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Abstract: In Egypt, the cheetah is very rare, and may be extinct. If still in Egypt, it is restricted to the Western Desert in and around the Qattara Depression. While hunting, habitat disturbance and the reduction in prey have at the very least brought the population down to a critical level, sightings have been reported as late as 1994.

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The Great and Lesser Wild Cats of Egypt  
by Mark Hunter

Chances are, anyone visiting Egypt for simply a vacation will never see much wildlife beyond birds, maybe bats and a few lizards and other small reptiles, unless visiting the Cairo Zoo or perhaps one of the hotels that sometimes maintain small collections of animals, such as the Movenpick Jolie Ville (certainly not a petting zoo) in Luxor. Wildlife exists, nonetheless, and the more adventurous can take nature treks that may reveal more of Egypt's animal inhabitants.

Of all the animals in Egypt, cats (felids) have a special history. Certainly other animals were important to the ancient Egyptians, such as the Ram, bulls and cattle, canine, hippopotamus, various birds and crocodiles. One can certainly argue that some of these animals were more important to the Egyptians of a distant past than cats. However, cats are enduring and seem to remain both a love and a curse of modern Egypt. Feral domestic cats roam the streets of Cairo today, making a habitat of our manmade jungle.

But there are also true wildcats in Egypt. Of the 35 species of wildcats, Egypt is home to as many as six, and a seventh, the Lion *Panthera leo*, probably became extinct in the late pharaonic period. Some of the six are extremely rare, and may no longer exist in Egypt, but certainly some of those that do still stalk the Egyptian landscape are some of the most interesting, including the small *Felis Silvestris*, or Wild Cat, which looks very similar to and sometimes interbreeds with domestic cats, and may be the forerunner of the domestic cat. Others small cats include the *Felis Chaus* (Swamp Cat) and the *Felis margarita* (Sand Cat). Larger cats include the *Acinonyx jubatus* (Cheetah), *Panthera pardus* (Leopard) and the *Felis caracal* (Caracal).

Most of Egypt's wild cats can be differentiated fairly easily, though the smaller cats are fairly similar. In fact, the most difficult of Egypt's true wild cats is the ***Felis silvestris*** (Wild Cat), because it is so similar to a large domestic tabby-type feral cats. However, Leopards and Cheetahs are both extremely rare and perhaps even extinct in Egypt, while the Sand Cat, Wild Cat and Caracal are very elusive. The Swamp cat probably provides the best chance to be spotted, as it seems to have adapted better than most to our human presence.

Many believe that the Wild Cat (*Felis Silvestris*) is the forerunner of the modern domestic cat. However, the animal is now thought to have been domesticated in Mesopotamia, around 8,000 years ago. In fact, the first representations of a truly domestic cat do not appear in Egypt until the New Kingdom, around 1450 BC. There are earlier pictures in tomb paintings and friezes of what are clearly cats, domestic in appearance, but there is no evidence to prove that these depictions are of domesticated tabbies. By the New Kingdom, cats are portrayed more closely in association with other tame domestic animals, being fed or tethered to chair legs.  
Wild Cats (*Felis Silvestris*)



The subspecies occurring in Egypt are the *F. s. libyca* and *F. s. tristrami*. Their Arabic name is *Qitt gabali libi*, though Egyptians frequently refer to them as Kaffir Cats. They grow in length to between 61 and 93.5 cm, with a tail measuring 23.7 to 39 cm. Weighing between 2.5 and 5 kg, males are usually larger and heavier than females. They look like large, domestic cats but can be distinguished by the color of the back of the ear, the shape of the tail and the length of the legs, though none of these characteristics are easy to see given only a quick glimpse. Furthermore, when threatened, they react similar to domestic cats, arching the back and erecting the fur, spitting and hissing, with claws extended. They also sound much like domestic cats. However, their limbs are longer and they have proportionately longer tails. These cats are a grizzled buffish above with a blackish stripe down the center of the back. They are paler along the flanks, and whitish to pale buff below, marked with pale brown spots that form vertical stripes along the shoulder and sides. The legs have brown transverse bands and are paler inside, while the feet are yellowish with broken stripes. These cats have short muzzles, with orange around the nose and white patches below the eyes. Their cheeks are striped, and the throat and upper lips are also white. There is almost no tuft on the ears, which are orange-buff on the back and whitish inside. The tail is long, and dark above, with three blackish rings at the base and a dark tip. These cats have a fairly large range outside of Egypt, In Egypt, the

*F. s. libyca* can be found along the margins of the delta and Nile Valley, including the Fayoum where they are reported as fairly common. However, in the Fayoum, many of the cats may be hybrids due to mating with domestic cats. They are also found along the Mediterranean coast desert to Mersa Matruh, and have also been recorded in the Western Desert at Bahariya and Dakhla. The *F. s. Tristrami* is known from the North Sinai around al-Arish and in the southwest Sinai. They prefer dry areas with cover including cultivated land in the coastal desert zone, but also inhabit areas in the mountains.

These cats are typically nocturnal, opportunistic hunters. They have well developed hearing and sight, and mostly make a diet of small mammals, birds, reptiles and insects.

Apparently, this animal has not been studied extensively in Egypt. For example, it is not known exactly how much they actually do breed with domestic cats. In fact, their breeding habits in Egypt are largely unknown, though elsewhere they have a gestation period of 56 to 60 days, giving birth in the spring to two to five kittens.

#### **Swamp Cats (Jungle Cat, *Felis chaus*)**

Swamp cats, of which only one subspecies appears in Egypt, the *F. c. nilotica*, can also be confused with domestic cats. In Arabic they are known as Qitt barri nili. These cats look not unlike a very large, short-tailed domestic cat, growing in length from 40.5 to 104 cm. They have tails that range in size from 21 to 28 cm, and weight between 7 and 11.2 kg.

These cats are generally grizzled yellow-brown above, paling in color towards the flanks and with a darker stripe down the center of the back. The underside and inside of the legs are pale. They have pale spots on the flanks and belly, and pale stripes behind the legs. Their feet are ochre to brown, and are in general less strongly marked than the *Felis silvestris*). Their muzzle is rather elongated, and buffish along the nose with white patches below the eye and very faint markings along the forehead. Their cheeks have no patterns, and the whiskers are mixed black and white. They have large ears with short, black tuft, and their backsides are russet with a blackish base. The tail is distinctly short with a rounded dark tip and two blackish rings. Kittens have strikingly short tails, blue-ray eyes and significantly more robust claws than domestic kittens.

In Egypt, these cats' range include the Delta, along the Mediterranean coastal desert to Mersa Matruh, and all along the Nile Valley in the South to Aswan. There have been three recent recordings of kittens in cane fields at Luxor. They have been recorded in the Dakhla and Khaga Oasis in the Western Desert, and are reportedly common in the Fayoum. They like thick cover such as agricultural farmlands, marshes and reed beds, though in the coastal desert they are found in areas of less cover and have even been recorded along sea cliffs on the north coast. They prefer to make dens in burrows, rock cavities, deep thicket or dry areas in reed beds, but have also been found in abandoned buildings.

They have very acute sight and hearing, good scent and diet mostly on small mammals, birds, reptiles, including snakes, fish and eggs. They are usually nocturnal, but have been sighted hunting during daylight hours.

When threatened, like the Wild Cat, they react similar to the domestic cat, arching the back, raising the fur and hissing. They are reported to defend themselves fiercely.

These cats are probably mostly solitary, occupying a home range, though there have been reports of up to three adults seen together. In Egypt, births are usually recorded between January and April with from two to as many as six kittens, reared only by the female or with help from the male.

As a final note, these cats were mummified by the ancient Egyptians, but there is not evidence that they were ever domesticated by them. A theory that they contributed to the present domestic cat is now mostly rejected.



**Sand Cats (*Felis margarita*)**

The smallest of the Egyptian wild cats, there are two subspecies recorded in Egypt, which include the *F. m. margarita* on the mainland and the *F. m. harrisoni* in the Sinai. They normally have a length of 66 to 83 cm with a tail ranging between 23 and 31 sm. They weight between 1.5 and 3.4 kg, with the male generally larger and heavier than the female. This cat is smaller and more compact than the *Felis Silvestris*, with proportionately shorter legs.

These cats have a pale buff above, that pales even further toward the flanks and legs. They are white below, with throats tinged orange. Their markings are obscure, with pale brown stripes along the flanks. However, the forelegs are strongly marked with two transverse blackish stripes, while the hind legs are less strongly marked, with up to five brownish stripes. The feet and pads are totally covered with long, brown hair. They have a broad, flat head, with a pale face marked with orange-buff. The ears are very large and broad, and almost meet over the forehead. The back of the ears are buff with darker batches, while the inside is whitish. Their eyes are large with yellow iris. The tail is long, measuring about half the body length, colored grayish buff above and paler below. The tail usually has faint rings, numbering two to six, and has a

clear dark tip. The *F. m. harrioni* differs from the *F. m. margarita*, having usually five to seven tail rings, pure white paws and a larger, broader skull.

In Egypt, very little is really known about the cat's range. They have been spotted in southern and middle Egypt along the Nile, but evidence suggests that they may be more numerous in the northern Sinai. They seem to like sandy desert, for which their heavily haired soles are thought to be an adaptation, but can also be found in more rocky areas, though not in the mountains. They are not good climbers.

When threatened, they behave much like the *Felis silvestris*, and thus the domestic cat.

Though considered strictly nocturnal, they have been observed basking during daylight hours on very rare occasions. They are very cautious animals, and have been observed surveying their surroundings for as long as fifteen minutes with just their head out of the burrow before finally emerging.

These cats are thought to feed largely on small desert rodents, including the Lesser Egyptian Jerboa, Cairo Spiny Mouse and others. They have also been seen to take geckos, and probably also feed on birds, other reptiles and large insects. We believe they hunt mostly by sound, though they also have good sight, but less developed scent. They are thought to have a home range that is probably very large, moving as much as eight kilometers during a single night. Though the breeding habits of these cats are unknown in Egypt, elsewhere they have a gestation of approximately 63 days, delivering from two to five kittens during March and April.

Though these cats have a voice similar to *Felis silvestris*, loud mewing calls during mating have been likened to the yelp of a dog. Their tracks are almost impossible to follow because of their dense fur.



Caracal (*Felis caracal*)

Of the larger cats, the Caracal is almost certainly the more numerous in Egypt. *F. c. schmitzi* make up the only subspecies in Egypt, known in Arabic as Umm rishat. They normally have a length of 85 to 120 cm, with a tail between 20 and 30 cm. They weight between 8 and 18 kg, with the male generally larger and heavier than the female.

This is a medium sized cat with a short tail and long ear tufts. It has a uniform orange-brown coloration above, and is paler to white below with pale spotting. There is faint striping on their legs. Their hindquarters are set slightly higher than their forequarters, and they have a rather angular and strikingly marked head, with pale marking above each eye and a clear dark line running from above the eye down along the tear line and along the nose. They have white chins and throats, while their ears are large, long and pointed with elegant, elongated black tufts up to 60 mm long. The back of their ears are blackish.

In Egypt, these cats are rare and little is really known about them. They have been recorded in the Eastern Desert and in the north and southwestern Sinai, with unconfirmed reports of tracks in the central Sinai. However, they are very elusive and may be more widespread than the few recorded sightings indicate. They like open country, as well as mountain areas.

The cats are not vocal but they may spit and growl if threatened. These cats are largely nocturnal, but they may be active at dusk or during the day. Usually they remain by day in rock crevices, caves, burrows or dense bush.

Caracal are famous for their bird hunting skills, and are known to grab a flushed bird from the air with a high leap. They are agile cats that also feed on mammals as large as full-grown gazelles, but also reptiles and occasionally fresh carrion, including dead fish and even fruit. They have excellent sight and hearing, and good scent.

These are usually solitary animals, though they do occasionally form pairs or family groups. The male is probably territorial, with a range depending on the density of prey.

The gestation period of the cats is 69 to 70 days, with births usually in early August. They make a nursery den lined with fur and feathers, and usually deliver from one to six kittens.



Cheetah (Hunting Leopard, *Acinonyx jubatus*)

In Egypt, the Cheetah is known as Fahd siyad, Shita. They range in length between 175 and 220 cm, with a tail of 65 to 80 cm. These

large, slender, small headed cats usually weight between 40 and 60 kg.

These cheetahs are buffish to yellow colored above and on the flanks and outside legs. They have solid, round, dark spots. Below, they are paler with more diffused spotting. Their fur is generally short and dense, but longer below and with an erect mane along the shoulders and back. Their head is proportionately small and flat on top, with dense spotting, though the chin is white. One of their most distinctive features is the blackish tear mark running from the eye down the side of the face. They have short ears and a short muzzle. Their tail is long and full, being broader at the tip than the base. The upper part of the tale is spotted, while the lower half has up to six dark rings. The last of these rings is the broadest, while the tip of the tail is white. Unlike the other cats in Egypt, their claws are only semi-retractable.

In Egypt, these cats are very rare, and may be extinct. If still in Egypt, they are restricted to the Western Desert in and around the Qattara Depression. However, hunting, habitat disturbance and the reduction in prey have at the very least brought the population down to a critical level. However, sightings have been reported as late as 1994. These animals like open plains and savannas but can also be found in semi desert environments. They have roamed in the acacia groves of the Qattara Depression, but historically have also been found in the Mediterranean coastal desert and the sandy deserts of North Sinai.

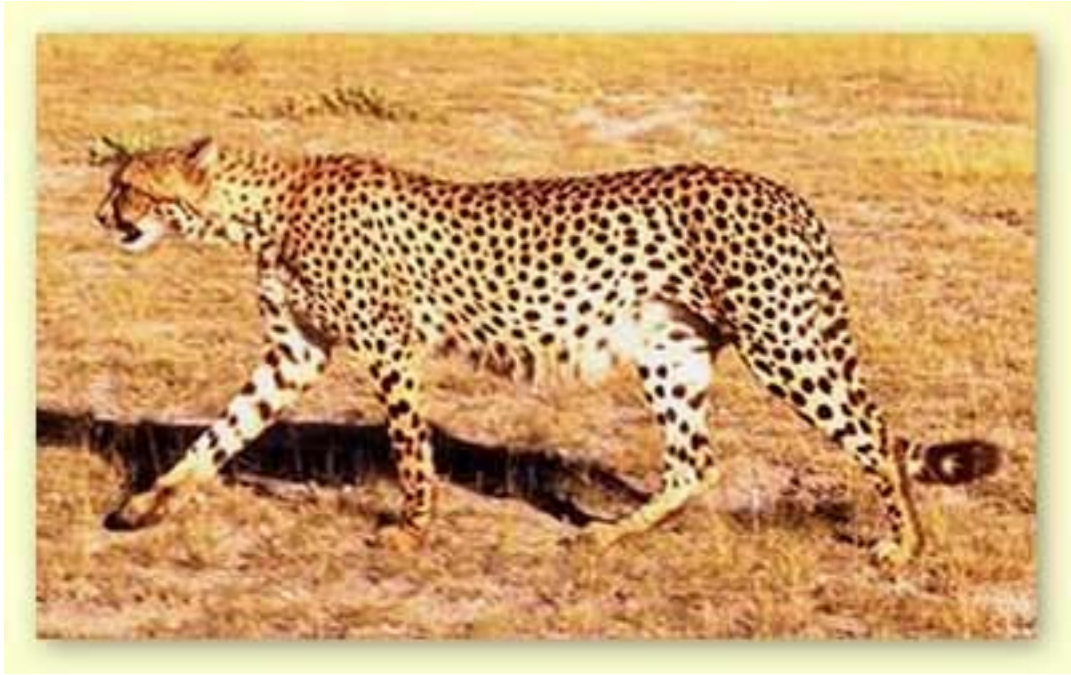
The Egyptian Cheetah has never been photographed, and very little is known about its habits. Elsewhere, they hunt by day, using mounds or raised areas as a lookout position. They run their prey down with a burst of speed up to 100 kmph, though they can only sustain this speed for a distance of about a half kilometer. Their diet in Egypt is likely to be gazelles, hares, birds and small mammals. They hunt mostly by sight.

Cheetahs hiss and snarl when angry.

These cats occupy a home range that varies according to prey density, which may be very large in Egypt. They have a complex social life. Females generally are solitary, except when raising their cubs or during mating. Young males are usually more social, forming groups, though in Egypt, it is unclear how these animals react given their small number.

The gestation period is usually 91 to 95 days, and in Egypt cubs have been found in April and May, but also November.





#### Leopards (*Panthera pardus*)

Leopards are another rare, if not extinct cat of Egypt, known in Arabic as Nimr. The subspecies occurring in Egypt are the *P. p. jarvisi* and *P. p. pardus*.

These cats are the largest in Egypt, measuring between 170 and 290 cm, with a tail 60 to 100 cm. They weight in the range from 35 to 85 kg, with the males larger and heavier than the females.

The Egyptian leopard is a powerful cat, orange-buff to pale yellow above, and white below. They are spotted all over, though less densely below and inside the legs. The spots are arranged in rosettes, particularly on the flanks and hindquarters. They have large and powerful heads, which are spotted more finely than the rest of the body. The cats have white chins, and ears that are rather small, with a backside marked in black and white. The upper part of the tail is also spotted, while the lower part have incomplete, dark rings. The Sinai variety, *P. p. jarvisi*, is described as being slightly darker with brownish spots. However, this subspecies is virtually unknown, and it may be a now isolated population of the Arabian Leopard, *P. p. nimr*.

In Egypt, sightings of this animal have been very rare. The *P. p. pardus* is recorded in the Western Desert as late as 1913, but in 1994, an expedition to the Gebel Elba region heard a leopard at night and recorded photographed fresh tracks the next day. The Sinai Leopards would be extremely rare, and the latest verified records are from the 1950s. However, Bedouins from the Gebel Serbal area and Feiran still claim that the animals can be found in the mountains in very small numbers.

These cats range from deep forest to near desert, but in Egypt, they have been found in mountainous areas that are lightly wooded with Acacia, such as Gebel Elba. They are very wary and elusive. Using hearing and sight, they are commonly only active at night, feeding on large to small mammals, birds, reptiles, large insects, eggs and sometimes livestock.

Normally they are solitary and territorial, though nothing is known of their habits in Egypt. They usually have a gestation period of 90 to 112 days, giving birth to one to six cubs.



See also:

The Animals of Ancient Egypt  
The Animal Cults of Ancient Egypt  
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