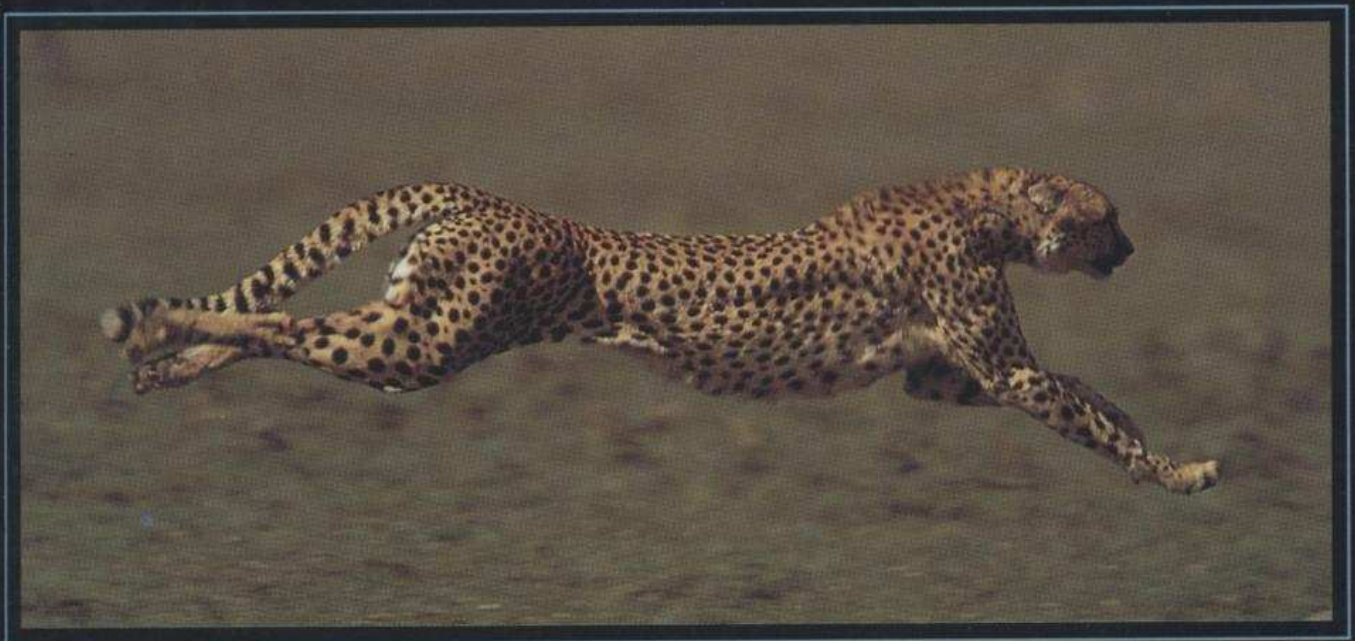


# BUILT FOR SPEED



*The Extraordinary, Enigmatic Cheetah*

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*A cheetah chases a Thomson's gazelle across the African savanna.*

## **Introduction**

The treeless East African savanna shimmers in the summer heat. A herd of Thomson's gazelles, a type of antelope, nibbles quietly on the dry grass. There are few trees or rocks to hide the Tommies from predators. Instead, the antelopes are protected by the large number of animals in the herd. If danger threatens,



one of the gazelles is sure to spot it in time for the whole herd to run away. Healthy adult antelopes can outrun most predators.

But crouched in the long grass near the herd is one hunter the Tommies cannot outrun—a cheetah. Its spotted yellow coat helps it blend into the grass as it creeps closer to the grazing animals. Suddenly the cheetah stands up, startling the gazelles. The frightened herd begins to run. With stunning speed, the cheetah runs down the antelope it has chosen as its prey. The cheetah bites the young gazelle's throat to strangle it. The rest of the herd stops in the distance and begins to graze again under the hot sun.

The cheetah is the world's fastest land mammal. But speed does not guarantee survival. In fact, the cheetah's biology and way of life make it difficult for the cheetah to survive. Many male cheetahs are infertile—unable to father cubs. Only 5 percent of cheetah cubs live to become adults. The remainder die from disease, starvation, or attacks by other predators, such as lions. The swift cats have been victims of humans, too. They have been hunted for their fur and destroyed as threats to livestock. Their hunting grounds have been fenced in by farmers and cattle ranchers. Where cheetahs cannot run free, they cannot survive. In much of their range, cheetahs have lost the race against extinction and have disappeared. Cheetahs are considered an endangered species.

Although humans have contributed to the cheetah's disappearance, human beings are making an effort to see that cheetahs do not die out altogether. In some areas, cheetahs are protected by law. Zoos and animal parks in Europe, Africa, and the United States are breeding and raising the cats. Scientists are studying them to learn more about their behavior. The more we know about cheetahs, the better we can help the cheetahs that still run free.



## Breaking Up the Family

Cats are all members of one family of animals called Felidae. Felidae is divided into five groups, each of which is called a genus. Most cats, including the domestic cat, are in the genus *Felis*. Cats in this genus are commonly called “small cats.” Lions, tigers, leopards, jaguars, and snow leopards, or “big cats,” are in the genus *Panthera*. These are the cats that roar.

## Quiet Cat

When we think of the sounds large cats make, we usually think of a lion's roar. Most of us have heard this huge, frightening sound at zoos or in the movies. Tigers, which live in Asia, and jaguars, which live in South America, also roar. But unlike lions, tigers, and jaguars, cheetahs cannot roar.

The ability to roar comes from a set of bones called the hyoid apparatus, which is located in a cat's throat behind its tongue. In roaring cats, this set of bones is held together by an elastic, or stretchable, ligament. When a great cat opens its mouth to vocalize, the ligament stretches, making the back of the cat's throat larger. The cat's call is like a shout into an echoing cave. The result is a roar.

A cheetah's hyoid apparatus is all bone. It has no elastic ligament, so the cheetah cannot open up the back of its throat. Though it cannot roar, a cheetah can growl, hiss, and yip. It can also make another very familiar sound. When content, a cheetah rumbles with a very loud purr.

Cheetahs make other sounds that are not catlike at all. When a female is ready to mate, she makes cooing or churring noises that sound something like a pigeon. And when a mother cheetah and her cubs call to each other, they chirp like birds. No other cat makes this kind of call.



Cheetahs are by themselves in a separate genus, *Acinonyx*. The cheetah's full scientific name is *Acinonyx jubatus*. *Acinonyx* comes from Greek words that can mean either "unmoving claw" or "thorn claw." *Jubatus* is a Latin word that means mane or crest. (Young cheetahs have a short mane that runs down their backs.)

The word "cheetah" comes from the Hindi word *chita*, which means "spotted one." The cheetah has coarse, light-yellow fur that pales to white on its chest and stomach. Its coat is covered with small rounded spots of very dark brown or black. A dark "tear streak" runs from the inside corners of its amber-colored eyes to the corners of its mouth. Some researchers think that the dark fur under a cheetah's eyes cuts down on the glare of the sun reflecting from the cheetah's light-colored face.

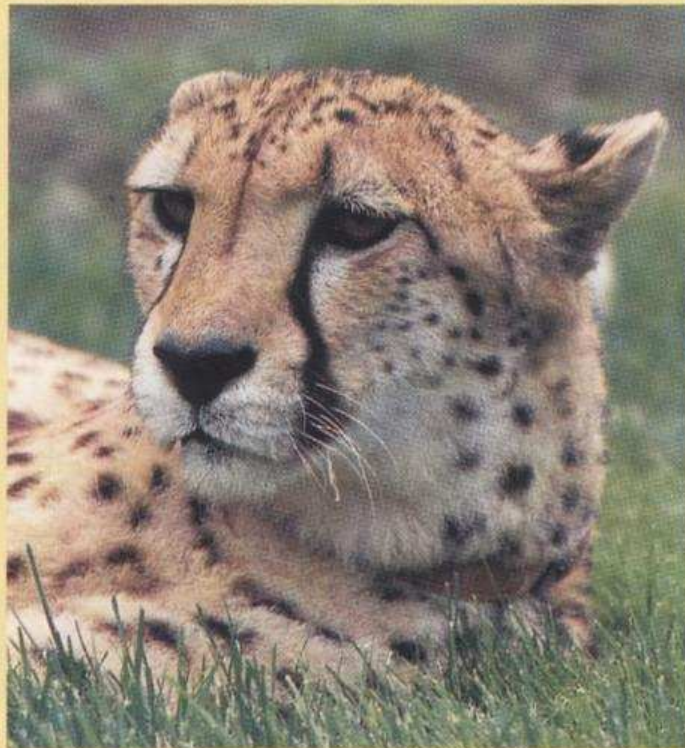
### *The Hunting Leopard*

Cheetahs' graceful bodies and stunning speed have always fascinated human beings. Cheetahs are the fastest-running animals on earth. They are able to run at speeds up to 70 miles per hour. Because cheetahs are easy to tame, for thousands of years people kept cheetahs as pets and used them to hunt antelopes and deer. The practice began as many as 5,000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia (parts of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey). The ancient Abyssinians (residents of modern-day Ethiopia), Persians (residents of modern-day Iran), and Arabians hunted with cheetahs, too. In the late thirteenth century, the Italian explorer and adventurer Marco Polo reported that Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan kept these "long-legged leopards" at his court in China.

## A Helpful Hunter

An African legend tells how the cheetahs got their tear streaks. It seems that a mother cheetah went off to hunt one day, leaving her four cubs hidden. But an evil man was watching her and saw where she had hidden the little ones. He stole the cubs while their mother was away. When the mother discovered her cubs were missing, she began to cry. She cried so hard that, to this day, all cheetahs have tear tracks on their faces.

The story goes on to explain that a kind man came along and asked the mother cheetah why she was crying. She told him about her stolen cubs. The man was angry that someone would take the cheetah's youngsters, and he went to search for them. He found them and returned them to their mother. She was so grateful that she promised that future generations of cheetahs would be loyal to humans. This legend may have begun as a way to explain why cheetahs are easily tamed.



*A cheetah's dark tear streaks may reduce glare, helping the cat to see in bright sunlight.*