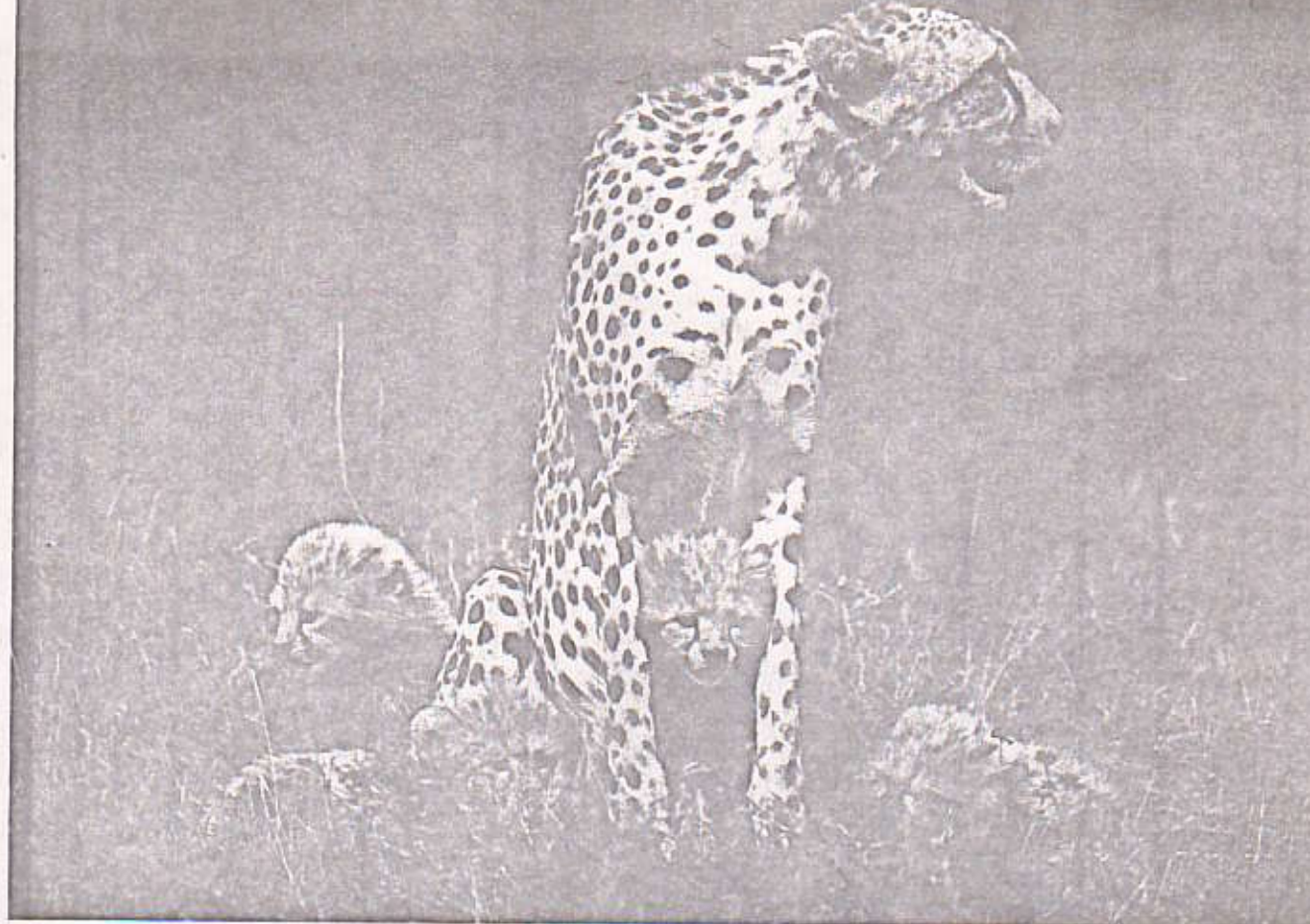


Myers N. Is the Cheetah a loser. The web of life:160-163.

Keywords: 1Afr/Acinonyx jubatus/cheetah/competition/Leopard/status

Abstract: This speedy hunter faces formidable odds in its struggle to survive. The cheetah is choosy about its habitat and has to compete for every bite of food. The cheetah was never as numerous as the lion or the leopard in the best of times. A cheetah needs a much larger territory to support it than a leopard does - and the cheetah's habitat, the open grasslands, is rapidly shrinking because of agricultural growth.



A mother cheetah guards her cubs. Among cheetahs mother-young bonds are strong until the cubs are mature enough to fend for themselves, but cheetahs are otherwise solitary animals. Cubs become independent at 14 to 16 months of age.

Is the Cheetah a Loser?

Norman Myers

This speedy hunter faces formidable odds in its struggle to survive. The cheetah is choosy about its habitat and has to compete for every bite of food.

One day I came upon a mother cheetah walking across the midmorning African savanna with four cubs. The mother was plainly out on a hunt. She stopped periodically to stare at small herds of Thomson's gazelles in the distance. The cubs' smoke-gray hair indicated they were about 6 weeks old. A few weeks earlier the cubs would not have been strong enough to accompany her, and she would have left them in a clump of withered grass, where their fur would have concealed them.

A cheetah with cubs must kill almost every day if she is to feed not only herself but her offspring, and this means considerable risk as long as the cubs must

stay behind for the entire foray. A cheetah litter generally totals five or six cubs, and the family could well have lost two of their members already to marauding lions, hyenas, or eagles.

Eventually the cheetah mother spotted a group of gazelles about 200 yards away, grazing unconcernedly. Somehow she indicated to her cubs that this was the time for business, and they disappeared under a 6-inch-high scrub patch. The mother made her cautious walk toward the prey, freezing from time to time in mid-stride, when she suspected she was being observed. Soon the low-slung walk accelerated to a trot and then into an all-out burst. A little cloud of dust sped across the grass-sparse plain, in pursuit of the gazelles stampeding in terror. One gazelle paused a fraction too long, and after less than 200 yards of chase, it was pinned to the ground in a silent stranglehold.

A shared meal

The cheetah lay for a while by the carcass, panting. When she recovered her breath, she started to drag her prey, but there was no convenient hiding place within reach, so, after a few minutes' effort, she gave up. Instead she trotted to the place where she had left the cubs, called them out of hiding, and returned quickly to the carcass.

But it was already too late. A vulture patrolling overhead had spotted the family. The bird alighted nearby. It was soon joined by a second, which had

seen the first vulture plunge earthward. Ten vultures gathered and attracted the attention of a jackal. The jackal's expectant gait had, in turn, signaled the interesting news to a spotted hyena lying outside its den half a mile away. The hyena didn't follow yet; it merely watched the jackal.

When the cheetahs reached the carcass, there was a brief altercation as they disputed ownership of the kill with the vultures. Unless some stronger carnivore opened up the carcass, the vultures could not feed. But meanwhile they stood close guard. Having driven them 2 dozen yards back, the mother cheetah began to rip and tear at the prey's abdomen. But every few

seconds—literally, I timed her by my watch—she paused to stare around the landscape with every sign of apprehension. Perhaps she sensed that if other predators came to join the meal, the food might not be limited to the gazelle. Within a few minutes, however, she had ripped open the hide sufficiently to start feeding in earnest. The cubs licked at the tidbits.

By now the vultures had grown into a flock of 50. Every few minutes they made a concerted rush, and the mother cheetah spent more time fighting them off than feeding. The cubs had to stay close by her to avoid lethal pecks from those hefty bills. She now managed only an occasional bite at the carcass, but

A 16th-century Indian painting shows Emperor Akbar hunting game with trained cheetahs. Easily tamed, cheetahs have been kept as hunting animals for centuries. Often used in relays, they were blindfolded until it was their turn to hunt.





Vultures gather aggressively near two cheetahs and their kill, a gazelle. Although vultures can sometimes drive a lone cheetah from its kill, two cheetahs are too much for them. But cheetahs lose a high percentage of their prey to competing animals.

this was not nearly enough to serve her needs since her teeth were not strong enough to shear away chunks of meat the way lions' or leopards' teeth can.

Suddenly the mother cheetah leaped aside from the carcass. The hyena was approaching at a rush, and across the plain came others of the hyena clan. The cheetah mother did not stand and fight, hungry as she still was. The hyena is a larger and more powerful animal than the cheetah. She might soon have got a nip in the haunches that could make the flat-out chase on the next hunt a painful affair—and anything less than a 60 to 70 mph speed could mean no kill when pursuing a gazelle.

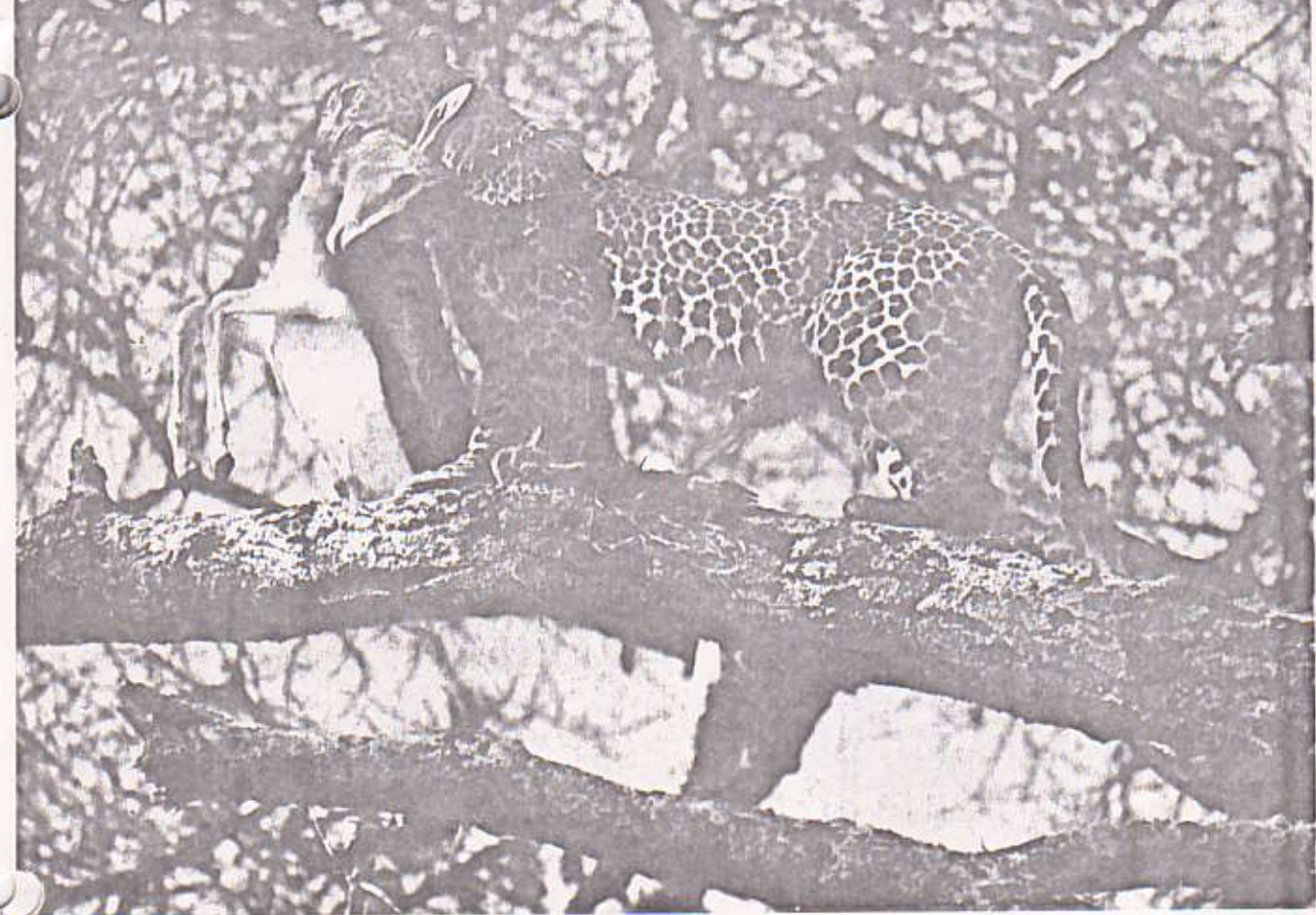
The cubs scattered. They did so in a star formation, instead of tagging after their mother. This tactic probably serves them well against a single predator, but it plays into the hands—or jaws—of pack predators. If the cubs crouch low in a close-by clump of grass, they are unlikely to escape notice from 20 hyenas milling around in the area. Even were they so fortunate as to survive this scene, they would be unlikely afterward to find the mother cheetah when the situation became safe enough for them to move.

An hour later I saw the mother cheetah striding

across the plain on the lookout for prey. Only three cubs followed her, one limping so badly it could hardly keep up. The life of a cheetah family is a constant search for food, which means endless wandering. Adult lions readily team up to attack a buffalo or a giraffe. But adult cheetahs do not cooperate in hunting, so larger antelopes are beyond their capacities. And the cheetah, which is not a good climber, cannot cache its food in a tree to be secure while feeding and to ensure that the remains will be available the next day.

Other predators are doing better

The cheetah was never as numerous as the lion or the leopard in the best of times. About 2,000 lions, at least 1,000 leopards, and some 3,000 hyenas live in the Serengeti National Park and its environs, but there are only 250 cheetahs—even though there are 5,000 square miles of open habitat suitable for a speed-chase hunter and half a million gazelles available as prey. Not only do the lions and other predators dispose of quite a few cheetahs but disease seems to be more of a factor for cheetahs than for other predators. On top of all this the cheetah does not show the adaptability to a variety of wild lands that the lion does. The lion can



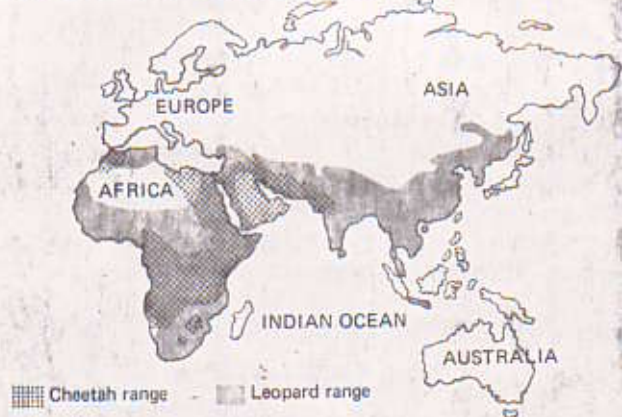
A leopard drags a half-eaten carcass up a tree for storage. Unlike the cheetah, the leopard is an excellent climber and has the strength to carry loads heavier than itself; kills are often cached in the fork of a tree.

survive in grasslands, savannas, woodlands, and thorn-bushes. The leopard can survive in each of these environments, and as many more again. The cheetah can manage only in semiarid areas, grasslands, and wooded savannas. Now that Africa's human population is exploding, people are spilling over from the more fertile arable areas into the next most favorable habitats—the grassland savannas.

For a variety of reasons, then, the cheetah is something of a "loser" in modern-day Africa. Its numbers have probably never been very high, but they were sufficient. Now the species is probably down to way below 20,000. This figure could well be only half as many as in 1960, when Africa's human populace began expanding its numbers and its aspirations.

Altogether Africa's parks and reserves contain only 3,000 cheetahs at most. Given the precarious position of the species, Africa's existing wildlife sanctuaries probably cannot guarantee the cheetah's survival. Were the cheetah ever to find itself in the plight of the Bengal tiger, with only some 2,000 left, it would be in far greater danger of losing the battle against extinction—and, because of the extensive tracts of land required to save it, the cost would be much higher.

Cheetahs Versus Leopards



The most widespread cat, the leopard is faring better than the cheetah. The leopard population is actually increasing in some areas, while the cheetah population, especially that of the Asiatic race, has seriously declined since 1960. The leopard is more adaptable; it can exist in a greater variety of environments, and its diet is far less specialized. A cheetah needs a much larger territory to support it than a leopard does—and the cheetah's habitat, the open grasslands, is rapidly shrinking because of agricultural growth.