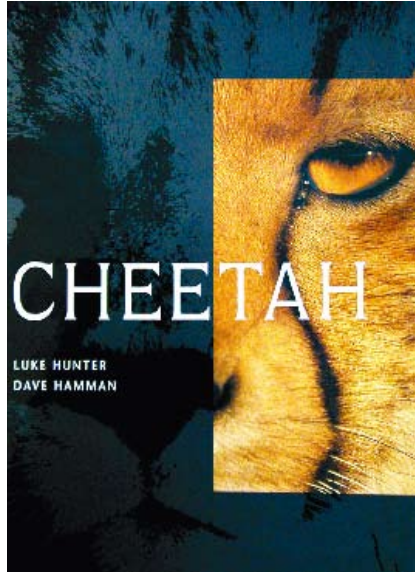


Book Reviews

Cheetah



**By Luke Hunter and Dave Hamman.
Struik, Cape Town, South Africa.
2003, 144 pp. ISBN 1 86872 710 X**

This is one of the rare “coffee table” books where the text is as rich as the photos and illustrations. Luke Hunter has written an overview of *Acinonyx jubatus* which will serve cat specialists as well as the general public.

Cheetahs were used by humans to hunt ungulates and hares since at least the first millennium AD, and possibly much earlier. The practice was so widespread that, Hunter speculates, it may have led to the widespread disappearance of the cheetah from Asia (where the only remaining populations are now found in Iran). The cheetah is likely to have evolved in Africa 3.5 mya and then spread rapidly throughout Eurasia. Meanwhile, other cheetah-like species evolved and became extinct. The modern cheetah’s hypothesized near-extinction in the late Pleistocene is discussed in Hunter’s summary of

the controversy over the cheetah’s remarkably homogenous genome. He advises conservationists to heed geneticists’ warnings of the potential adverse consequences of inbreeding, but notes that there is little evidence of impaired reproduction and immune response in wild cheetahs.

Delving into cheetah behavior and ecology, Hunter does a good job of summarizing the scientific literature while drawing on his own research on a reintroduced population of cheetahs in South Africa’s Phinda’s Game Reserve. His text is interspersed with photos of his study animals and excerpts from his field diary. These dramatize not only well known aspects of the cheetah – such as the vulnerability of cheetah cubs to lion predation, and the sprinting hunting technique – but also include rare and unusual observations, such as can-

nibalism following territorial fighting amongst adult male cheetahs. “*The territorial pair, Carl and Linford, are hunting about 150 meters in the distance. A moment after I first sight them, they take off after something, but the grass is very long and I am too far away to see what they are chasing. I lose them and relocate them [10 minutes later]. I am stunned to discover that they are in the process of killing another male cheetah. Carl is throttling the male in the manner*

of killing prey, and Linford is mauling the flank...” Throughout, Hunter is careful to highlight behavioral differences between males and females, and to explain why these strategies maximize fitness.

Reviewing cheetah conservation, Hunter addresses threats while emphasizing aspects of cheetah resilience. For example, cheetahs are remarkably successful hunters of gazelles, and also show considerable dietary plasticity.

They can live in a wide range of habitats, not just savanna grasslands, and in many cases have survived alongside humans where other large predators have been extirpated. However, highlighting the work of conservationists to encourage more tolerance of cheetahs by local communities, Hunter reminds us all that the fate of the cheetah is in our hands.

Kristin Nowell