

Asian wildcat

Felis silvestris ornata



Fig. 1. The Asian wildcat (top) has a more brightly coloured pelage and clearer spots compared to the European wildcat (bottom), where faint spots often coalesce to a striped pattern and the fur is darker (Photos M. Bohnacker & CB-Verlag).

Wildcats of Central Asia *Felis silvestris ornata* have a light fur, ranging from greyish to sandy-yellow to reddish. They differ from other wildcat subspecies mainly in their distinct small black or red-brown spots (Fig. 1). The spots sometimes form transverse stripes or bars, especially on the legs and tail (Sunquist & Sunquist 2002). Such striped cats are most often found in the Central Asian regions east of the Tian Shan. The Asian wildcat has a long, tapering tail, always with a short black tip, and with spots at the base. The forehead has a pattern of four well-developed black bands. A small but pronounced tuft of hair up to one cm long grows from the tip of each ear. Paler forms of Asian wildcat live in drier areas and the darker, more heavily spotted and striped forms occur in more humid and wooded areas. The throat and ventral surfaces are whitish to light grey to cream, often with distinct white patches on the throat, chest and belly. Throughout its range

the Asian wildcat's coat is usually short, but the length of the fur can vary depending on the age of the animal and the season of the year. Compared to the domestic cat, Asian wildcats have relatively longer legs. Males are generally heavier than females (Nowell & Jackson 1996, Sunquist & Sunquist 2002). Some Chinese sources propose four wildcat subspecies for China: *F. s. chutuchta*, *F. s. issikulensis*, *F. s. shawiana*, and *F. s. vellerosa* (Smith & Xie 2008), but recent genetic research suggests that all these subspecies should be united under *F. s. ornata* (Driscoll et al. 2007).

Other wildcat subspecies are *F. s. silvestris* distributed in Europe and from southwestern Asia to Iran, *F. s. lybica* occurring along the eastern border of the Mediterranean Sea, in northern Africa, some Mediterranean islands, and parts of the Arabian peninsula, and *F. s. cafra* in southern Africa (IUCN 2010). The domestic cat *F. s. catus* derives from the

wildcat, originating in southwestern Asia (Driscoll et al. 2007).

Status and distribution

The Asian wildcat occurs in Iran, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia and Mongolia, Pakistan, eastern Afghanistan, the western plains of India and throughout northwestern China (Nowell & Jackson 1996, IUCN 2010). Where there is sufficient dense vegetation, it is reported from elevations up to 2,000-3,000 m (Heptner & Sludskii 1992).

The status Least Concern in the IUCN Red List is attributed to the species, including all subspecies of wildcats. There is no information on current status or population numbers of *F. s. ornata* for its entire range, but populations are thought to be declining (IUCN 2010).

Within China, the Asian wildcat is distributed in Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, Shaanxi, and Inner Mongolia. Records from northern Tibet as well as Sichuan are questionable (Smith & Xie 2008; Fig. 2). Gao (1987) noted that the population may once have exceeded 10,000 individuals in northwestern China, with a density of 10/100km². Its recent status in China is unknown, but it is assumed to be rare and, according to the China Species Red List, the population is declining (Wang 1998).

Habitat

The Asian wildcat is most typically associated with scrub desert (Nowell & Jackson 1996, Dookia 2007). It occurs in habitats with halophytic vegetation (India, Sharma 1978; Uzbekistan, Allayarov 1963) and even inhabits extensive clay valleys with lakes and isolated rows of sandy mounds and river basins, seeking shelter in the belts of bush and reeds in close proximity to water sources (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan; Guggisberg 1975). It frequently uses rock crevices or burrows dug by other animals (Heptner & Sludskii 1992). Asian wildcats can be found near oases, gardens, cultivated areas, and human settlements (Smith & Xie 2008, Riordan & Kun, pers. comm.). Snow depth in winter is thought to limit the northern boundaries of their distribution range (Heptner & Sludskii 1992). In China, the Asian wildcat is associated with the grasslands and arid regions of northwestern China. It is found in plains and steppe, semi-deserts and deserts, and is most often associated with shrub desert (Smith & Xie 2008). Throughout the southern foothills of the Tian Shan, it can be encountered in bushy areas and in the undergrowth of apple groves below 2,000 m (Guggisberg 1975).

Ecology and behaviour

Little is known of the Asian wildcat's behaviour and ecology, but it is believed to be a highly territorial, solitary hunter. It is crepuscular but also frequently active during daytime (Heptner & Sludskii 1992). No information about home ranges of the Asian wildcat is available and there is no genuine information on its ecology from China.

Mating was reported in March to April and November to December (Rajasthan, India; Sharma et al. 1984), January to February (Central Asia; Allayarov 1963) and all year round (Sind, Pakistan; Roberts 1977). Sexual maturity is reached at around 10 months for females and at up to 22 months for males. Litter size is generally 3 but can range up to 5-6 (Nowell & Jackson 1996). There is no information on the average lifespan of Asian wildcats.

Prey

Wildcats prey on a wide range of species. In China, Asian wildcats feed on small vertebrates, preferring rodents such as ground squirrels, gerbils and jerboas, which comprise 60-70% of prey as determined by frequency of occurrence. In some areas, the activity of Asian wildcats closely matches that of the Yarkand hare *Lepus yarkandensis* (Smith & Xie 2008). They also eat birds (e. g. snowcock; P. Riordan & C. Kun, pers. comm.), reptiles, and insects (15-25%; Smith & Xie 2008). Asian wildcats have also been reported to raid chicken coops in the former Soviet Union (Heptner & Sludskii 1992).

In captivity

There is no information on how many Asian wildcats are held in zoos.

Main threats

High human-caused mortality has been reported for all wildcat subspecies. Wildcats are killed because they prey on poultry and are considered pests (Sunquist & Sunquist 2002).

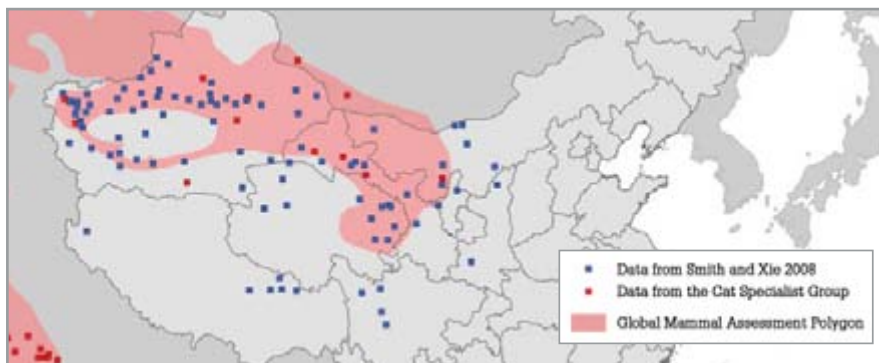


Fig. 2. The distribution of the wildcat in China.

Felis silvestris ornata

Fact Sheet

Names:

草原斑貓 [cao yuan ban mao], 野猫 [ye mao]
Asian wildcat

Head and body length:

55-80 cm

Tail length:

25-40 cm

Weight:

2-8 kg (males)

2-6 kg (females)

Global Population:

Felis silvestris:
>50,000 (IUCN 2010)

Chinese Population:

>10,000 (Wang 1998)

Distribution in China:

NW China

IUCN Red List:

Least Concern (2009)

CITES:

Appendix II

China Red List:

CR A1a

China Key List:

Class II



Photo: K. Deacon

In the 1980s, Asian wildcats were hunted in China and their fur was found on markets (Tan 1984), but now it is illegal to hunt and trade this species in China (IUCN 2010). Records of Asian wildcats in the fur trade have been decreasing, but the species was still found in local markets, e.g. in Kashgar in 1999 (U. Breitenmoser, pers. comm.). Surveys indicate that a small number of furs from Mongolia are illegally imported into China (Y. Xie, pers. comm.). Another threat for the Asian wildcat is habitat conversion to agricultural areas (Dookia 2007). In China, habitat loss has been mitigated to some extent by the establishment of more protected areas (Bao 2010, this issue). Wildcats can do well in cultivated landscapes,

but in these areas interbreeding with domestic cats may occur (IUCN 2010). Hybridization with domestic cats has been known to occur in Pakistan (Nowell & Jackson 1996), India (Dookia 2007), and central Asia (Driscoll et al. 2007). Nothing is known in regard to disease transmission between Asian wildcats and their domestic relatives (IUCN 2010, A. Kitchener, pers. comm.).

Current and future protection

Even though the Asian wildcat is now fully protected across most of its range, including China, it is probably still persecuted. However, international trade in its pelt has decreased drastically (Nowell & Jackson 1996). At present, the status of the Asian wildcat in China and elsewhere is difficult to assess, since there are no recent surveys, and only incidental observations (P. Riordan & C. Kun, pers. comm.). Scientific research and regular surveys are required in order to determine the Asian wildcat's conservation status and to learn more about its ecology. Enforcement of anti-poaching laws is another important conservation action, especially in China (Bao 2010, this issue).