



Sand cat (*Felis margarita*)



Also known as: sand dune cat

French: Chat Des Sables
Spanish: Gato De Las Arenas, Gato Del Sahara

Kingdom Animalia
Phylum Chordata
Class Mammalia
Order Carnivora
Family Felidae
Genus *Felis* (1)
Size Head-body length: 45 – 57 cm (2)
 Tail length: 28 – 35 cm (2)
Weight 1.5 – 3.5 kg (2)

STATUS

The sand cat is classified as Near Threatened (NT) on the IUCN Red List (1) and listed on Appendix II of CITES (3).

DESCRIPTION

The smallest cat species in Arabia (4), the sand cat (*Felis margarita*) is well adapted to its arid desert habitat, obtaining all the water it needs from its food (5). Prey capture is facilitated by the sand cat's highly sensitive ears, which are large and triangular, and capable of detecting noises from animals both above and below the surface of the sand (5). Its foot pads are covered with thick hair, enabling it to move easily over quickly moving sands in its desert environment, and insulates them from the surface heat (5). The fur of the sand cat ranges from yellowish-brown to dull grey, with vague lines on its limbs and several black rings near the black tip of its tail (6). A dark, reddish streak runs from the corner of the eye down the cheek (5). The patterns on the sand cat's fur vary between the six **subspecies** (6).

RANGE

The sand cat ranges from northern Africa, through the Arabian Peninsula to central and south-west Asia, but due to its specific habitat requirements, it has a patchy distribution within this range (1) (5).

HABITAT

The only cat species to be found primarily in true desert (1), the sand cat inhabits arid stony and sandy deserts, especially among sparse vegetation (5) (6).

BIOLOGY

Sand cats feed on a variety of desert-dwelling creatures, including rodents, hares, birds, reptiles and some arthropods (6). Small rodents are most commonly taken, although in Arabia, sand-dwelling reptiles such as sand skinks are particularly important sources of prey, and are uncovered by rapid digging (1). As there is very little standing water available in the sand cat's habitat, they must obtain all their water from their prey, in a similar way to the black-footed cat of South Africa (5). Hunting is done at night and alone; the cat becomes active at dusk after spending the day in a burrow or sheltering under shrubbery or rock (5). Three kittens are typical of sand cats, born after a **gestation** period of around 66 days. The new born, blind and helpless kittens weigh between 39 and 80 grams at birth but grow rapidly, and may reach sexual maturity by 14 months of age (5).

THREATS

The primary threats to sand cats include the destruction of their habitats by humans and decline of the population of prey (1). Sand cats have also been hunted for sport, as they enjoy sunning themselves on rocks during the day and are not aggressive which makes them easy targets (6). This reputed docility was also a reason why many sand cats were collected for use in the pet trade during the 1960s, which resulted in many cats dying in captivity (6). Due to the uncontrolled nature of this commerce, this caused a drastic decline in populations (5). Other localised threats include the introduction of feral and domestic cats and dog, which may compete with, prey upon or transmit disease to the sand cat (1).

CONSERVATION

The sand cat is found in a number of protected areas throughout its range (1). Hunting of the sand cat is also prohibited in several countries: Algeria, Iran, Israel, Kazakhstan, Mauritania, Niger, Pakistan and Tunisia (1). The listing of this species on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) means that all trade in sand cat products should be strictly regulated (3).

FIND OUT MORE

For further information on the sand cat, other cat species and their conservation:

- IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group:
www.catsg.org

AUTHENTICATION

This information is awaiting authentication by a species expert, and will be updated as soon as possible.

If you are able to help please contact:

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GLOSSARY

- **Gestation:** the state of being pregnant; the period from conception to birth.
- **Subspecies:** a population usually restricted to a geographical area that differs from other populations of the same species, but not to the extent of being classified as a separate species.

REFERENCES

1. IUCN Red List (August, 2009)
<http://www.iucnredlist.org>
2. Burnie, D. (2001) *Animals*. Dorling Kindersley, London.
3. CITES (March, 2007)
<http://www.cites.org>
4. Hellyer, P. and Aspinall, S. (2005) *The Emirates: A Natural History*. Trident Press Limited, London.
5. Sunquist, M. and Sunquist, F. (2002) *Wild Cats of the World*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
6. Cat Survival Trust (August, 2009)
<http://www.catsurvivaltrust.org/>