

Common Name: Chinchilla

Scientific Name: *Chinchilla lanigera*



IUCN Red list Status: Critically Endangered
AZA Conservation Program:

Class: Mammalia
Order: Rodentia
Family: Chinchillidae
Genus: Chinchilla

Habitat: Chinchillas are native to western South America and can be found living in the Andes Mountains, between elevations of 9 and 15 thousand feet. The land they inhabit is rocky, arid, and sparsely covered with vegetation. Chinchillas used to be common along the whole western coastline of South America, but can now only be found in Chile, Peru, and Bolivia.

Threats in the Wild: The thick, bluish grey, and extraordinarily soft fur of the chinchilla has not made a positive impact on its survival. Chinchillas have now been trapped to near extinction for their pelts. Andean tribes have always hunted chinchillas for their fur and used it to make blankets and clothing. Tribal hunting of chinchillas never made a negative impact on chinchillas, but commercial hunting has. By the late 1800s, chinchilla fur had become a valuable export to North America, Europe, and many other countries with ever increasing demand. This caused Chinchilla populations to decrease and those remaining are still threatened to this day by hunting even though it is now illegal. It is very difficult to enforce this law in the remote slopes that chinchillas inhabit.

Chinchillas also have to worry about predators in the wild that aren't human. These predators include skunks, snakes, eagles, and hawks. Chinchillas don't often go down without a fight though! They usually try to frighten a predator off by standing on their hind legs and puffing up their tail, making themselves look larger. If this doesn't work, they will try to bite their attacker. Their thick fur also lends its own defense. When a predator is attempting to bite the chinchilla, their fur is so thick that the predator might only end up with a mouth full of fur!

Physical Characteristics: Chinchillas have adapted well to their arid and cool mountain habitat. They

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have extremely dense fur, having (on average) 80 hairs per follicle. Comparatively, humans only have one hair per follicle. Their extremely dense coat is very effective at keeping them insulated from the cold. They have strong, long hind legs that they use to propel themselves across the rocky terrain in search of food and when escaping predators. Chinchillas have large ears and eyes that are well suited for hearing and nighttime vision. Like other rodents, a chinchilla's incisor teeth never stop growing. They average at 12-21 inches in length and males tend to weigh around 17 oz. and females weigh around 28 oz.

Reproduction: Chinchillas are mostly monogamous, meaning that they mate for life. On average, females produce two litters per year, with two to three young per litter. This is considered to be a relatively low reproductive rate for small mammals. Breeding season falls between May and November. During breeding season, females become very aggressive towards other females and even the males. After about a four month gestation period females give birth. The young (called kits) are well developed at birth; with their eyes already open, covered in fur, and weighing about 35 grams. Mothers care and nurse for the kits for about six to eight weeks after birth. Chinchillas reach sexual maturity at about eight months of age.

Longevity: In human care: 20 years on average In the wild: 10 years on average

Diet: Chinchillas search for their food during the night. When they are eating, they sit upright on their back legs and hold their food with their front feet. In the wild, they eat herbs, grasses, bark, and other native Andean plants. Water is scarce in their habitat, so they have adapted to absorb most of the water they need from the plants that they eat.

Miscellaneous: Chinchillas are social and live in large colonies of up to 100 individuals. During the day, they rest in the rocky caverns and crevices, safely out of sight of predators. They occasionally come out of their burrows to take a dust bath, hop around on the rocks, or warm themselves in the sunshine. However, they are most active at night, dusk, and dawn. When the colony is out in the open, at least one individual maintains a lookout and vocalizes alarms when there is a threat nearby. The colony stays close to their burrow, just in case there is a need to hurry to safety.



Sources:

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<https://www.marylandzoo.org/animal/chinchilla/>



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