

## Close Encounter With a Desert Roaming Cheetah

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*Yvonne de Jong is a National Geographic grantee working to track down what may be Africa's least understood large animal, the Desert Warthog.*

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When you are lucky enough to spot a cheetah (scientific name: *Acinonyx jubatus raineyi*; Kiswahili name: *duma*), you typically see a 'little' head (well.....for a cat of that size 'little') sticking out of tall yellow grass under a shady acacia or balanites tree. If you are really lucky, there is a second 'little' head sticking out nearby. While conducting our [desert warthog survey](#) on the edge of Kenya's remote Chalbi Desert we had a very different encounter with the majestic cheetah. While driving slowly along a sandy track, we suddenly saw, only 4 meters away, a lean adult cheetah standing between two thorny shrubs...staring at us.



Two adult cheetah in Meru National Park, central Kenya. Photograph by Yvonne de Jong & Tom Butynski.

Cheetah are predominantly diurnal and occupy enormous (800-1500 km<sup>2</sup>) home ranges. Their distribution is largely dependent on the availability of prey. In fact, the cheetah's distribution coincides with that of gazelles (*Gazella* spp.) and impala (*Aepyceros melampus*). Cheetah are supported by a wide range of vegetation types but their densities are highest in wooded savannahs. Cheetah are adapted to open and semi-arid environments where they use their speed to out run their, usually fast, prey [small- and medium-sized ungulates including gazelles, impala, gerenuk (*Litocranius walleri*), dik-diks (*Madoqua* spp.), as well as our focal species during this survey....warthogs (*Phacochoerus* spp.).

Guenther's dik dik (*Madoqua guentheri*) in the the acacia shrubland of the Koroli Desert,



northern central Kenya. Photograph by Yvonne de Jong & Tom Butynski.

Life in the Chalbi Desert is tough. Wildlife is not diverse and those species that can endure this waterless environment occur at low densities. During our survey we do, however, come across potential cheetah 'nyama' (Kiswahili word for 'meat'). The widely scattered acacia and commiphora bushes and spare grass provide habitat for gerenuk, Guenther's dik-diks (*Madoqua guentheri*), Bright's gazelle (*Gazella notata*), and hares (*Lepus* spp.). The occasional oasis supports flocks of vulturine guinea fowl (*Acryllium vulturinum*). Despite the lack of warthog in the Chalbi Desert, small numbers occur in the doum palm (*Hyphaene thebaica*) dominated areas just to the west, near Lake Turkana. The spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*), which is known to steal kills from cheetah, is likely the only large carnivore to compete with the cheetah in this region. This competition is, however, probably minimized by the fact that the cheetah hunts primarily during the day and the hyena hunts primarily at night.

Spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) captured by one of our camera traps in an oasis located between the Koroli Plains and Chalbi Desert. A hyena chewed-up and destroyed a camera trap at this site. See our blog: [New Population of Bushbabies Discovered in Northern Kenya](#).

Photograph by Tom Butynski & Yvonne de Jong.

A flock of about 40 vulturine Guinea fowls (*Acryllium vulturinum*) was encountered in an oasis located between the Koroli Plains and Chalbi Desert. Photograph by Yvonne de Jong & Tom Butynski.

The ability to hide and disappear is an adaptation that cheetah have to compensate for their physical defenselessness...they are built for speed (indeed they are the fastest land mammal with a speed just over 100 km/h). They are not built to physically defend themselves against other larger predators.

Cheetah are generally difficult to observe and never reach high densities. Nonetheless, there is a reasonable

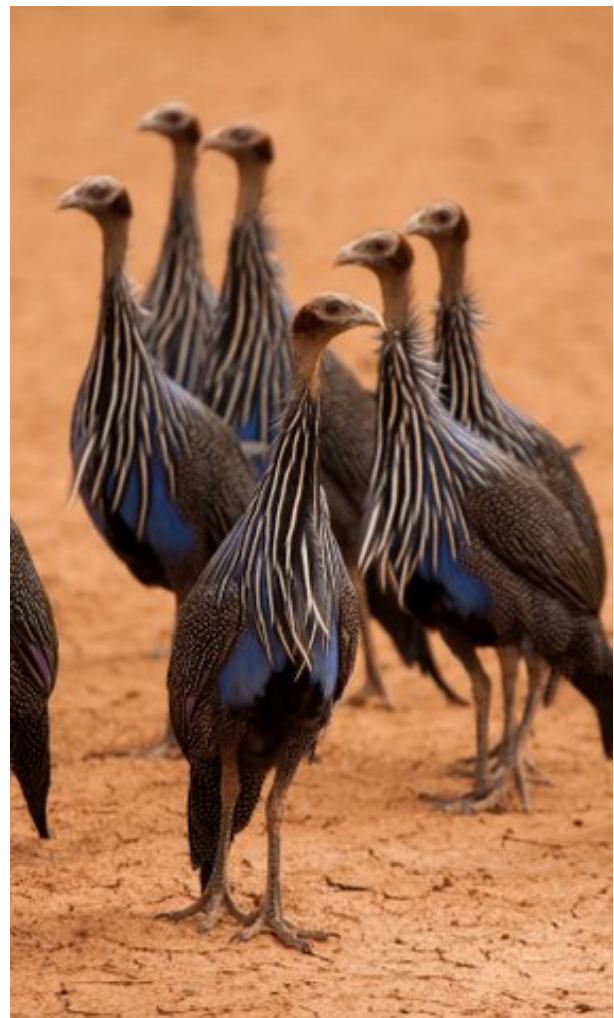


chance to see this charismatic cat when visiting Samburu National Reserve, Meru National Park and Laikipia County in central Kenya, or the Masai Mara in south-western Kenya.

Since 1986, the cheetah has been listed as a 'Vulnerable' species on the *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*. Cheetah are highly sensitive to modifications to their environment, competition with other large carnivores, and unstable prey densities. The major threats to their long-term survival are habitat degradation, destruction and fragmentation, as well as disease.

Cheetah were once widespread across Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Today, the only population outside of Africa is in Iran (estimated at 70 to 100 individuals). In Africa, the main populations of cheetah are in southern Africa and East Africa, but this is not saying much. For example, about 94% of the historical range of this over the area covered by Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and southern Sudan has been lost. The number of adult and sub-adult cheetah over this vast area is believed to be fewer than 2,600.

In East Africa, the main population of cheetah is in



southern Kenya (Masai Mara National Reserve, Tsavo East National Park, Tsavo West National Park) and contiguous central northern Tanzania (Serengeti National Park) with an estimated 710 individuals (IUCN 2013). Kenya's protected areas hold only about 20% of the country's cheetah. The other 80% are on private or community lands. Despite the fact that northern Kenya is marginal as cheetah habitat, human disturbance is limited due to the very low annual rainfall (average of 200 to 300 mm). What prey remains for cheetah is widespread and at low densities. We suspect that Guenther's dik-dik and Kirk's dik-dik (*Madoqua kirkii*) are the main prey of cheetah in this region.

Cheetah sightings in northern Kenya are rare. Although there are historic records from the Chalbi Desert, this area is now excluded from the IUCN Red List's cheetah distribution map. Our encounter was about 65 km north of the confirmed resident population of cheetah in Kenya.



Adult cheetah in Samburu National Reserve, central Kenya. Photograph by Yvonne de Jong & Tom Butynski.

During our opportune encounter with that cheetah in the Chalbi Desert we realize, a fraction of a second later, that a second adult cheetah was watching us from behind a bush. Now, with the cheetah behind us, we quickly stopped the Land Cruiser and grabbed our cameras, only to experience what the world's fastest land mammal does best....vanish in a flash!

**Next:** [New Populations of Bushbabies Discovered in Northern Kenya](#)

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