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.

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

by Marco Sordelli photos by Gigi Grasso

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#### project .

Today the cheetah's main population centre is located in the northern part of southern Africa and in east Africa where prey is abundant and there are vast expanses of land including grassland savannahs, dense vegetation, and mountainous terrain.

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However, cheetah populations continue to decline from loss

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of babitat, 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 byenas, and most protected areas are unable to maintain viable cheetah 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 strongbolds: Kenya/Tanzania in East Africa and Namibia-Botswana in southern Africa.

In Greek the genus name Acinonyx, means "nomove-claw", the species name jubatus "maned" in Latin, a reference to the mane found in cheetah cubs.

While the cheetah 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 buffcolored, with solid black

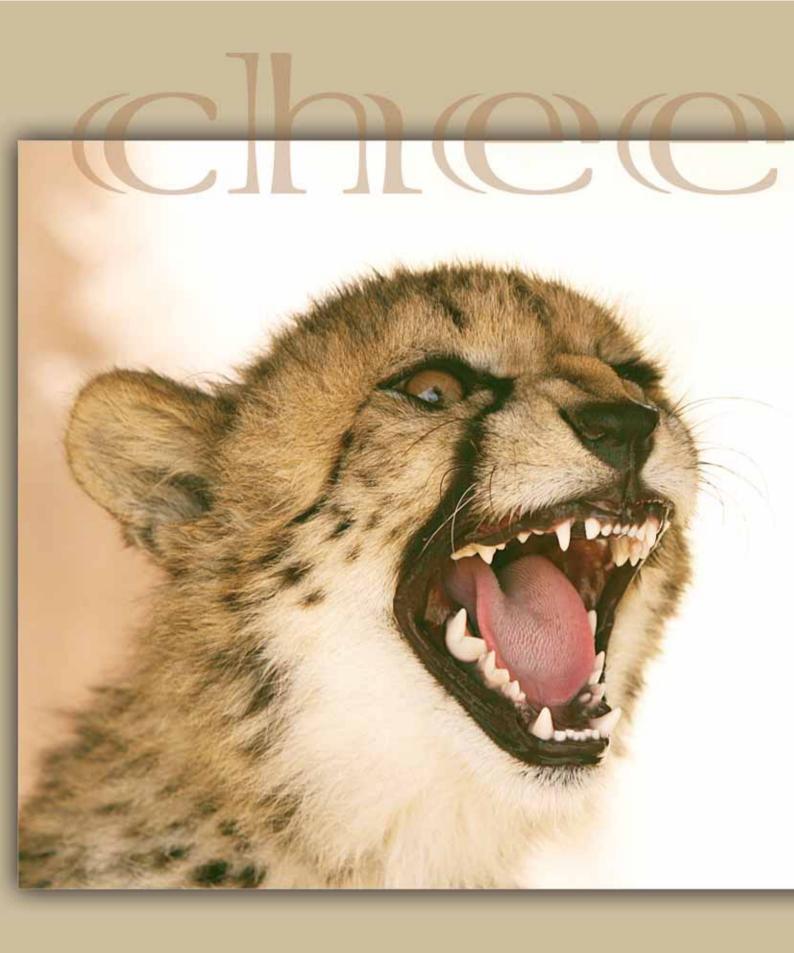


spots. The tail has spots that merge to from four to six dark rings at the end, and usually ends in a bushy white turf. The teardrop markings serve to camouflage the cheetah in shadowy grass.

The cheetah is aerodynamically built for speed through many







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

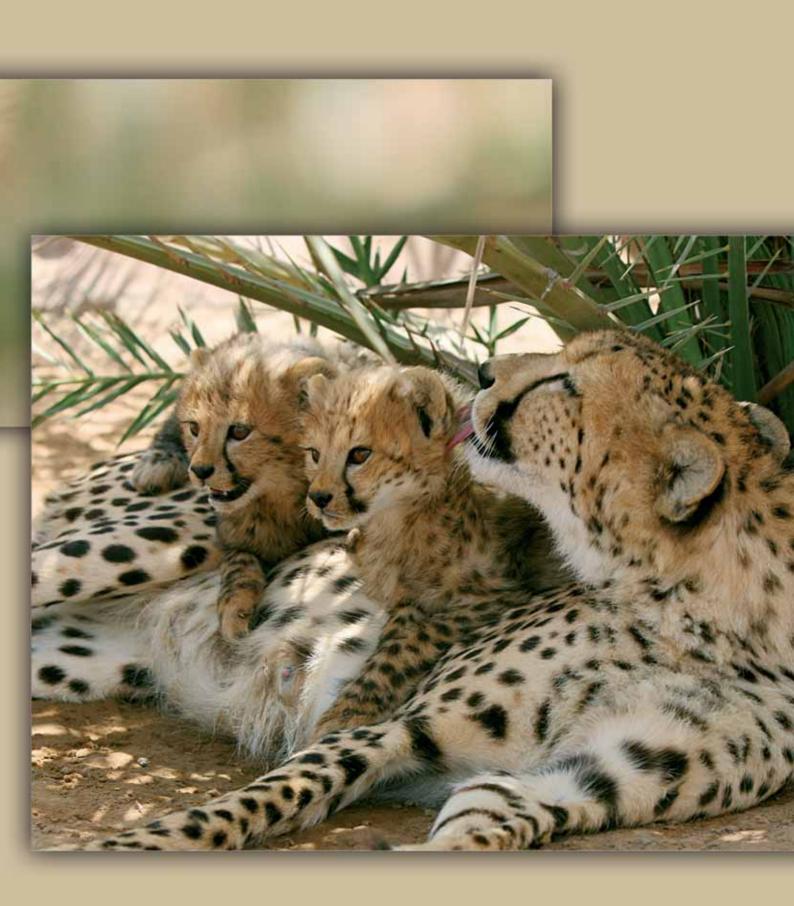
As the cheetah runs, only one foot at a time touches the





ground. The cheetah is the only cat with semi-nonretractable 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 bas 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, bidden spot in the tall grass, under a low tree, in thick underbrush, or in a clump of rock. The mother is extremely devoted to ber young and spends a long time teaching them how to bunt. For the first six weeks, the female bas to leave the cubs alone much of the time in order to bunt. 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 bistory of buman and cheetab 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 pharaobs, the cheetah was considered a goddess named "Mafdet." Pharaobs kept cheetabs 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, bunting ability, and beauty, and was bonored as a symbol of royalty and prestige.

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

Namibia is home to the world's largest remaining population of cheetabs, where from 1990 the mission of the Cheetab Conservation Fund (CCF) has focused on conservatory research, management strategies and techniques that will lead to the long-term survival of free-ranging cheetab. The CCF was founded in 1990 by Dr. Laurie Marker and is dedicating to saving the cheetab 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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