

Clouded Leopard

Neofelis nebulosa

Life in the Trees

Clouded leopards are well adapted for arboreal living. Their short, flexible legs, large feet and sharp, retractable claws make them very adept in the trees. Their long tail provides balance as they leap from branch to branch. Their arboreal lifestyle also provides protection from larger predators like tigers and leopards.

What Big Teeth You Have!

Clouded leopards have the longest canine teeth relative to their body size of any cat species. Their canines can reach two inches longer. Their skull is long and narrow providing support for the powerful jaw muscles they use to hold and kill their prey. Unlike most cats, clouded leopards deliver a killing bite on the back of the neck rather than a suffocating bite on the throat.

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Family: Felidae

Genus: *Neofelis*

Species: *nebulosa*

Distribution

Southeast Asia in southern China, parts of Nepal, India, Burma and from Indochina to Sumatra and Borneo. Extinct in Taiwan.

Habitat

Primarily lowland tropical and subtropical evergreen forests up to 6500 feet but also found in dry woodlands, mangrove swamps, tall grasslands and coastal hardwood forest.

Physical Description

- Clouded leopards have a head-body length of 24-43 inches (60-110 cm) with a 24-35 inch (60-90 cm) tail.
- They weigh 24-50 pounds (11-22 kg). Females are smaller than males.
- Their fur has distinctive "cloud-shaped" dark blotches partially framed in black on a tawny gray background.
- They have a long body, short legs and a long tail.
- They have canine teeth up to two inches long.

Diet

What Does It Eat?

In the wild: Monkeys, birds, small mammals, porcupines, deer, wild boar and occasionally livestock including chickens and goats.

At the zoo: Special feline diet and bones.

What Eats It?

Tigers, leopards, and humans.

Social Organization

Clouded leopards are solitary except for mating pairs and females with cubs.

Life Cycle

Clouded leopards reach sexual maturity at two to three years of age. Relatively little is known about the breeding season and mating behavior of this elusive cat in the wild. In a ground-level den or hollow tree, the female gives birth to a litter of one to five (usually two) cubs after a gestation of 85-93 days. Females raise the cubs alone. Cubs are born blind and helpless weighing five to nine ounces (140-280 gm). The cubs are born with characteristic large "cloud" spots, which are solid black until they are six months of age when they develop the typical adult coloration. The cubs open their eyes at 10-11 days. They can walk at 20 days and climb trees by the age of six weeks. They consume meat at seven to ten weeks and are weaned at 10-14 weeks. The cubs are completely independent by 10 months and leave their mother to establish their own territory. Lifespan in the wild is about 11 years. Clouded leopards have lived up to 17 years in captivity.

Adaptations

Life in the Trees

Clouded leopards are well adapted for arboreal living. Their short, flexible legs, large feet and sharp, retractable claws make them very adept in the trees. Their long tail provides balance as they leap from branch to branch. They can descend head first down tree trunks, move along branches while hanging upside down and even hang from branches using only their hind feet enabling them to drop down and ambush prey on the ground. They have highly developed binocular vision resulting in extremely accurate 3-D vision, which helps them gauge the distance to prey as they hunt in the tree canopy. Their arboreal lifestyle also provides protection from larger predators like tigers and leopards.

Creatures of the Night

Clouded leopards are not solely nocturnal as was once thought, but they are most active at night. Their distinctive cloud patterned fur coat provides camouflage enabling them to stalk prey and also hide from potential predators like tigers and leopards. They have excellent hearing that enables them to locate prey at night. They have a tapetum lucidum, a mirrorlike layer in the back of the eye that reflects light back through the eye to help produce a brighter image in low light enabling them to see six times better than humans at night.

What Big Teeth You Have!

Clouded leopards have the longest canine teeth relative to their body size of any cat species. Their canines can reach two inches (four cm) or longer. Their skull is long and narrow providing support for the powerful jaw muscles they use to hold and kill their prey. Unlike most cats, clouded leopards deliver a killing bite on the back of the neck rather than a suffocating bite on the throat.

Can You Spot Me Now?

The color or pattern of most cats' fur is similar to the color of their primary habitat. Stripes, spots, blotches or rosettes break up the outline of the cats helping them blend into their surroundings and concealing them from prey. The clouded leopards' distinctive coloration and cloudlike spot pattern provide excellent camouflage in their forest habitat.

Conservation Connection

IUCN Status: Vulnerable.

There are no reliable estimates for clouded leopard populations in the wild, but their numbers are thought to be in decline. Clouded leopards are endangered primarily due to habitat loss due to deforestation for agriculture. They are hunted for their beautiful pelts and their bones, claws and teeth are used in traditional Asian medicine. These beautiful cats are also on the menu in restaurants in Asia. Clouded leopards are difficult to breed in captivity because of a high incidence of aggression between males and females. Recent efforts to introduce male/female pairs before they are a year old have led to more successful breeding.

Fun Facts

- Clouded leopards have a hyoid bone so they can purr like small cats, but they cannot roar like other large cats.
- They have flexible ankle joints that allow their hind feet to rotate. This adaptation enables clouded leopards to descend trees headfirst. The only other cat that can do this is the margay.
- The clouded leopard is one of the most arboreal of all cats.
- They can leap 15 feet from branch to branch.
- Despite their name, clouded leopards are not a species of leopard. Clouded leopards are placed in their own genus *Neofelis* because they are so unique. They are considered a "bridge" between typical big cats (lions, tigers, etc) and the small cats (puma, lynx, ocelot, etc).