

Lion *Panthera leo*

Size: HB ♂ 172–250 cm, ♀ 158–192 cm;
Tail 60–100 cm

Weight: ♂ 150–225 kg, ♀ 122–182 kg

Key identification features: Massive cat, uniform tawny-tan in colour. Youngsters have residual rosette-like spots that fade with age, although these are retained by some adults. The backs of the ears are black; muzzle and beard is pale blonde; tawny tail ends in a dark-tufted tip. Very rare ‘white’ colour morph occurs in Kruger, especially near Timbavati. Sexually dimorphic, mature males have a shaggy dark mane.

Habitat: Open and closed savannah, and riverine woodland. Prefers the zone between grassland and treed savannah.

Habits: Mostly active between dusk and dawn; lethargic during the day. Very sociable: prides consist of 4–6 mature females, a dominant (alpha) male or coalition of related males, and their cubs. Both sexes roar regularly to declare their territory, a sound that can carry 5 km.

Diet: Opportunistic generalists, the preferred prey is medium to large ungulates. Larger prides target larger prey, with certain individuals/prides specializing in particular species. Giraffe, Wildebeest and Zebra are the most frequent prey in Kruger.

The largest and most frequently encountered of the African cats. Lions are common and regularly seen in Kruger, although they are less frequent north of Shingwedzi.

Kruger is perfect Lion country, and the park is estimated to support around 1,700 individuals with an average pride size and

WHITE LIONS OF TIMBAVATI

The famous White Lions are not albinos, but are a result of a rare recessive colour gene. Discovered in the mid 1970s in the private Timbavati reserve adjacent to Kruger, three wild White Lions were taken to Pretoria Zoo for ‘research’ purposes and breeding. Wild White Lions seemingly died out, then in 2006 two cubs were born at Umbabat (near Timbavati). Other reintroduced White Lions have fared well, and although they remain exceedingly rare, are seen occasionally in the private reserves of the Timbavati area.

home range of 12 individuals and 25 km², respectively. Females form the stable nucleus of prides, while males, either alone or as a coalition of related individuals, tend to wander and attempt to take over any pride they encounter. After deposing the reigning males, they will remain with the females for as long as they can maintain the status quo. Their reign as top cat is relatively brief, normally 2–3 years, before stronger, younger upstarts replace them. New males typically kill any cubs from previous litters, thereby ensuring that only their genes are passed on to the next generation. Soon the females come into breeding condition and the pride will have new cubs sired by the reigning males. Once deposed, male coalitions stay together, but have to focus more on hunting as they can no longer rely on the females to do so for them.

The mane indicates male fitness and testosterone levels, and signals sexual dominance to the females, even at a great distance. Dominant males will mate-guard any females in breeding condition, seldom allowing females to stray more than a few metres from their side. Mating only lasts for about 60 seconds, but with bouts every 15–20 minutes over a period of 24–36 hours it can be quite exhausting. Females leave the pride to give birth in isolation and



A male Lion in his prime

BIG CATS

The big cats of the genus *Panthera* appeared on Earth relatively recently, some 7–11 million years ago. Although Africa is now the world-famous big cat area, it is thought that the genus originated in Asia before spreading into Africa. Big cats are a massive draw for the millions of tourists that go on safari each year, with every encounter being an unforgettable highlight!

Lionesses are the main providers of food for the pride.



Lion

return when the cubs are 4–8 weeks old. Occasionally several pregnant females in a pride will give birth at the same time. The resulting cubs are cared for communally, each cub suckling more than one female. However, cub mortality is high, with more than 50% dying in their first year. Sub-adult males are expelled from the pride when they are about three years old.

When hunting, prides often divide into smaller subgroups, each of which performs a different task. Working cooperatively in this way almost doubles their chances of making a successful kill. Larger females tend to fulfil the role of ‘centre’ and smaller females act as ‘flanks’. They carefully stalk their intended prey to get as close as possible before making a rapid dash – at speeds of up to 60 km/h for a few hundred metres. The ‘flanks’ drive the prey towards the ‘centre’, which launches at the rump or shoulder and uses its retractile claws to anchor itself, and weight to bring down the prey, before suffocating the animal with a bite to the throat. If nearby, the pride males will partake of the meal, being afforded the honour of eating first.

THE MANE JOB


The main role of the dominant male is pride defence and ownership. They hunt infrequently, although can play a key role in subduing large prey. They often scavenge kills of other Lions or Spotted Hyenas. Battles between Spotted Hyenas and Lions are vicious and these two large social predators are constantly vying for local dominance. The victors are usually those that have the greater number, although Spotted Hyenas need to outnumber Lions by about 3:1 in order to be successful; the chances of Lions succeeding being greatly increased by the presence of a large male.

UNDER THREAT

Although Lions are frequently encountered in Kruger, the species is categorized as Vulnerable by the IUCN, having undergone a very significant population decline across Africa since the mid-1990s.

A seven-month-old cub: spotting on the legs is only lost when the animal is mature.





The mane on this young but fully-grown male is not yet completely developed. He and his brothers will have to hunt for themselves until they can take over a pride from another male.

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