



# Tiger

## *Panthera tigris*

There are several different types, or *subspecies*, of tigers, and their names reflect where they live geographically. Pressures from illegal killing, or *poaching*, and habitat loss have already driven three tiger subspecies to extinction (the Bali, Javan, and Caspian subspecies) while the remainder are threatened with the same fate. Today, tiger subspecies include the Indian or Bengal, Indo-Chinese, South Chinese, Sumatran, and Siberian tigers.

Tigers occupy habitats as diverse as the coniferous, mixed deciduous forests of the Russian Far East to the tropical rainforests, grasslands and marshes of India and Indonesia. In the past, they were also found around the Caspian Sea in Turkey and Iran and on the islands of Bali and Java in Indonesia.

Tigers belong to the cat family, and are the biggest of the big cats, a group which includes lions, jaguars and leopards.

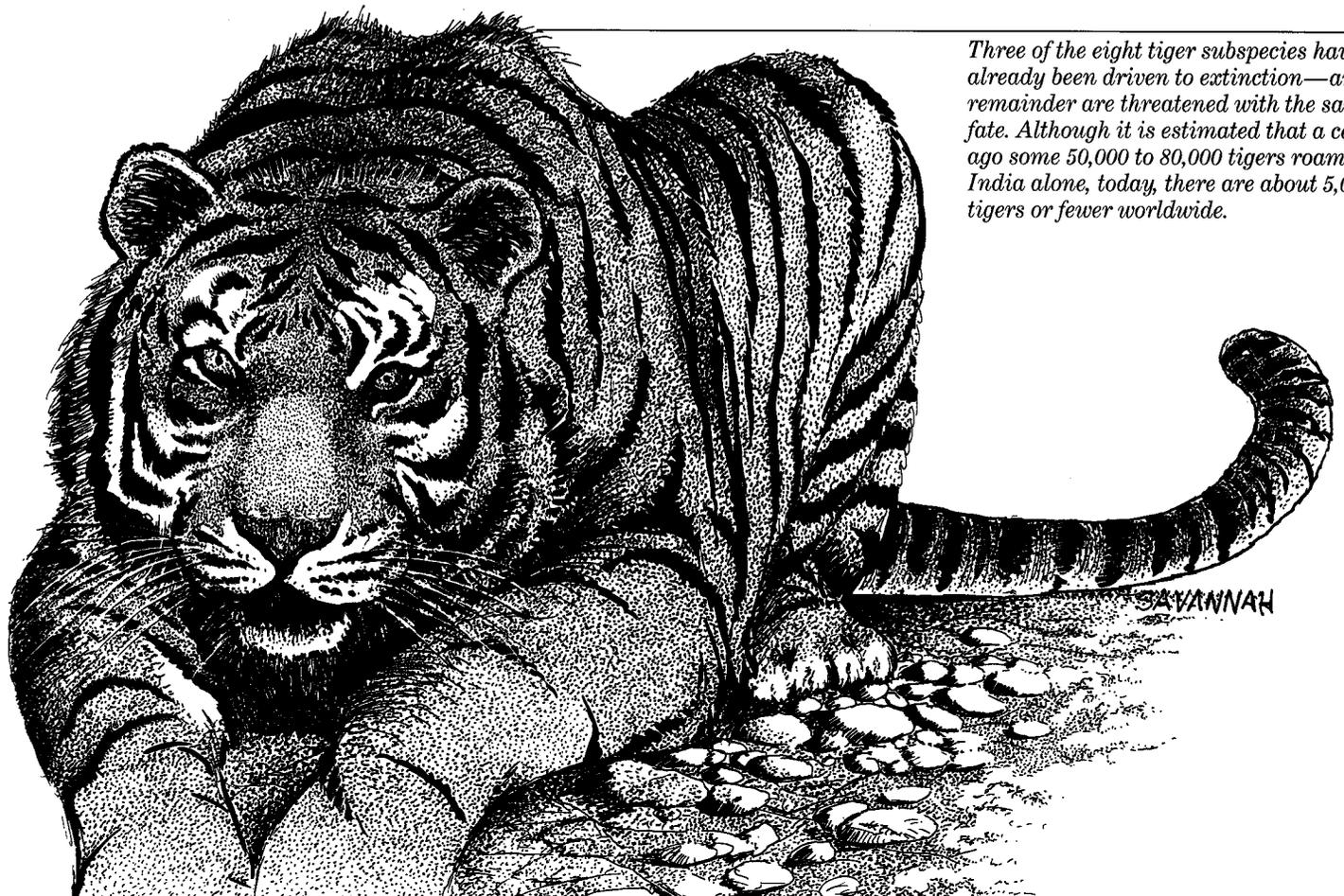
Siberian tigers are the largest of all of the tiger subspecies. Their size and extra thick, long coat help them survive temperatures as low as -49 degrees Fahrenheit. Siberian tigers' coats are more yellow than their tropical relatives, which are brighter in color with shorter and thinner hair. Bali tigers were the smallest of all the tigers; today, Sumatran tigers are the smallest of the living subspecies.

Although there is some variation in size among the subspecies, males generally measure about 11 feet from their nose to the tip of their tail and weigh about 400 pounds. Females are slightly smaller measuring a

little more than 8 feet and weighing about 300 pounds. Males also have ruffs of hair around their cheeks.

Although their orange coats with black stripes and white patches are very conspicuous in a zoo, tigers blend in well with their natural surroundings. The black lines serve to break up their body shape in tall grasslands. These stripes also serve as identifying markers because, just like human fingerprints, no two tigers have the same pattern of stripes.

Tigers are *carnivores*, or meat-eaters. They prefer deer, antelopes, and wild pigs, but they will eat whatever they can catch. This might be animals as small as frogs, turtles, fish, or birds, or animals as large as water buffalo, elk, rhinoceros, or elephant



*Three of the eight tiger subspecies have already been driven to extinction—and the remainder are threatened with the same fate. Although it is estimated that a century ago some 50,000 to 80,000 tigers roamed India alone, today, there are about 5,000 tigers or fewer worldwide.*

calves. Tigers generally avoid contact with humans.

Tigers are well-equipped for hunting. Their keen eyesight picks up even the slightest movement. The tiger's large, cup-shaped ears focus sounds making its hearing very sensitive. A tiger's long, stiff whiskers are used as feelers to help it maneuver through twigs and branches in the dark. The tiger's sense of smell is also excellent.

Like housecats, tigers have retractable claws. They can pull their claws into a protective sheath to prevent them from becoming worn down while walking on rocks or hard ground, keeping them very sharp.

Tigers are primarily *nocturnal*, meaning they hunt at night. But they may continue to hunt during the day if they are not successful. They may travel 10 to 20 miles in a single night searching for a meal.

Tigers rely on surprise and great strength to overcome their prey. They may stalk their prey, or lie in ambush at a watering hole or a well-used path. Tigers can run very fast, but only for brief distances (about 80 feet). If an animal eludes them, they seldom continue to chase it.

If they catch their prey, tigers are very effective at killing, but they fail to catch their targets many more times than they succeed; tigers may only succeed in catching a meal once in 15 or 20 attempts.

Tigers can eat as much as 50 to 70 pounds at one meal. Many times, though, they eat much less and may go a week without any food at all.

A male tiger's territory might encompass up to 25 square miles, while a female's range is about 8 to 10 square miles. Male tigers are willing to share territory with females, but will not tolerate other males. Tigers mark their territory by scratching trees, scraping

the ground, and spraying trees, rocks, and bushes with urine.

Tigers may live up to 15 years in the wild. Most of this time is spent alone, coming together only to mate. The mating period lasts only a few days, then male and female go their separate ways once again.

About 3 to 3½ months after mating, a litter averaging 2 to 3 cubs is born. About the size of a housecat, the cubs are blind and helpless. It will be 2 weeks before their eyes open, and they will be 3 months old before they start eating meat.

At first, the mother brings food back to the den. After about 2½ months, the cubs accompany her to learn how to hunt. Young cubs follow their mother through tall grass, keeping sight of the back of her ears, which are easily identified by the black coloring with a large white spot.

After 1½ years of learning to survive, the young can effectively hunt on their own, but often, due to their lack of experience, the young may be hurt or even killed by the antlers or hooves of prey. At this time, they leave their mother's territory to establish their own, and are ready to begin breeding and raising their own families.

Some estimates indicate that a century ago, some 50,000 to 80,000 tigers roamed India alone. Today, there are about 5,000 tigers or fewer worldwide. And these numbers continue to decline.

Until it was banned, trophy hunting and a market for tiger rugs and coats threatened the tiger's survival. Today, habitat destruction, population growth, and an insatiable demand for tiger parts may be too much for the remaining tigers to survive.

In many Asian cultures, tiger parts are thought to cure diseases such as convulsions, typhoid fever, rheumatism, and dysentery.

Tiger bone used in these traditional medicines sells for as much as \$75 to \$115 per pound—as much as some villagers make in a year. In addition, tiger genitalia is considered to be an *aphrodisiac*, a substance thought to contribute to sexual stamina. All of these factors cause widespread poaching of tigers.

In Russia, logging threatens the Siberian tiger's already shrinking habitat. Poaching has greatly increased since the borders between Russia, China and North Korea opened.

In 1972, India led the world in efforts to save tigers by setting aside a number of areas as tiger reserves complete with patrolling guards. But poaching continues due to widespread corruption and a lack of alternative incomes for village populations that continue to grow.

Tigers are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an agreement among more than 120 nations to eliminate illegal trade in animals and plants, such as wild tigers, and their parts and associated products. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is the federal agency responsible for the U.S. government's compliance with the CITES treaty.

The U.S. government imposed wildlife trade sanctions on Taiwan in 1994 for that country's illegal trade in tiger as well as rhinoceros parts and products—the first time the U.S. government has taken such action on another country to penalize illegal trade in critically endangered wildlife.

*Endangered* means a species is in danger of becoming extinct throughout all or a portion of its range. The less dire *threatened* designation means a species is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future.

In addition, all tiger species are listed as endangered species under the Endangered Species Act, prohibiting tiger parts and products from being imported into the U.S. except under certain conditions.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service also supports conservation efforts in other countries, such as India, through funding and technical assistance that includes resource management, research, and education.

Even in areas where tigers are now extinct, they live on in myths, legends and rituals. Tigers may never be as numerous as they were a century ago, but perhaps we can learn to revere and protect them before it is too late.

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