



# Fishing Cat

*Prionailurus viverrinus*

## Classification *What groups*

*does this organism belong to based on characteristics shared with other organisms?*

Class: Mammalia (all mammals)  
Order: Carnivora (carnivores)  
Family: Felidae (cats)  
Genus: Prionailurus (Asian small cats)  
Species:  
Prionailurus viverrinus (fishing cat)



## Distribution *Where in the world does this species live?*

Fishing cats are found in scattered areas throughout Asia. They inhabit the peninsular region of India, and areas of Southeast Asia including, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Sumatra, Thailand, Java, and Pakistan.

## Habitat *What kinds of areas does this species live in?*

Fishing cats live primarily in wetland areas, both marshes and swamps. These cats can be found in heavily forested regions adjacent to rivers or near jungles. They can also be found in scrub areas, reed beds, tidal creek, and mangrove areas. In the Nepalese lowlands some individual fishing cats spend a lot of time in dense grasslands well away from water.

## Physical Description *How would this animal's body shape and size be described?*

- Fishing cats are considered one of the largest of the lesser cats. Adults can weigh 13 to 26 lb (6-12 kg) and measure 2-3 feet long (0.6-1 m).
- Fishing cats are powerfully built with short limbs and a stocky body.
- They have a long head and a short tail that is roughly one-third the length of their body.
- Their fur is coarse and brownish gray in color with distinctive dark markings, which are a combination of both spots and stripes. These spots are arranged longitudinally across the body. Six to eight dark lines run from above the eyes between the ears over the crown to the nape of the neck. These lines gradually break up into shorter bars and spots on the shoulders. The fur on the underside is longer and spotted, and the tail is ringed with 5-6 black rings; tail tip is black.
- The ears are small and set low on the sides of the head. The backs of the ears are dark and have a central white spot. The face has two dark stripes extending across the cheeks from the eye to below the ear.
- The paws have moderately well-developed webs, and the claws extend past the claw sheaths when retracted.



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## Diet *What does this species eat?*

*In their historic range:* Fishing cats are best described as piscivores-predominately feeding on fish and shellfish. However, fishing cats' teeth are not specially modified for catching fish and its diet probably includes any small to medium-sized vertebrate it can catch. These cats are known to have killed frogs, snakes, and insects; also rodents, small civets, fawns, small pigs, coots, ducks, sandpipers, and a variety of domestic animals such as goats, calves, poultry and even dogs have been prey of fishing cats. At times they have been observed to be feeding on dead cows, so are thought to also eat some carrion.

*At the zoo:* At Denver Zoo the fishing cats are fed primarily fish (salmon, cod, herring, capelin, smelt, crayfish). At the zoo they are often fed live tilapia to allow the cats to hone their hunting and fishing skills. They also receive a small amount of various meat/prey items such as chicken, rabbit and rib bones.

## Predators *What eats this species?*

Fishing cats do not have any documented predators other than man. .

## Social Organization *How does this animal interact with others of its species?*

These animals are thought to be primarily nocturnal and solitary, with males having a territorial range of 16-22 km and females 4-6 km and mark their territory with their strong-smelling urine. However, little is really known of their behavior in the wild.

## Life Cycle *How does this species mate, raise young, grow and develop?*

Fishing cats mate in January and February. A male and a female make a sound called chittering as part of their courtship, with the female signaling her willingness to breed and the male communicating submissiveness. Birthing dens are often found in dense patches of reeds. Gestation lasts about 63-70 days and litter size varies from 1-4 with an average litter of 2 kittens. In the wild females raise their young without help from the male; he doesn't stay around once breeding is over. But males in captivity have been observed helping females care for and rear the young. The kittens weigh 100-173 grams at birth and will gain 11 grams per day. On the 16th day their eyes open. The kittens take meat around the 53rd day and are weaned at 4-6 months of age. At 8-9 months the young reach adult size and are independent at 10 months, and probably reach sexual maturity soon after. Not much is known about the lifespan of fishing cats in the wild. Zoo records indicate they many live up to 12 years in human care.

## Adaptations *What physical and behavioral characteristics enable this animal to survive and thrive?*

- Possibly the most obvious and striking adaptation of fishing cats compared to other cats, is the **webbing** between their toes and their behavior in and around water. Fishing cats are great **swimmers** and have adapted to **hunting in marshy areas** of Southeast Asia. They have been observed in the wild "**fishing**" at the edges of bodies of



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water. They appear to **scoop their prey** from the depths of the water with their partially webbed paws, and have also been observed playing with fish in shallow water. In captivity they have been observed to engage in washing behavior -taking flesh of other prey and dropping it in the water, retrieving it , and then eating it. They are also **strong swimmers** and **will swim and dive for their prey**. By **tapping their paws on the surface of the water, they trick fish** into thinking the water ripples are from an insect. When the fish is close enough, the cat dives in after it.

- **Fishing cat's fur has two layers:** one layer is very short and dense to keep the cat's skin warm and dry during time spent in the water; longer hairs, called guard hairs, give the cat its color pattern, which is great for camouflage.
- Like many smaller felines, **fishing cats communicate** with hisses, guttural growls, and even a low, demanding meow. Males and females make sounds called "chittering" as part of their courtship.
- **Kittens learn to fish** by watching their mother.

## Collection Connection

Denver Zoo is the only zoo housing mature adult fishing cats together with two fishing cats on exhibit. Ronaldo, born 6/14/12013 is the father of Miso-Chi. His favorite sleeping spot on exhibit is inside the large hollow log. He has a voracious appetite. Miso-Chi, born 1/25/2017 is the first and only fishing kitten ever born at Denver Zoo.

## Conservation Status: *Is this animal at risk for extinction and why?*

*IUCN Status:* Vulnerable

The conversion of wetland and floodplain habitats to agriculture has reduced the habitat of this species throughout its range. Southeast Asia wetlands are disappearing as the human population grows. These wetland areas are affected by pollution, over-farming and the use of chemical fertilizers at farms that drain into wetlands, over-fishing by humans, and drainage issues. These cats have also been subject to poaching, they are often hunted for food, medicine, or various body parts.

## Resources and Where to Learn More

Cat Specialist Group, 1996. "Fishing

Cat: *Prionailurus viverrinus*" <http://lynx.uio.no/catfolk/viver01.htm>.

Finn, F. 1929. *Sterndale's Mammalia of India*. Bombay: Thacker, Spink and Co.

Sunquist, M., F. Sunquist 2002. *Wild cats of the world*.