



Lion (*Panthera leo*)



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| French: | Lion d'Afrique |
| Spanish: | León |
| Kingdom | Animalia |
| Phylum | Chordata |
| Class | Mammalia |
| Order | Carnivora |
| Family | Felidae |
| Genus | <i>Panthera</i> (1) |
| Size | Male head-body length: 1.7 - 2.5 m (2) Female head-body length: 1.6 - 1.9 m (2) Average male height at the shoulder: 1.20 m (2) Average female height at the shoulder: 1.10 m (2) Male weight: 150 - 240 kg (2) Female weight: 122 - 182 kg (2) |

Top facts

- The lion is one of the largest of the 'big cats' and can prey on animals many times its size
- Lion cubs are born with brown rosettes that disappear as they age, although some lions may retain faint spots
- Lions are the most social cat, with related females living together in prides and males forming coalitions
- Related female lions within a pride often reproduce at the same time and cross-suckle their cubs
- Female lions are responsible for most of the hunting, and usually use the night as cover

STATUS

The lion is classified as Vulnerable (VU) on the IUCN Red List (1), and listed on Appendix II of CITES (3). **Subspecies:** the Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) is classified as Endangered (EN) on the IUCN Red List (1), and listed on Appendix I of CITES (3).

DESCRIPTION

It seems that no animal has inspired the imagination of man more than the lion (*Panthera leo*). Characterised as fearsome, courageous and majestic, the lion's strength and ferocity has earned it the title of 'King of the Beasts' in many cultures (2). As one of the largest of the 'big cats', the lion is built to prey on animals many times its size, its strong jaws and muscular build emanating an image of sheer power. Male lions are larger than females and typically possess a mane of hair around their heads, a feature unique amongst the cat family (the Felidae) (4). The rest of the coat is short and tawny in colour for both sexes, paler on the underside, without markings. The backs of the ears and the tuft of hair at the tip of the tail are dark brown or black. Lion cubs are born with brown rosettes that disappear with maturity, although some lions retain faint spots (5) (6).

Two **subspecies** are currently recognised: the African lion (*Panthera leo leo*) and the Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) (1). The Asiatic lion is slightly smaller than its African cousin, and has a shorter, thinner mane and a fold of skin running the length of the belly that is rare in African lions (6) (7). It has been suggested that there may actually be six **subspecies** of lion; however, only the African and the Asiatic **subspecies** have been confirmed on the basis of genetic analysis (1).

RANGE

Formerly ranging throughout Eurasia and Africa (5) (7), the lion is now found only in sub-Saharan Africa, and a small isolated population of Asiatic lions (*P. l. persica*) remains in the Gir Forest in western India (1), where a 2005 census reported just 359 lions (7).

HABITAT

The lion has a broad habitat tolerance, ranging from the savannah woodlands of East Africa to the sands of the Kalahari Desert (2). However, thick brush, scrub, and grass complexes appear to be optimal habitats in providing cover for hunting and denning. The lion has also been recorded to venture high into the mountains of East Africa, up to 4,240 metres in Ethiopia's Bale Mountains (4).

BIOLOGY

The lion is the only truly social cat, with related females residing together in prides and related or unrelated males forming coalitions that compete for tenure of prides in fierce and often fatal battles (1). Despite maternal defence, infanticide by the victorious males is common following a pride takeover (5) (6). This seemingly horrific practice means the lionesses are capable of breeding again sooner, and the reproductive potential of the males is maximised in their often relatively short period of pride tenure (5). Females are able to breed at four years, males at five, and one to six cubs are born after a **gestation** period of around 110 days. Females are the predominant care-givers to cubs, which are dependent upon adults until about 16 months old. Related females within a pride are often found to reproduce in synchrony and then cross-suckle their cubs (5) (6). Prides usually consist of four to six adults and their young, which break into smaller groups when hunting (1).

The lion is a predatory **carnivore**, which feeds upon almost any animal, from rodents to rhinos, but medium- to large-sized ungulates, such as antelope, zebra and wildebeest, form the bulk of its prey. It will also **scavenge**, chasing other predators away from their kills (1). Female lions perform most of the hunting, usually at night to avoid detection (4).

THREATS

Historically the lion has been killed for sport (2) and is generally considered a serious problem animal whose existence is in conflict with human settlement and cattle farming (4). The increasing spread of farmlands has reduced the lion's habitat and wild prey base, resulting in increased stock-raiding behaviour. This makes the lion particularly vulnerable to poisoned carcasses that are put out to eliminate predators. The lion is often seen as vermin and shot on sight, even in protected areas (1) (4). Publicity of the lion as a human killer only adds to its unfavourable reputation (2) (5).

With a population estimated at around 360 individuals in 2005, the Asiatic lion is much more threatened than the African lion (1). Nevertheless, this figure actually represents a significant increase on figures a century ago when rough estimates of the population ranged between 12 and 100 remaining, as a result of intensive hunting (1) (7).

CONSERVATION

In most countries hunting of lions is either prohibited or regulated so that only dangerous animals can be killed, although trophy hunting does remain permissible in a few countries in Africa (4). The Asiatic lion (*P. l. persica*) is fully protected in India, but another separate population is desperately needed in order to prevent the subspecies being wiped out completely in the wild by an **epidemic** or other disaster affecting a single population (4) (5) (7). The Palpur-Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary in northern Madhya Pradesh has been identified as a potential reintroduction site in India (4). In both Africa and Asia, the understanding and cooperation of the community is crucial in ensuring the future of this big cat. Fortunately, the lion is a powerful cultural icon and one of the highest valued eco-tourism species on the African continent, which is now being promoted as a compelling incentive to do everything possible to protect this magnificent animal (1) (5) (8).

FIND OUT MORE

Further information on the lion:

- IUCN Cat Specialist Group:
<http://www.catsg.org/>
- BBC Wildlife Finder - Lion:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/species/Lion>

Find out more about lion conservation projects:

- Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund:
<http://www.speciesconservation.org/projects/African-Lion/676>

AUTHENTICATION

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<http://www.catsg.org>

GLOSSARY

- **Carnivore:** flesh eating.

- **Epidemic:** an outbreak of an infectious disease spreading widely across a population in a relatively short period of time.
- **Gestation:** the state of being pregnant; the period from conception to birth.
- **Scavenge:** to feed on dead material, often on animals that have been killed by another predator.
- **Subspecies:** a population usually restricted to a geographical area that differs from other populations of the same species, but not to the extent of being classified as a separate species.
- **Ungulate:** any hoofed, grazing mammal.

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2. Macdonald, D. (2001) *The New Encyclopedia of Mammals*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
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<http://www.cites.org/eng/resources/species.html>
4. IUCN Cat Specialist Group (September, 2005)
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6. Haas, S.K., Hayssen, V., Krausman, P.R. (2005) *Panthera leo*. *Mammalian Species*, **762**: 1-11.
7. Jackson, P. (2006) *Pers. comm.*
8. Dudley, J.P. (2002) Issues and Priorities for Mammal Conservation. *Conservation Biology*, **16**(4): 1169-1171.