

African Lion- Unmatched Charisma in the Wild Africa Point Insider



The African lion is a magnificent, charismatic, and awesome beast. It is the largest of Africa's big cats, and is widely respected due to its reputation as a fierce predator. The lion has a grand presence; it oozes power, strength, and dignity, and for those qualities many seek to be associated with it. It is depicted in innumerable family crests, seals, emblems, national flags, and coats of arms, in many parts of the world and through many civilizations.

The lion is the leading member of the prestigious club of the 'Big Five', alongside the elephant, rhino, leopard and buffalo. It is an apex predator- and sits right at the top of the food chain. On account of its character and regal bearing, the lion has long been referred to as the 'King of the Beasts'. You may therefore be surprised to learn that it is not even the biggest of the big cats; it comes second after the tiger.

Lions live together in close family groups called prides; they are actually the only social felines. The lion is essentially a very large cat, powerfully built for supremacy in the wild. It is slightly smaller in size than the tiger, but much larger than the leopard. Unlike its striped and spotted kin, it wears a plain coat with colours ranging from yellowish beige to a tawny brown or darker, with a hint of gold.

The lion is a carnivorous mammal known to scientists as *panthera leo*. At least about 10,000 ago, the lion roamed freely in the fields of the Lord; in the Americas -from Alaska all the way to Peru; in Europe through the Middle East to Asia, and in its original home of Africa. In fact scientists believe that it was then the most widely dispersed large mammal besides man. Thereafter, its population continuously dipped, eventually becoming extinct in some regions.

Today it is only in Africa that lions have remained widespread, and even so only in sub-Saharan Africa - particularly eastern and southern Africa. In Asia only about 300 individuals remain in Gir Forest Sanctuary in the north-west of India.

The lion at present does not survive outside protected areas. The African genre is classified in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as Vulnerable (VU), and is termed as 'likely to become endangered unless the circumstances threatening its survival and reproduction improve'. The Asiatic one is considered as already endangered, but there are currently numerous breeding programs trying to replenish it.

Lions have no natural predator- their only real enemy is man. They have greatly suffered under man's dominion of the earth, mainly through hunting and poaching. The rise in human population -and resulting human-wildlife conflict, disturbances such as war and civil unrest, habitat loss and environmental degradation, are the key factors challenging the survival of the African lion.

The lion's future hangs in the balance; but those fighting the good fight to improve its survival chances insist that "the king is not dead, long live the king!". Lions in Africa are today estimated to number not more than 30,000, from about 100,000 in the early 1990's.

The lion is classified in 8 sub species- mainly on the basis of geography, mane appearance, and size. Asia's only surviving subspecies, which is commonly known as the Indian lion once thrived all through the Middle East to Asia, as far as Bangladesh. The other seven subspecies are all African. They favour savannah grasslands, open woodlands, and scrub habitats.

Africa's Barbary lion has perhaps become extinct, though it is speculated that most zoo lions are drawn from this subspecies. This lion stood as the largest of all lion species and once inhabited the open ranges of Morocco, and all the way to Egypt. The last of its kind in the wild was killed by hunters in Morocco in the 1920's.

The Maasai or East African lion is the subspecies found in Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and Ethiopia. The West African lion sub species is the found across from Senegal to Nigeria, while the North East Congo lion is found in central Africa.

The remaining three subspecies can be attributed to the south of the continent with the Katanga or Southwest African lion living in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Katanga in DR Congo, Angola, Botswana, and Namibia.

The Southeast African lion or Transvaal subspecies is essentially a South African lion that is found in Transvaal and Kruger National Park; it is believed to be of the same genetic lineage as the Cape lion, whose fate hangs precariously in the balance.

The lion's body is efficiently fashioned for the hunt. It has muscular legs -with the fore limbs designed for striking, seizing and gripping, while the hind legs are best suited for pouncing. The legs have enormous paws and retractile claws, with a dew claw that comes handy as a tooth pick. It has a powerful well-built jaw that opens wide to reveal 30 conical teeth. The canine teeth are remarkably long and pointed- up to 8 cm, enabling it to pierce and tear into flesh. The molars are for cutting and tenderising chunks of meat.

It is interesting to note how the lion cannot move its jaw from side to side, causing it to use only one side of the jaws at any given time. The lion's tongue is covered with papillae, pin-like protrusions that effectively abrade flesh from the bone. The lion's tail is important in maintaining body balance. This is the only cat with a tufted tail; its tuft which is usually black conceals the tail bone.

The lion cannot move its eyes from side to side and has to turn its entire head for a broader view of the world. This aside, it has exceptional vision and can see almost perfectly in the dark with just a little moon or star light. Its round and large eyes have a reflective layer; in the dark they appear to glow.

Though its hearing is surpassed by others in the wild, it is rated fairly above that of humans. Its sense of smell is however impeccable; it can smell prey from afar and the scent of blood is inescapable. Being territorial, its sharp nose aids it in mapping out demarcations.

Lions communicate through body language and altering vocalizations. They greet and show affection by displaying a lot of nuzzling, gentle head rubbing and licking. They vocalize in purrs, hisses, meows, snarls and their signature roar. The roar is a full, deep, resonant growl that is released from deep

within, and resounds in the throat.

The only other cats that can pull off a roar are tigers, leopards and jaguars. The lions roar instils primordial fear, and on hearing it many animals appear startled and will in most cases remain still or speed off. The lion's roar is so loud it can be heard from 8 km away.

The male lion has a characteristic mane, which is absent in other big cats. The mane is a distinctively long and thick ruff that grows around its head, neck and shoulders. It is shaggy, and tough to the touch, with colourations varying from shades of fair tinge to cinnamon brown and can get as dark as black. It accords the lion an ostentatious flaunt, making it appear fierce and easily intimidating other animals. The mane is mostly hereditary, and varies in fullness, length and colour.

It is believed that the darker the mane, the more superior the genes, and dark-maned lions actually tend to be popular with females. The dark mane however absorbs and retains heat and can therefore cause discomfort in the African savannah. But it comes in very handy in fights as it provides a damper against impact and sharp objects. Though such a defining feature of males, some maneless breeds are on record in Kenya's Tsavo East National Park, as well as in Senegal.

Like most mammals, the African male lion is significantly larger than its female. Fully grown, it stands at about 4 ft at shoulder height and is 8 ft long, excluding the tail. The tail on its own is usually about 3 ft long in both genders. The male weighs an average 195 kg; however, a 313 kg heavyweight is on record. They mature at the age of 2-3 years and are fully grown by their 4th birthday. They then have 6-7 years of full of life, and are considered old after the age of 10 years. Those that reach 15 years are mostly senile, weak and virtually dead.

The males are leaders and protectors of their families called 'prides. An average pride consists of about 15 individuals; 2-3 grown males, 3-6 females and their offspring. The females are in most cases sisters. The males in a pride are close relatives -usually blood brothers or close cousins that have grown up together. The leader among them is an alpha male; the others are subordinates whose job is to provide backup in protecting females and the young from adversaries- which includes other lions.

The alpha male is the strongest of the pride males and always takes the front line in battles and feuds. The attendant risk comes with benefits, for the alpha male gets to copulate with most if not all the females, and fathers most of the cubs in the pride.

Males are territorial and are deeply disturbed by the presence another male intruder. They customarily mark their territory with a spray of urine and defecations, and scratch the barks off their favourite trees to scent them. At about the age of 2, male cubs are considered a threat enough by the older males to warrant a kick out.

These youngsters sometimes stick together and form their own bachelor brotherhood, living, hunting and looking out for each other, as they bid their time. There are cases where the youngsters split up, but those that stick together have a higher chance of surviving the turbulent adolescence and early adulthood period.

Lionesses- as females are called, stand 3.5 ft at shoulder height, are 7 ft at length and tip an average 136 kg on the scale. They attain sexual maturity at the age of 4 years and are considered full grown at 5 years. It is the lionesses that fend for the group- doing as much as 90% of hunting.

The females in a pride are a formidable force, and are ranked among the most successful hunters in the wild. They are cooperative hunters, with a display of skill and technique that gives them an edge over other predators. Their hunts are well coordinated, synchronized and executed, under the guidance of the group's dominant female.

In most cases they surround a herd of prey, each taking up a strategic position. Communication is in sign language, where the tail is mainly used to give directions and point out the victim. They are adept at the stealth hunt- where they go under the cover of long grasses before pouncing on an unsuspecting victim.

The most advantageously positioned lioness takes the first leap to strike and possibly kill, as the others close in to help. Sometimes members of the pride act as a decoy, stirring panic and confusion in the herd as one of them picks out the weakest victim. At other times, they lay an ambush and wait until the prey is close enough to attack. They can effortlessly leap up to 12 ft in the air and 36 ft horizontally, and can run at speeds of up to 59 km/h for short distances. Whatever the mode of hunting, lions will often strangle and suffocate their prey to death.

Lionesses generally prey on ungulates, comfortably taking down those sized between 50-300 kg. Their top favourites include zebra and wildebeest, impala and buffalo, in addition to gemsbok, hartebeest, eland, and kudu. Hefty full grown buffaloes -though tempting due to the size of catch are a risky proposition -they are capable of putting up a dirty fight, and can inflict serious injuries.

After a successful hunt, the females prioritise their hunger above that of their cubs. In contrast, when males hunt, they show more consideration to cubs by allowing them to eat along with them. A male will rarely share its kill with other adult males, unless they have participated in the hunt. They are not always so gallant; they occasionally steal the lionesses' kill from right under their noses.

Though lions are apex predators, they are also partial scavengers- and never hesitate to steal other predators' prey. It may appear rather undignified, but the king of beasts can rely on scavenging for as much as 50% of its food. This habit has made it into a mortal enemy of the spotted hyena; the two animals engage to the death even when there is no apparent cause.

But male lions are also very good hunters, and in many instances will step in to aid females in dealing with a stubborn victim. They also take more risks in hunting and occasionally prey on much larger animals. They can fiercely take down bull buffaloes, giraffes and even hippo. In the jungle however, the lions' dominance is at times tenuous- for they are known to have been killed in encounters with buffalo, crocodile, hyena, and hippo.

Those who know of the lion's ambition and fearlessness were still surprised by the report that a BBC camera crew had recorded lions preying on elephants near the Savuti River in Botswana's Chobe National Park. Even with cooperative hunting, this is quite a feat – for elephants have on average 25 times a lion's body weight!

This desperate and thoroughly risky hunt was prompted by the near starvation the lions of Savuti were facing. Once they realised that it was achievable, they successfully repeated it over and over again. The mutual respect that existed between the two animals in the Savuti was in no time lost.

Lions require about 7 kg of meat daily to keep healthy, but in times of plenty they will gorge down as much as 30 kg in a single feeding session. They can nonetheless forgo 4 days of food, when attending

to the serious business of perpetuating the species. Here, the king's performance is truly heroic- for lions can mate up to 40 times a day in a series of days.

Lionesses have a complex reproductive system where ovulation is stimulated by the thrust of a male. Lions do not have a specific mating season as their females are polyestrous. A female will go on heat after loosing all her cubs or when they stop nursing.

In good shape a female sequentially conceives and gives birth every 2 years. She experiences a gestation period of 3 months 20 days to give birth to a litter of 2-6 cubs. Usually, 2-4 females in a pride will conceive and give birth at about the same time so as to nurse their babies together. This subsequently offers the cubs better protection and survival. The little ones are born in a hideout away from the rest of the pride. They are quite helpless at birth- they lack in teeth and are blind.

Cubs measure about a foot long and weigh as little as a kilo. They usually have spots on their coats similar to those of the leopard, but which gradually fade away as they grow up. At 2-3 weeks they can open their eyes, but see for the first time at 4 weeks. At around this time they also begin to teeth, which is such a painful process that some die of it. They are weaned at about 2 months but still continue to depend on mother's milk.

Mothers move their cubs by taking them by the scruff, clenching them gently between the jaws. At about 3 months the little cubs are moved to the pride area. They begin to practice stealth movements and by 11 months practical hunting lessons begin. This vital life lessons are given by the lionesses. The cubs are initially allowed to practice with their mothers' tails before moving on to small live prey.

An amazing footage aired on the Nat Geo Wild channel revealed a remarkable hunting lesson. A few females surrounded a small antelope, held it down and then called the little ones out to hunt. Fumbling with their prey, they tried over and again until they got it right.

At about 2 years old cubs are outright independent and male cubs are then thrown out of the pride while the females stay on.

Lions have a well earned reputation for sloth- for they shamelessly spend up to 20 hours daily resting.