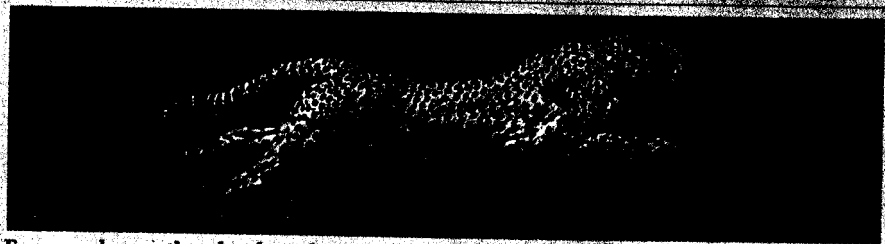


Phillips H. 1997. The cheetah's time has come. *New Scientist*:653.

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Abstract: The speed of the cheetah was assessed by hand timing on a known length using a meat lure held from the back of a landrover to caught its attention for the start. Three separate runs yielded almost identical speeds - the fastest was a rather impressive 65 m.p.h. (105 km/h).

## The cheetah's time has come



Everyone knows that the cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), shown here in full flight, is the fastest land animal. So a report by N. C. C. Sharp (*J. Zool.* 241, 493–494; 1997) claiming to provide the first accurate measurements of the cheetah's running speed comes as something of a surprise. Moreover, the timing was done as long ago as 1965.

Apparently, for many years after Sharp made the measurements, he was unaware of the inaccuracy of previous studies. The widely quoted report of a cheetah running at 71 m.p.h. ( $114 \text{ km h}^{-1}$ ) was discredited some time ago — not only was the distance over which the speed was measured found to be 65 not 80 yards as first thought, but the timing was inaccurate and the arithmetic faulty. Other calculations have been made from films, using the animal's body length to estimate the distances involved. These yielded a disappointingly low estimate of 56 m.p.h. ( $90 \text{ km h}^{-1}$ ),

suggesting that the cheetah might be outspurred by a Thomson's gazelle — though timings of the speed of the gazelle are themselves subject to doubt.

The speed for the cheetah now reported was assessed very simply. Sharp, then an athletics coach, who says he was "well used to hand timing", measured a course of 220 yd (201.2 m), marked at either end by posts and a thin tape. The cheetah was held 18 m from the posts, to allow a running start, and when its attention was caught by a meat lure held from the back of a Landrover, it was released. The cheetah chased the Landrover over the course, and was timed with two calibrated stopwatches.

Three separate runs yielded almost identical speeds — the fastest was a rather impressive 65 m.p.h. ( $105 \text{ km h}^{-1}$ ), still much faster than racehorses at 69  $\text{km h}^{-1}$ , or greyhounds at 58  $\text{km h}^{-1}$ .

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