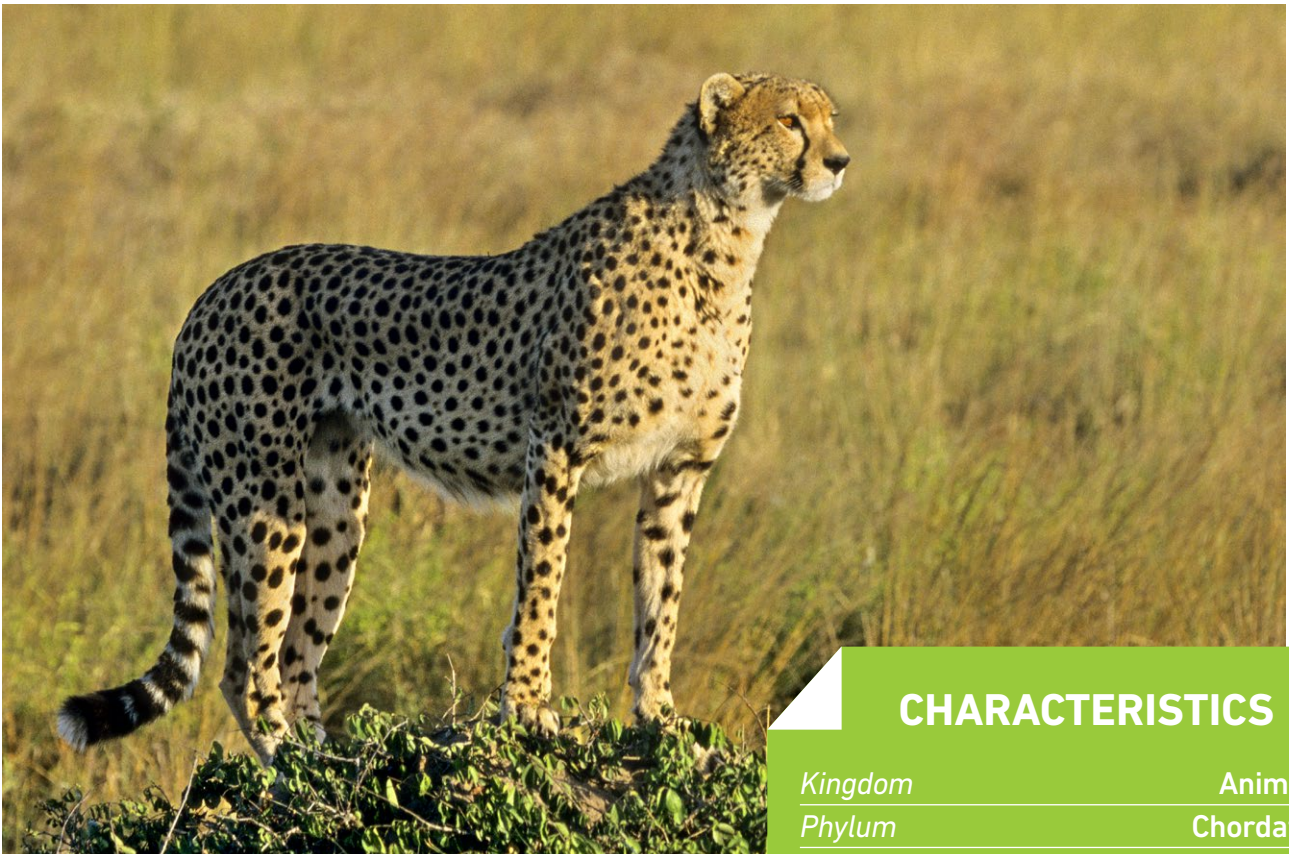


THE CHEETAH



CHARACTERISTICS

| | |
|---------------------|------------------|
| Kingdom | Animal |
| Phylum | Chordata |
| Class | Mammalia |
| Order | Carnivora |
| Family | Felidæ |
| Genus | Acinonyx |
| Latin name | Acinonyx jubatus |
| Weight | 35 to 65 kg |
| Length | 120 to 170 cm |
| Height to withers | 70 to 90 cm |
| Sexual maturity | 18 months |
| Reproductive season | All year round |
| Gestation | 91 to 95 days |
| Number of young | 3 to 4 |
| Diet | Carnivore |
| Longevity | 14 years |
| IUCN status | Vulnerable |
| CITES | annexe I |

In Africa, on the plains of Kenya, a sleek silhouette, ever watchful, is hidden in the tall grass; it is the cheetah. With its long paws and slim body, this watchman of the savanna chases its prey over small distances (no more than 500 m). Its taste is for gazelle, antelope, ostrich, zebra, and young gnu. In days gone by, this feline with its black-spotted fawn coat ranged all over Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Sub-continent.

The female bears 3 or 4 cubs in each litter. The cubs are the prey of ferocious predators: lions and hyenas. According to the IUCN, it is classed

amongst the most vulnerable species. The African sub-species is threatened with extinction, and the Asian sub-species is in critical condition. There are currently between 10 000 and 15 000 individuals on the African continent, thanks to the creation of reserves in Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as in Eastern, Northern and Southern Africa. Eastern Iran holds just a few specimens (perhaps 250). Cheetahs present an abnormally low level of genetic variation. According to researchers, a single female may be the ancestral mother of the entire current population. Most individuals were victims of an ice age dating back to 10 000 years ago. For most mammals, two individuals have 80% identical genes. In cheetahs, that figure rises to 99%. The high degree of resulting consanguinity is responsible for their decline, in particular due to sperm of poor quality and high vulnerability to disease. Another threat that is common to felines is hunting by farmers, especially in Namibia, where the increase in



The feline is now classed as a vulnerable species by the IUCN.

stockbreeding in its natural habitat means that the cheetah is a menace to livestock. In parks, the growth in tourism appears to disturb them as well. Various proposals have been put forward



A cheetah in the Masai Mara marking its territory. It uses its dung to mark the boundaries of its hunting preserve.

*The female
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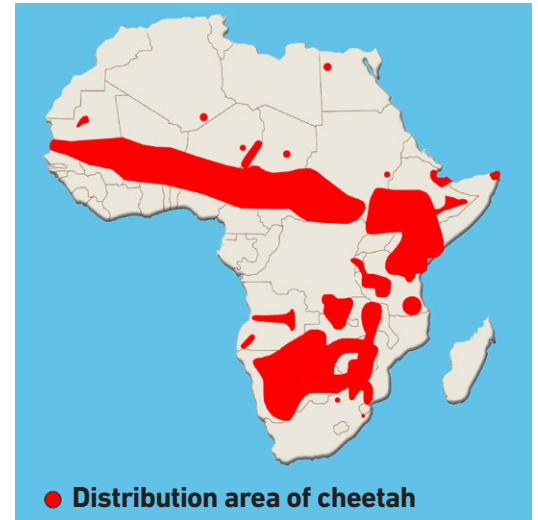


to re-introduce the cheetah to Sub-Saharan Africa, Israel, India, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. However, re-introduction must be seriously considered only after genetic comparisons and environmental-impact assessments have been made. Indian geneticists want to use cutting-edge cloning techniques to resurrect the famous Indian cheetah, which became extinct in 1948. Sperm and ovaries have been collected in large numbers, because abortion rates are very

high for cloned embryos. To take things further, they must obtain tissue from the Iranian leopard, an endangered sub-species that cannot be the subject of exchanges of genetic material in the natural state, in accordance with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The African leopard seems to be more

*The cheetah is a predator
that is perfectly adapted
to hunting on the savanna,
and is built for coursing
through tall grass.*





The cheetah's preferred diet is gazelle, antelope, ostrich, zebra, and young gnu.

The cheetah is an accomplished sprinter, and can reach almost 115 km/h at peak speed, but that effort swiftly tires the animal, and its hunts are rarely successful.



distant, but it may be used as a back-up. Those who harbour doubts about the project point to the difficulties encountered in re-introducing captive animals to a natural setting. Given the cost of

the operation, they state that the money should first be used for the conservation of threatened populations.

Text by **Laurent Tenard** - Photographs by **Gilles Martin**