



## Fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*)



**Synonyms:** *Felis viverrinus*

**French:** Chat Pêcheur

**Spanish:** Gato Pescador

**Kingdom** Animalia

**Phylum** Chordata

**Class** Mammalia

**Order** Carnivora

**Family** Felidae

**Genus** *Prionailurus* (1)

**Size** Head-body length: 65.8 – 85.7 cm (2)

**Weight** 6 – 12 kg (2)

### Top facts

- Surprisingly there is no evidence that the membrane between the fishing cat's toes is specifically adapted to swimming.
- As its name suggests the fishing cat is perfectly happy to dive into water for fish as well as scooping them out of the water from above.
- The fishing cat is not limited to water based prey and will also take snakes, birds and larger animals such as goats.
- Illegal poaching presents a large threat to the fishing cat.

## STATUS

The fishing cat is classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List (1), and listed on Appendix II of CITES (3).

## DESCRIPTION

The fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*) is another feline that contradicts the belief that cats dislike water, frequently entering the water to prey on fish, as its common name alludes (4). However, it has often been incorrectly credited with physical adaptations to these habits. While webbed feet have previously been noted as a characteristic of the fishing cat, the partial membrane between the toes is in fact no more developed than in other wild or domestic cats (5). The fishing cat has a long stocky body and relatively short legs, a short thick tail, a broad head and elongated muzzle (4). The pelt is olive-grey with black bars running along the neck and face, dark brown spots in rows on the body, and a series of incomplete rings circle the tail (4) (6) (7). Females are markedly smaller than males (8).

## RANGE

The fishing cat is discontinuously distributed throughout southern and southeast Asia, found in northeastern India, the foot of the Himalayas in Nepal and India, and a few scattered areas in the rest of

India, Bangladesh, Indus Valley Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Reports of occurrences in peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian Islands of Sumatra and Java are unconfirmed (9).

## HABITAT

The fishing cat typically inhabits areas of wetland, including swamps and marshy areas, oxbow lakes, reed beds, tidal creeks and mangrove areas (1) (5).

## BIOLOGY

As its name implies, the fishing cat predominantly preys on fish (6). Largely active at night, fishing cats are good swimmers and have been observed diving for fish, as well as scooping them out of the water with their paws (8). These cats will also prey on frogs, **crustaceans**, snakes, birds, calves, goats, and dogs, and will **scavenge** on carcasses of larger animals (5).

Although capable of breeding all year round (6), birth peaks have been noted in March and May in north-eastern India (8). One to four kittens are born after a **gestation period** of 63 days (7). Young suckle until they are six months old (5) and reach independence at ten months (8). In captivity, males have been recorded to aid in the rearing of young (5). Fishing cats live an average of 12 years (8), but have been known to live more than 15 years in captivity (5).

## THREATS

The primary threat the fishing cat faces is wetland destruction, with over 50 percent of Asian wetlands under threat and disappearing (4) (8), as a result of human settlement, drainage for agriculture, pollution, excessive hunting, and wood-cutting (1). Destructive fishing practices have also greatly reduced the fishing cat's main prey base. Additionally, fishing cats are hunted for food, medicine, and body parts in some areas of their range, and have been persecuted for taking domestic stock (1). The skin of the fishing cat has occasionally been observed in Asian markets, although far less frequently than other cats (4).

## CONSERVATION

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) lists the fishing cat on Appendix II, under which permits are required for international traffic in this species (5). The fishing cat is also protected by national legislation over most of its range, with the exception of Bhutan, Malaysia and Vietnam (4). Legal protection is extremely difficult to enforce, however, and illegal poaching does take place (4) (5). In addition to enforcing protective legislation for this species, it is crucial that there is protection of its wetland habitat. Habitat degradation has been the most significant contributor to the decline in numbers, and this must be addressed if we are to maintain populations of this beautiful and extraordinary cat throughout its range across southern and southeast Asia.

## FIND OUT MORE

For more information on the fishing cat:

- IUCN Cat Specialist Group:  
[www.catsg.org](http://www.catsg.org)
- Fishing Cat Working Group: <http://www.fishing-cat.wild-cat.org/>
- The Cat Survival Trust:  
[www.catsurvivaltrust.org](http://www.catsurvivaltrust.org)
- International Society for Endangered Cats Canada:  
[www.wildcatconservation.org](http://www.wildcatconservation.org)

## AUTHENTICATION

Authenticated (28/04/06) by Peter Jackson, Chair, IUCN Cat Specialist Group.  
<http://www.catsg.org>

## GLOSSARY

- **Crustaceans:** diverse group of arthropods (a phylum of animals with jointed limbs and a hard chitinous exoskeleton) characterised by the possession of two pairs of antennae, one pair of mandibles (mouthparts used for handling and processing food) and two pairs of maxillae (appendages used in eating, which are located behind the mandibles). Includes crabs, lobsters, shrimps, woodlice and barnacles.
- **Gestation period:** in mammals, the period from conception to birth.
- **Scavenge:** to feed on dead material, often on animals that have been killed by another predator.

## REFERENCES

1. IUCN Red List (October, 2016)  
<http://www.iucnredlist.org>
2. Animal Diversity Web (October, 2005)  
<http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/index.html>
3. CITES (October, 2016)  
<http://www.cites.org>
4. International Society for Endangered Cats Canada (October, 2005)  
<http://www.wildcatconservation.org>
5. The Cat Survival Trust (October, 2005)  
<http://www.catsurvivaltrust.org>

6. Lioncrusher's Domain (October, 2005)  
<http://www.lioncrusher.com>
7. Macdonald, D. (2001) *The New Encyclopedia of Mammals*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
8. IUCN Cat Specialist Group (October, 2005)  
<http://www.catsg.org>
9. Jackson, P. (2006) *Pers. comm.*