

EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT CATS

The Wild Cat Book

FIONA SUNQUIST AND MEL SUNQUIST

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS
BY TERRY WHITTAKER





Fishing Cat

PRIONAILURUS VIVERRINUS

Several cat species will catch and eat fish when the opportunity arises, but the fishing cat is the only species to be named for its habits and diet. Fishing cats and leopard cats are closely related and share several physical characteristics, including similarly spotted coats; long, narrow skulls; and small, rounded, black-backed ears with prominent white patches. But here the resemblance ends. The powerful, stocky fishing cat and the slim, agile leopard cat look as different as a weight lifter and a ballet dancer.


Rather than the lithe, light-footed grace that one normally associates with a small cat, the fishing cat presents an aura of power and strength. Its deep-chested body and comparatively short legs give it the look of a much bigger cat. The fishing cat is about twice the size of a large house cat. The toes on the front feet are partially webbed, and the tips of its claws

protrude from their sheaths, even when fully retracted. The short tail is about one-third of head and body length and unusually thick and muscular near the body.

The fishing cat lives in marshes, swamps, oxbow lakes, reed beds, mangroves, and tidal creeks. It is very much at home in the water and can swim long distances, even underwater. With its powerful build and strong swimming ability, it is not surprising that the fishing cat takes a wide range of prey, most of it in and around water. Fishing cats can be seen crouching on sandbars and rocks along rivers, using their paw to scoop out fish, and swimming underwater to catch ducks and coots. One was watched by S. Mukherjee, an Indian graduate student, as the cat hunted along the edge of a small canal. It pounced on a frog, ate it, then moved to another spot, where it sat, focusing intently on the scene. A few moments later, the cat leaped into the water and, putting its head under the surface, grabbed something, then ran onto the bank with its prize.

In zoos fishing cat kittens take to water at

While fishing cats are found in wetland habitats, their distribution across Southeast Asia appears to be very localized and is still not well known.

A close-up photograph of a fishing cat (Felis tigris) with its mouth open, catching a fish. The cat has a brown and black striped pattern on its fur and is looking intently at the fish. The fish is silver with a pinkish-red belly and is being held in the cat's mouth. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some green foliage.

The fishing cat's partially webbed feet, a thick, muscular tail, and a long, narrow skull are all adaptations for swimming and capturing fish.



Fishing cat mother with her three-month-old kitten.

an early age. They begin to play in their water bowl at four weeks, and by three months they are spending a lot of time in the water, play fighting, wrestling, and pouncing on imaginary fish. They hook fish out of their pool with a paw, and in deeper water the cats wade in and submerge their head to seize the fish with their teeth. Fishing cats are not common in captivity, but the few institutions that do keep them have found that when provided with a pond and live fish to catch, they make striking exhibits. Fishing cats seem to be unusually tolerant of each other, so several adults can be kept in the same enclosure.

Fishing cats belong to the leopard cat lin-

eage, and recent DNA studies show that the fishing cat, leopard cat, and flat-headed cat—another fish-eating specialist—form a tight-knit group of species that appeared in Asia in the late Pleistocene, when sea levels were lower and the islands of Southeast Asia were connected. Interestingly, the flat-headed cat is found only on Borneo, Peninsular Malaysia, and Sumatra, where the fishing cat's presence is disputed. It may be that the “fishing-cat niche” is not wide enough to support two such specialized cats.

The fishing cat is found in scattered pockets of suitable habitat across much of Southeast Asia. There are large gaps in its distribu-



Fishing cats are unusual in that they will plunge their entire head underwater in search of prey. They have been seen diving headfirst into water, catching fish with their mouth.

tion, and the species seems to have been in serious decline for the last twenty years. The new survey technique of camera trapping has revealed just how rare fishing cats have become. In many parts of Southeast Asia, remotely triggered cameras routinely record the leopard cat, the Asiatic golden cat, and even the elusive marbled cat, but rarely photograph fishing cats.

Wetland destruction, elimination of mangroves, and development of wetlands for human settlement and shrimp farming seriously threaten this species. Fishing cats are still trapped for their fur and have a comparatively high market value. The cat's large size, a sought-after spotted pelt, and a distribution tied to easily convertible wetlands and grass-

lands almost certainly mean that this species will suffer accelerating declines in the future. With this in mind, the cat specialist group recommended that fishing cats be uplisted to Endangered, and in 2008 they became one of the few felid species to be moved from Vulnerable to Endangered on the IUCN Red List. International trade is now controlled, and the species is listed on Appendix 2 of CITES, which limits trade only to within countries with fishing cats.

STATUS: IUCN Red List—Endangered

WEIGHT: 11–35 pounds (5–16 kg)

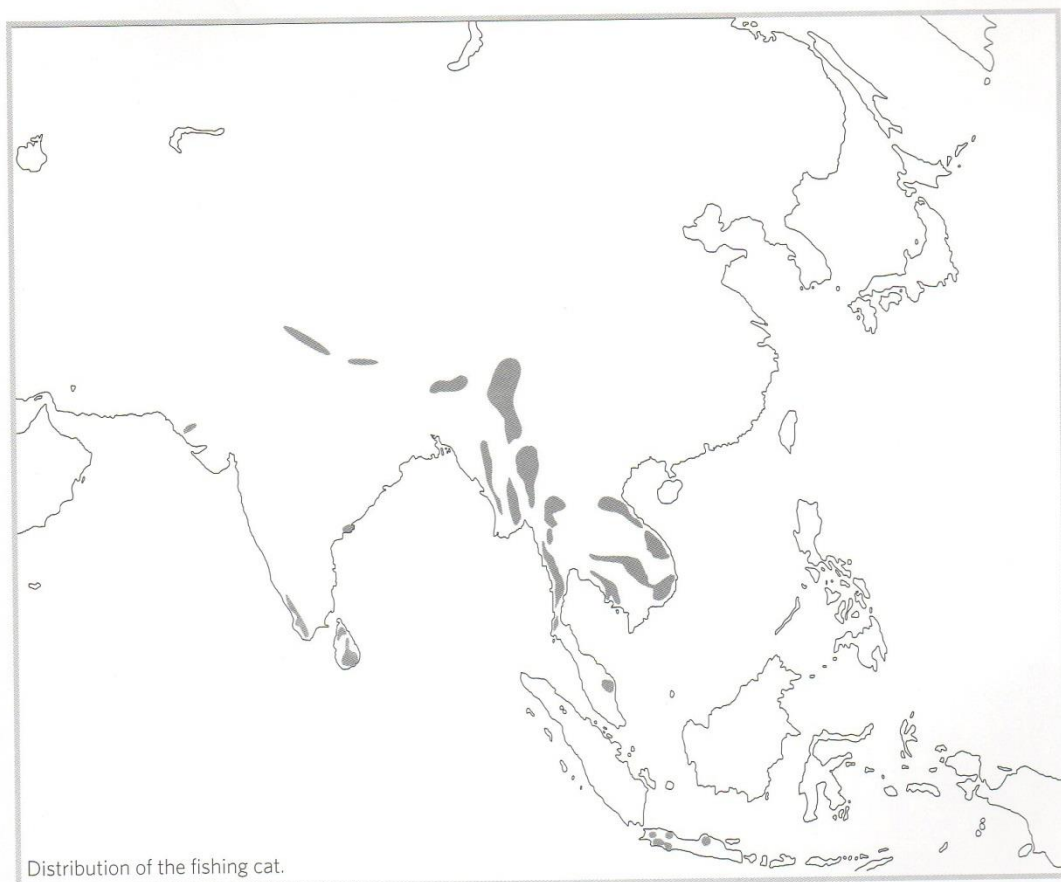
HEAD-BODY: 26–33 inches (65–85 cm)

TAIL LENGTH: 9–12 inches (24–30 cm)

LITTER SIZE: 2–3 kittens



Fishing cats are very much at home in the water and can swim long distances even underwater.



Distribution of the fishing cat.