



Flat-headed cat (*Prionailurus planiceps*)



French:	Chat À Tête Plate
Spanish:	Gato Cabeciancho
Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Class	Mammalia
Order	Carnivora
Family	Felidae
Genus	<i>Prionailurus</i> (1)
Size	Male head-and-body length: 42 – 50 cm (2) Female head-and-body length: 33 – 37 cm (2) Male tail length: 13 – 20 cm (2) Female tail length: 15 – 17 cm (2) Male weight: 1.5 – 2.75 kg (2) Female weight: 1.5 kg (2)

STATUS

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

DESCRIPTION

Its distinctly elongated, flattened head and small, rounded ears, make this unusual member of the cat family bear a strong resemblance to the civets, which are not cats, but members of the Viverridae family (4) (5). About the size of a domestic cat, the flat-headed cat has a long body, short legs and a short, thickly-furred tail (5). Even more than the fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrina*), the flat-headed cat appears remarkably adapted to a semi-aquatic, fish-eating lifestyle (6). Partial webbing between the toes help the animal to move through water, and the long, narrow jaws and pointed, backward-facing teeth aid the catching and holding of slippery prey such as fish and frogs. The thick, soft coat is reddish-brown on the top of the head and dark brown on the body, finely speckled with grey and buff on the tips (5). The belly is mottled white, spotted and splashed with brown, and the insides of the limbs are reddish-brown, fading towards the feet (2). The muzzle, chin and cheeks are white, with two dark streaks on each cheek and prominent white stripes between and below the large brown eyes (5).

RANGE

Formerly recorded from southern Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra (Indonesia), and Borneo (4), the flat-headed cat was declared extinct in 1985, until it was sighted again in Malaysia, and also later on the Merang River in southeast Sumatra in 1995 (7).

HABITAT

Very little is known about this species in the wild, but most records come from tropical forest or scrub on or near riverbanks, swampy areas, oxbow lakes and riverine forests, below 700 meters above sea level, although it has also been sighted in oil-palm plantations in Malaysia (1) (2) (8).

BIOLOGY

Almost all information on the biology and ecology of this cat comes from a handful of animals in captivity and fewer than 20 specimens collected from the wild. Anecdotal reports suggest the species is **nocturnal**, but activity patterns in captivity have been recorded as more **crepuscular**. The diet is thought to contain fish, frogs and crustaceans, but it has also been suggested that individuals can survive in oil-palm plantations by hunting rodents (4).

Like other cats, this species is probably solitary, maintaining its territory by scent-marking. Only three litters have ever been recorded in captivity, one consisting of two kittens, the other two of a single kitten (4). Litters of one to four kittens are thought to be usual, as adult females have four sets of nipples. A kitten was found in the wild in January and it is believed that the gestation period is about 56 days (7). Captive animals have lived to 14 years of age (4).

THREATS

Although the exact status of this obscure, seldom-encountered cat is not fully understood, it may be especially vulnerable because of its apparent association with watercourses (4). Habitats along rivers are often the first to be exploited and encroached upon by humans as settlements and agriculture expand (5). Perhaps an even greater threat to the species is water pollution, particularly by oil, organochlorines and heavy metals associated with agricultural run-off and logging activities, contaminating the cat's prey (1).

CONSERVATION

The flat-headed cat is fully protected across most of its range, with hunting and trade prohibited in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand, and hunting regulated in Singapore (1), although no legal protection is afforded in Brunei, Borneo (7). However, if the species is adaptable and can survive in palm-oil plantations as reports suggest, then it may be able to cope with considerable habitat disturbance and the future would not seem quite so bleak (2).

FIND OUT MORE

For more information on the flat-headed cat see:

- The Cat Survival Trust:
<http://hometown.aol.com/cattrust/flathead.htm>
- International Society for Endangered Cats (ISEC) Canada:
<http://www.wildcatconservation.org/Flat-headed.html>
- IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group:
http://lynx.uio.no/lynx/catsgportal/cat-website/20_cat-website/home/index_en.htm

AUTHENTICATION

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<http://www.globalcanopy.org/>

GLOSSARY

- **Crepuscular**: active at dusk and/or dawn.
- **Nocturnal**: active at night.

REFERENCES

1. IUCN Red List (June, 2009)
<http://www.iucnredlist.org>
2. The Cat Survival Trust (November, 2006)
<http://hometown.aol.com/cattrust/flathead.htm>
3. CITES (November, 2006)
<http://www.cites.org>
4. Sunquist, M. and Sunquist, F. (2002) *Wild Cats of the World*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
5. International Society for Endangered Cats (ISEC) Canada (July, 2010)
<http://www.wildcatconservation.org/Flat-headed.html>
6. IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group (November, 2006)
http://lynx.uio.no/lynx/catsgportal/cat-website/20_cat-website/home/index_en.htm
7. Animal Diversity Web (November, 2006)
http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Prionailurus_planiceps.html
8. Bezuijzen, M.R. (2000) The occurrence of the flat-headed cat *Prionailurus planiceps* in south-east Sumatra. *Oryx*, **34**: 222 - 226.