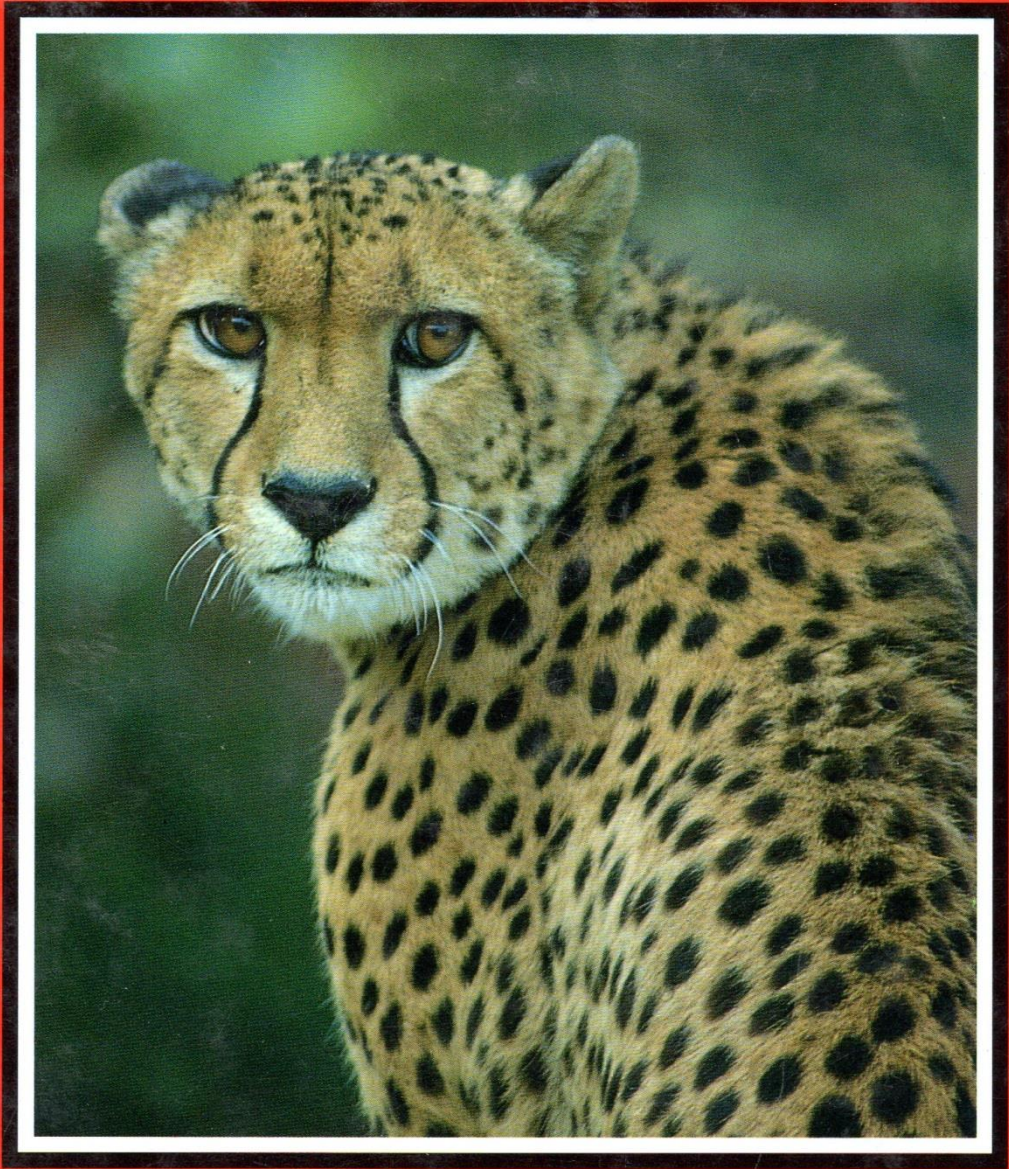


WILD CATS **OF THE** **WORLD**



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Photographs by Bruce Tanner

their habitat has, however, now been declared a National Park and wildlife protection area. Japan's Environment Agency has set up a feeding and monitoring programme for these cats on Iriomote, with a view to increasing their numbers.

Not much is known about the reproductive habits of this species, but it is thought that females usually give birth to between one and four kittens. Mating has been recorded in February and March, and again during September and October, so it is possible that two litters could be produced in a year. Fighting between males, prior to mating, has been documented. Pregnancy lasts about eight weeks and the female gives birth in a den which may be a hollow tree or under rocks. A partial albino form has been recorded, but this is the only known colour variant.

Fishing cat *Felis viverrina*

DISTRIBUTION

Occurs in isolated pockets of suitable habitat across Asia, from south-western India and Sri Lanka via the southern Himalayas, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam into China and south to the islands of Sumatra and Java.

Its resemblance to a civet is what led to the fishing cat being christened *Felis viverrina*. It differs in some respects from other cats, being powerfully built but with a surprisingly short tail, which is less than a third of the combined head and body length. The tail is also particularly thick near its base, for reasons which are unclear. In overall size the fishing cat is larger than the leopard cat and duller in coloration, being greyish with dark brown spots running down its sides in rows. White spots are again apparent in the centre of the ears, with between six to eight dark lines extending from the forehead over the crown of the head and down the neck.



Distribution of the fishing cat (*Felis viverrina*).



While entering water regularly, and swimming well, the heavily-built fishing cat (*Felis viverrina*) will take a variety of other prey besides fish.

Webbing is apparent between the toes of the front feet, while the sheaths here are not large enough to accommodate the claws fully, so that they project even when the cat is walking. The extent of this webbing has recently been the subject of some debate; it has been suggested that it is no more extensive than in other species such as the bobcat, and so is not related to the aquatic habitat where these cats are found.

Fishing cats do not stray far from streams and rivers, preferring areas with good cover such as reed beds, mangrove swamps and marsh areas. They may range up to an altitude of 1500 m (5000 ft) in the Himalayas.

The English name for these cats is a literal translation of the Bengali *mach-bagral*, although for a period there was some doubt as to the significance of fish in their diet. It is now clear, however, that fish forms a major part of their food intake. A fishing cat will sit on a sandbank or rock, watching intently for passing fish which it will then scoop out of the water with one of its front paws. It will also wade into shallow water and may even dive in pursuit of a fish, grabbing it directly in its mouth.

Other prey, such as *Ampullaria* snails and crustaceans of various types, may be easier to gather in the shallows. Frogs and snakes are also eaten by fishing cats. On land, they will take birds and small mammals, and have been recorded as scavenging on the carcass of a dead cow.

These cats, which can weigh up to 12 kg ($26\frac{1}{2}$ lb), have a reputation for ferocity, and are said to be capable of driving off a pack of dogs when cornered. There is also a remarkable tale of a fishing cat which carried off a four-month-old baby at Jeypore. The cat was killed, and the infant returned safely to its mother. Similar stories from the western coastal area of India have been reported, so this may well not have been an isolated incident, although there is no report of any attacks on adults.

A further example of the strength of these cats followed the capture of a male, which was housed in an enclosure adjoining that of a female leopard. It broke through and killed the leopard, which was twice its size. Young fishing cat kittens prove quite tractable, however, and are usually friendly towards people whom they know well.

It is thought that fishing cats may breed throughout the year, at least in those parts of their range where conditions are favourable. At this stage the characteristic chirping calls uttered by both sexes may be heard, with mating most likely in February and August. The gestation period lasts for just over two months, after which two or three kittens are born in a den which may be concealed in reed beds.

While male fishing cats, distinguishable by their larger size, will assist in the rearing of kittens born in captivity, it is not clear whether they participate in this way in the wild. Kittens are born blind, and their eyes open when they are just over two weeks old. They leave the den for the first time when they are about one month old, and are starting to eat solid food approximately a month later. The young cats are fully grown by nine months old.

The wide distribution of the fishing cat is deceptive when it comes to assessing their numbers, simply because of their specialist requirements in terms of habitat. Overall they are thought to be endangered and so feature on CITES Appendix I (see p. 13). In India the species is still widely distributed, however, and present in a number of reserves. But hunting for its coat is a problem in various countries, including India, and this persecution has brought it to the verge of extinction in Pakistan. Poisoning and habitat destruction are also threats in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

Flat-headed cat *Felis planiceps*

DISTRIBUTION

Thailand, Malaysian peninsula, Indonesia, Sumatra and Borneo.

This, the most distinctive of all the smaller cats, is similar in size to a domestic cat. Its head is broad and flat, with small ears set well down on the sides of the elongated skull. The eyes are large, while the legs are relatively short, as is the tail. Its fur is thick, soft and reddish brown, usually with a silvery tinge. The underparts in contrast are white with brown spots, and two clearly defined white stripes run from the sides of the nose up to the forehead.

The claws of the flat-headed cat are not entirely retractable, with the result that their tips remain visible even when the claws are retracted. Their pattern of dentition is unique in that all their teeth are pointed; the upper pre-molar is particularly strong, being anchored into the jaw by two roots.