

Larger than the average moggy

On Wednesday 10th December, Berwick Wildlife Group were treated to a fascinating glimpse into the world of big cats, through a talk by Richard Wales. Richard is currently Red Squirrel Project Officer for South Scotland, but until recently worked with large cats, mostly in South Africa.

Richard began by outlining the variety of cats on our planet. The true big cats are all able to roar, but unable to purr on the inhale like domestic cats, and include lions, leopards, tigers and jaguars. Of these, lions are the only sociable species, living in prides of up to 30 animals and co-operating in hunting, which enables them to tackle really large prey. Although capable of speeds of up to 45 mph., their main hunting tactic is ambush. Only about three hunts in ten is successful, but the provision of a calorie-dense meal does not normally take too long so lions sleep a lot, averaging about 21 hours snoozing a day. Although lions were once a very widespread and abundant species, few now remain outside Africa.

Leopards are solitary animals, good climbers, extremely strong and very adaptable. Again Africa is their stronghold, although small populations of different sub-species occur in Siberia, Borneo, S. China and Sri Lanka, and there are Snow Leopards (a different species) in the mountains of Asia. Tigers occur in small numbers in Russia (Siberian Tigers) and in Asia, especially India. Their numbers are being decimated by use of tiger bones in Chinese medicine, and habitat loss. Jaguars are the only New World big cat, found from Arizona to Argentina. Although jaguars have been hunted almost to extinction in many parts of this range, they are making a slow come-back in a few protected places. Jaguars have the most powerful bite of any cat species, giving them the ability to crush skulls but also dental problems as they sometimes break their teeth. Black panthers are black jaguars, carrying a double dose of the recessive melanistic gene.

In addition to the big cats, there are medium-sized cats – such as the caracal (African lynx), puma, serval, ocelot and lynx. Most of these are also endangered. Indeed the trade in ocelot pelts is still legal, not because the animals are so plentiful but because no-one knows how many remain so no protection laws can be drafted. Small cats include the European wild cat, the black-footed cat, the jungle cat, the domestic cat and Palas' cat which is unique among cats in having round pupils.

Cheetahs are also cats, but in a separate sub-family of their own. They are speed specialists, and have many dog-like characteristics. The fastest of any land mammal, they are able to go from a standstill to 70 mph. in only 2 seconds. Cheetahs purr on both the inhale and exhale, and sleep with their heads up (unlike most other cats), probably because vigilance and speed is their only defence. They run down their prey, but as they are able to keep up their phenomenal speed for only about 600m they are exhausted and vulnerable when they have finally caught their meal. There are only about 12,400 cheetahs left in the wild.

Richard's wonderful slides showed all these animals, but the most amazing shot was of him sitting on a sofa beside a fully-grown cheetah (an orphaned cub which he had reared). He also discussed ways of estimating the populations of all these animals: camera traps, foot-print identification, photographing faces (to record unique whisker spot patterns), playing recordings of challenge calls, radio telemetry and so on. As people encroach more and more onto the cats' territories it is vital to accurately

monitor the remaining populations. Most are endangered. There are more big cats in captivity in America (where the laws on keeping dangerous wild animals are lax) than in the wild. Without accurate counts, effective conservation laws and the means of enforcing them, many groups of these magnificent animals will soon be extinct.

Richard will be talking to the Duns Group of the Scottish Wildlife Trust on his current work with red squirrels, at Duns Parish Church Hall on Thursday 8th January at 7.30 pm.