

# The Yippittee!

for kids who are crazy about conservation!

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## Wild Cousins



Your pets might seem all cute and cuddly, but they weren't always so tame. Over hundreds or even thousands of years these animals have been domesticated by humans keeping them as pets or as farm animals. Yet wandering out there in the plains of Africa, the jungles of South America and the chill of the Arctic remain their wild cousins.

You might think that your pet has some very strange habits, but often these are what would help them to survive in the wild as well as the way they look, although some of our pets have been bred so much, they look very different from their cousins. Now, lets take a look at the wilder side of our furry friends.

### Cats

Looking at your feline friend curled up, purring on the sofa, its hard to imagine that cats have a wilder side to them. Yet their behaviour is not much different to their wild cousins who are also members of the **felidae** family.

Cats often get told off when they sharpen their claws on the furniture in the house! But they are actually practicing a very natural wild behaviour stretching out their leg and foot muscles and cleaning their claws at the same time.

If you have a cat you may have seen that many play with their prey before they eat it. Mother cats teach their kittens how to hunt by releasing prey such as mice which they have caught already, so they can watch and learn. Sometimes mother tigers do the same, giving the cubs half dead prey so they can practice killing them.

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# Small Cats

This category includes cats such as the **lynx**, **cougar** or **puma** and the **bob cat**. They are found in North and South America and the lynx is found in Europe and Asia too. They feed on animals the size of hares.

Wild cats are found in the forest of Europe, in parts of Asia and on the African grasslands. All our pet cats probably originated from Africa. They would have begun to live near humans because there were lots of mice and rats to eat, scurrying around the grain stores. So perhaps 5,000 years ago people would have started to treat them as pets because they were doing an important job. The wild cat is shown on

**Egyptian tomb paintings** 3,000 years old.

They thought so much of them that they even had a cat goddess called Bast!

Until about 100 years ago pet cats would have had short hair like their wild cousins. Short hair doesn't get tangled in bushes and is easier to keep clean although in colder climates wild cats do have longer hair to keep warm!



Scottish **wild cats** look like tabby cats with their stripy markings but are larger, heavier and fiercer! They cannot be tamed, even if reared by humans from birth. They were found all over Britain some centuries ago but were killed by gamekeepers to protect their grouse, partridges and pheasants. True Scottish wild cats are getting rarer because they breed with feral cats - these are domesticated pet cats which now live in the wild and aren't treated as pets any more.

# Tigers

Tigers exist in the tropical heat of India and in the icy cold of **Siberia**. Siberian tigers are the biggest cats of all weighing 300 kg and measuring about 2.8 metres from their nose to the tip of their tails.



## Did you know?

Tigers' stripes are like our fingerprints - every set is unique. The patterns on big cats helps to break up their outline so that they can hide among vegetation and sneak up on their prey. Sadly their beautiful designs have not helped them to survive in recent history as they have been killed by people to make items like clothes and rugs.

Tigers, like pet cats, hunt at night because they have special night vision, six times better than a humans. Cats' eyes are reflective which is why their eyes shine in the dark from car lights. Now because of that, on our roads there are reflective lights called cats eyes! Their sensitive whiskers also help them to find their way in the dark.

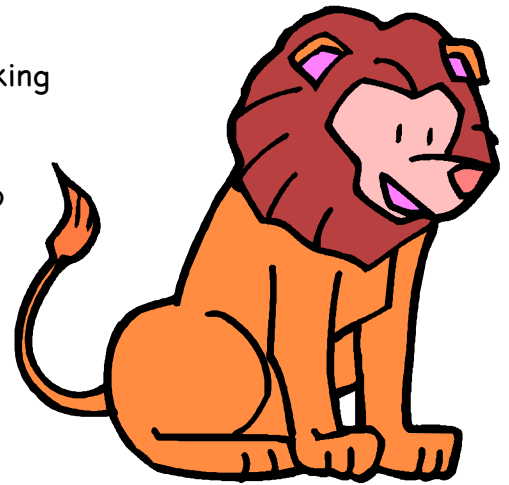
# Lions

Lions are the second largest of the big cats and live in groups called **prides**. The lionesses help to keep each other clean by licking each other - but at the same time they are doing something much more important - they are spreading their personal scents over each other so that they all smell the same. This helps them to identify with each another, a bit like wearing a school uniform shows that you all go to the same school.

Domestic cats are obsessive washers too! They are always licking themselves. Watch how they lick their paws and wipe their faces clean. When they rub their paws against their jaws they pick up a scent from glands in their chin which goes onto their feet. Then where ever they walk they leave the **scent**

behind, like a trail which marks the cat's **territory**.

The same happens when they rub themselves against objects, or maybe your legs! Pet cats bury their poo in gardens unlike wild ones which leave it in a prominent place to show who lives there.



## Did you know?

Small cats are unable to roar, they just purr, unlike the lion whose roar can be heard five miles away. This is to communicate with other lions rather than to scare anything away!

Female lions do most of the **hunting**. They are the only cat that hunts for prey bigger than themselves because unlike most wild cats which hunt on their own,

lions work as a team to catch their prey. The lionesses take it in turns to chase a zebra, gazelle, wildebeest or buffalo, until it is so exhausted they can catch it and kill it!

Have you noticed how cats like to sleep a lot - or have a "cat nap"? Well lions are incredibly lazy too, sleeping up to 21 hours in a day. Have you ever played the game "sleeping lions"? Now you know why its called that!

The number of lions in the wild is declining (they are getting less) because people break the law and kill them for their skin, claws and teeth. Every year about 600 are killed this way.

Big cats are powerful **predators** but they rarely attack humans unless they feel threatened or are ill or old and cannot catch their usual prey. As the number of people increases around the world and more villages and towns are being built, people are encroaching on the big cats' territories and this is causing some problems. The loss of habitat means that there is less food for the cats to hunt so they go to the villages in their old territories and hunt the farm animals instead. Sadly even people have been killed by the cats. This is a conservation issue because then the people kill the dangerous cats.

All big cats sneak up on their prey and then ambush them leaping towards them. Once caught they kill their victim with a bite to the neck. The only exception is the cheetah which relies on its speed to catch prey and can run up to 70 mph making it the fastest land animal in the world!



# Wild Horses

The only true wild horse left is called **Przewalski's horse** and it is reckoned that it has hardly changed since the end of the ice age ... years ago. It is probably the ancestor of all modern horses. It survives along the boundary between China and Mongolia where it has been hunted for centuries for food. When firearms (guns) were invented the number of horses declined very quickly.



There are over 150 domestic breeds of horses and ponies (small horses). Most can be traced back to breeds found in North Africa and Arabia. The biggest are **Shire horses** and the smallest are **Shetland ponies**. "Heavy horses" have a strong build and have been used for generations by farmers to pull their ploughing machinery through the fields. Even today the power of motorised vehicles is measured in "horse power".

The most unusual kind of horse is the zebra with its black and white stripes of which there are 3 types in Africa. Horses with black or brown and white patches help to keep them camouflaged. Tame horses have shoes which protect their hooves, especially for walking on hard surfaces which they wouldn't do so much in the wild. In the wild the stallions (male horses) defend their territories and the mares (females) by lashing out with their front legs or even by biting!

## Descendant

*Creatures born after another creature but which are in the same family. For example dogs are the descendants of wolves.*

## Ancestor

*The creatures that lived a long time ago but were in the same family as a creature that was born after them are called their ancestors. Wolves are the ancestors of dogs.*

## Carnivore

*This is an animal which eats meat.*

## Herbivore

*This is an animal which eats plants.*

## Predator

*A creature which hunts for its food.*

## Prey

*A creature which gets hunted. Usually there are more prey than predators so that some will survive long enough to breed and have young.*

# Dogs and Wolves



Dogs belong to the family called **Canidae** which is where we get the word canine from. The dog family includes foxes, jackals, coyotes and bush dogs. Our pet dogs are the direct **descendants** of the largest member of this family, the wolf -

even poodles! Wolves live in all sorts of places like forests, the arctic, deserts, mountains and plains in places like Canada and Russia.

Wolves live in **packs** of 8 - 20 members which is why semi wild/feral street dogs group together in the same way. Within the pack wolves have a definite hierarchy or structure meaning that some are more dominant than others - in other words there are leaders and followers. Domestic dogs treat their owners as if they are members of the pack and need them to lay down the rules of the house. Usually the leaders, the

**alpha** male and female are the oldest in the pack and they are the only ones which are allowed to have cubs, usually 4 to 7 at a time. Pet dogs usually bark but you won't find wolves doing this. Instead they **howl**, several at once like they are talking to each other. This makes them sound big and scary and warns other wolves to keep out of their territory but a lot of their friendly behaviour is similar to a dog's such as nose licking and tail wagging!



The pack is a bit like a team and they all work together when they hunt so that they are able to catch large **prey** such as **deer** and **moose** which are about 10 times the weight of a wolf! They have a great sense of smell and hearing. They move on their toes, unlike people who walk on their whole foot. This helps them to move a lot faster. They have 42 very sharp teeth! The arctic wolf changes its colour in the winter and becomes white so it can blend in with the snow and sneak up on its prey. It also has thick fur to keep it warm. Huskies are one kind of dog with thick hair which still lives in cold places like Canada - you sometimes see them being used to pull sledges.

## Did you know?

*There has been talk of bringing wolves back to live in Scotland, to help control the deer of which there are too many at the moment as there are no natural predators left.*

*However, many people are afraid of wolves with tales like Little Red Riding Hood and The Three Little Pigs making wolves seem like scary beasts! We forget that they are where our dogs originally came from.*

# Hamsters & Gerbils

Hamsters and gerbils both belong to the **rodent family**, the same as mice, rats, squirrels and beavers. To be classed as a rodents you need to have 2 pairs of sharp front teeth (incisors) for gnawing seeds and other tough food. They never wear away because they are constantly growing.



Hamsters live in dry grasslands, deserts and on mountain slopes. The golden hamster is the one we are all familiar with and is no longer found in the wild but there are still wild **grey** and **dwarf hamsters**.

Gerbils used to be called **Desert rats** because they are particularly suited to dry places and can survive for days without water, just getting their moisture from plants. They have fur, even on their tails, not to keep warm but to stop them from getting sun burnt. They keep it clean by having sand baths!

Gerbils can escape the heat of the sun by going into their **underground burrows**. This is where they build their nests. Have you ever seen a pet gerbil shredding vegetation or toilet rolls? This is what its instincts are telling it to do to make a nest!

**Mongolian gerbils** have been kept as pets only since 1964. You can feed them seeds, fruit and vegetables (except for lettuce) but in the wild they are insectivores eating mainly creepy crawlies!

Gerbils live in family groups and often they sleep piled up on top of one another.

Hamsters like to live alone. In fact the males are chased away from the burrow after mating. Pet hamsters have to be separated after mating or else **the female might eat the male!**



## A Golden Moment

Until 1930, it was thought that the golden hamster was extinct. Then, in 1930, near the ancient town of Aleppo in Syria, a Jewish **archaeologist** by the name of Aaron Abrahams, came across a nest containing a small rodent with twelve babies that he could not identify. He carefully placed the family into a container and had them taken to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. There they were identified as golden hamsters and, under laboratory conditions, encouraged to breed. As a result, all the **golden hamsters** kept as pets in the world today are descended from the mother and babies found by accident in Syria back in 1930. It has never again been found in the wild.

Hamsters use their cheek pouches to carry food back to the burrow where they can eat it in safety or store it for later. Their pouches can be stuffed so full that they stretch back beyond their shoulder blades!

In their burrows hamsters' winter stores can contain around 90 kg of cereals, seeds, pulses and root vegetables! Its been known for the poorer people in China to dig up these stores for themselves!



# Ferrets & Polecats

Ferrets belong to the **Mustelidae weasel** family. They are not wild animals but a domesticated version of the polecat! This domestication started at least 2,500 years ago and even today they are kept as pets and used to hunt rabbits as they fit easily down the holes.

In **New Zealand** there are too many ferrets in the wild. They were taken there to keep down the numbers of rabbits which



had been introduced by people too and were becoming a pest. Once the rabbits became less the ferrets started to eat the native wildlife such as the birds.

The polecat used to be called the “**foul mart**” because of its strong smell. They can live in almost every kind of habitat and were even found on the outskirts of London in the 19th century. However they were trapped for their fur called “fitch” and persecuted by **gamekeepers** because they were known to kill chickens. What they didn't think of was the useful job the polecats were doing in keeping the number of mice and rats down!

# Guinea Pigs



Guinea pigs also belong to the rodent family. Their wild relatives are called cavy and live in **South America** in the grasslands, forests and rocky areas. They mainly like to eat grasses and small plants.

**Cavies** live in other animals' disused burrows under the ground to hide from predators and keep out of the cold. Living in the wild is a tougher life than being a pet which is why cavies live just 3 to 4 years, unlike their cousin guinea pigs which live about 8 years.

Did you know?  
In Peru, South America where the cavy comes from, people eat guinea pigs for dinner!

Cavies are often prey to bigger animals so they have brown, greyish fur which keeps them **camouflaged**. Guinea pigs, on the other hand have been bred to be all different colours.



# Rabbits

Wild rabbits originally came from Spain, Portugal and North West



Africa and the Normans (French invaders) brought them over to Britain and kept them for their fur and meat.

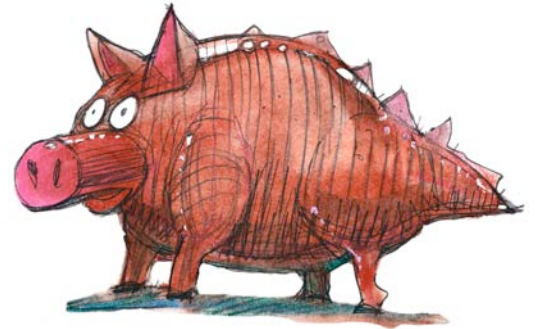
If you have a pet rabbit, it probably lives in a hutch, but wild rabbits live underground. The burrows or tunnels they dig link together to form a big maze called a **warren**, up to 3 metres deep. Within the warren are chambers or rooms where the rabbits sleep and have

their babies, which by the way are called **kittens!**

They are mainly **nocturnal** to avoid predators such as foxes, stoats and buzzards so they come out at dusk when it is getting dark and graze throughout the night. This is safer than broad daylight. Their big ears help them to listen out for danger and their eyes can see a wide area too. If they spot danger they will thump their hind foot against the ground to warn the other rabbits! If they don't get caught they can live up to 10 years but most don't survive for more than a year. It's a good job then that they breed like rabbits! Each doe (female rabbit) can have about 20 kittens in a year!

# Pigs & Wild Boar

The largest wild pig is of course the boar! They are similar to farm pigs but are slimmer, tougher and more agile! In Britain in the **middle ages** forests were full of boar but they were hunted to extinction in the 17th century. The young have stripy hair which helps them to blend in with their woodland surroundings.



## Eat Like A Pig!

Pigs love to **snuffle** around with their snouts which are very sensitive and have a great sense of smell. In the wild this behaviour is essential for finding food such as roots, insects and larvae. In fact they will eat almost anything, plant or animal which is why we sometimes say that a greedy person eats like a pig! In France sows (female pigs) are used to sniff out truffles, a kind of fungi hidden under the ground which people can eat. The females find them because they smell a bit like male pigs.



Pigs and boars love to **wallow** in mud and often think of pigs as dirty because of this. However this is an important activity in the wild as it helps to remove parasites (little creatures which live on animals' skin). The mud also protects the pig's sensitive skin from the sun, like sun lotion!

Boars were probably domesticated at about the time when people stopped moving around hunting for their food and started farming instead. The **Chinese** had domesticated pigs back in 3,000 BC. It was bred with other pigs from around the world so now there are lots of different types. Older breeds of domesticated pigs are now becoming **rare breeds** themselves.



# Parrots

There are about 350 species of parrots in the world including cockatoos, macaws, parakeets, budgerigars and love birds. They mainly live up trees.



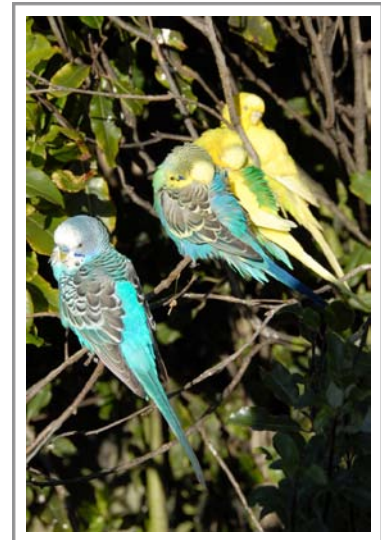
**Macaws** are one of the largest kinds of parrot living in the **rainforests** of South and Central America. They have very strong bills which they use to break open nuts. When **Christopher Columbus** discovered the "New World" of the Americas, European people started shooting and catching these colourful exotic birds and taking them home to sell to people as pets. There were seven species of macaw on some islands called the **West Indies** but were so popular that within a few hundred years all seven had become extinct. Nowadays eight out of the sixteen species of Macaw are endangered with the spix's macaw on the brink of extinction, partly because of the pet trade, but also because their rainforest habitat is being cleared so that the land can be used for farming instead.

They make popular pets especially because of their vivid colours and their ability to mimic human voices and even sounds like the door bell and telephone!

*Many people keep exotic animals as pets such as tarantulas and snakes and sometimes even wild cats like panthers! These animals are not really "domesticated" but wild. usually they are bred in captivity but sometimes creatures are taken illegally from the wild. If that happens a lot then the wild animals become rarer.*

# Budgies

Budgerigars are a favourite pet bird and can be found living wild in the grasslands of **Australia** where they can find seeds to eat. In fact they coincide when their eggs will hatch with the time there will be plenty of seeds available. They are very sociable which means that they like to be with their friends! They stay together in flocks, huddling up to keep warm and even preen (clean) one another's feathers.



They are very agile, like acrobats in the air, they can twist and turn to avoid predators such as falcons. Wild budgies are nomadic so rather than staying in just one place they quite often fly to new places. This is very different to pet budgies which are kept inside of cages.

## Exotic pets!

# Crazy About Conservation!

This is your page so if you want to send us a poem, story or letter about the environment, sent it to us at this address: Crazy about Conservation!, YPTE, Suite 29, Yeovil Innovation Centre, Barracks Close, Copse Road, Yeovil, Somerset, BA22 8RN or e-mail it to us at... [info@ypte.org.uk](mailto:info@ypte.org.uk)

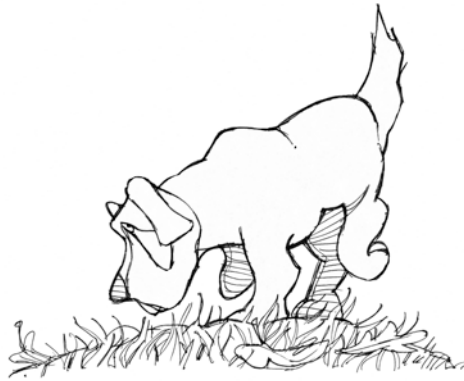
## You're joking!

Why is it hard to play cards in the jungle?

There are too many cheetahs!

What do you get when you cross a parrot with a centipede?

A walkie talkie!



If you find this magazine interesting then why not learn more about them - go to the library and look in some books and check out our animal fact sheets on our web site.

What's the difference between a flea and a wolf?

One prowls on the hairy, the other howls on the prairie!

What's the unluckiest kind of cat to have?

A catastrophe!

## Crossword

### Across:

2. Domesticated animal.
3. Hamsters have one of these on each cheek.
6. A group of lions.
8. A female pig.
11. Dominant wolf.
13. The male has a mane.
14. Baby rabbit
15. Member of the felidae family.
16. Hamsters and gerbils are both kinds of what?

### Down:

1. Ancestor of all dogs.
2. Name the only wild horse left.
4. A wild guinea pig.
5. The opposite of predator.
7. Habitat where gerbils live.
9. Maze of rabbits' underground burrows.
10. Macaws are a type of what?
12. Another name for the "foul mart".

