



Andean cat (*Leopardus jacobita*)



Also known as: Andean mountain cat, mountain cat.

Synonyms: *Oreailurus jacobita*

French: Chat Des Andes

Spanish: Chinchay, Gato Andino, Gato Lince, Osjo

Kingdom Animalia
Phylum Chordata
Class Mammalia
Order Carnivora
Family Felidae
Genus *Oreailurus* (1)
Weight 4 kg (2)

STATUS

Classified as Endangered (EN) on the IUCN Red List (1) and listed on Appendix I of CITES (3).

DESCRIPTION

The Andean cat is considered to be one of the most endangered wild cats in the world and perhaps the rarest South American felid, and yet is one of the least known cat species (4). It is very rare, and its similarities to the more common South American pampas cat (*Leopardus colocolo*) have made studying this species even more difficult (2). There have been only a handful of observations of the Andean cat in the wild, few photographs taken and just a few museum skins and skulls have been preserved (2). It is described as a small but sturdy cat, with long ash-grey fur patterned with rusty red spots (2) (4). The sides are marked with thick dark stripes extending down from the back and prominent dark grey bars run across its chest and forelegs (2). The tail is thick and long, at about 70 percent of the cat's head-body length, and is banded with approximately seven dark rings. Its nose is black, and its belly pale with dark spots (2).

RANGE

The Andean cat lives in the Andean mountain range. It is distributed over 620,000 square kilometres in four countries, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru, and its presence is extremely sparse (4) (5).

HABITAT

This species is known by the locals as 'huana titi', meaning the cat from dry places, which aptly describes its typical habitat (4). It inhabits the rocky, arid and sparsely vegetated areas of the high Andes above the tree-line, and is restricted to habitats above 4,000 metres (2) (4). The climate here is cold all year long, with snow or sleet storms at any time of year. Almost all precipitation is in the form of snow, and the winds are variable and intense. Vegetation is poor and dominated by a ralo grass. There are no trees but only ground-hugging bushes (5).

BIOLOGY

Essentially nothing is known about the biology and behaviour of the Andean cat (2) (2). Its range is so remote and inhospitable it has proved extremely difficult to survey the area and there are no Andean cats known to be in captivity (2). Knowledge is built up from rare sightings of the animal, physiological studies of stuffed specimens and more recently genetic analysis of faeces (2) (6).

The Andean cat's range does appear to coincide with the distribution of the mountain chinchillas (*Chinchilla lanigera*) and viscachas (*Lagidium* spp.), and it has been observed hunting these species (2). Both prey species escape from predators by bounding off rock faces and making unpredictable changes in direction. The Andean cat's long tail probably aids in balance when chasing these rodents (2). The Andean cat's diet may or may not include other species, such as birds, reptiles and other small rodents, but there is no information on this (2). This small cat has an acute sense of hearing, which may assist in hunting, due to its well developed ear drums (5). This adaptation is typical of animals that inhabit arid environments with little cover for protection, such as the mountain chinchilla species (2).

The Andean cat may suffer from competition with the pampas cat (*Leopardus colocolo*) for food and space. The pampas cat occurs in higher numbers in the Andes, and also occupies the lower, more productive regions of the Andes, which may constrain the Andean cat (6). The Andean cat has a significantly lower population than the pampas cat and is believed to live in low densities, though no figures are known (5) (6). It appears to be extremely specialised in its habitat requirements, and the presence of rocky piles and boulders may be important (2).

THREATS

It is not clear whether the rarity of the Andean cat is a natural phenomenon or attributable to human actions. Alternatively it may simply be a misperception resulting from lack of observations (2). Pelts of this species have been seen in local markets occasionally, killed by herders who carry guns (2). The high Andean Indians appear to have little knowledge of this species and the only pelts observed to be used in local ceremonies have been those of the pampas cat (5). There are no records of international trade of this species either. It is therefore thought that hunting of the Andean cat is primarily carried out to protect local cattle (1). The common threat of habitat destruction, common worldwide, does not apply here, as there have been no significant changes in land-use of the high Andes over the last 2,000 years. If anything, the human population has decreased in these regions (2).

It is possible that the Andean cat is rare because it has evolved to be a specialised predator of the mountain chinchilla and viscacha species which have naturally patchy distributions. More specifically, if the Andean cat did evolve to hunt the **nocturnal** long-tailed chinchilla, then its low numbers could be explained (1); only 100 years ago the long-tailed chinchilla was abundant in the Andean mountains, but, since the early 1900s, hunting for its fur has driven it to the brink of extinction (7). This widespread extinction of chinchilla colonies may have had disastrous results on the Andean cat (1). However, if this cat is not a specialist predator, its rarity must be attributed to other factors for small prey is abundant in the Andes (1).

CONSERVATION

International trade of this species is prohibited by its listing on Appendix I of CITES (3), and according to national legislation, the Andean cat is fully protected throughout its range (2). There is a huge gap in our knowledge of this species and how to best protect it. However, since the publication of the Cat Action Treasury Plan there have been substantial increases in research efforts (1) (7). The Cat Action Treasury has sponsored surveys to determine the status of this species and improve our understanding of this cat in order to inform conservation measures (8). These surveys confirmed the rarity of this species. The Andean cat has been upgraded from Vulnerable to Endangered on the IUCN Red List (1) (7). It has been suggested by the Andean Cat Alliance (AGA), previously the Committee for the Conservation of the Andean Cat (COCGA), that because this cat needs large areas to live successfully, and its range extends over the Andes through international borders, a multinational, cooperative approach is necessary for its long-term conservation (5). AGA has launched a multinational project to collate and analyse data on the on the Andean cat in order to initiate immediate conservation efforts, and in 2004 a conservation action plan was drawn up for the species. The fact that there are no captive specimens or breeding programmes for the Andean cat means that the survival of this species depends on the development and success of these conservation measures (5).

FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about the conservation of the Andean cat see:

- Andean Cat Alliance (Alianza Gato Andino):
<http://www.gatoandino.org/>
- Andean Cat Conservation Action Plan:
<http://www.gatoandino.org/archivos/Andean%20cat%20Action%20Plan.pdf>
- IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group:
<http://www.catsg.org>

AUTHENTICATION

Authenticated by Peter Jackson, Chairman Emeritus, IUCN Cat Specialist Group (21/02/05).

<http://www.catsg.org>

GLOSSARY

- **Genus:** a category used in taxonomy, which is below 'family' and above 'species'. A genus tends to contain species that have characteristics in common. The genus forms the first part of a 'binomial' Latin species name; the second part is the specific name.
- **Nocturnal:** active at night.

REFERENCES

1. IUCN Red List (June, 2009)
<http://www.iucnredlist.org>
2. Nowell, K. and Jackson, P. (1996) *Wild Cats: Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan*. IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.
3. CITES (October, 2002)
<http://www.cites.org>
4. Vallalba, L. and Bernal, H. (2002) *Geographic distribution of the Andean mountain cat and pampas cat in the Bolivian Andes. A report presented at the Defenders of Wildlife's Carnivore 2002 Conference*. Monterey, California, USA.
5. Andean Cat Alliance (Alianza Gato Andino, AGA) (June, 2009)
<http://www.gatoandino.org/>
6. Perovic, P., Walker, S. and Novaro, A. (2003) New records of the Endangered Andean mountain cat in northern Argentina. *Oryx, The International Journal of Conservation*, **37**(3): 374 - 377.
7. Macdonald, D. (2001) *The New Encyclopedia of Mammals*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
8. Cat Action Treasury (October, 2003)
http://www.felidae.org/ABOUT_CAT/about_cat.htm