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Small Wild Cats

By Brad Kullos

Tigers, Lions, and Cheetahs—most people have heard of these large wild cats and how endangered they are, but how many people have ever heard of the Pallas Cat, Sand Cat, or Andean Mountain Cat? These are just a few of the 29 species of small wild cats that make up most of the 36 different cat species. Small wild cats are often just as, or even more endangered as their larger cousins and these small cats are the closest relatives to the kitties we share our lives with, the domestic cat.

A perfect example of how little is known about these cats is the elusive Borneo Bay Cat. None exists in captivity and even more amazing, until 1998 there had never been a photo taken of a live Bay Cat. Thankfully we are learning more about some of these fascinating small wild cats:

Pallas Cat

One of the most amazing looking cats in the world is the Pallas Cat which weighs between 6 and 10 pounds though appears larger because of its massive fur coat which it uses to keep warm on the cold rocky steppe of Mongolia and central Asia. It's small ears, and flat forehead allows it to peek over rocks before it pounces on its prey and its giant furry tail keeps it warm. The stocky built cat also has a unique barking like call. The Pallas Cat's main threats include the poisoning of its prey by humans and the hunting for its fur. The Pallas Cat Project, Cincinnati Zoo and Small Cat Conservation Alliance are working to save the cat.



Pallas Cat

For More Information

Pallas Cat Project www.wildaboutcats.org/pallas.htm
Cat Action Treasury www.felidae.org
Cat Specialist Group www.catsg.org
Small Cat Conservation Alliance www.smallcats.org
International Society of Endangered Cats www.wildcatconservation.org

Sand Cat

The Sand Cat Weighs between two to three and a half kilos (four to eight pounds) and lives in the deserts of the Middle East. "They have very big ears so in the desert environment they can hear a lot farther than a domestic cat, and this allows them to hear their prey much easier. They also have very thick fur on the bottom of their feet allowing their pads to never touch the ground," said Bill Swanson, Ph.D, Director of Animal Research at the Cincinnati Zoo. This ensures they don't burn their sensitive pads on the hot sand. "They don't really drink in the wild, in the desert there is very little open water and so they get pretty much all their water from the prey they eat," continued Dr. Swanson. The Sand Cat is threatened in the wild from habitat loss and hunting. The Cincinnati Zoo and Small Cat Conservation Alliance are working on Sand Cat Conservation.



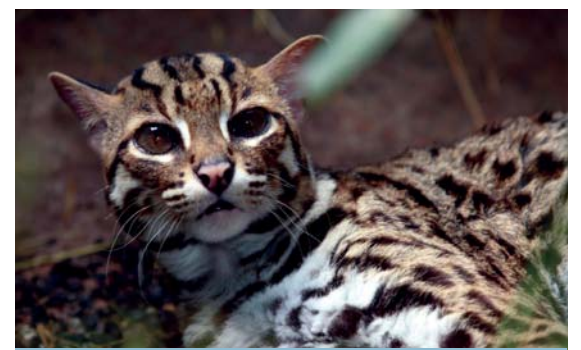
Sand Cat

Andean Mountain Cat

The Andean Mountain Cat lives in the high Andes in South America. "It is just a small cat weighing four and a half kilos (10 pounds) so it is like a domestic house cat, except It is a big fur ball because it lives at such high altitude where it's very cold, so it has a lot of hair and its tail is huge and very furry, which it uses as a scarf," said Jim Sanderson, Ph.D, Founder and Director of the Small Cat Conservation Alliance. "The cat used to eat Chinchillas, but they were all harvested for their fur nearly to extinction and when that happened the cat disappeared because that was the cat's food," continued Dr. Sanderson. In addition, local people hunt the cat for religious reasons. Today Dr. Sanderson and his organisation are actively involved in working for the cat's conservation.

Fishing Cat

The Fishing Cat lives in the wetlands of Southeast Asia and is built for swimming with its waterproof coat and web like feet. It swims and scoops fish out of the water to eat and has even been known to tap on the water's surface to attract fish. It weighs between six to eleven kilos (13 and 26 pounds) . Its main threats are the disappearance of wetlands and over-fishing by humans which eliminate their prey. In Australia you can see the Fishing Cat at the Taronga Park Zoo and at the Perth Zoo.



Fishing Cat

More zoos are beginning to display small wild cats through captive breeding programs. The hope is people will get as excited about seeing them and work for their protection as they have the large cats.

A study of small wild cats found that many have the preconditions to become domesticated (a process which takes thousands of years), showing that it was a matter of historical chance that the African Wild Cat became our domesticated cat. We could have had Sand Cats or other small wild cats as lovable house pets. Instead, like the cats in this article, they are endangered "These small wildcats need help and if there is anyone who can understand how important this is, it's cat owners. If we could just get cat owners to pull together and stand up for small wild cat conservation we could make a huge difference," said Kristen Nowell, Ph.D, and Director of the Cat Action Treasury, a group which funds small wild cat conservation projects.

The World's Most Endangered Cat

With only 100 Iberian Lynxes living in Spain and Portugal, this small wild cat could be extinct in less than five years. The Lynx would be the first cat species to become extinct since the Saber Tooth Tiger, 10,000 years ago. The Iberian Lynx weighs between ten and sixteen kilos (22 and 36 pounds). The lynx's main threats in the wild have been hunting as trophies and by landowners trying to protect their game.



Iberian Lynx

In addition, the Iberian Lynx's main prey, rabbits, has contracted deadly diseases in the recent past which decimated Lynx populations. Development and the building of roads, which separate the cats' territory and breaks up their populations, are also threats. Major efforts are under way to save the species. For more information on how to help save the Iberian Lynx visit www.soslynx.org.