



## Serval (*Leptailurus serval*)



<b>French:</b>	Chat-tigre
<b>Kingdom</b>	Animalia
<b>Phylum</b>	Chordata
<b>Class</b>	Mammalia
<b>Order</b>	Carnivora
<b>Family</b>	Felidae
<b>Genus</b>	<i>Leptailurus</i> (1)
<b>Size</b>	Head and body length: 67 – 100 cm (2)
<b>Weight</b>	8.7 – 18 kg (2)

### STATUS

The serval is classified as Least Concern (LC) on the IUCN Red List (1) and listed on Appendix II of CITES (3).

### DESCRIPTION

Built for height rather than speed, the serval (*Leptailurus serval*) is a tall, slender cat with the longest legs relative to body size of any cat species (4). It has a long neck and a narrow face dominated by enormous, oval ears which it uses to scan vegetation for sounds of prey (2) (4) (5). Black spots, varying in size and shape, pattern its tawny fur and in some instances merge to form stripes on the back and neck (4) (6). Furthermore, in parts of the serval's range, all-black forms are fairly common (2) (4) (5).

### RANGE

The serval is found in Africa and is widely distributed in most countries south of the Sahara (4). In North Africa there are only a few recent records of isolated populations in Morocco and northern Algeria (1) (7).

### HABITAT

Found in most types of grasslands, the serval is most common in moist habitats such as reed beds and marshes (4) (5) (6). Although absent from desert, semi desert and dense forest, servals sometimes occur on forest edges and wooded areas interspersed with grassy glades (4).

### BIOLOGY

The serval is most active from dusk to dawn, but will sometimes hunt during the day, particularly when the weather is cool or overcast (4) (7). Moving slowly through long grass, it uses its huge ears and height advantage to detect prey in the surrounding vegetation. On locating prey, it stealthily approaches and then pounces up to three metres into the air to strike down with its forepaws (4). This technique is typically employed to catch rodents and other small animals off the ground but remarkably the serval is also able to catch birds and insects in flight (2) (4) (5). As a less energetic alternative to pouncing, the serval will also use its long legs to investigate holes and crevices, and will sometimes venture into water to catch live fish (4).

The serval is typically a solitary species with pairs only coming together for a few days when the female is in heat (4) (5). The **gestation** period lasts around 74 days, after which the female normally gives birth to a litter of one to four kittens (2) (4). When with young, the female is forced to spend considerably more time than usual hunting and consequently less time resting. After around a year, the female chases the young from the **natal area** but tolerate female offspring for a few months longer than males (2).

## THREATS

Although Africa's serval population remains relatively widespread and abundant, habitat degradation and hunting are responsible for a decline in overall numbers. Of primary concern is the loss of wetland habitat which supports the high densities of rodents on which servals depend. Compounding wetland degradation is overgrazing and burning of grasslands, which similarly reduce the abundance of small mammals. Despite being listed on Appendix II of CITES, which prohibits international trade without a permit, hunting of the serval for its pelt still continues on a significant scale, particularly in West Africa. Furthermore, in rural parts of Africa, the serval is often persecuted by farmers who consider it a threat to livestock (1) (7).

Given, that these impacts are yet to seriously undermine the stability of the overall serval population, the species is currently classified as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List. However, in North Africa the serval population is thought to comprise less than 250 individuals, isolated in vulnerable subpopulations of fewer than 50. Consequently, the population north of the Sahara is recognised to be Critically Endangered (1).

## CONSERVATION

Currently there are no known conservation measures in place for the serval but it continues to occur in numerous protected areas from Morocco to South Africa (1). In addition, hunting of servals is prohibited or regulated in roughly half the countries that overlap its range (1) (7).

## FIND OUT MORE

Find out more about the conservation of wild cats:

- IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group:  
[www.catsg.org](http://www.catsg.org)

For more information on the serval:

- BBC Wildlife Finder:  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/species/Serval>

## AUTHENTICATION

This information is awaiting authentication by a species expert, and will be updated as soon as possible. If you are able to help please contact:  
[arkive@wildscreen.org.uk](mailto:arkive@wildscreen.org.uk)

## GLOSSARY

- **Gestation:** the state of being pregnant; the period from conception to birth.
- **Natal area:** site of birth.

## REFERENCES

1. IUCN Red List (September, 2008)  
<http://www.iucnredlist.org/>
2. Nowak, R.M. (1999) *Walker's Mammals of the World*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland.
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<http://www.cites.org>
4. Sunquist, M. and Sunquist, F. (2002) *Wild Cats of the World*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
5. African Wildlife Foundation (January, 2009)  
<http://www.awf.org>
6. Burnie, D. (2001) *Animal*. Dorling Kindersley, London.
7. Nowell, K. and Jackson, P. (1996) *Wild Cats: Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.