

CATS of the Indian Subcontinent

Immortalised by Kipling, the tiger is rightly considered the king of India's jungle and is commonly perceived as the only wild cat on the subcontinent, but the reality is very different.

The astonishing diversity of geography, ranging from the snowy peaks of the Himalaya to the jungles of Sri Lanka, supports an equally diverse variety of flora and fauna including numerous species of cat.

Historically many of these species roamed throughout the subcontinent, although the ever increasing influence of man has reduced their natural habitat and the national parks are frequently their last bastions. India remains the only country in the world where both lions and tigers reside and although their populations are limited, sightings are not uncommon. At the other extreme, the snow leopard, arguably the most beautiful of cats and 'the holy grail' for many wildlife enthusiasts, traverses huge territories of rocky slopes and mountain passes in search of prey. Smaller species of cat more akin to the domestic cat hunt on the jungle floor, high in the treetops, along river banks and most surprisingly in the streams and water channels. Visiting the many

national parks of the subcontinent remains the best way to see these wonderful species and our wildlife specialists will be able to tailor a trip to maximise the chances of seeing these beautiful creatures in their natural environment.

FACT FILE

A two week trip to India incorporating visits to the three major national parks of Ranthambhore, Bandhavgarh and Kanha costs from £2,500 per person, including return flights. For details please contact Rupert or Harsha on 01993 838 300.

SPECIES MARBLED CAT **LENGTH** Up to 0.55 metres

WEIGHT Up to 5 kilogrammes **LIFESPAN** Up to 10 years

DIET Birds, small mammals, rats, some amphibians and the occasional insect.

HABITAT Nocturnal and partly arboreal the marbled cat dwells in tropical forests although it is being affected by habitat loss.

WHERE ARE THEY FOUND? This very rare species inhabits the forested areas of Bhutan, Nepal and northeast India.

BEST TIME TO VIEW THEM An incredibly agile animal, the marbled cat is active at night and spends much of its time in the safety of trees.

RECOMMENDED ACCOMMODATION Very little is known about this cat but research would suggest that the species may be resident around Manas National Park in Assam and Bhutan. The Bansbari Lodge at Manas is the best accommodation available, situated next to the park entrance.

SPECIES FISHING CAT **LENGTH** Up to 0.85 metres

WEIGHT Up to 14 kilogrammes **LIFESPAN** Up to 10 years

DIET Primarily a semi-aquatic hunter of fish, frogs, crabs, water insects and shellfish, the fishing cat will also prey on small mammals or scavenge on kills.

HABITAT Disproving the theory that cats do not like water, the fishing cat lives near lakes, river banks, creeks and swamp areas where there is a good supply of aquatic prey.

WHERE ARE THEY FOUND? Mainly found in north and northeast India near water sources, small populations also exist in Kerala and Sri Lanka.

BEST TIME TO VIEW THEM The fishing cat can hunt by day or night but will take food when any opportunity arises. Sightings are possible when their prey are most active during the early morning or late afternoon.

RECOMMENDED ACCOMMODATION Sightings may be possible during stays at the Wild Grass Lodge in Kaziranga, a comfortable retreat close to the park and tea plantations.





SPECIES ASIATIC LION

LENGTH Up to 2.75 metres

WEIGHT Up to 250 kilogrammes

LIFESPAN Up to 15 years

DIET Due to its proximity to local communities the Asiatic lion will often take cattle from surrounding farmland. However, buffalo, nilgai, chital, sambar and wild boar will also make up its diet.

HABITAT Found in grassland, scrub and open forest in Sasangir National Park in the western state of Gujarat.

WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

Restricted to an isolated population in Sasangir National Park in Gujarat, although there are plans to relocate a number of animals to other protected areas.

BEST TIME TO VIEW THEM

These animals are largely tolerated by local tribesmen despite regularly taking cattle and other livestock. As a result the Asiatic lion does not fear man as much as other cats and lives in relatively close proximity to villages. Sightings of Asiatic lions are possible during the day.

RECOMMENDED ACCOMMODATION

Limited and fairly basic accommodation in Sasangir National Park.



SPECIES JUNGLE CAT

LENGTH Up to 0.95 metres

WEIGHT Up to 16 kilogrammes

LIFESPAN Up to 15 years

DIET Feeds mainly on small mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians.

HABITAT Resembling a large domestic cat, the jungle cat hunts in the jungles and swamps but can occasionally be found in scrub and on village fringes.

WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

The jungle cat is the most common of the subcontinent's small wild cats and is similar in appearance to the domestic cat but with slightly longer legs and ears. Found in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka this cat hunts around river banks, ponds and on the outskirts of village settlements where leftovers and waste attract its prey. They are sighted in Ranthambhore, Pench, Kanha, the Chambal river valley and in the Aravali hills of Rajasthan.

BEST TIME TO VIEW THEM

Jungle cats are active during the day and night so sightings are not uncommon.

RECOMMENDED ACCOMMODATION

You may see a jungle cat on the banks of the Chambal river during a stay at the Chambal Safari Lodge around an hour south of Agra.

SPECIES TIGER

LENGTH Up to 2.8 metres

WEIGHT Up to 300 kilogrammes

LIFESPAN Up to 18 years

DIET Tigers feed mainly on deer, nilgai, black buck, wild boar, buffalo, gaur and sometimes elephant calves. They will also take livestock, often resulting in persecution by local village and farming communities, an issue that threatens its existence.

HABITAT Tigers have adapted well to a range of habitats. Shade and access to water are their essential needs but they can be found in diverse landscapes across India including open scrub, thick forest, mangrove swamps, rocky country and open grassland.

WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

They are resident in a number of protected national parks in India including Ranthambhore, Kanha, Bandhavgarh, Pench, Nagarhole, Bandipur and Kaziranga.

BEST TIME TO VIEW THEM

Tigers are predominantly active at night, although they can be seen resting in the shade or sometimes wallowing in a waterhole during the day. The best time for viewing is generally early morning and late afternoon as most parks do not permit entry during the hours of darkness.

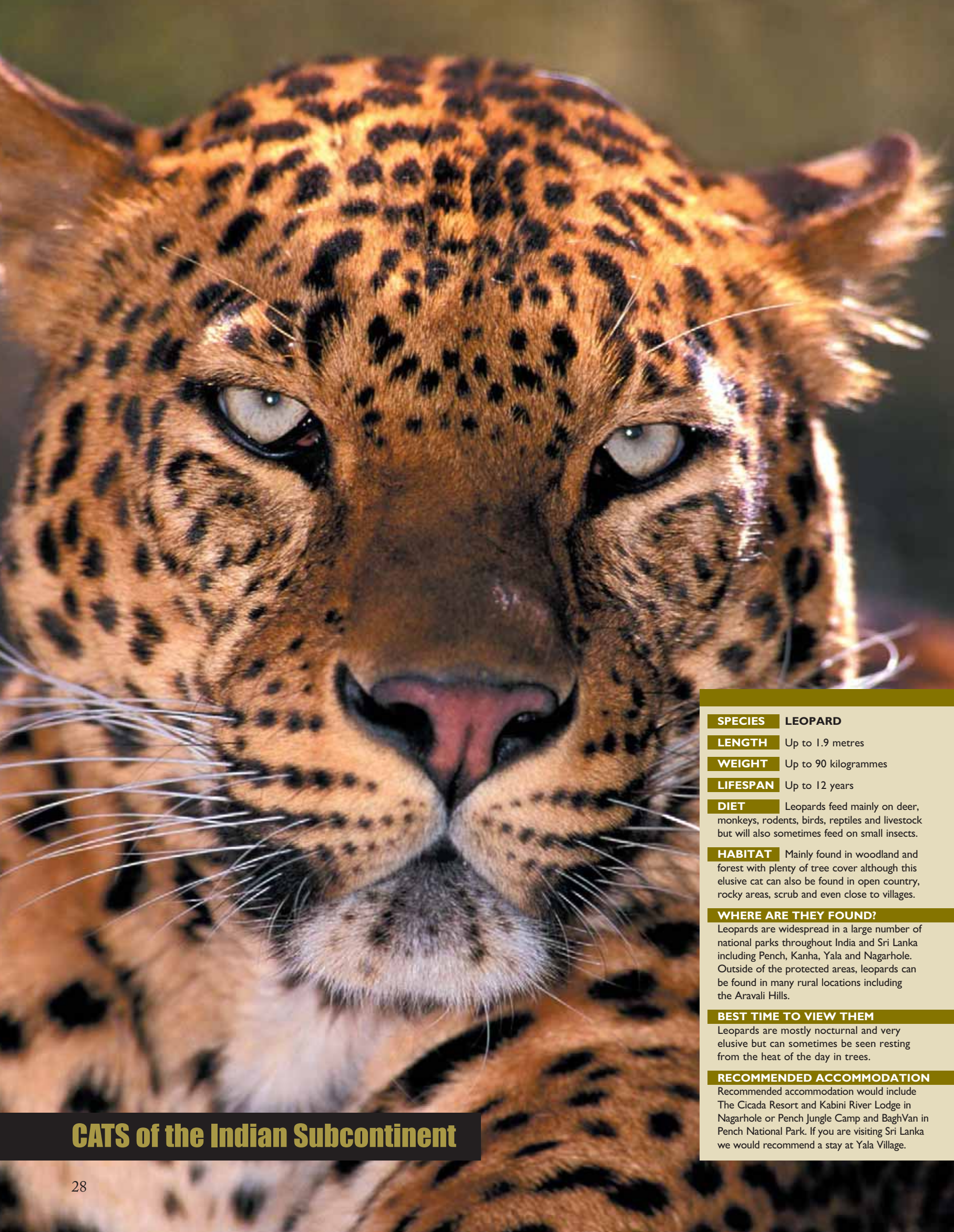
RECOMMENDED ACCOMMODATION

Tigers are present in a variety of national parks and each offers a range of accommodation. Shergarh in Kanha, run by experienced naturalist Jehan and his English wife, has been popular since opening in 2004, while the new King's Lodge at Bandhavgarh is only a few minutes from this park's gate. Built in traditional Assam style, the Wild Grass Lodge at Kaziranga is a relaxing option with good park access.



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SPECIES LEOPARD

LENGTH Up to 1.9 metres

WEIGHT Up to 90 kilogrammes

LIFESPAN Up to 12 years

DIET Leopards feed mainly on deer, monkeys, rodents, birds, reptiles and livestock but will also sometimes feed on small insects.

HABITAT Mainly found in woodland and forest with plenty of tree cover although this elusive cat can also be found in open country, rocky areas, scrub and even close to villages.

WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

Leopards are widespread in a large number of national parks throughout India and Sri Lanka including Pench, Kanha, Yala and Nagarhole. Outside of the protected areas, leopards can be found in many rural locations including the Aravali Hills.

BEST TIME TO VIEW THEM

Leopards are mostly nocturnal and very elusive but can sometimes be seen resting from the heat of the day in trees.

RECOMMENDED ACCOMMODATION

Recommended accommodation would include The Cicada Resort and Kabini River Lodge in Nagarhole or Pench Jungle Camp and BaghVan in Pench National Park. If you are visiting Sri Lanka we would recommend a stay at Yala Village.

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SPECIES SNOW LEOPARD

LENGTH Up to 1.9 metres

WEIGHT Up to 55 kilogrammes

LIFESPAN Up to 12 years

DIET Due to the habitat of the snow leopard, this cat feeds mainly on ibex, domestic high altitude sheep and goats.

HABITAT Requiring vast ranges, the snow leopard resides on rocky and precipitous mountain slopes.

WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

This elusive cat is a resident of the Tibetan Plateau, Indian, Nepalese and Bhutanese Himalaya and the high mountains of Pakistan. The snow leopard dens in caverns or crevasses and is mostly seen in mountains or alpine meadows.

BEST TIME TO VIEW THEM

The snow leopard is active by day and is most likely to be seen hunting during the early morning and late afternoon.

RECOMMENDED ACCOMMODATION

Sightings are extremely rare and only enjoyed by a lucky few in remote mountain regions. A tough tent and lots of time are the best way to see this animal.

WEB PLUS

www.audley.co.uk/features/bigcats
View a slideshow of cats in the Indian Subcontinent