

# *Cuon alpinus*



**Family:** Tibetan wild dog

**Common names:** Dhole (Hindi), Ramkum (Kashmiri), Rang kukur (Assamese), Farra (Ladakhi), Huithou (Manipuri), Ban kukur (Bhutanese), Phara (Tibetan)

**Classification:**

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Family: Canidae

Genus: *Cuon*

Species: *alpinus*

**Profile:**

Dhole is a species of wild dog of the Canidae family, also known as the Asiatic Wild Dog, Indian wild dog, red dog and the whistling hunter (due to the whistling sound it can make). Dholes of the Himalayan region are also referred to as Tibetan wild dog. Within the family, the Dhole is placed in a genus of its own and has been a distinct species for several million years. The dhole's scientific name means "mountain dog" in Latin. It has a long body, strong limbs and a long, bushy tail. The head appears rounded because of the short muzzle and has rounded ears. During summer, the animal has a reddish-brown coat and a darker bushy tail with a white tip. The underside is often whitish or light ginger coloured. During winter, the coat grows longer, and turns pale sandy-brown, while the tail turns dark brown. The ears are triangular, the muzzle is brown and relatively short, the nose is black and the eyes are slightly hooded with amber irises. The pups are sooty brown when born but turn russet in about three months. Dhole packs vary in size depending on the season. The total length of the body of the dhole is approximately 90 cm, and it weighs 12-18 kg. Unlike other canids, dholes have only six molars instead of seven. Therefore, they have only 40 teeth as opposed to 42 of other canids. The animal has some extraordinary vocals. It can make high-pitched screams, mew, hiss, yelp, chatter, and cluck like a chicken. Its most well known sound is its strange whistle, likened to the sound obtained when air is blown over an empty cartridge. These calls are used for contact within the pack. The whistles are so distinct that individual Dholes can be identified by it.

**Lifespan:** 10-16 years

**Distribution:** The dhole exploits a large variety of habitats - from freezing cold to tropical heat - reflecting its adaptability. It normally inhabits dry and moist deciduous forests and thick jungles, as well as tropical rainforests, which provide better cover for hunting. It can also, survive in dense alpine forests, meadows and on the open steppes. As the second part of its Latin name *alpinus*, suggests, the dhole is often found in hilly or mountainous regions. It is found in most of South, East and South-east Asia, from Tien-Shan and Altai mountains, right down to Sumatra and Java. In India, the dhole is mainly seen in tropical dry and moist deciduous forests. Apart from India, the species can be seen in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, China, Nepal and Pakistan.

**Population:** Less than 2500 mature individuals (IUCN) (Figures are for wild population only)

**Behaviour:** Dholes are highly social. They hunt in family packs of 5-12 individuals, rarely exceeding 25, with more males, sometimes twice as many as females. Usually there exists one breeding female in a year. Within the packs, there is a strict social hierarchy, and hence almost never any aggression. The dhole is most active in the early morning and evening, and sometimes at night. They like open spaces and during the day they can often be found on jungle roads and paths, riverbeds, and in jungle clearings. They are ruthless killers and as a pack, can bring down prey many times their individual body size. After bringing down the prey, the entire pack starts feeding in great haste, often before the animal is dead. An individual may devour 4 kg of meat in an hour. The dhole breeds communally with most pack members helping to feed and guard the young. In the breeding season, communal hunting is carried out. Dens are constructed near streambeds or among rocks, often in

burrows vacated by other animals, such as porcupines. Dhole young begin to become independent at 6 weeks, leave the den area at 10 weeks, and join the rest of the pack to hunt at 7 months. Dholes mature at one year of age, and may or may not leave the pack. They are shy animals and wary of humans.

- **Diet:** Dholes are carnivores. They eat deer, rodents and rabbits. They hunt for larger prey in packs and can kill animals up to ten times their size. They have been spotted killing tigers and bear as well.
- **Reproduction:** Mating season: September-February, Gestation period: 2 months, Litter size: 3-4 pups, Weaning: 3 weeks, Sexual Maturity: 1 year.

#### **Current status:**

- **Status:**
  1. IUCN 2008: Endangered
  2. CITES 2008: Listed in Appendix II
- **Threats:**
  1. Loss of habitat due to deforestation.
  2. Decline in the number of prey species.
  3. Hunting of dholes by humans for fur.
  4. Killed in conflict with humans over livestock depredation.
  5. Killed by humans out of fear of the dholes spreading diseases or attacking human settlements.
- **Conservation practices:**
  1. Hunting of dholes has been prohibited in Russia since 1971.
  2. In India, dholes are protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Act of 1972 (killing is prohibited expect for self defense).
  3. Dholes are kept in various National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries in India and Nepal.