

## South African Lion

*Panthera leo krugeri*

### Classification

Class: Mammalia  
Order: Carnivora  
Family: Felidae  
Genus: *Panthera*  
Species: *leo*  
Subspecies: *krugeri*

### Distribution

South African lions live in sub-Saharan Africa excluding the Congo rainforest belt.

### Habitat

Lions live in a variety of habitat including rich grasslands, scrublands, arid woodlands, and semi-deserts.

### Physical Description

- Males can exceed nine and a half feet (2.9 m) in length.
- Male lions weigh 330-530 pounds (149-239 kg); females weigh 270-400 pounds (122-180 kg).
- The lion stands over three feet (1 m) at the shoulder.
- Their fur is a pale sandy or tawny yellow.
- Adult males have a large, bushy mane of darker fur around their head and neck.
- Cubs have rosette spots which fade as they mature.

### Diet

What Does It Eat?

*In the wild:* A variety of large prey including wildebeest, antelope, zebra, giraffe and warthog. They also steal kills from other predators.

*At the zoo:* Nebraska feline diet and bones.

What Eats It?

Lion cubs are killed by hyenas and male lions that are not pride members.

### Social Organization

Lions are the most social of all cats. They are the only cats that live in large family groups called "prides" consisting of four to 12 related adult females with their offspring plus two to three unrelated adult males. Lions also hunt in groups using stalking and ambush techniques. Females do most of the hunting. All members of the pride share in the kill, with males eating first followed by females and then cubs. Males protect the females and cubs from other lions and hyenas.

### Life Cycle

Females are sexually mature at about two years, males at about three to four years. Mating can occur throughout the year. A litter of one to five cubs is born after a gestation of 100-119 days. Females rear their young together and will suckle cubs other than their own. Cubs nurse for six to eight months but begin eating meat by three months. Sub-adult males leave the pride at two to three years of age but females may stay with the same pride for their entire life. Males live alone or in coalitions of two to three lions. Mortality of cubs is high – up to 80% die before age two. Cubs eat last at a kill, so if food is scarce, they may starve. Also a new male taking over the pride will often kill existing cubs to induce females to mate with him and therefore populate the pride with his own cubs. Males generally stay with a pride only a few years before being forced out by other, stronger males. Lions have a life span of 15 years in the wild and up to 24 years in captivity.

### Adaptations

#### Mane Attraction

Male lions have an impressive large, bushy mane of darker fur around their head which makes them appear larger, helps scare away other males and attracts females. The mane also helps protect the lion's face and neck when fighting other males.

#### Keep in Touch

The roar of a lion can be heard up to five miles away and can be very intimidating up close. Lions roar to keep in touch at night or during the day if they can't see other pride members in tall grass. Males roar to maintain territories and to chase away other males. Female lions roar to protect cubs from encroaching males or to call other female pride members for help. Lions can make a purring sound only when exhaling.

### **Smile!**

Lions have large canine teeth to grab and kill prey. Their carnassial teeth are adapted for gripping and tearing flesh. To compensate for the lack of chewing molars, the lion's tongue is coated with sharp pointed papillae that help to lacerate food and rasp flesh off the carcass.

### **3-D Vision**

Cats have the most highly developed binocular vision of all carnivores resulting in extremely accurate 3-D vision, which helps them gauge the distance to prey animals. In low light they can see six times better than humans.

### **Conservation Connection**

*IUCN Status: Vulnerable.*

While lions are not immediately threatened with extinction, their long-term survival is far from assured. Lions need large territories in which to hunt, enough large prey to sustain the pride and safety from humans. The increasing human populations in Africa are reducing and fragmenting the available territory and prey. The lion's future may depend on safe areas like national parks or preserves to protect lions and provide for their survival.

### **Fun Facts**

- Because they live so closely together, lions in a pride communicate their emotions using visible facial expressions.
- Like all cats, lions walk digitgrade – on their toes – like a runner in the starting block.
- Lions have the biggest eyes of any meat-eating animal and can sometimes see prey miles away.
- A lion can jump as much as 35 feet in one leap.
- Whisker spots are different on each lion and can be used to identify individual lions.
- Lions are the second largest cat species (tigers are larger) and the only cats that live in large family groups.

