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A Saber tooth tiger Kingdom Animalia Phylum Chordata Class Mammalia Order Carnivora Family Felidae Genus Smilodon Species Smilodon populator Niche Carnivorous Length 79 - 98 in (2 - 2.5m) Weight 661 lbs (300 kg) Lifespan 20 - 40 years Social Structure Social Conservation Status Extinct Preferred Habitat Forests and grasslands Average Litter Size 3 Main Prey Species deer, bison and small woolly mammoths Main Threats Humans The Basics The saber tooth tiger is one of the most widely known species of saber toothed cats from the genus Smilodon. This extinct cat was named for the pair of elongated teeth in its upper jaw. The saber tooth tiger was found across North and South America during the Pleistocene Epoch. It went extinct approximately 10,000 years ago. Unlike its name suggests, these cats are not related to the modern-day tigers found in Asia. In fact, the saber tooth tiger got its name from its large canine teeth that could grow over 7 inches in length. Its teeth were narrow, curved, and had extremely sharpened edges that enabled it to slice through soft tissue. They were quite fragile, though, and may have broken if they had hit bone instead of flesh. Scientists have uncovered a number of saber tooth tiger skeletons and fossils. From this, we know that saber tooth tigers were large cats that had short limbs. Scientists think that these cats would have been similar to a modern-day African lion (Panthera Leo) in both size and color, although it is not related to lions either. They were dominant predators that preyed upon large herbivores such as deer and bison. It is also thought they would have eaten the occasional small woolly mammoth. The large cats are likely to have bred in the spring, with the female giving birth to a maximum of three cubs. There is not a lot known about saber tooth tiger cubs, but researchers think that they were born blind like other cats. They had no natural predators. It is thought that they were hunted to extinction by humans. A saber tooth tiger skeleton Interesting Insights from the Saber Tooth Tiger! The saber tooth tiger is one of the most well-known prehistoric animals that was named for its enormous canines. Still, these weren't the only biological adaptations that made the saber tooth tiger such a successful predator. Let's take a close look. Physical Adaptations - Head The saber tooth tiger had several adaptations that enabled it to have such large teeth. The cats had a wide gape that enabled it to open its mouth to 120 degrees. This is double that of today's lions, who can open their mouths to 60 degrees. This wide gape was necessary to allow the cats to get the full use of their teeth, which could be up to 28 cm in length. The skull also had a modification that enabled it to accommodate the attachment of strong neck muscles, which helped it to bring its head down. This suggests that it hunted by stabbing and slashing at its prey with its teeth. The saber tooth tiger had a short bobtail. Physical Adaptations - Limbs The limbs of these cats were shorter and thicker than that of other felines. They also had powerful abductor muscles and denser bones. This would have helped the cats' stability and given them more power when wrestling with their prey. These physical adaptations suggest that saber tooth tigers were ambush hunters that stalked their prey. The structure of their head (as mentioned above) and their teeth provide further evidence for this theory. Saber tooth tigers also had one other adaptation that supports the theory that they were ambush hunters. Unlike modern-day cats, such as lions and cheetahs, Saber tooth tigers had a bobtail. A long tail is used by big cats to provide stability and balance when they are chasing their prey. Without this long tail, it is more likely that these big cats would have hidden and waited for their prey. Once they had surprised their prey, they would have delivered a fatal bite using their impressive canines. Humans are likely to be the cause of the saber tooth tiger going extinct. Social Behaviour Unlike modern cats - such as tigers and house cats - which are solitary hunters, the saber tooth tiger was a social animal. It is thought that they lived in packs and had a social structure much as lions do. Fossils found all over North America provide evidence for this theory. Smilodon fossils found in the La Brea tar pits show proof that some of the animals had experienced fractures, severe crushing, crippling arthritis, and other degenerative diseases. If these cats were solitary hunters, it is likely they would have died before these wounds healed. Many of the bones found showed extensive healing and regrowth. This suggests that the cats survived after their injuries and were most likely cared for by other cats. At the very least, the other cats enabled them to feed. The bones did, however, show some evidence of evidence from other saber tooth cats, suggested that fights sometimes broke out, most likely over females. Indiana University Bloomington IU Bloomington Facebook Twitter LinkedIn Twitter Your verification message has been resent to the email associated with your account. Please check your email before you try to log in again. Your session for the Indiana Geological and Water Survey will expire in 30 minutes. Please refresh your browser or click here to restart your session timer. Your session for the Indiana Geological and Water Survey is about to expire. Your browser will automatically refresh in10 seconds. Naturally, saber-tooth cats are known for their distinctive teeth -- two very long canines that extended well past the bottom of the jaw. These canines were about twice as thick from front to back as from side to side, so they resembled very thick, somewhat curved knife blades. In Smilodon fatalis, adults' saber teeth could measure up to 7 inches (18 centimeters) long. That's about as long as the average man's hand from the wrist to the end of the middle finger. But the cats' teeth weren't always so big. Saber-tooth cats had deciduous baby teeth, just like people and many other mammals do. The cats lost their baby teeth, including a set of miniature saber canines, before they entered adolescence. In order to reach the necessary length, their adult canines grew at a rate of about 8 millimeters a month for more than 18 months. Today's tigers' teeth grow about this fast, but the canines of saber-tooth cats grew for a longer period of time than tiger teeth do. The sheer size of a saber-tooth cat's canines can make it seem like eating or attacking prey would be a problem. But saber-tooth cats had the ability to open their mouths very wide to make up for the extreme length of their teeth. Smilodon fatalis could open its mouth up to 120 degrees wide. This let the cats take big bites, although, according to computerized tomography (CT) scans, they used those big bites for soft flesh, not thick bones. The cats' skulls weren't designed to handle the pressure of biting through bone. They also weren't designed to provide anchors for the amount of muscle needed to hang on to struggling prey for a long time. That's one reason why saber-tooth cats tended to aim for the throat or abdomen instead of the bonier parts of their prey. What the saber-tooth cat lacked in jaw strength it made up in physical bulk and power. These carnivores were like sturdy, squat versions of modern lions. Their legs and bodies were short and powerful, and they had a lot of muscle mass, causing them to weigh a lot more than the average lion. While a lion might weigh up to 500 pounds (227 kilograms), saber-tooth cats weighed between 600 and 750 pounds (272 and 340 kilograms). Saber-tooth cats also lacked the long tail that today's lions use for balance. This may have made saber-tooth cats stronger but less agile than most of today's big cats. The lack of a long tail is also one reason why scientists don't call them saber-tooth tigers or saber-tooth lions. Imagine a bulked-up lion that's lost its tail and been slightly compressed from head to rear and foot to shoulder, and you've got a pretty good idea of what the saber-tooth's body was shaped like. Its color is a whole other matter, though. So far, paleontologists haven't found any fossilized remains of saber-tooth skin or fur, so there's no solid evidence of their coloring. However, based on analysis of plant fossils from the last ice age, many paleontologists believe that Smilodon fatalis had the dappled coat of a cheetah or bobcat. This coloring would have helped the cat blend in with the vegetation that was common at the time. Fossils have also given paleontologists a few ideas on how saber-tooth cats lived and behaved. We'll look at the evidence for a social structure among saber-tooths -- and arguments that they were solitary -- in the next section. Perhaps the most popular icon of the Ice Age is the sabre tooth cat (Smilodon fatalis), but this predator is only known from more southerly parts of North America, ranging no further north than southern Alberta. The more widely distributed scimitar cat (Homotherium serum) is perhaps a more fitting iconic predator of the ice age world. The scimitar cat is often confused with its sabre-toothed relative, but the two can be most easily distinguished by the size and shape of their oversized canine teeth. The scimitar cat has smaller, serrated "dirk-shaped" upper canines while it's sabre-toothed relative has larger "sabre-shaped" upper canines. Both cats would have been formidable hunters, but to date only scimitar cat remains have ever been found in Yukon. Scimitar cats on display at YBIC. Scimitar and sabre tooth cats are part of a unique and now extinct branch of the feline family tree, a fact only recently confirmed using DNA extracted from a Yukon fossil. Since these cats have no living relatives, palaeontologists have been struggling to unravel the mysteries of how they lived, how they used their oversized canine teeth, and why there are no scimitar or sabre-toothed cats alive today. American scimitar cats had long limbs, a long powerful neck, a short stocky body with a sloping back, and a relatively short tail. They seem well adapted to short bursts of speed and for delivering a precise, fatal bite with their fierce upper canine teeth. However, with its specialized, precision hunting style focused on medium-sized prey (for example horse, bison and caribou), the scimitar cat appears to have been unable to compete when prey populations changed and new, less specialized predators arrived. Scimitar Cats in Yukon The scimitar cat was the second largest feline species to live in Yukon during the Ice Age (after the Beringian lion) — weighing in around 200 kilograms. Their meagre fossil record indicated they were relatively rare, and their populations peaked just before 20,000 years ago. The first scimitar cat fossil ever discovered in Yukon was found in 1968. This bone, a fragment of a lower jaw, was recovered by researchers working along the Old Crow River in northern Yukon. Since this discovery, scimitar cat bones have also been found in the Klondike goldfields area and in Alaska. Using the chemical composition of and radiocarbon dates for scimitar cat and other predator bones from Fairbanks, Alaska, researchers have been able to explore the predator-prey relationships of ice age Beringia. For example, the scimitar cat fossils from Fairbanks were all about 35,000 years old, from a time when there were few Beringian lions or short-faced bears. These scimitar cats preyed upon horses and bison, the most abundant prey animals of that time. When horse and bison numbers started to decline, and lions and short-faced bears became more abundant, the scimitar cat was outcompeted and disappeared. A scimitar cat canine from the Canadian Museum of Nature. Recent Discoveries Many researchers have attempted to answer the age-old question of why these cats have oversized canine teeth. Recent studies have looked at the relationship between the size of these impressive upper canines and overall body size to reveal information about their evolution. One striking conclusion suggests that the oversized sabre tooth cat canines may not have even been adaptations for hunting. Rather, these formidable teeth may be more related to impressing a female — something biologists call sexual selection. This contrasts with those of scimitar cats and modern felines where canines evolved as specialized hunting weapons. Want to keep exploring? Check out the Beringian Research Notes on the scimitar cat.

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