

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

How Long Does It Take For A Baby Cheetah To Go From Fluffball To Hunter?

September 2, 2017.

[Jane] This is *But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids* from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. In each episode we take your questions and we find interesting people to answer them. This week our questions come from about 10,000 miles away from our home base in Vermont. They come from two kids in Mallacoota, Victoria. That's in Australia. Here is 6 year old Asha.

[Asha] How long does it take one of those cute little foals to grow into a stallion or a mare?

[Horse Neighing]

[Jane] That's right, we're talking about horses. We love this question Asha, and let's open up the barn door and find the answer.

[Steve] I'm Steve Davis, Director of the University of Vermont Morgan horse farm. The Morgan breed is America's first official breed of horse established in 1789 by the foundation's sire figure who acquired the name of his owner, Justin Morgan. The Morgan was the indigenous horse of the Northeast region.

[Jane] Indigenous means native, so the Morgan is from the northeastern United States and Morgan horses have a long history in Vermont. Now a breed is a specific type of an animal. Some other breeds of horses you might have heard of include Appaloosas Thoroughbreds, Arabians... but there are a lot of different breeds of horses, even some that originated in Australia, including the Australian draft horse.

But let's learn a little bit more about Morgans

[Steve] Morgans are a compact, small animal. When I say small the breed standard is 750 to 1200 pounds. Fourteen and a half hands or 56 inches at the wither... 58 inches to 16 hands or 61-62 inches would be the tallest Morgans typically.

[Jane] Horses are measured in hands, which sounds a little weird, right? Well, way back in ancient times, before people had standard measurements like the rulers we have today, people measured things using their body parts. These were pretty rough measurements, since your hand and my hand might all be very different in size. But it was at least a rough estimate of how large something was.

Now we do have standard measurements and horse breeders all agree that a hand is four inches. So that's why Steve says a horse might be 16 hands or 64 inches at the

withers... and the withers, by the way, that's the shoulder area of the horse, right before its neck. Anyway, back to Asha's question.

[Asha]How long does it take one of those cute little foals to grow into a stallion or a mare?

[Jane]This spring, the UVM Morgan horse farm had nine baby horses or foals.

[Steve]We are looking at two filly foals here, and, let's see... the one on our left is, was foaled on May 16th. She's the youngest of our 2016 foals. And the one on our right is about a half a month older. Now, these animals are referred to as fillies, a juvenile female, until they are three years of age or they become pregnant and have a foal of their own, and then they would be called a mare.

[Jane] Mother horses are pregnant for 11 months. Remember, it's nine months for humans, and when foals are born they can do a lot more than a newborn human.

[Steve] Birthings are quick. So, within 45 minutes usually the full labor, hard labor has started and the foal hits the ground. And then, within the hour, a typical vigorous foal is on their feet. They are pretty wobbly at first, and so mares try to be secluded. If they are in a pasture with others, they try to go off by themselves, to not be bothered. And then that first couple hours, when that foal gets its first milk, and they get their wobbles out of their long-legged systems, they can motivate and get away from predators.

Foals typically for the first few weeks are strictly on milk and they nurse probably every hour or so, and the mares milk is very rich in nutrients. And then very quickly they'll start eating grass or dried feed stuffs in our system, like hay and grain probably at a month of age. And then as they develop, like these two, they will start getting supplemented with grain to help get maximum growth and development.

Our animals are weaned from our system at four to six months of age, so that... in here, in 2016, September and October... and then they would be referred to as weanlings. And then until January 1, most registries consider the animal a year older. So on January 1, we'd refer to them as yearlings.

[Jane] At three years old, these horses will officially be called stallions or mares, depending on whether they're males or females, and they'll be considered fully grown. Now we learned the name for a young female horse before she becomes a mare – that's a filly – young male horses are called colts. And Steve says some breeds of horses take a little bit longer to get fully grown than others.

[Steve] The Morgan is a fairly slow developing breed compared to the Thoroughbred for example. So when we see horses on the track in this country and other countries, things are accelerated for them so they would be racing two year olds and they would be

backing long yearlings and that's all designed around earning money. But also the Thoroughbred breed develops quick or their growth plates...

(Oh this one's moving around for us.)

Their growth plates close quicker than these Morgans, who sometimes will develop until they're four to six years of age. So if we look at these two mares in front of us, these two nursing mares, they're in peak lactation period and they're milking heavily. These two individuals are kind of needy so they're segregated and they get extra feed. But they're in very good order, they eat about 12 pounds of grain a day and about 15 pounds of hay a day.

[Jane] Horses typically live about 25 to 30 years.

[Steve] The Morgan is known as a long lived breed. So currently our senior horses are two stallions, they're 24 years of age. So I guess any equine, if it's between 20 and 30 years, it's considered senior. It's not uncommon for Morgans to live to be 30 years of age and sometimes beyond.

[Jane] That was Steve Davis from the UVM Morgan horse farm in Vermont telling us all about how foals grow up to be stallions and mares.

We also got a question from Asha's brother, Jamari.

[Jamari] How long does it take for a cheetah to go from one of those fluffy cute little fluff balls to a fully-grown cheetah that can hunt for itself?

[Dr. Crosier] My name is Dr. Adrienne Crosier and I am the cheetah biologist at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute.

[Jane] The Smithsonian is an organization based in Washington D.C., the capital of the United States, and it runs a lot of museums of science, history, and art, and also the National Zoo. A few years ago the Smithsonian launched the Conservation Biology Institute in Virginia. It focuses on the survival of species that might be endangered.

One of those species is the Cheetah. The institute breeds cheetahs to try to increase the number of these animals that are born. And Dr. Crosier says the program has had success

[Crosier] So far, since 2010, we have had a total of nine cheetah litters born. We've had 34 cubs born, with 26 of them surviving. Gestation or the length of time that a cheetah female is pregnant before she gives birth is just about three months, the average is 92 days.

In the wild, cheetah moms will give birth in a nest that they have made... in tall grass or somewhere safe where the cubs can be hidden really well. At the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute they usually give birth in one of the dens that we provide for them. Sometimes they do give birth outside. That is OK as long as the weather is not too cold.

[Jane] In the wild, cheetahs are native to the East African savannah. Remember what we said that means? That's where they evolved, where they're indigenous to. Now it's a lot warmer and drier in the African savannah than in Virginia. But the Cheetah Conservation Station tries to mimic the cheetah's natural habitat as much as possible. When you picture a cheetah you're probably imagining a sort of beige or tawny kind of yellow colored big cat with lots of spots. Well Dr. Crosier says they don't look like that when they're born.

[Dr. Crosier] Cheetah cubs are very grey in color when they are born and it is very hard to see their spots until they're a few months old. Their eyes and ears are not open when they're born, and they only weigh about one pound. Cheetah cubs have claws when they are born, but they do not have teeth right away. The cubs make a lot of different noises. They purr, just like your cat at home, and they also chirp, which is a high pitched call used to locate each other. So the cubs will chirp to each other and they will also chirp back and forth with mom.

The cubs will nurse for three to four months but they will actually start eating meat at five to six weeks. Cubs are able to walk when they are just a few weeks old. They will start running around when they are three to four weeks of age. In the wild, the cubs would learn how to hunt from mom and she starts teaching them this when they are about 6 months old. The cubs leave mom when they are about 2 years old and at that point they are able to hunt for themselves.

[Jane] So they leave their parents when they're 2 years old. That's pretty different from humans. Can you imagine leaving your parents when you were two? But just because they leave their parents doesn't mean they're necessarily alone.

[Dr. Crosier] All of the brothers in a litter will stay together for life, in what we call a coalition. They will hunt together and stay together in a very tightly bonded group.

Females live alone as adults unless they have cubs. Females will have their first litter in the wild at about 3 years of age.

[Jane] Thanks to Dr. Adrian Crosier from the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute for all that Cheetah info.

So there you have it Jamari, they're pretty much fully adult and having babies of their own by the time they're about 3 years old. And cheetahs can live in the wild for maybe 10 or 12 years, longer in captivity.

By the way, cheetahs are about four or five feet long when they're fully grown, but that doesn't include their tail. The long tail of the cheetah can be nearly 30 inches. That's almost three feet or almost a meter long! And cheetahs are built for speed. They can run more than 60 miles or 100 kilometers per hour in short bursts.

I've actually seen a cheetah in the wild, in Maasai Mara, Kenya. I watched it eat a Topi which is a kind of African antelope. Cheetahs are great hunters, partly because of their speed. And they're amazing to see up close, they're so muscular. So I really hope you get a chance to see one in its native habitat someday Jamari.

Thanks to you and Asha for those great questions and good day to our Australian listeners! We've heard from a few of you and we're so thrilled you're listening. Tell us what else you want to know from the podcast.

That's it for this episode. We love all of your questions, so keep them coming. Have an adult record it using a voice memo app on a smartphone. And tell us your first name, where you live, and how old you are. Then send it to questions@ButWhyKids.Org.

If you enjoy the show, we hope you'll give us a rating or a review in iTunes. It really helps other families find us. And check out our Facebook page for photos and videos, and to learn more about the kids who are asking these questions.

If you send us a picture and tell us a little bit about yourself, we'll feature you on our Facebook page too.

But Why is produced by me, Jane Lindholm, along with Melody Bodette at Vermont Public Radio. The theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks.

In the meantime, Stay Curious!