

4K

AGE OF THE BIG CATS

3 x 50 min.

Produced by **Martin Dohrn**

4K, 5.1 and Stereo

Executive producers: **Ivo Filatsch, Sabine Holzer**



TERRA MATER
Factual Studios

We think we know big cats pretty well, don't we?
Well actually, we don't.

In this unprecedented series, recent scientific discoveries shed new light on the extraordinary prehistory of big cats and their ascent to world domination. How did these giant carnivores survive the ice age extinctions that wiped out the sabretooths, and persist into the present day? When we learn that the jaguar was once found in UK, the tiger ranged from Siberia to Turkey, and the lion, far from being African was a true worldwide phenomenon, it's clear our view of cats has been blinkered. What happened? Brand-new night vision systems, super slow-motion cameras, and cutting-edge computer-generated imagery of a bygone age take us on a tantalising trail of evidence to answer these questions, revealing incredible and surprising stories of the world's most charismatic predators: the big cats.

ORIGINS

3 million years ago, the land was changing, the forests were receding, and endless grasslands continued their spread. Predators of all kinds had adapted to follow the huge herds of grazing animals—yet now, one new group of hunters started its own rise to prominence.

These were the first of the big cats. From the agility and skill of the snow leopard to the lightning speed of the cheetah and the incredible jaw strength of the jaguar, the big cats developed special hunting skills to fit their environment. They didn't just survive, they thrived in this competitive world.

By 1.8 millions years ago, the big cats became more recognisable as the ones we know today, and could now be found over most of the Earth's surface except for Australia and Antarctica.

The age of the cats had just begun. Even though the true cats had by now made it to pretty much every possible corner of the world, they didn't fully own it yet. The sabretooths, giant hyenas and giant bears still had reign over the lands, in daylight at least. However, a new big cat was gaining ground. The lion.

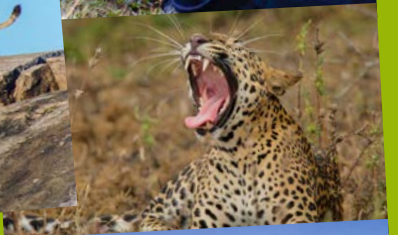
RULERS OF BEASTS

We often describe the lion as the king of beasts. This might once have been purely because of its magnificent physical stature—but at one time, the lion dominated the globe. When the lion appeared in Africa 1.9 million years ago, an unexpected thing happened: the sabretooth cats began to disappear. and again when lions moved into Asia. Did the lions outcompete these prehistoric predators, or were there other forces at play?

The lion is unusual; unlike any other cat, it's social. It was perhaps teamwork that allowed lions to colonise the vast open landscapes across Asia and the Americas, all the way south to Patagonia. They became the most widely distributed large land predator since the age of the dinosaurs.

In the southern, moister areas, forest cover was more frequent and so there was a different ruler—this is where tigers made their home. From modern Turkey as far as Siberia, tigers were the undisputed top predators of the forests.

It would be easy to assume that the big cats simply out-competed the sabretooths, but when the lion invaded the Americas, the diverse range of predators already living there didn't disappear. For 200,000 years they all shared the plains of north and south America. Yet 40,000 years ago, a human migration left Africa and continued right into the Americas. Within 3,000 years, all remaining sabretooths were extinct along with 80% of the other large mammals of the Americas.



Sadly it wasn't just the Americas that suffered loss, bigger animals all over the world were diminishing. Though the reign of the big cats was badly damaged, they were now, apart from humans, the main predators. A new world order was forming, and the big cats would have to find ways of surviving among humans.

DOWNFALL?

The puma somehow managed to survive the Pleistocene extinctions that devastated the Americas. With origins in Africa, the puma today can predominantly be found in South America. In particular, the Patagonian population is thriving, feeding mostly on guanaco, another ice age relic. Today, for the first time in their history, pumas have almost no competition, and in national parks are also protected from hunters. They are true masters of this kingdom.

By taking out so many large predators and their main competition during the extinction 40,000 years ago, it is very possible that it was humans that enabled the puma and the rest of the big cats to flourish. It appears our lives are more entwined with big cats than we initially realised.

Before humans colonised the Americas, the now extinct American horse was on the jaguar's menu. When the early Spanish explorers brought the horse back into the Americas 500 years ago, jaguars were quick to take advantage, and were persecuted all over the Americas for centuries.

The leopard has an altogether different story—many are becoming urban. They hang around villages, sneaking up on pariah dogs, or wild boar. In order to manage them, some Indian states now have well funded 'wildlife rescue teams' to relocate individuals. Remarkably, there are even places where lions and leopards are moving into rural areas with the blessing and encouragement of local people.

There's a final twist to the tale. Predation—whether by cats, wolves, bears or falcons—is such an integral part of any habitat that without apex predators, natural systems soon collapse and diversity drops. Only now are we realising how much we really need these predators.

Perhaps, with our help, the age of the big cats can truly return.



NATURE