



African Lion

Panthera leo

Range: African lions live in East Africa, the Kalahari Desert, South Sahara, and South Africa, excluding the Congo Rainforest.

Habitat: They prefer rich grasslands and avoid dense forests because their prey is scarce. Lions can live in forested, shrubby, mountainous, and semi-desert habitats. Competition for Africa's grasslands by humans has drastically reduced the lions' range.

Diet: A typical diet will include zebra, giraffe, buffalo, wildebeest, gazelles, and impala. Lions are opportunistic and will readily scavenge the kills of cheetahs, leopards, wild dogs, and hyenas.

Lifespan: They can live 15-25 years in captivity.

Description: African lions are the tallest (at the shoulder) of the felines, and also the second heaviest after the tiger. Lion coloration varies from light buff to yellowish, reddish, or dark yellow/brown. Lion cubs are born with brown spots on their body. Although these fade as lions reach adulthood, faint spots may still be seen on the legs and underparts, particularly on lionesses. Lions are the only members of the cat family to display obvious sexual dimorphism, meaning the males and females look different. They also have specialized roles that each gender plays in the pride. The typical role of the female is the hunter. The mane of the male impedes his ability to camouflage himself while stalking prey and may cause him to become overheated during a chase.

Breeding: Lions breed year-round and are usually polygynous. After a gestation period of 100-119 days, the pregnant female leaves the pride and finds a place to deliver. Depending on their habitat, lions will hide their newborn cubs in marshes or kopjes. The lioness moves her cubs to a new den site several times a month, to prevent scent from building up at a single den site and attracting predators. Usually the mother does not integrate herself and her cubs back into the pride until the cubs are 6-8 weeks old. The number of cubs born depends on the age and dietary condition of the mother. The typical litter size is 1-4 offspring. The pride synchronizes its reproduction so they can rear their cubs together, each suckling the others' cubs as well as their own. For example, if a lioness is away hunting, her cub will be suckled by another lactating female. Cubs are nursed for 6-7 months.

Behavior/Adaptations: Lions are more social than most other cat species which are usually solitary by nature. They live in prides composed of 3-30 individuals, which includes related adult females and their young. Each pride has its own social dominant hierarchy in which the weakest male ranks above all females. If the resident males are defeated by new males they will leave the pride and typically never return. On the open plains, hunting takes place at night. In areas of high grass or thick foliage, it may occur during the day. The male rarely hunts with the pride. Lionesses hunt instinctively in a cooperative fashion. When hunting in a group, they fan out to surround prey and attempt to drive it toward one another. Since lions can only run 36 mph, and some of its prey can run up to 50 mph, cooperation and stealth are vital. The females are expert stalkers and the color of their coat helps camouflage them. Prey is eaten by all members of the pride. As each struggles to eat as much as possible, fights erupt, growling, hissing, and paw swiping. The strongest eats the most. Afterwards, they all calm down and greet each other affectionately and the peaceful cooperative life of the pride continues.

Predators: Humans

Conservation: Vulnerable due to poaching, habitat loss, and carcass poisoning.

The Zoo's Lions: Leo (male), Lilly and Malkia (females) are siblings all born on 9/21/2007.

Interesting Facts:

- Lions are the least active members of the cat family—they can rest up to 21 hours per day!
- A lion's roar can be heard from nearly 5 miles away.
- As a big cat, lions have round pupils (while small cats have slit pupils) and generally eat lying down.

Information taken from the following sources:

http://library.sandiegozoo.org/factsheets/african_lion/lion.htm

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/a/african-lion/>