

Name: _____

Speedy, Spotted Cats

By Guy Belleranti

On the grasslands of Africa lives the world's fastest land animal, the cheetah.

What makes this spotted cat such a speedy runner? A lean flexible body and long strong legs that can stretch far forward with each stride. In fact, a cheetah's stride is as long as a racehorse. And while a racehorse might reach speeds of 40 to 45 miles an hour,



a cheetah can burst to a speed of 60 to 70 miles per hour in just a few seconds. The cheetah runs at this incredible speed for only a short distance – the length of a football field or less. But I sure wouldn't want to be chased by a cheetah, would you?

That burst of speed is often enough for the cheetah to catch its meal. The cheetah's running ability is also helped by its long tail which provides balance.



Cheetahs have good hearing and sense of smell. However, it's their great eyesight that they use for hunting. The cheetah hunts most often during daylight, including early morning or late afternoon. When it spots prey it moves in closer under the cover of tall grass. The cat's yellow-tan, black spotted coat provides camouflage in the grass. The cheetah will get as close as possible to the prey, and then – zoom!

Sometimes the prey is alert and fast enough to escape. When it isn't, the cheetah drags the dinner to a hiding place. A cheetah rests a short time before eating, as the chase is hard work. Sometimes larger and more powerful predators like lions and leopards, or groups of

hyenas, steal the food away.

What do cheetahs hunt? Hares, birds and smaller antelopes, like gazelles and impalas. They also hunt larger animals like the wildebeest (or gnu) and the zebra when hunting in groups.

Cheetah mothers have an average of three cubs at a time. Cubs have a darker coat, which helps them blend into the shadows when mom goes out to hunt. Still many cubs don't reach adulthood, with lions, hyenas, leopards and eagles among their predators. Cubs reach



full size at around 15 months and stay with their mother for one to two years.

Cheetahs once lived in most of Africa and also in parts of Asia. However, much of their habitat and prey has disappeared because of human activity and the cheetah is now an endangered mammal.



About the Author

Guy Belleranti works as a docent at Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences working with wild animals and teaching others.

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1. Cheetahs are...
- a. faster than a jet airplane
 - b. the only animals faster than racehorses
 - c. faster than human beings
 - d. the fastest animals in South America

2. List six animals mentioned in the article that are hunted by cheetahs.

3. List four animals mentioned in the article that prey on cheetah cubs.

4. According to the information in the article, cheetahs are an endangered animal. What does this mean?

- a. There are no more cheetahs in the wild.
- b. There are more wild cheetahs than there have ever been.
- c. There are not many cheetahs left in the wild.
- d. Zoos are not allowed to keep cheetahs.

5. A cheetah can run at top speed for about...

- a. 100 yards, or 300 feet
- b. 500 yards, or 1,500 feet
- c. a mile, or 5,280 feet
- d. seven miles, or 39,960 feet

6. How does a cheetah's spotted coat help it survive?

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The scrambled words below are vocabulary words from the article. Unscramble each word and write it on the line. Please be sure each word is spelled correctly.

1. _____

l n e a

hint: thin and healthy

2. _____

d i e b l c r e i n

hint: hard to believe; extraordinary

3. _____

a n t

hint: yellowish-brownish color

4. _____

s e c a h

hint: to go after something; follow quickly

5. _____

p r l a e o d s

hint: large, spotted cats

6. _____

a t c o

hint: an animal's fur

7. _____

e b n c a l a

hint: ability to stay upright and steady

ANSWER KEY

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- Cheetahs are... **c**
 - faster than a jet airplane
 - the only animals faster than racehorses
 - faster than human beings**
 - the fastest animals in South America
- List six animals mentioned in the article that are hunted by cheetahs.
hares, birds, gazelles, impalas, wildebeest (gnu), and zebra
- List four animals mentioned in the article that prey on cheetah cubs.
lions, hyenas, leopards, and eagles
- According to the information in the article, cheetahs are an endangered animal. What does this mean? **c**
 - There are no more cheetahs in the wild.
 - There are more wild cheetahs than there have ever been.
 - There are not many cheetahs left in the wild.**
 - Zoos are not allowed to keep cheetahs.
- A cheetah can run at top speed for about... **a**
 - 100 yards, or 300 feet**
 - 500 yards, or 1,500 feet
 - a mile, or 5,280 feet
 - seven miles, or 39,960 feet
- How does a cheetah's spotted coat help it survive?
The coat provides camouflage, which allows it to sneak up on prey.

ANSWER KEY

Speedy, Spotted Cats

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The scrambled words below are vocabulary words from the article. Unscramble each word and write it on the line. Please be sure each word is spelled correctly.

1. lean

l n e a

hint: thin and healthy

2. incredible

d i e b l c r e i n

hint: hard to believe; extraordinary

3. tan

a n t

hint: yellowish-brownish color

4. chase

s e c a h

hint: to go after something; follow quickly

5. leopards

p r l a e o d s

hint: large, spotted cats

6. coat

a t c o

hint: an animal's fur

7. balance

e b n c a l a

hint: ability to stay upright and steady