



CCF is an international non-profit incorporated association dedicated to the long-term survival of the cheetah and its ecosystems.

RESEARCH

CONSERVATION

EDUCATION

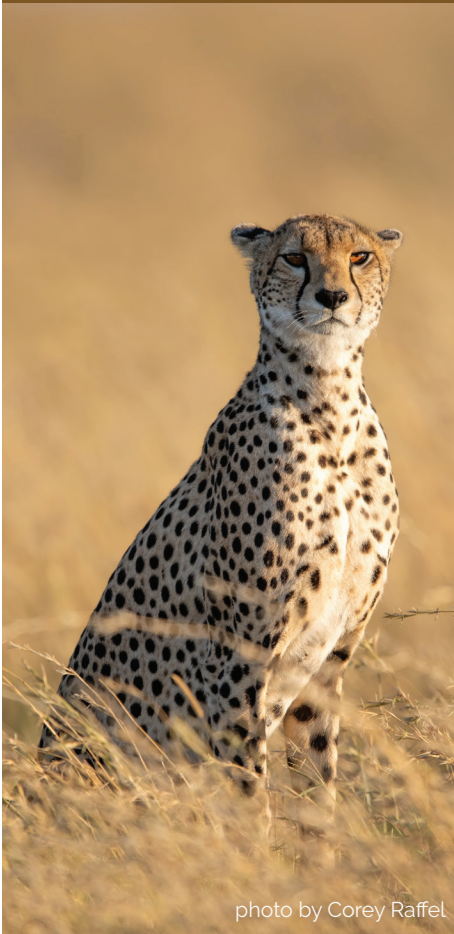


photo by Corey Raffel

The cheetah, *Acinonyx jubatus*, is one of the oldest big cat species, with ancestors dating back over five million years to the Miocene era. It is the world's fastest land mammal, a feline icon of nature. Cheetahs are built for speed, with all body parts evolved for precision and agility. Their small head, aerodynamic lean body, long legs, flexible backbone, and tail that works like a boat's rudder, along with semi-retractable claws resembling cleats on a running shoe, allow them to reach speeds of up to 70 mph (112 kph) and change direction in a split second. Additionally, the cheetah can accelerate from zero to 60 mph (96 kph) in just three seconds.

Cheetahs: Big Cats Built for Speed

PHYSICAL TRAITS

Cheetahs have a thin frame with a narrow waist and deep chest. They possess extra-large nostrils that enable increased oxygen intake, along with larger than normal heart and lungs, and robust arteries and adrenals that work together to circulate oxygen more efficiently. Their weight ranges from 75 to 125 pounds (34 - 55 kg), and their length, measured from the head to the hindquarters, can vary from 40 to 60 inches (100 - 150 cm), with an additional 24 to 32 inches (60-80 cm) for the tail. Most cheetahs stand 28 to 36 inches (70-90 cm) tall at the shoulder. While males are slightly bigger with larger heads, there is not much physical difference between the sexes. Identifying the cheetah's sex by appearance alone is challenging.

The cheetah's undercoat varies in color from light tan to deep gold and features solid black spots. Unlike the rosettes found on a leopard or jaguar's coat, these spots are not open, which serves as a quick way to distinguish the cheetah. Another distinctive feature of cheetahs is their black "tear marks" extending from the corners of both eyes along the sides of their noses to their mouths. These markings have a biological purpose, reducing sun glare and enabling cheetahs to see clearly across long distances. The cheetah's tail ends with a bushy tuft surrounded by five or six dark rings. These markings provide excellent camouflage during hunting and make it more challenging for other predators to spot them.

Unlike other big cats such as tigers, lions, leopards, and jaguars, cheetahs do not roar. Instead, they growl when they encounter danger, and their vocalizations are more akin to high-pitched chirps, bubbles, and barks when communicating with each other. An interesting distinction of cheetahs is their ability to purr while both inhaling and exhaling, a trait not found in other big cats.

THE CHEETAH'S LIFE

The cheetah's lifecycle encompasses three stages: cubhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The gestation period is 93 days, and litters usually consist of one to six cubs (occasionally, eight cubs are recorded, but it's rare). At birth, the cubs weigh between 8.5 to 15 ounces (240 - 425 grams) and are born blind and helpless. The mother diligently grooms and comforts them, purring softly. After a day or so, she leaves to hunt while ensuring their care continues. The first few weeks are the most vulnerable, as the cubs are unprotected. They reside in a concealed nest for six to eight weeks, regularly moved by their mother to avoid predators. The mother independently cares for her cubs for the next year and a half.

At around six weeks of age, cheetah cubs begin joining their mother on her daily hunts as she searches for prey. During this period, the mother's limited mobility puts the cubs at higher vulnerability, resulting in high cub mortality. Sadly, less than one in 10

cubs will survive this phase, often falling victim to predation by larger predators like lions and hyenas or facing injuries. However, this time is crucial for imparting crucial life skills to them. The long mantle of hair on their backs serves a dual purpose: keeping them warm and providing camouflage, protecting them from predators that might mistake them for aggressive honey badgers.

Between four to six months of age, cheetah cubs become highly active and playful, displaying abundant energy and enthusiasm. They utilize trees as valuable vantage points to observe their surroundings and develop balancing skills. Their semi non-retractable claws are sharper at this age, helping them grip tall “play trees” as they climb and interact with their siblings. These playful activities and climbing exercises are crucial for their physical and cognitive development during this important phase of their lives.

Cheetah cubs begin learning to hunt around one year of age, participating in hunts with their mother. The hunt involves prey detection, stalking, the chase, tripping, and suffocation biting. At 18 to 22 months, the mother and cubs separate, and independent males and females form coalitions to enhance their hunting skills. Adolescent females attract dominant males during their cycling phase, leading to their brothers’ departure. This separation allows young cheetahs to establish territories and lead independent lives as adult cheetahs.

MALE COALITIONS

Male cheetahs from the same litter form lifelong coalitions, enhancing hunting success and predator defense. After leaving their mother and sisters, adolescent males become dispersal males, roaming for a few years until they establish and defend their territory. They may travel several miles,

sometimes facing displacement by more dominant males. Cheetahs have extensive home ranges, averaging 1500 - 2300 mi² (580 - 2300 km²).

In adulthood, cheetahs encounter challenges. Their fast-paced and relatively short life spans, typically 8 to 10 years, are impacted by territorial competition among adult males, often leading to death. Adult mortality significantly limits cheetah population growth and survival.

CHEETAH SURVIVAL

Relatives of modern cheetahs once had a global distribution, but their numbers declined drastically around 20,000 years ago due to environmental changes. Today, fewer than 7,500 cheetahs remain in the wild, classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List. They face threats like human-carnivore conflict, habitat loss, poaching, and the illegal wildlife trade.

Cheetah populations are fragmented, covering only 9% of their historic range in Africa. The Asiatic cheetah is critically endangered, with less than 20 individuals remaining in Iran. Namibia has the largest cheetah population, earning it the nickname “The Cheetah Capital of the World.” Addressing these challenges is essential to conserving the future of these magnificent creatures and protecting their habitats.

LEARN MORE



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photo by Chris Koseff



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