

Cheetahs, (Acinonyx jubatus) the world's fastest land mammals, are extremely shy creatures and although they roam widely, are not often seen as easily as some other cats due to their reclusive nature.

LOVE

Prior to the 20th century, cheetahs were widely distributed throughout Africa and Asia, and ranged throughout the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East to India. The Asian cheetah (Acinonyx jubatus venaticus) is almost extinct today, and can only be found in small isolated populations in a few remote areas of Iran and Afghanistan under a government research



cheetahs

■ by **Marco Sordelli**
photos by Gigi Grasso



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of habitat, decline of prey species, and conflict with livestock farming. Throughout Africa, cheetabs are not doing well in protected wildlife reserves due to increased competition from other larger predators, such as lion and hyenas, and most protected areas are unable to maintain viable cheetab populations. Therefore, a large percentage of the remaining cheetab populations are outside of protected reserves, placing them in greater conflict with humans. There are now only two remaining population s t r o n g h o l d s : Kenya/Tanzania in East Africa and Namibia-Botswana in southern Africa.

In Greek the genus name Acinonyx, means “no-move-claw”, the species name jubatus “maned” in Latin, a reference to the mane found in cheetab cubs.

While the cheetab is often mistaken for a leopard, its distinguishing marks are the long teardrop-shaped lines on each side of the nose from the corner of its eyes to its mouth. The coat is tan, or buff-colored, with solid black

cheetabs



spots. The tail has spots that merge to from four to six dark rings at the end, and usually ends in a bushy white turf. The teardrop markings serve to camouflage the cheetah in shadowy grass.

The cheetah is aerodynamically built for speed through many



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adaptations – the flexible spine, oversized liver, enlarged heart, wide nostrils, increased lung capacity, and can accelerate from zero to 40 mph in three strides and to full speed of 70 mph in seconds.

As the cheetah runs, only one foot at a time touches the



ground. The cheetah is the only cat with semi-non-retractable claws providing extra grip to the ground like cleats for traction when running. Unlike other big cats the cheetah does not roar, however it does



purr and has other vocal sounds which range from high-pitched yelps and barks to longer chirruping sounds.

Cheetahs will live singly or in small groups. The female's gestation period is 90 to 95 days, after which she will give birth to a litter of up to six cubs. She will find a quiet, hidden spot in the tall grass, under a low tree, in thick underbrush, or in a clump of rock. The mother is extremely devoted to her young and spends a long time teaching them how to hunt. For the first six weeks, the female has to leave the cubs alone much of the time in order to hunt. During the first few weeks of life, a thick yellowish-grey coat, called a mantle, grows along the cub's back. The mantle begins to disappear at about three months old, but the last traces of it, in the form of a small mane, are still present at over two years of age.

The history of human and cheetah interaction dates back to the Sumerians, about 3,000 BC, where a leashed cheetah is seen being tamed for a pet. In Egypt, during the time of the pharaohs, the cheetah was considered a goddess named "Mafdet." Pharaohs kept cheetahs as close companions as a symbol of protection by Mafdet. Cheetahs are depicted on ritual and magic knives, statues, and in paintings in royal tombs. The ancient Egyptians believed the cheetah would carry the Pharaoh's soul to the afterworld. The cheetah was greatly admired for its speed, hunting ability, and beauty, and was honored as a symbol of royalty and prestige.

Marco Polo noted that many cheetahs were kept as pets in the orient. Three historical figures are documented as having pet cheetahs: Genghis Khan, Akbar the Great of India and Charlemagne. Hunting with cheetahs was for the challenge of sport, and typically the hooded cheetah was carried on horseback or in a cart.

Namibia is home to the world's largest remaining population of cheetahs, where from 1990 the mission of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) has focused on conservatory research, management strategies and techniques that will lead to the long-term survival of free-ranging cheetah. The CCF was founded in 1990 by Dr. Laurie Marker and is dedicating to saving the cheetah from extinction. Zoos, animal parks and private facilities throughout the world have developed captive breeding and genetic programs to limit the vulnerability of the species. Today, the cheetah's very survival depends on people and our ability to manage the wild population and protect its habitat. □



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