

## The Lion: *Panthera leo*

**Order:** *Canivora* (The meat-eaters)  
**Family:** *Felidae* (The felines or cats)  
**Species:** *Panthera leo*

*In the jungle the mighty jungle  
 The lion sleeps tonight.  
 In the jungle the quiet jungle  
 The lion sleeps tonight.*

(Mistranslation of lyrics of South African song "Mbube" by Solomon Linda, 1939)

The Lion (*Panthera leo*) lives in several different types of habitats but the jungle or tropical rainforest is not usually one of them. "Lion" is generally used to refer to the large, tawny cat that is found in Africa south of the Sahara except in desert and rainforests. At one time the range for the lion was as far north as Greece and through the Middle East to India. Today the lion in Africa is a Vulnerable species on the Red List of the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources). In the Gir Forest in India there is a remnant population of about 200 Asiatic lions (*Panthera leo persica*), which are considered Endangered by the IUCN. Anywhere a large predator conflicts with human need and expansion, the large predator loses.

Most, but not all, lions are in protected areas and national parks in Africa. Since the middle of the 19th Century the populations of lions have dropped dramatically and within the past two decades the numbers in Africa have dropped a further 30% due to indiscriminate killing in defense of life and livestock and depletion of prey species.

Lions are carnivores that have large ranges and are dependent on great numbers of prey species within the range. Plains, savannahs, shrubby mountainous areas and semi-desert are the habitat for the herds of prey species such as gazelle, wildebeest, zebra, rhino or impala, which are some of the species that lions will prey on. They will also eat carrion, steal from hyenas or eat whatever small animal happens to be handy. Lions will stalk prey until they can get close enough to avoid having to chase them over too large of a distance. The family group or pride hunts larger prey cooperatively; small prey is usually an individual pursuit.

Lions are the second largest members of the cat family (Felidae) after the tiger and can weigh up to 260 kg for males and 125 kg for females. Lions range from 90 to 250 cm in length with another 100 cm for the long fur-tipped tail. Lions, tigers, leopards and jaguars are distinguished by the fact that they can roar – something that no other cats can do. Males have manes of fur around the head, neck and front of the chest. The mane is thought to make the animal look bigger to any other animals that would attack the pride. However the large mane is a deterrent when the lion wishes to hide while stalking prey, as it is so conspicuous. The females of the group do most of the hunting usually at night when the air is cooler and their prey cannot see them as well.



Generally the only time there is fighting within the pride is when there is food; males eat first, then females and, finally, the cubs. An adult lion can eat as much as 18 kg of meat at one time but may not eat for a couple of days after a large feast.

Lions breed year round and although there may be several males in a pride there is usually no fighting over a female in season especially as there are also a number of females as well. One to six cubs are born after a 3.5 month gestation and they weigh about 1 to 2 kg. Their coats are grayish with prominent brown spots. At about 15 days in the den with the mother, they are walking about. The mother will keep the cubs in hiding until they are about 8 weeks of age. The cubs are dependent on the adults for food and protection until they are about a year and half old. Currently there are two lions in the Potash-Corp Ark exhibit. Dobi, our male, and Coeey were both born at separate facilities in 2008. They arrived at the Saskatoon Forestry Farm in 2009 and will be on exhibit until 2012. Do come out and watch as they grow and mature while they are with us.

Photo of Dobi courtesy of Ernie Husulak