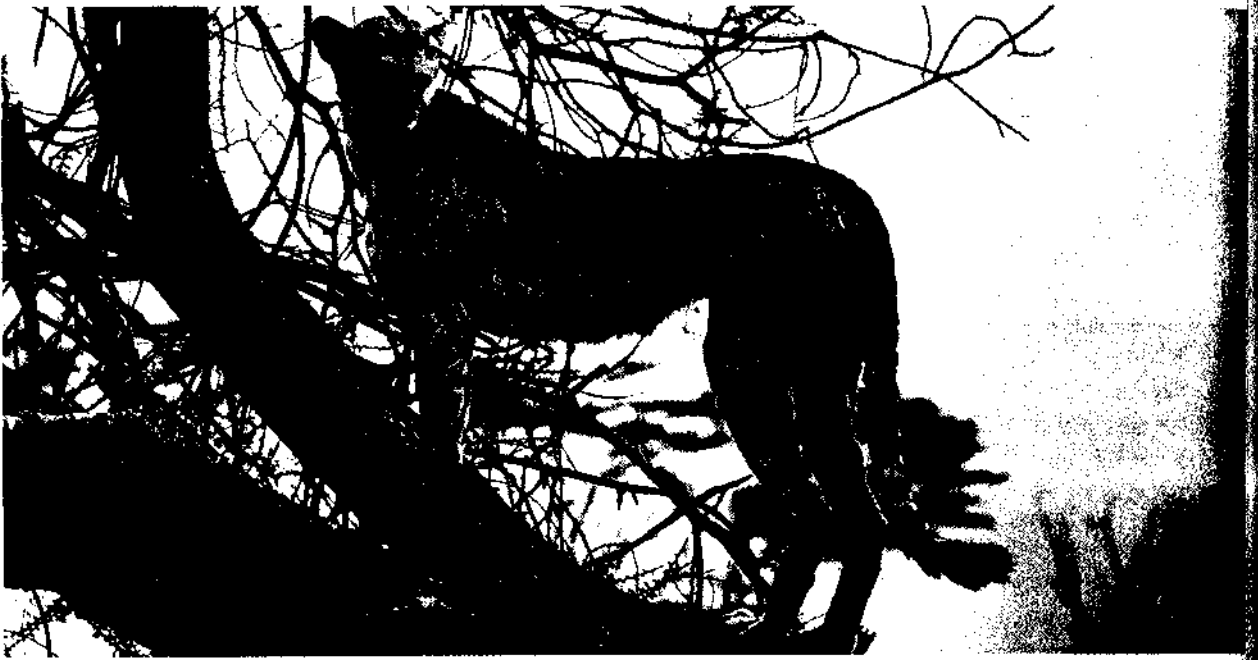
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Evolution and Biology

Considered the world's fastest land mammal, the cheetah can reach speeds of 60-75 mph (96-120 km/h). The cheetah's name is derivative from the word *chita*, which means "spotted one." This animal measures 4.5-5 ft (1.4-1.5 m) long, weighs 110-150 lb (45-66 kg), and its tail is 24-32 in (61-81 cm) long. Its tawny brown fur is accented by black spots, a black tear streaks across the cheeks, and black spots on the flanks. In some cats in southern Africa, the spots create a uniquely blotched coat; these are called king cheetahs. Cheetahs are able to run but not with the same facility as semi-cats. They can, however, chase their prey at a trot for short sprints. The cheetah has physiological similarities to dogs and, like them, pursues prey rather than ambushing them. Its method of hunting depends on the size of prey; as in other cats, it is throttled while small prey is bitten on the neck. Large prey animals include gazelles, impala,

wildebeest, and antelopes; small prey includes warthogs, hares, and ground birds.

Adult females are solitary except when mating or raising cubs. Males often live with littermates in groups of two to four called coalitions. Coalitions have an advantage over solitary males in securing and defending a territory of approximately 15.5 sq mi (40 sq km). Females cover a much larger range while following migrating prey such as Thomson's gazelle. The female's territory may cover as much as 310 sq mi (800 sq km) and often overlaps the territory of other females. Sexual maturity is reached in 20-24 months. Females in heat squirt urine on rocks, trees, and bushes to attract males, then mating occurs frequently over a period of several days. After a gestation period of 90-95 days, a litter of one to eight cubs is born. They are hidden by the mother and moved often to new hiding places in long grass or bushes until they are weaned in three months. Young cubs are especially vulnerable to predation by lions,



Cheetah.

hyenas, jackals, and eagles. The mother brings small, live prey to the cubs to help them develop hunting skills.

Habitat and Current Distribution

The cheetah is now restricted to Africa south of the Sahara. Estimates of total population range from 5,000 to 12,000. An additional population estimated at 200 animals occurs in Iran and possibly in northwest Afghanistan.

Preferred habitat is savanna and arid, open grasslands for hunting prey. It also utilizes bushland as cover for stalking prey, for hiding from predators, and for shade in the heat of the afternoon.

History and Conservation Measures

The cheetah once ranged over much of Africa, Arabia, the Middle East, and northern India. Population was estimated at 28,000 in the mid-1950s and at 14,000 in the early 1970s. Decline in distribution and

population is attributed to a number of factors, including hunting and habitat disruption. Cheetahs are legally protected in most countries, but they are sometimes killed by farmers protecting their domestic animals. They are also hunted for their spotted pelt, although not as often as other cats.

The loss of habitat is the most serious threat to this species. As suitable habitat decreases, so does available prey for cheetahs and for other large carnivores. Other concerns include a cub mortality rate of almost 90 percent and a depleted gene pool that leaves the cheetah vulnerable to genetic defects. The death rate of adult males is also very high as a result of territorial disputes. Despite these obstacles, the cheetah seems to be adapting to its reduced circumstances and resisting extinction.

Captive breeding of this species has not been very successful, with less than 25 percent of captive adults breeding more than once. The American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums is sponsoring research through the Species Survival Plan to investigate the causes of breeding failure.