



RUSTY-SPOTTED CAT (*PRIONAILURUS RUBIGINOSUS*): SPECIES IN NEWS

- **Scientific Name:** *Prionailurus rubiginosus*
 - The rusty-spotted cat belongs to the genus *Prionailurus* and is one of the smallest wild cats in the world.
- **Size:** *The smallest and lightest known cat species in the world.*
 - This feline holds the title of the smallest wild cat, with adults weighing between **0.9 to 1.6 kg** and measuring **35-48 cm** in body length, excluding the tail.
- **Distribution:** *Found in dry deciduous and semi-deciduous forests in northern and central India, the Western Ghats, Kachchh, Rajasthan, peninsular India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.*
 - This species thrives in diverse habitats, from **dry forests and scrublands to rocky outcrops and grasslands.**
 - In India, it is widely distributed across the subcontinent, particularly in **Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu.**
 - Outside India, populations exist in **Nepal and Sri Lanka**, where they are known to inhabit dense forests.
- **Population in India:** *India holds 80% of the species' total population.*
 - The majority of the global population of rusty-spotted cats is found in India, making conservation efforts crucial for their survival.
 - Habitat destruction, deforestation, and human-wildlife conflict threaten their numbers.
- **Coat:** *Fawn-grey with rusty spots on the back and flanks.*
 - The rusty-spotted cat's fur has a **soft fawn-grey color**, with distinctive **rusty-red spots on its back and sides**, which provide camouflage in its natural habitat.
- **Head:** *Short and rounded, with two white streaks on the inner edges of the eyes.*
 - The cat has a small, rounded face with white streaks extending from the **inner corners of its large eyes**, which enhance its keen vision.
- **Eyes:** *Large, with greyish-brown to amber irises; large eyes are adapted for nocturnal behavior.*
 - The **large eyes** help the cat see clearly in low-light conditions, as it is primarily **nocturnal** and hunts at night.
- **Legs and Feet:** *Relatively short legs with black soles on the feet.*



- The cat has **short but agile legs**, and its **black footpads** help it move stealthily across different terrains.
- **Tail:** *Moderately long, rusty-colored, unmarked.*
 - The tail is **proportionally long** compared to the body and **lacks markings**, which differentiates it from other wild cats.
- **Conservation Status:** *IUCN Red List: Near Threatened.*
 - The species faces threats from **habitat destruction, poaching, and road accidents.**
 - Conservation measures, including **protected areas and awareness campaigns**, are crucial to its survival.



Big Cats in India

1. Royal Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*)

- **Population in India:** 2,967 (as per 2018-19 Census).
- **India accounts for about 70% of the world's tiger population.**
 - The **Bengal tiger** is the largest wild cat species in India and the **national animal of India.**
 - It is found in **tropical and subtropical forests, mangroves, and grasslands**, with major populations in **Sundarbans, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttarakhand, and Assam.**



- India's tiger population has seen a steady increase due to conservation programs like **Project Tiger (1973)**.

2. Asiatic Lion (*Panthera leo persica*)

- **Population in India:** 674 (as per the 2020 Census).
- **Gir National Park in Gujarat is the last abode for the surviving population of Asiatic Lions in the world.**
 - Unlike African lions, Asiatic lions have a **smaller mane and a prominent belly fold**.
 - They were once widespread across the Middle East and India but now survive **only in the Gir Forest of Gujarat**.
 - Their population has increased from fewer than **200 in the 1960s** due to strong conservation efforts.

3. Leopard (*Panthera pardus fusca*)

- **Population in India:** *Estimated between 12,000 to 14,000.*
- **The population is genetically diverse/outbred compared to other subspecies in Asia.**
 - Leopards are **highly adaptable** and are found across **forests, hills, and urban areas**.
 - They are known for their **agility and ability to climb trees**, often dragging prey up trees to avoid scavengers.
 - Major populations exist in **Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan**.

4. Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*)

- **Population in India:** *Approximately 500 (as per 2021 estimates).*
- **Native to the mountain ranges of Central and South Asia, found in Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh.**
 - Snow leopards inhabit **high-altitude mountainous regions**, typically above **3,000 meters**.
 - They have **thick fur and large paws**, adapted for walking on snow and surviving in freezing temperatures.
 - Conservation efforts include **Project Snow Leopard (2009)**, aimed at protecting this elusive species.

5. Cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*)

- **Reintroduced in India in 2022.**



- **Cheetahs were declared extinct in India in 1952, and in 2022, eight individuals were reintroduced from Namibia into Kuno National Park.**
 - The cheetah is the **fastest land animal**, capable of reaching speeds of **80-100 km/h**.
 - India had a historical population of Asiatic cheetahs, but they went extinct due to **hunting and habitat loss**.
 - The reintroduction program aims to establish a **breeding population in Kuno National Park**, marking the first wild cheetah population in India in over **70 years**.

Conclusion

India is home to a diverse range of wild cats, from the **tiny rusty-spotted cat** to the **majestic Bengal tiger**. Conservation efforts, including **habitat protection, anti-poaching measures, and community involvement**, play a vital role in ensuring the survival of these species. The **reintroduction of cheetahs** marks a significant step in India's wildlife conservation history. However, ongoing threats such as **deforestation, human-wildlife conflict, and climate change** highlight the need for continued efforts to protect these magnificent creatures.

Source: <https://theprint.in/environment/researchers-tracking-pangolin-poachers-stunned-by-rare-sight-a-rusty-spotted-cat-in-purulia-forest/2470543/>

