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National Geographic Readers: Cheetahs

By: Laura Marsh

Adorably cute and amazingly fast, the cheetah is a perennial favorite among kids. And they can go from 0 to 60 mph in less than 3 seconds!

6-8

Age Range

15-30 mins

Length

650L

Lexile[®] Measure

3.4

AR Level

Cheetahs

Laura Marsh

 NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC
Washington, D.C.

It's a Cheetah!

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What runs so fast
it races by in a flash?



What looks
like it cries
but has no
tears in
its eyes?



What is covered in spots
and lives where it's hot?



It's a cheetah! (And we're not "lion.")

Cheetahs are large cats that look as
cute and cuddly as a house cat. But you
wouldn't

want to
snuggle
up to a
cheetah!

Cheetahs
are powerful
hunters with
sharp claws
and teeth.

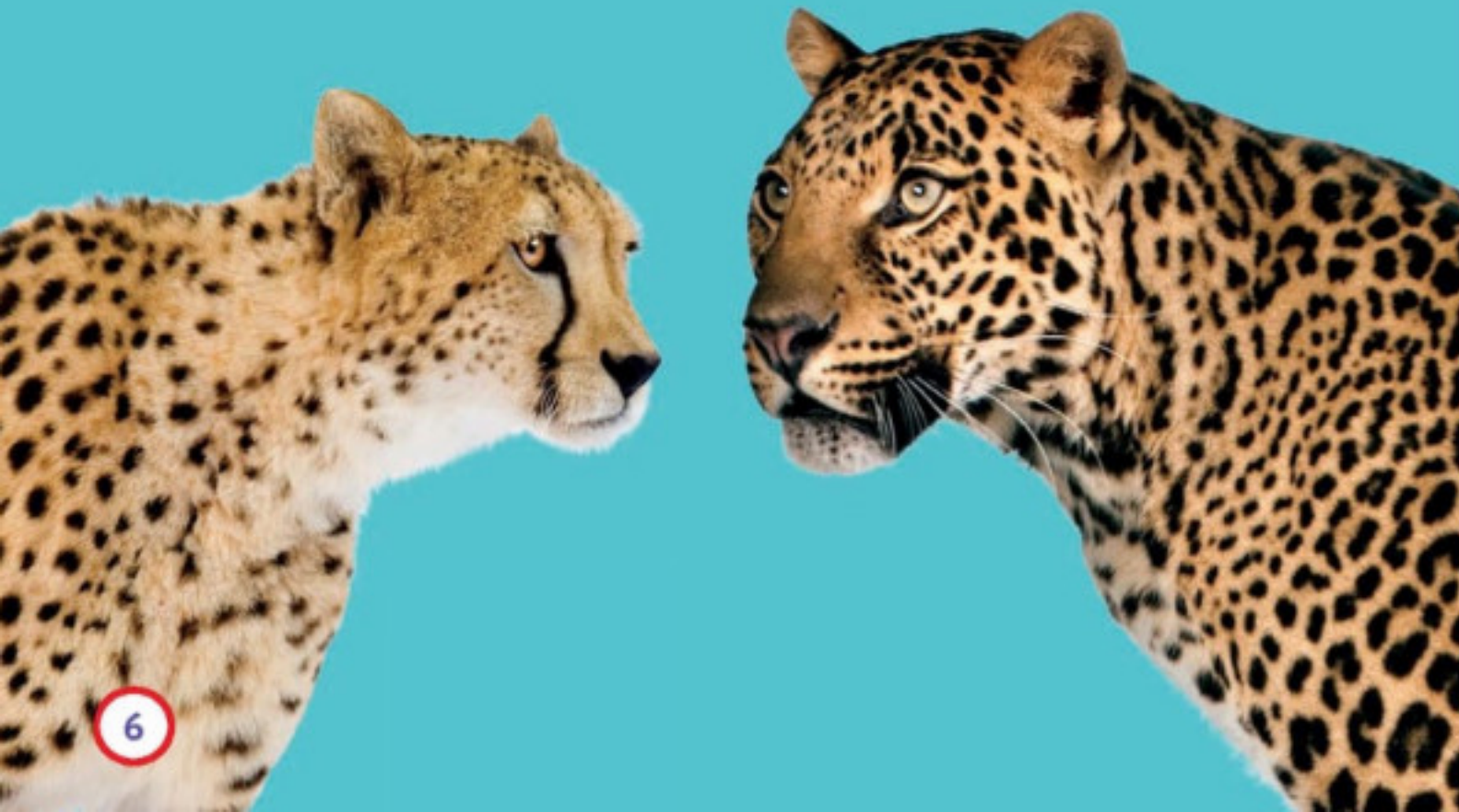


Spotting Cheetahs

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Cheetahs and leopards look alike because they both have spots. But they are different in many ways.

Cheetahs have “tear marks.” These are black stripes that run from their eyes to their mouths. Leopards don’t have stripes on their faces.



Cheetah



long and thin



narrow



small

Leopard



thick and short



wide



large

T
A
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B
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D
Y

H
E
A
D

Safari Speedster



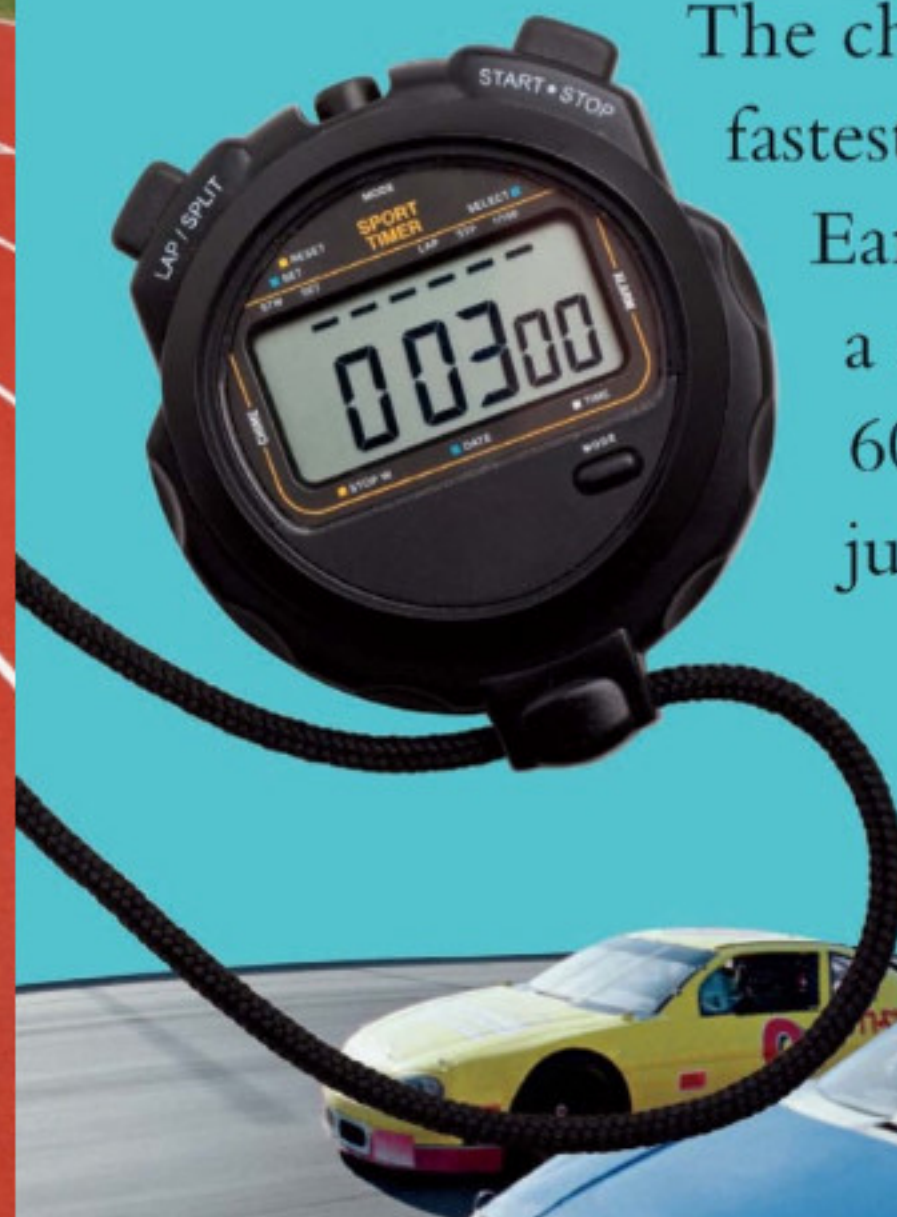
In a race between a lion, a greyhound dog, and a cheetah, which animal would win?

We can

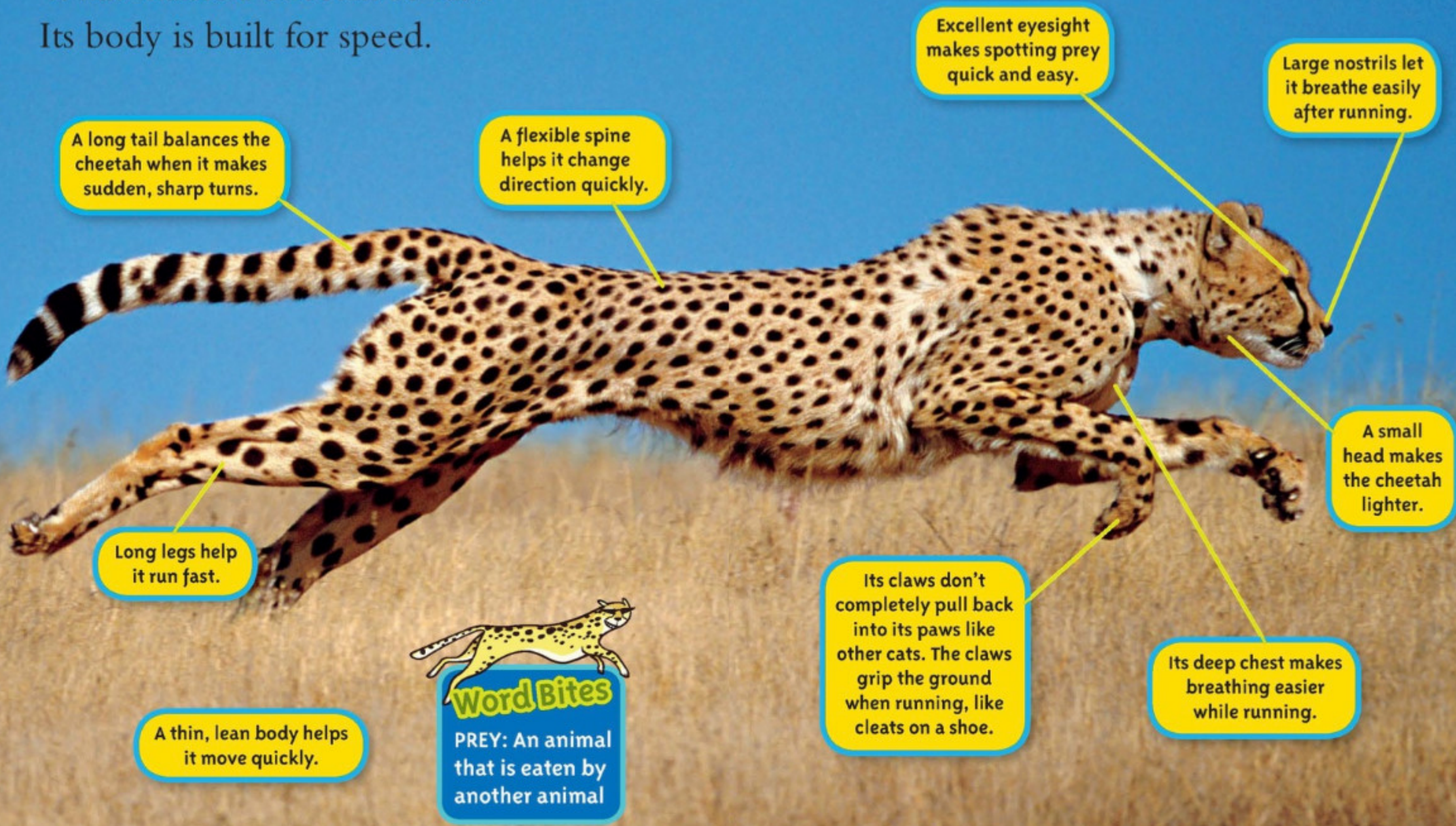
The cheetah, hands down!

The cheetah is the fastest land animal on Earth. It can reach a running speed of 60 miles an hour in just three seconds.

That's as fast as a sports car!



What makes a cheetah so fast?
Its body is built for speed.



A long tail balances the cheetah when it makes sudden, sharp turns.

A flexible spine helps it change direction quickly.

Excellent eyesight makes spotting prey quick and easy.

Large nostrils let it breathe easily after running.

Long legs help it run fast.

A small head makes the cheetah lighter.

A thin, lean body helps it move quickly.

Its claws don't completely pull back into its paws like other cats. The claws grip the ground when running, like cleats on a shoe.

Its deep chest makes breathing easier while running.



Word Bites
PREY: An animal that is eaten by another animal

Great Hunters

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When they get close, cheetahs chase their prey.

But cheetahs get tired quickly. Whew! They need to rest, too.

camouflage
Say CAM-oh-flaj

Cheetahs are sneaky when they hunt! Their spotted coats act as camouflage in tall grass. They stalk their prey slowly and quietly.



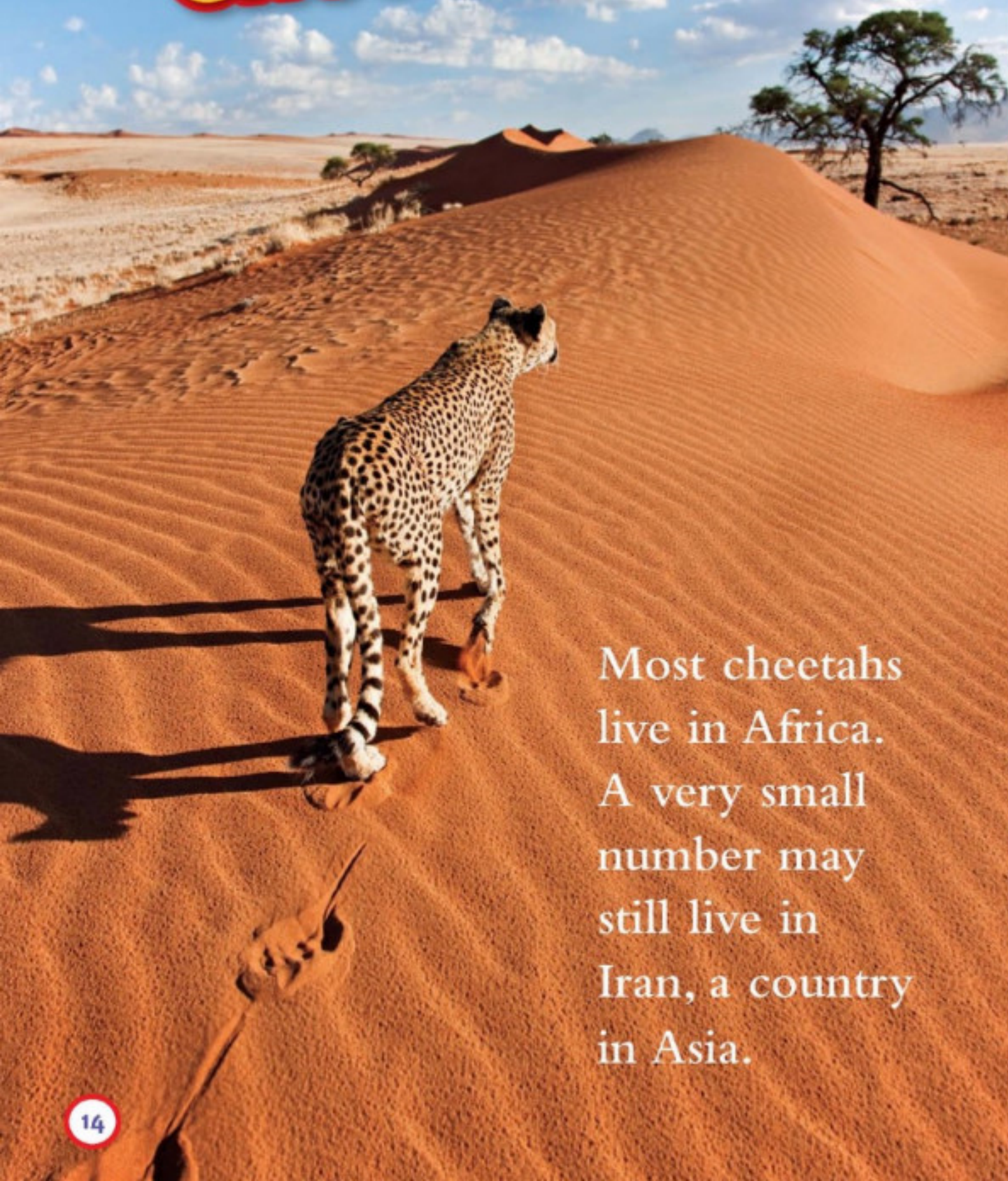
CAMOUFLAGE: An animal's natural color or form that allows it to blend in with its surroundings.

Word Bites

STALK: To move secretly toward something.

How Cheetahs Live

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Most cheetahs live in Africa. A very small number may still live in Iran, a country in Asia.

Like people, cheetahs can live in different habitats. Cheetahs live on the savanna and in areas with lots of plants. They also live on grasslands and in the mountains.

But cheetahs can't live near crowded buildings. They need open space.



Word Bites

HABITAT: The place where a plant or animal naturally lives

SAVANNA: A grassy plain with few trees in a hot, dry area

No matter where they live, male cheetahs stick together. Brothers live in a group called a coalition.

Female cheetahs live alone, except when caring for their cubs. Male and female cheetahs come together to have cubs. Then they live apart again.



coalition
Say koh-ah-LISH-un



A mother cheetah has three to five cubs at one time. They are born blind and helpless.

But the cubs grow quickly! They can open their eyes and crawl in less than ten days.



The mother cheetah keeps the cubs safe in their den. If she needs to move, she carries them in her mouth.



Can you find the cheetah cubs?

The cubs' dark coats blend in with the shadows. The long, soft hair along their backs looks like the dry, dead grass.

The cubs are protected by camouflage. It's hard for predators to find them.



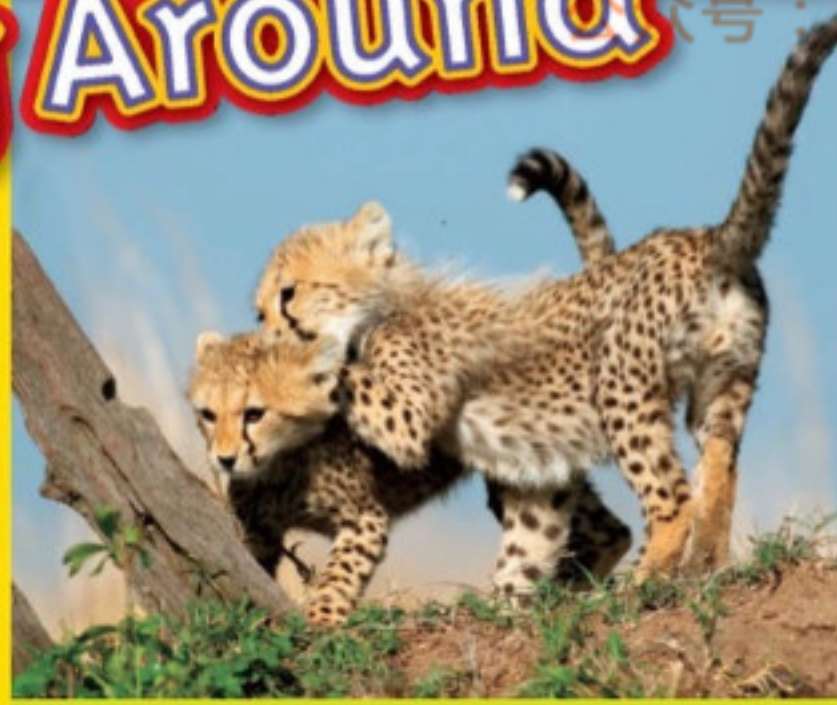
Word Bites

PREDATOR: An animal that hunts and eats other animals

Playing Around

The cubs learn a lot from their brothers and sisters. They wrestle, stalk, and chase one another.

They practice skills they will need for hunting when they grow up.



When the cubs are older, the mother cheetah teaches them to hunt. She also shows the cubs which predators to avoid.



Royal Cats

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Q

How does a cheetah greet other animals on the plain?

“pleased to eat you”

A

Cheetahs have lived on Earth for a long, long time. As far back as ancient Egypt, pharaohs kept cheetahs as pets.

The famous pharaoh King Tut was buried with many statues of cheetahs.

Some ancient Egyptians believed in a cat-goddess called Mafdet. They thought Mafdet could protect the pharaohs.

Art from ancient Egypt shows cheetahs on statues, furniture, and in paintings.

Mafdet
Say MAHF-det



Statues of cheetahs from King Tut's tomb



Golden head of a cheetah found in King Tut's tomb

Cheetah Talk

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Cheetahs make sounds that tell how they're feeling. Cheetahs can't roar like other big cats. But they can purr like a house cat.



Here's a dictionary for understanding cheetah talk:

Bleating:

A cheetah bleats when it's upset. It sounds like a cat's meow.

Purring:

This is a low, motor-like sound, made when a cheetah is happy or content.

Hissing:

When a cheetah feels angry or threatened, it may let out a sharp "h" sound.

Chirping:

Cheetahs chirp when they look for each other. The call sounds like a chirping bird.

Churring or stuttering:

During social meetings, cheetahs growl with a high pitch that stops and starts.

Growling:

A cheetah growls when it feels angry or threatened.

Saving Cheetahs

: Wecancan

You need space to run, to jump, and to play—and so do cheetahs.

More people and more buildings push cheetahs onto smaller pieces of land. Cheetahs need lots of open space to live, to hunt, and to have babies.



Less open space means cheetahs are disappearing. Today fewer than 12,000 cheetahs live in the wild.

But some people are working to save cheetahs. And we are learning more about these big cats.



The more we know, the better chance we have to keep cheetahs on Earth.

Glossary



CAMOUFLAGE: An animal's natural color or form that allows it to blend in with its surroundings



HABITAT: The place where a plant or animal naturally lives



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SAVANNA: A grassy plain with few trees in a hot, dry area



STALK: To move secretly toward something