



## Pampas cat (*Leopardus colocolo*)



**Synonyms:** *Oncifelis colocolo*

**French:** Chat Des Pampas

**Spanish:** Gato De Los Pajonales, Gato Pajero, Osio

**Kingdom** Animalia

**Phylum** Chordata

**Class** Mammalia

**Order** Carnivora

**Family** Felidae

**Genus** *Leopardus* (1)

**Size** Head-body length: 42 – 79 cm (2)

Tail length: 22 – 33 cm (2)

**Weight** 3 – 3.7 kg (3)

### STATUS

Classified as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List (1) and listed on Appendix II of CITES (4).

### DESCRIPTION

This little known South American cat can be found in a greater variety of habitats than any other small cat on the continent. It looks like a robust domestic cat, with a broad face, amber eyes and distinctive pointy ears (2). The ears are black or grey on the back, with a silvery grey spot in the centre, and two conspicuous stripes run from the eyes, across the cheeks and meet beneath the throat (2) (5). The colour, pattern and texture of the pampas cat's coat varies considerably throughout its wide range. The background colour varies from yellowish white to greyish brown to silvery grey, and can be soft, short and vividly patterned, or long, coarse and virtually unmarked (2). In fact, these geographical differences are so pronounced it has been proposed that the pampas cat is actually three species. Genetic studies are underway to determine if this is correct (3). Generally, the forelimbs and hindlimbs have distinctive brown bands, and the short, bushy tail has fairly indistinct brown or black rings. Long hairs on the back, which can be up to seven centimetres long, stand erect when the cat is nervous or frightened, creating an appearance of being much larger than it actually is. In Argentina and Chile, the pampas cat is known as the "gato pajero" or grass cat, pajero being the local name for pampas grass, one of the habitats in which it lives (2).

### RANGE

Occurs in south-western South America, in Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina (2). The presence of this species in south Colombia is also suspected (6).

## HABITAT

As its name suggests, the pampas cat is typically associated with the pampas, or open grasslands. However, it also occurs in thorn forest and scrub, open woodlands, cloud forests, floodplains, swampy areas and semi-arid cold deserts. It has been reported to occur up to altitudes of 4,800 metres (2). One habitat it does not occur in is lowland rainforest (3).

## BIOLOGY

Despite the pampas cat being a fairly common species, there is little data available on its ecology (3). It has a diet primarily of small mammals, such as small rodents and guinea pigs. It also preys on the eggs and chicks of ground-dwelling birds (3). Due to its ability to occupy a wide range of habitats, it is likely to eat any small **vertebrate** it can catch (2). The pampas cat is thought to be a predominantly **nocturnal** and terrestrial species (3). It is an adept climber, though it is not clear whether they use this skill for hunting or just for escaping from predators (7).

The little available information regarding the breeding behaviour of this species comes from the study of captive species; a female first reproduced at the age of two years, and **gestation** lasted for 80 to 85 days. The litter size varies from one to three, and the average life span is nine years, but some have lived for over 16 years (3) (5).

## THREATS

The pampas cat faces a number of threats, but due to the lack of information regarding the status of this cat in the wild, it is difficult to determine to what extent populations are being impacted. In the past they were hunted in large numbers for their pelts; 78,000 pelts were exported between 1976 and 1979 from Argentina, but international trade ceased in 1987 (3). Today, habitat destruction is believed to be the primary threat (2). A large percentage of pampas grassland in Argentina and Uruguay has been converted into agricultural land and heavily grazed, resulting in a reduction of available habitat and prey species. Retaliatory killing for poultry depredation is also considered to be a threat (6), but to what extent is not known. It is known that in central Chile and Argentina hunters and their dogs are becoming more common, whilst dense cover for the pampas cat is becoming rarer (2).

## CONSERVATION

The pampas cat is listed on Appendix II of the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which means that trade in this species should now be tightly controlled (4). Hunting of the pampas cat is prohibited in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay, and regulated in Peru, but there is no legal protection in place at present in Brazil or Ecuador (3). Conservation actions recommended by the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group include determining whether the pampas cat is actually more than one species, and conducting research into its behaviour, ecology and distribution in the Argentinean pampas grasslands (3).

## FIND OUT MORE

For further information on this species and its conservation see:

- IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group:  
<http://www.catsg.org/>
- The Cat Survival Trust:  
<http://catsurvivaltrust.org>

## AUTHENTICATION

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## GLOSSARY

- **Gestation:** the state of being pregnant; the period from conception to birth.
- **Nocturnal:** active at night.
- **Vertebrate:** animal with a backbone.

## REFERENCES

1. IUCN Red List (June, 2009)  
<http://www.iucnredlist.org>
2. Sunquist, M. and Sunquist, F. (2002) *Wild Cats of the World*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
3. Nowell, K. and Jackson, P. (1996) *Wild Cats Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.
4. CITES (June, 2007)  
<http://www.cites.org>
5. International Society for Endangered Cats (May, 2007)  
[http://www.wildcatconservation.org/Pampas\\_Cat\\_\(Oncifelis\\_colocolo\).html](http://www.wildcatconservation.org/Pampas_Cat_(Oncifelis_colocolo).html)
6. Pereira, J. (2009) *Pers. comm.*
7. The Cat Survival Trust (May, 2007)  
<http://www.catsurvivaltrust.org/pampas.htm>