

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 have extremely dense fur, having (on average) 80 hairs per follicle. Comparatively, humans only have one hair per follicle. Their extremely

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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. In captivity, chinchillas eat timothy hay pellets and timothy hay.

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 (used to remove excess dirt and oil from their fur), hop around on the rocks (Their light, hollow bones aid chinchillas in jumping to heights of up to 6 feet!), 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 of danger. In the wild Chinchillas have durable pads on their paws which can withstand abrasions while scaling tricky surfaces such as rocky ledges. A chinchilla's hands are also capable of gripping tightly to jagged outcroppings and tree branches, allowing them to reach incredible heights in their quest for safety.

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Handling: In the wild, Chinchillas are hunted by other animals. It's natural for them to be nervous. Chinchillas have developed some special ways to defend themselves if they feel threatened. One way they do this is 'fur slip' where they shed patches of fur so they can escape if another animal gets hold of them. Chinchillas can sometimes bite if they're scared or if they're picked up and handled roughly. It's really important to learn how to pick up and hold Chinchillas safely so they don't panic and don't get injured. Chinchillas can run and jump which makes it sometimes difficult to remove from their enclosure - do not hesitate to secure the animal and **do not grab their tail!**

Chinchillas are delicate pets and can easily be injured if not handled properly.

Adults should pick up Chinchillas by:

- Placing one hand under or around the chest area.
- Lifting and supporting their hind legs with your other hand.
- Holding the Chinchilla close to your body for security. Apply just enough pressure to hold securely but not too tight as their **rib cage is thin and delicate.**
- Keeping the Chinchilla upright to protect their delicate spine.
- **Never grab a chinchilla by its tail** as this could cause a fracture.
- Emil - (b 2017, folded ear, Dad to Esteban), Harder to catch but easier to handle, sometimes vocalizes when first picked up.
- Esteban - (b 2019, more energized, harder to handle - can be nippy and he squirms so watch that your fingers aren't in front of his face when holding, (may choose to wear leather gloves), he may try to climb you.
- Anything dangling from wrist or neck they will try to chew.

Transporting: Chinchillas cannot get wet. Their coat is too dense and thick and has trouble drying. This causes the coat to mildew and can make the chinchilla become sick. When transporting, make sure to protect the chinchilla by covering the container until you are in a dry space. Do not take the chinchilla out if the temperatures are too hot as this can lead to overheating.

Signs of Overheating: Chinchillas can overheat very easily. Their temperatures need to stay within 65-75 degrees Fahrenheit with humidity being max 40%-50%.

Here are some signs to look for when handling:

Red ears, warm body, drooling, lethargy, and heavy breathing.

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Signs of Stress: Barking and whistling, spraying urine, baring teeth, hissing, spitting, and rearing up on hind legs.

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

