



Arabian Sand Cat

Kingdom: Animalia
 Phylum: Chordata
 Subphylum: Vertebrata
 Class: Mammalia
 Order: Carnivora
 Family: Felidae
 Genus: *Felis*
 Species: *margarita harrisoni*



Photo courtesy of Mike Dulaney

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The sand cat is found in the Sahara Desert of Africa in the countries of Algeria, Niger and Morocco; throughout the Arabian Peninsula; and parts of Central Asia including Turkmenistan, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. They live in desert habitats ranging from plains with little vegetation to rocky valleys with shrubs and trees.
- **Exhibit Location:** Adaptations

Characteristics

- Head & body length: 17 to 22 inches; tail length: 10 to 14 inches; Shoulder height: 10 to 12 inches; Weight: 4 to 8 pounds.
- The *Felis margarita* has a small, round body set on short legs. The head is large and wide in proportion to the body. It has a dense soft fur that is sand or gray color above and paler underneath. Reddish streaks run from its eyes across its cheeks. Its muzzle is white and it has brown tabby markings on its face and body.
- There are faint stripes running down the flanks with brown bands running around the tops of the front legs. The tail has 2-3 black rings towards its black tip.
- It has large, triangular ears that are set wide on its head. The ears are reddish-brown and black tipped and are deeply tufted to protect them from blowing sand.
- Enlarged auditory bullae (inner ear), and oversized ear flaps (pinnae) contribute to their keen sense of hearing needed to detect prey both above and below ground.
- The feet are covered with a thick layer of wiry hair that insulates the footpads (daytime sand temperature in the Sahara can reach 225 degrees Fahrenheit) and allows for easier movement in the sand.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild:** up to 13 years; **In Captivity:** 13 years (Mortality rate for juveniles is 41%)

Behaviors

- The sand cat is solitary and primarily nocturnal. The male and female come together only for mating. *Felis margarita* has a loud mating call, which resembles the barking of a small dog. Its other vocalizations include meowing, growling, hissing, spitting, screaming and purring.
- The sand cat is not a good climber or jumper, but it is an excellent digger. It uses this digging ability to dig burrows to escape the heat of the day. The burrows are shared with other individuals, but more than one cat never occupies the same burrow simultaneously. The sand cat is known to lie on its back outside the burrow to release internal heat.
- It has an estimated home range of about 7 square miles, and territories of neighboring males often overlap.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** scents, toys, insects

Reproduction

- Both males and females become sexually mature at 10-12 months
- The breeding period is thought to be: January –April in the Sahara; April in Turkmenistan; September-October in Pakistan.
- Gestation period is 60-63 days. Average litter size is 3 but can be as many as 6. Kittens weigh 1.5 to 2 ounces at birth and will gain about ¼ ounce every day for 3 weeks.
- Kittens' eyes open by the 14th day, they begin to walk by the 21st day, and by 5 weeks they emerge from the burrow and begin to dig for food. They will stay together for 4 months, when they start to learn to hunt for themselves.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** Jerboa (small desert mice), lizards, rabbits, insects, birds and snakes.
- **At the Zoo:** rats, quail, carnivore diet

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Near Threatened ; **CITES Appendix:** II
- Very little research has been done on the sand cat because they live in such vast desert locations. They are primarily nocturnal and their tracks are difficult to find.
- Their main threat comes from humans. They have been shot for sport and for their pelt. Many are trapped live and sold in the illegal pet trade.
- Hunting of the sand cat is prohibited in Algeria, Iran, Israel, Kazakhstan, Mauritania, Niger, Pakistan and Tunisia.
- It is unknown at this time to what extent, if any, the fires and bombs of the Gulf war have affected the sand cat.
- Predators: Humans, venomous snakes, jackals, birds of prey.

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- Their furry feet leave no tracks in the sand.
- Ancient tradition holds the belief that the sand cats were companion to the prophet Mohammed and his daughter.
- Their claws are very dull since they have nothing to sharpen them against in the desert.

Sources:

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