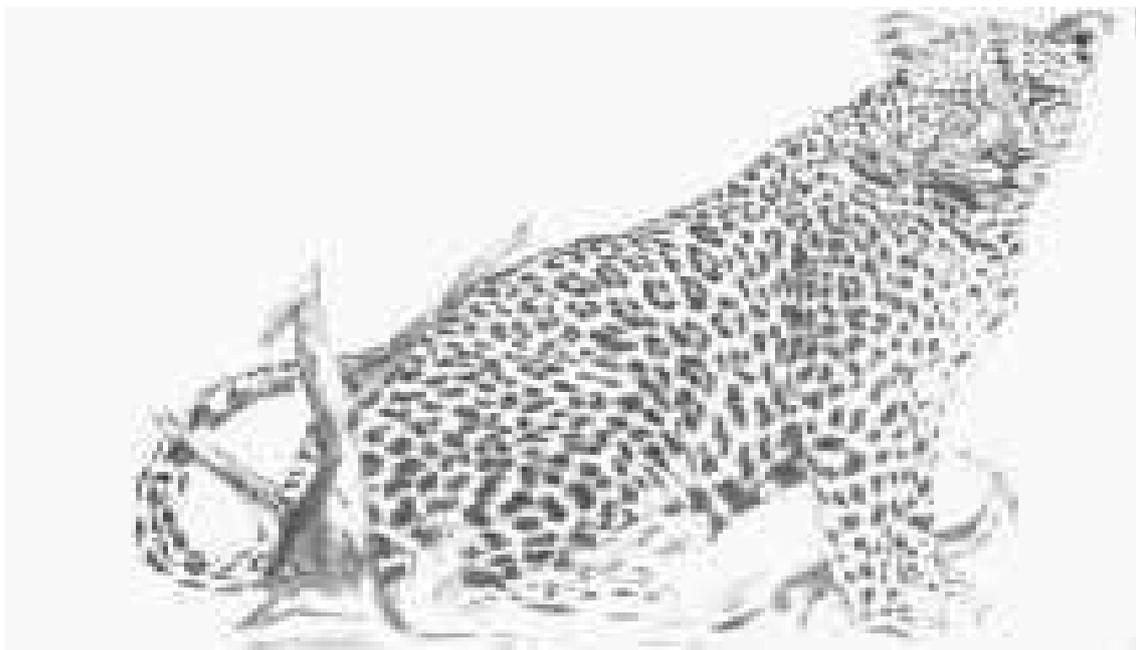


The Cheetah



Fastest mammal on land, the cheetah can reach speeds of 60 or perhaps even 70 miles (97 or 113 kilometres) an hour over short distances. It usually chases its prey at only about half that speed, however. The cheetah is smaller than the lion or the leopard, but by far the fastest.

The cheetah's excellent eyesight helps it find prey during the day. Sometimes it perches on high places and watches for prey.

When it sights prey, the cheetah often begins to stalk. It creeps as close as possible before the attack. It may lift its head high to keep the prey in sight. But it keeps its body hidden. The cheetah is hard to see because its spotted coat blends with the tall, dry grass of the plains. Suddenly, the cheetah makes a lightning dash. With a paw it knocks its prey to the ground and then bites its throat.

Once found throughout Asia and Africa, cheetahs today are racing toward extinction. Loss of habitat and declining numbers of their prey combine to threaten the future of these cats. Cheetahs are found in open and partially open savannas.

Behaviour

The cheetah is basically a solitary animal. At times, a male will accompany a female for a short while after mating, but most often the female is alone or with her cubs. Cheetah mothers spend a long time teaching their young how to hunt. Small live antelopes are brought back to the cubs so they can learn to chase and catch them.

Cheetahs do not roar like lions, but they purr, hiss, whine and growl. They also make a variety of contact calls; the most common is a birdlike chirping sound.

Diet

Cheetahs usually prey on small antelopes such as Thomson's gazelles and impalas, but also hunt small mammals and birds. The cheetah gets as close to the prey as possible, then in a burst of speed it tries to outrun its quarry. Once the cheetah closes in, it knocks the prey to the ground with its paw and suffocates the animal with a bite to the neck. Once a cheetah has made a kill, it eats quickly and keeps an eye out for scavengers—lions, leopards, hyenas, vultures and jackals will steal from this timid predator. Unlike most other cats, the cheetah usually hunts during daylight, preferring early morning or early evening.

Predators and Threats

A shy creature that roams widely, the cheetah is not seen as easily as some other cats. Never numerous, cheetahs have become extinct in many areas, principally due to shrinking habitat, loss of species to prey upon, disease and a high rate of cub mortality. In some areas 50 to 75% of cheetah cubs die before 3 months, as they are highly susceptible to disease at this age.

Did You Know?

- The name cheetah comes from an Indian word meaning "spotted one."

- The young cub has a long grey-blue coat and a black underbelly that rapidly lightens and becomes spotted.
- Early peoples trained cheetahs for hunting, and many civilizations depicted them in their art and in written records.
- Cheetahs were so popular that Akbar the Great of India was said to have kept a stable of about 1,000.



FUN FACTS

Its tail, fully grown, measures 26 to 33 inches (66 to 84 centimetres) long.

A cheetah's head and body grow to 44 to 53 inches (112 to 135 centimetres) long.

Female cheetahs usually bear three to five cubs in a litter. Cheetah cubs stay with their mothers until they are 12 to 20 months old

When a cheetah is running at top speed, it covers about 23 feet (7.3 meters) in only four footfalls.

The scientific name for the cheetah is *Acinonyx jubatus*.

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After a chase, a cheetah needs half an hour to catch its breath before it can eat.

Cheetahs eat small- to medium-size animals, such as hares, impalas, wildebeest calves, and gazelles.

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