

Chinchilla Information

Scientific Names: *Chinchilla langier* (Long-tailed chinchilla) and
Chinchilla brevicaudata (Short-tailed chinchilla)

Order: Rodentia

Size: Long-tailed chinchilla = 26 - 27 cm long (body length)
Short-tailed chinchilla = 30 - 38 cm long (body length)
Long-tailed chinchilla tail length is approximately 14.5 cm
Short-tailed chinchilla tail-length is approximately 10 cm

Weight: Short-tailed chinchilla, Females up to 1.8 lbs, Males about 1.25 lbs.
The long-tailed chinchilla weighs somewhat less

RANGE/HABITAT: The original range of chinchillas included the foothills of the Andes and adjacent mountains in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru with the Long-tailed chinchillas inhabiting the southern portion of the range. Today, the short-tailed chinchilla is no longer found in the wild and the long-tailed chinchilla exists in the wild only in two disjointed populations in Chile approximately 250 kilometers apart. They occupy burrows at the base of Cardon plants or shelter in rock crevices.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: The general coloration is bluish, pearl or brownish gray. Each hair usually has a black tip. Underside is a yellowish-white. Bushy tail covered with coarser hairs. Large mouse-like ears, large black eyes, and a small squirrel-like body. Fur is extremely plush producing more than 50 hairs per follicle. (Humans produce only 1 hair per follicle.) Small bare palmed forefeet with 4 digits. Elongated back feet are also bare soled with four weak claws and stiff bristles that may be used for grooming. Cheek-teeth are ever growing and their incisors are colored.

ADAPTATIONS: Mainly nocturnal or crepuscular, but have been observed sitting in front of burrows on bright days. Chinchillas sit erect to eat, sunbathe and groom. Dust baths are frequently observed in their behavior. They can climb and jump bi-pedally with agility. Formerly found in colonies of hundreds of individuals. Very few current colonies have been observed with over 50 individuals. Females can be very aggressive towards members of either sex, especially within captivity. Serious fighting is rarely seen the wild; however, growling, chattering the teeth, and urinating express aggression. Life span of 10 years in the wild and up to 20 years in captivity.

DIET: Wild: Feces content analyzed in 2002 found that wild chinchillas are opportunistic generalized herbivores, which is probably an adaptation to the harsh conditions and high variability in food availability in their arid habitat.

REPRODUCTION: Sexual maturity reached at approximately 8 months. Breeding season lasts from May to November with a gestation of 111 days. Usually 2

litters a season, however, on average only 1 to 2 offspring are produced in a litter. Newborns weigh about 35 grams each and are fully furred, have their eyes open and are active. They nurse 6-8 weeks.

PREY/PREDATOR: Chinchillas do not prey on other species; they are herbivores. Their main predators are foxes and man.

STATUS IN THE WILD: The short-tailed chinchilla (*C. brevicaudata*) is thought to be extinct in the wild. Both the long-tailed (*C. lanigera*) and the short-tailed species are listed as "endangered" in Chile and "threatened" by the IUCN. Many are now being raised commercially on farms for the fur and pet trades. They are also used for medical research.

SPECIAL NOTES: Both species of chinchilla were considered extinct in the wild by 1953. However, the long-tailed chinchilla was "rediscovered" in 1975. Because Chinchillas have one of the softest, longest, finest furs of any wild mammal, people have harvested these rodents since ancient times. Inca noblemen used the fur to make coats and ate chinchilla meat. Indians from Chile also used their pelts for garments. However, commercial exploitation of chinchillas truly began in 1828 when Spaniards started to export pelts to Spain. Local chinchilla trappers known as "chinchilleros" became common in Chile, using a variety of trapping methods including dynamite to extract them from their burrows. Not only were the populations of chinchillas devastated, but also the local plant life. Many of the plant species in that habitat are now endangered. According to one source, between 1840 and 1916 over 21 million chinchilla were killed for their pelts. Even though legislation was created to protect the chinchilla as early as 1898 and 1910, they were not enforced until the mid-1980s. The majority of the remaining chinchilla colonies, however, are well protected in the Chinchilla National Preserve in Chile.

References:

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