

Awww-some Cheetahs!

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PHOTOS BY SUZI ESZTERHAS

Cheetahs are sleek, swift hunters. But this is how they start life: small, helpless, and very sleepy!

The snoozing cubs **below** are only five days old. Their eyes are still closed and they are just starting to crawl short distances. They're a long way from dashing across the African plains as only cheetahs can. First, they will need lots of care from Mom—and lots of good luck.





"I WANT MY MOMMY!"
the babies above seem to be crying. When Mom returns from her day of hunting, it's bath time for one of the cubs (right).

This mother cheetah has a hard job—and she has to do all the work herself. Her mate doesn't stay around to help, and the cubs can't help themselves. It will be six weeks before they can follow Mom when she goes hunting.

But Mom needs meat *now* to stay strong and take care of her cubs. Without plenty of food for herself, she can't make milk for her growing family. So she has to leave the cubs alone while she hunts, sometimes for many hours at a time.

The cubs have a few tricks to stay safe while Mom is away. Their spotted gray fur helps them blend in as they hide in the dry grass. The long, light-colored hairs growing along their backs give them extra camouflage and may also be a good disguise.



Some scientists think they make the cubs look a bit like honey badgers—fierce African predators that most animals avoid.

But danger is all around. Lions, hyenas, jackals, wild dogs, and eagles all eat baby cheetahs.

Even if they don't see the cubs, they may smell them. So Mom has one more trick to keep the babies safe. Every day or two, she looks for a fresh spot in the tall grass or behind a tree or pile of rocks. Then she gently picks up her cubs in her mouth and moves them to this new hiding place.



HARD TO HIDE
On the wide open plains, it's not easy to find a safe place for babies. Mom takes shelter under a small tree as she keeps watch over her nursing cubs (above). Mom's milk is all they will eat for their first four weeks (circle above).

ON THE MOVE
At left, Mom protects the cubs by moving them, one by one, to a safer place.

RUN, LITTLE ONE! The cub below isn't beating any speed records yet. But running to Mom is good practice.



CUB ON GUARD: Now that her cubs are growing stronger and more alert, Mom can finally get a little rest (below).

The babies are now more than two weeks old. They're growing fast. But because life is so dangerous, most cheetah cubs don't survive to become adults.

Maybe these cubs will be among the lucky ones. If so, they'll live with Mom until they're one and a half to two years old. They'll play together and learn to stalk and hunt. When they've grown into their slim, long-legged adult bodies, they'll dash off to live a speedy cheetah life. Good luck, little guys!

Rangers: Cheetahs are very endangered. To find out more, go to www.nwf.org/rangerrick.

—R.R.

