

Bengal Tiger

At a Glance

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Family: Felidae

(Panthera tigris tigris)

Where in the World

- There are probably fewer than 2,000 Bengal tigers left in the wild.
- Bengal tigers are found in India and some of the surrounding countries.
- At one time, Bengal tigers were found from the country of Burma (or Myanmar) to Pakistan.

Take a Look

- Bengals are the second-largest tigers in the world. (The largest are the Siberian tigers.)
- Male Bengal tigers can be up to nine feet long, not including the tail which can add another three feet to the total. Females tend to be smaller.
- Adult male Bengal tigers can weigh up to 550 pounds; the females can weigh up to 350 pounds.
- Bengal tigers have lush coats of reddish-orange fur marked with striking bands of black. Every tiger's facial stripes are different - that may help tigers recognise each other.
- Tigers have strong, retractable front claws and a rough, raspy tongue.

All in the Family

- There are eight subspecies of tiger including the Bengal. The others are also named for the areas where they are found. They are the Siberian, Caspian, Indochinese, Chinese, Sumatran, Javan, and Bali tigers.

Just the Facts

- Tigers are generally solitary, but get to know their tiger neighbours. They often join together when one has made a kill.
- Unlike most cats, tigers don't like to climb, but they're excellent swimmers.
- Tigers can purr, roar, and even make an odd barking noise when they're startled.

- They hunt at night, or in the grey hours around dawn and dusk.
- They hunt for a variety of large animals (antelope, buffalo, deer, pigs, and an animal like a ox called a gaur), but they will eat smaller creatures as well.
- A female Bengal usually has two to three cubs per litter, although she can have as many as six.
- The cubs stay with their mother for at least two years, or until she has another litter of kittens.
- The father does not help to raise his cubs, although he may hunt with the mother, thus making her job of feeding the cubs a little easier.
- Females usually have a litter of cubs about every two years, although some wait for as long as three or four years.
- Whether in captivity or in the wild, the maximum life span for a Bengal tiger seems to be about 26 years.

Habitat

Bengal tigers are pretty adaptable. They can live in a wide range of habitats, including tropical rainforests, pine forests, swamps, grasslands, savannahs (grasslands with scattered trees), and even rocky areas. As long as they have food to eat, shade to sleep in, a safe place to raise cubs, and water for drinking and bathing, the tiger can get along. One of the few things that good tiger habitat can do without is humans. People always seem to come in conflict with tigers - either the tigers begin hunting livestock or, even worse, humans, or the people start developing the wild habitat the tigers need to live.

In places where prey animals are scarce, a Bengal tiger needs quite a lot of room. They can travel for many miles in a single day to find something to eat, and in their travels can cross a wide variety of ecosystems. A male Bengal tiger may consider his home range to be up to 375 square miles, regardless of what boundaries he crosses to get from one end to the other. Inside or out of a protected national park or crossing from India into Nepal - once the tiger has chosen and established his range, he does not care about the laws that may or may not protect him.

Most of the Bengal tigers are found in India, and a few are still living in neighbouring countries. The hot weather can be hard on the tigers, but if they have access to a river, stream, pond, or lake, they will go swimming to cool off. So a permanent, year-round supply of water (one that won't go dry in the hottest part of the summer) is very important. At one time, Bengal tigers roamed from the western part of Burma (also known as Myanmar, to the east of India) to Pakistan (to the Northwest of India). They became extinct in Pakistan by 1906.

Food

Bengal tigers need a lot of prey, and they prefer larger mammals - but they'll eat just about anything they can catch, including birds, turtles, and small mammals. But small food is a waste of energy - it's only when the tiger can catch a large animal that the energy expended in the hunt is replaced by food. Bengals hunt for wild pigs (which can be large indeed), deer, antelope, buffalo, and an animal like an ox, called a gaur. Tigers hunt by sneaking up on their prey and springing on them. They try to knock the prey over and either bite it on the back of the neck or strangle it. The tigers are successful in their hunts about one time in every ten tries.

Once they get a kill, though, it's usually big enough to make up for the misses. One tiger killed a gaur and then dragged it to a safe place, which just happened to be about 40 feet away. Later, thirteen men tried to drag the gaur away (naturally, they waited until the tiger left!), but found that even when they worked together, they weren't strong enough to budge the ox. When a tiger kills an animal that big, it can't consume the whole thing right then and there. Instead, the tiger eats what it wants (sometimes up to 40 pounds in one sitting) and then covers the prey with soil and leaves. Over the next few days, the tiger will return to eat until the prey has been eaten or until it begins to decompose. Tigers only like fresh meat. When the prey animal is too old, it is left to the scavengers of the forest or grasslands - buzzards and others who like carrion.

Habits and Characteristics

When you imagine a tiger, you probably see it in a jungle - that's the right place for most tigers, but the very first tigers were actually snow cats. The original tiger is the Siberian, a tiger that can live in deep snow and cold winters. The Bengal tiger, and the other six subspecies (Caspian, Indochinese, Chinese, Sumatran, Javan, and Bali tigers) are all descended from this cold-weather tiger. When the tigers moved south thousands of years ago and evolved into the hot-weather cats that they are today, they shed a lot of the Siberian's heavy coat. But even with that fur-thinning, the Bengal tiger often feels overheated in the steamy jungles and grasslands of India. So this intelligent tiger does something you might not think a cat would do - it goes to the nearest river or stream and plops down in the middle of the water. After it has swum around for a while, the tiger will lie in the shallows and flip cool water onto its back with its long, agile tail.

Tigers are excellent swimmers. They've been known to swim across rivers that are six miles wide. It may depend on how strong the current is in the river, but six miles probably isn't too hard for the strong Bengal tiger - one swam 18 miles during one "bath." The powerful legs that let the tiger swim that far also make it fast on land, with an ability to leap that is astonishing. One tiger leap was measured at 33 feet for a single bound. That's about the length of three small cars parked end to end! Even though they're fast and have a lot of stamina, tigers don't chase their prey. Instead, they stalk their victim, creeping up very slowly from the side or the rear. Once they're close enough, they pounce, and try to knock the other animal down. Amazingly, for an animal as smart and as agile as a tiger, its hunts are only successful about 10% of the time - the other 90% of the time, the prey animal gets away.

Tigers have been known to hunt people, although tigers are generally shy of humans. In most cases, tigers only take to hunting people when their natural prey isn't available, or when the tiger is too injured to hunt anything else. The match-up between a human and a tiger is pretty well balanced in favour of the tiger. Humans are much smarter, and know how to avoid tigers - but if a confrontation with a tiger occurs and the human doesn't have a gun or other weapon, the tiger will win. Once the tiger realises that humans are so easy to hunt, it usually gives up on the animals in the jungle that are harder to catch and becomes a determined man-eater. In that case, the tiger has to be killed.

Tiger cubs aren't trained by their mother to hunt humans, although she teaches them everything else they need to know. The cubs are born in a safe den selected by the mother, in a rocky cave or under a fallen tree, where they will be safe on their own while she hunts. Their eyes open in their first two weeks and they are soon up and around, exploring the area around the den. The kitten games they play, like the ever-popular "pounce on mum's tail" are training for becoming expert hunters, when they will have to pounce on something much bigger and faster than mum's tail. (You have to figure that mum is pretty happy when her kittens finally outgrow that game!) By the time they're six months old, they're old enough to leave the den area and follow their mother.

Before they're a year old, they've learned how to hunt for themselves. Still, they stay with their mother until she has another litter of cubs. That could be when the cubs are two, or even three or four years old. After they leave her, they begin their own solitary life, but mother and cubs remember each other and will socialise if they meet over a meal of antelope or other prey. The females have their own home range, but they aren't selfish about it - other females can live partially or even entirely in each other's range. Males, on the other hand, are quite selfish. Their home ranges are much larger than the females. (Depending on how many prey species are around, a male's range can be as small as six square miles if there's plenty to eat or as large as 375 square miles if food is scarce.) Males will fight off strange male tigers, although they're more tolerant of the males that live in the same area. Females are more welcome - in fact, a male's range may overlap or include the home ranges of several females.

Threats

Tigers need a lot of room. If prey species are scarce, one male tiger needs over 375 square miles of territory just for himself - no other males allowed. That's an amount of space more than five times as big as the city of Manchester - for just one tiger. India has established special reserves where the tigers are protected, but none of them are large enough for even one male tiger. So the tigers are constantly travelling in and out of the reserves - inside, they're fairly safe, but outside they have almost no protection. Their available habitat is shrinking fast as the population of India grows and the people need more room. What was once tiger habitat is being turned into fields for agriculture, or communities. In some cases, good tiger habitat is flooded by large dams that create needed electricity.

In the past, it was very sporting and exciting to go tiger hunting. The rajahs (kings) of India would invite special guests to ride on elephants and shoot any tiger they saw. A tiger skin rug or stuffed tiger head on a trophy wall was extremely fashionable in Victorian times. The craze was so popular that the tiger populations began to decline. Even after the Indian government realised that their tigers were in trouble, and began to defend them, the passion for tiger skins continued. In the 1970s (even after tigers had been declared endangered), a tiger skin was worth about £4475 - and people were willing to pay. So, although India's tiger population had plummeted from an estimated 40,000 in 1900 to fewer than 2,000 in 1972, people would still hunt tigers illegally (called poaching).

Today, poaching is still a problem, but the bigger threat for the tiger is its loss of habitat. When its home range is developed, the prey species are often killed or driven off - that leaves the tiger with little to hunt. So the possibility that a tiger will become a man-eater grows, and more and more tigers must be killed because they've developed a taste for humans. If they had enough territory of their own, with adequate prey, the tigers wouldn't become man-eaters. But, because they need so much room, it's very hard to set aside land just for tigers and other wildlife when people need that space, too.

If you would like to do something, you can support some of the organisations that are trying to help. The World Wildlife Fund is working with the Indian government on "Project Tiger" to find suitable habitat for the cats. The IUCN (World Conservation Union) is trying to find a balance between human and wildlife needs. The National Wildlife Federation and the Hornocker Wildlife Research Institute are performing a study on the big cats of the world. Any of these groups would be glad for your support. In addition, you can learn more about Bengal tigers - the more you know, the more likely you will be to see an opportunity where you can help. Try the library, and keep up to date on current events in India by reading the newspaper and watching the TV news.

Fun Facts

In 1951, a rajah (or local king) took some guests hunting in his jungle in India. (The rajah ruled an area called Rewa - today, this area is part of a larger state called Madhya Pradesh.) They went to hunt Bengal tigers. During their hunt, they heard the sound of a tiger cub crying. So they followed the sound, and found a small, shivering male cub, alone and scared - a cub with white fur and black stripes. The rajah had heard stories about white tigers in his jungle, but no one had ever found a living one. So he had the cub rescued, and took him back to the palace. When the cub grew up, the rajah found a yellow female to be the white tiger's mate. Their cubs, it turned out, had a one in four chance of being white. So the rajah knew that the white cub wasn't an albino, but a rare colour phase that could pass that white fur on to his children (just as your parents "gave" you the colour of your hair and eyes). Today, all the white tigers in the world are descended from that one male white tiger of Rewa.

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