

All About Tigers - Physical Characteristics, Diet & Evolution

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The tiger is the largest member of the cat family. Tigers have striped fur, usually orange stripes on black with a white underbelly. White tigers (mutated Bengal tigers from India; they are not albinos) are white with dark brown or deep maroon stripes, pink noses, and blue eyes. Black tigers (extremely rare) have orange to yellow fur with black stripes. Even rarer, stripeless tigers have been recorded.



SIZE

Adult tigers range from 4.5 feet (1.37 m) to 9 feet (2.7 m) long. Males are larger than females. The largest tigers are the Siberian tigers, weighing about 500 pounds (230 kg); the smallest are the Sumatran tigers, weighing about 250 pounds (115 kg). Tigers' tails are 3-4 feet (0.9-1.2 m) long.

EYES

Like most cats, their night-time vision is very good. They have round pupils and yellow irises (except white tigers which have blue eyes).

HAIR

Tigers have hair all over their body to insulate, protect and camouflage themselves in their habitat. They have two types of hair--guard hair and underfur. The guard hair is long in length and protects the skin. The underfur is shorter and traps air in order to insulate. The color of the hair provides camouflage. There's also a distinct dark striping pattern on its hair and skin. Each tiger has its own individual pattern. They are usually light orange to reddish in color.

TEETH AND CLAWS

Tigers have retractable claws. Tigers have the largest canine teeth of any land-based carnivores.

BEHAVIOR AND SOCIAL HABITS

Tigers are mostly solitary animals except for times of mating and when the female cares for her young cubs. Sometimes tigers gather to share a large kill. Tigers are most active at night, but are active in the day during the winter. Tigers mark out their territory, like most cats, by spraying their urine together with a glandular secretion, by leaving fecal droppings, or by scratching marks into trees with their claws. Tigers need a territory of about 10-30 or more square miles to provide enough prey to support them. The size of the territory depends on the amount of prey available in the area.

DIET

Tigers are meat eaters (carnivores). Their prey includes small- to medium-sized mammals (like badgers, rabbits, boars, deer, and wild cattle), ranging in size from 60 to 2,000 pounds. The usual method of killing is to ambush the animal from behind and bite its neck; this usually breaks the prey's spinal cord, killing it. Tigers then drag the kill to a safe place in which they eat it. Tigers can eat as much as 40 pounds of meat in one sitting. They can go for days at a time without eating. Tigers mainly eat ambar deer, wild pigs, water buffalo and antelope. Tigers are also known to hunt sloth bears, dogs, leopards, crocodiles and pythons as well as monkeys and hares. Old and injured tigers have been known to attack humans and domestic cattle.

HABITAT AND DISTRIBUTION

Tigers live in Asia, primarily in forests (some tigers live in areas with tall grasses, areas where they can hide while hunting). Tigers are very good swimmers and like the water,

unlike most cats. Tigers evolved in south central China and moved to nearby areas, like Siberia, Sumatra, Indochina, and India. There are no tigers native to Africa.

Tigers live in climates ranging from tropical rainforests to deciduous forests to cold, mountain hardwood forests. The Siberian tiger lives in Siberia and Manchuria, in mountain forests in elevations up to 3,000 feet.

LIFE SPAN

Tigers can live about 10-15 years in the wild, and about 20 years in captivity.

REPRODUCTION

Tigers breed during the winter season, and females give birth to 2-4 blind cubs about 103 days later. The cubs weigh about 2-3 pounds at birth. One cub frequently dies at birth. The cubs live on mother's milk for 6-8 weeks and then are introduced to meat. Cubs are dependent on the mother for about a year and a half; they can start hunting on their own at this age. Female tigers reach sexual maturity at about 3 years old; males reach maturity in about 4 years.

EXTINCTION STATUS & POPULATION

Tigers are threatened with extinction due to loss of habitat. There are 5 surviving subspecies; 3 other subspecies have gone extinct in the last 70 years. There are estimated to be about 5000 to 7400 tigers left in the wild. In the early 1900s, there were around 100,000 tigers throughout their range. Today, an estimated total of around 3,000-4,500 exist in the wild. Below is a breakdown of tiger numbers by subspecies.

1. Bengal tiger: Less than 2,000
2. Indochinese tiger: 750-1,300
3. Siberian tiger: Around 450
4. Sumatran tiger: 400-500
5. Malayan tiger: 600-800
6. South Chinese tiger: Extinct in the wild
7. Caspian tiger: Extinct
8. Javan tiger: Extinct
9. Bali tiger: Extinct

EVOLUTION OF TIGERS

Tigers (and all the Order Carnivora which consists of all cats, dogs, bears, seals, weasels, stoats, pinnipeds, etc.) are descended from the family of marten-like woodland animals called the miacidae. These small omnivores evolved during the late Cretaceous period (toward the end of the age of the dinosaurs), about 70-65 million years ago. Not many fossils of these creatures have been found. These early quadrupedal mammals had 44 teeth including specialized, meat-cutting teeth. They had long bodies, long tails, flexible shoulders and elbows, and short, flexible limbs. Modern-day tigers evolved in Asia. Early tiger fossils have been found in China and Siberia. No one knows exactly where modern-day tigers appeared first.

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