



Sign up for our Free email Newsletter and get all the latest wildlife news!

Choose: Weekly Monthly

Your email address

[Subscribe](#)



- [Home](#)
- [Wildlife News](#)
- [UK & Ireland Wildlife](#)
- [World Wildlife](#)
- [Safaris](#)
- [Wildlife Photography](#)
- [Birds](#)
- [Whales & dolphins](#)
- [Marine & diving](#)
- [Forum](#)
- [Overview](#)
- [Europe](#)
- [Asia](#)
- [Central America](#)
- [North America](#)
- [Africa](#)
- [Australasia](#)
- [Antarctic](#)
- [Caribbean](#)
- [Middle East](#)
- [South America](#)
- [Arctic](#)

IN THIS SECTION

[Leopards in the Caucasus](#)

[The Gathering of the elephants in Sri Lanka](#)

[Giant Freshwater stingray research in Thailand](#)

[A family holiday in Nepal](#)

[Show all...](#)

Safari of the week



WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE

the **wildlife** experts

Leopards of Luangwa

Includes flights, 7 nts Kapani Lodge or satellite camps. No two days will be the same - sit by quiet lagoons, track lions, enjoy bush breakfasts on the banks of the river and enjoy unrivalled game-viewing.

From £3,295

Hand-Crafted Specialist Holidays
0845 130 6982
www.wildlifeworldwide.com

[Click here for more](#)

[CLICK HERE TO SEE FULL DETAILS OR TO BOOK.](#)

Voluntary Subscription

[Subscribe](#)



Help us maintain Wildlife Extra

[Home](#) » [World Wildlife](#) » [Asia](#) » **Leopards in the Caucasus**

Leopards in the Caucasus

MANIFESTATION OF A GHOST: THE CAUCASIAN LEOPARD - WRITTEN BY STEPHANIE SEARS

We are standing at one end of a broad sweep of rich ploughed soil and meadow which is the limit between Vashlovani Park and cultivated land. To the north at our backs, the white-capped Greater Caucasus range raises its mighty barrier. At our feet the ground drops abruptly into a landscape worthy of Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The lost world': volcanic mountains, loess cliffs, plateaus and ravines covered in Juniper and November's brightly hued shrubbery.

"That's where Noah was first photographed," points Amiran Kodhiashvili, owner of Eco-tour and former deputy director of the 35,054 Vashlovani State Reserve in south-east Georgia and bordering Azerbaijan. The photograph alluded to is, in fact, one of several taken by remote sensor camera in 2004, of one robust, well-fed looking male leopard in profile, his piercing gaze focused on a point ahead. Has he found a mate? Bejan Lortkipenidze of the NGO Nacres based in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, has unfortunately seen no trace of Noah in the last year. Nonetheless, rumors of leopard presence are tenacious; shepherds hold the leopard responsible for attacks on their sheep and identification of teeth and claw marks has confirmed the accusation. Last year, in Tusheti Park in the northeast of Georgia, bordering Russia, another leopard was photographed.

Noah may not be a permanent resident of Georgia and may have come from Azerbaijan or Armenia. But it is more likely that he wandered in from the Caucasian area in northwest Iran, using the mountain ranges that both link and divide the whole Caucasus region.

Leopards in Iran & Turkmenistan

A year earlier I had walked through Golestan Park in northern Iran near the Caspian Sea and we had found, both in its humid Hyrcan forest and its dry open Juniper forest, a fair amount of leopard scats and pugmarks, indicating a significant population (30 to 40 in Golestan). Further northeast and south of Turkmenistan where leopards reside in the Kopet Dag range separating the two countries, Tandureh Park is believed to have between 35 and 45 individuals though we found substantially fewer traces there. Though these two parks are east of Caucasian Iran per se, continuous mountain range may provide a way for leopards to move west and contribute to leopard numbers in the Caucasus. More about [Leopards in Iran](#).



It is thought that there may be 5-800 leopards surviving in Iran today.
Photo credit Iranian Cheetah Society.

The leopard population for all of Iran is estimated to be between 400 and 800 individuals, but with no more than 25 cats in the north-western Caucasian region abutting to Armenia and Azerbaijan. Because it is still uncertain whether Georgia has itself a permanent nucleus of leopards, this Iranian region is considered to be the fountainhead for leopard presence there and in the rest of the Caucasus. Leopard survival in the region relies heavily on how well Iran maintains its own population of the big cat and on how continuous and well protected the 'corridors' between the countries are.

Noah's solitary manifestation in Vashlovani points clearly to Georgia's present position on the cusp between two opposing tendencies: One in which the country will favour the environment and systematically consider it as a national asset able to contribute to its economic development; and one where it may underestimate

that potential. The first will most certainly lead to a strengthening of leopard presence while the other will most probably lead to his extinction. The outcome, however, also depends on the action taken by all the countries of the Caucasus.

Caucasus Mountains stretch across 6 countries

The Caucasus is that interesting region to which Europe almost extends and where the Middle East and Asia meet in a riot of natural, cultural and political diversity. Three mountain systems, the Greater Caucasus, the Western and Eastern Lesser Caucasus and the South Caucasus Highlands stretch between the six countries that compose the region: Russia, Turkey and Iran in portions only of their territory, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia in their totality. The endangered Caucasian leopard (*Panthera pardus transcaucasica*) has increasingly taken to steep terrain to travel between countries, blissfully unaware of frontiers yet forced higher by expanding human presence.

Leopards were common in the Caucasus until the 20th century

For a European used to considering the leopard as an inhabitant of Africa, Sub-continental and Far Eastern Asia, their presence in the Caucasus is almost akin to space aliens landing in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris. In reality, until the early twentieth century, leopards were common in the Caucasus (As well as the Caspian tiger which was found until the

Keyword search
[Go](#)

Picture Africa Wildlife Photography Courses

+44 777 63 45 627
+27 728 14 84 31
info@picture-africa.com
www.picture-africa.com

WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE
the **wildlife** experts

Hand-Crafted Specialist Holidays
0845 130 6982
www.wildlifeworldwide.com

[Click here for more](#)

14 - 15 OCTOBER 2011
ALEXANDRA PALACE, LONDON

MAJOR NEW WILDLIFE EXHIBITION!

WILDLIFE XPO

www.wildlifexpo.com
01285 865223


Supporting from each ticket sold will be donated to your local Wildlife Trust

Reader offer
10% off



Bob Books
Digital photo
books & calendars

SOUTH AUSTRALIA
southaustralia.com



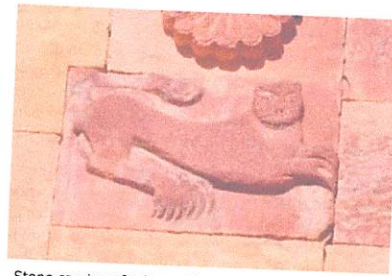
S



South Australia.
A brilliant blend.

1950s in Armenia and Azerbaijan, whilst lions disappeared long before in the 10th century, except in Iran where they were still found in the 1940s).

The now rare leopard is still a living reference for many cultural representations in the Caucasus, be it stone carvings or frescos on church walls such as at the cathedral of Mtskheta village outside of Tbilisi; literature and poetry references as in the Georgian epic poem 'The knight in the tiger skin', which, in a current edition using nineteenth century illustrations, shows clearly the large spotted skin of a leopard and not the skin of a tiger; decorating ancient Armenian tombstones; a thirteenth century lectern in Yerevan and in carved petroglyphs, to mention just a few examples.



Stone carving of a leopard on a church Georgia, The same church that contained the leopard fresco above.
Photo by Strehanie Sears.

Poachers, military presence, deforestation, over grazing & dams

The leopard's persistent survival in the Caucasus despite a list of menaces conveys two essential messages to environmentalists: First, that the cat has been remarkably tough and worthy to symbolize power and courage as he has over the centuries; secondly, that environment and fauna have been seriously abused and that even a reasonable effort to protect and enhance strategic natural areas could stabilize leopard populations. The causes for dwindling numbers make up a list that is by now familiar and found in other parts of the world; but in the Caucasus the degree of responsibility varies according to country.

In Georgia, the main culprits are poachers of leopard prey (Bezoar and Tur goat, red deer, wild boar, chamois, among the larger prey), military presence and fortifications at borders, deforestation, poor environmental and enforcement policy; in Azerbaijan, the dangers are leopard poachers and over grazing; in Armenia, they are leopard and leopard prey poachers, military presence at borders, fire and deforestation (illegal logging and expansion of agricultural areas), the building of roads, mining, poor enforcement of the law, political instability and low international cooperation; in Russia, they are again leopard and leopard prey poachers and poverty; in Turkey, it is poaching again, the building of dams, low international cooperation, livestock defence, poor enforcement of the law; in Iran, both types of poachers are a main problem, but also poor enforcement of the law, low international cooperation, cattle grazing in forests and infrastructure building.

Less tangible factors affecting the survival of leopards are a diminished familiarity with nature and poverty, and they are probably at the source of more direct ills against nature.

Leopard numbers in the Caucasus

What then is the current leopard population in the Caucasus? Estimates are today mostly approximations. WWF Georgia's evaluation based on photo trapping, traces and questionnaires given out to locals in different regions is of ten to fifteen leopards in the Greater Caucasus range and some fifty to eighty for the Lesser Caucasus including Iran's Caucasus region, keeping in mind that population numbers fluctuate with individual ranging. This more or less corresponds to the country by country evaluation which finds ten individuals for the Russian Caucasus, three to four for Armenia, the same for Azerbaijan, twenty-five for the Iranian Caucasus, while for Georgia and Turkey there are for the time being only hopeful guesses. WWF Georgia's conservation director, Nugzar Zazanashvili believes, however, that Turkey probably has more leopards than the three smaller countries of the Caucasus put together. Estimation for an ideal population in the whole region correspond to only a modest increase of the existing estimates : no more than ten for Georgia, twenty each for Armenia and Azerbaijan, twenty for the Turkish Caucasus and thirty for Caucasian Iran; a hundred leopards in all could sustain a genetically healthy population as long as trans-Caucasian movement was secured.



Yvashlovani National Park, where 'Noah' was seen in Georgia in 2004.

Caucasian leopard corridors

Panthera pardus saxicolor transcaucasica is a large animal (70 -90 kg for a male, 40-45 for a female), yet even when cover is sparse he has the ability to make himself invisible. One might think therefore that satisfactory corridors could be quite narrow. Opinions differ on the matter, however. For Igor Khorozyan, an Armenian leopard specialist, they should be at least ten kilometres wide, while for WWF Georgia's conservation director there are no absolute rules: an area that has already served as a corridor will have proved that it is adequate even if only one to two kilometres wide. The natural corridors now used by the big cat are the Zangezur and Megri mountains in southern Armenia bordering Azerbaijan, which are vital connections between these countries' protected border areas and Iran; the Talysh mountains in Azerbaijan together with the Alborz range in northern Iran which allow cats to range along the Caspian into north-eastern Azerbaijan; the Murovdag range between Iran and the south Caucasus provide a corridor to the Greater Caucasus which in turn allows the leopard to move northwest.

Russia reintroduction - Trans border protection and new protected areas

To boost a disappearing or extinct western population, Russia is planning the reintroduction of two pairs of leopards in Sochi Park and the Caucasus Natural Reserve near the Georgia's north-western border; the West Lesser Caucasus along the Black Sea is a corridor between northeast Turkey and southwest Georgia. Natural corridors that overlap countries point to the necessity for trans-boundary conservation agreements between neighbours. Georgia and Turkey have already taken the steps for such cooperation and the Turkish government has created three new protected areas near the Georgian border: Agri, Sarikamish Parks and Jamili Biosphere Reserve. Azerbaijan has doubled its protected areas since 2000. Two protected areas were recently created in southern Armenia: Arpi Lake and Arevik National Park and the Zangezur Sanctuary. The Russian Caucasus has three national parks and has expanded its Ezri Reserve. 7,2% of Georgia's territory is protected. In 2008 a Persian leopard conservation network was established and in 2009 Iran had a new ministry of the Environment that gave hope to a new generation of fervent, ambitious scientists and park officials that their environmental concerns might at last get proper attention.

Ads by Google

Rainforest of Borneo

Eco-lodges, bird watching, wildlife safari, mud volcano, jungle trekking
www.tabinwildlife.com.my
Fantastici Sconti Verona

Con i nostri Coupon a Basso Costo Ogni Giorno Sconti Fino al 70%
www.GROUPON.it/Verona

Safaris in Zambia

Your Safari in the heart of Africa. Safari Packages online. Search Now
www.NormanCarrSafaris.com

Kilimanjaro climbing

the best tour operator in mountain Kilimanjaro Safaris & Zanzibar
www.africajoytours.com

Hotels in Georgia USA

All hotels shown on a region map. Book online now, pay at the hotel!
www.booking.com/Georgia

Ads by Google

Dream About Marriage?

View 100s Armenian Ladies Profiles Meet your Perfect Match & Marry!
AnastasiaDate.com

Wildlife

Explore India's Rich, Exotic & Fascinating Wildlife Heritage.
shikhar.com/Wildlife_Heritage

Leopard Conservation Work

Volunteer at Wildlife Projects & Big 5 Game Reserves in South Africa
www.EnkosiniEcoExperience.c

Bhitarkanika National

Bhitarkanika National Park, Orissa Visit to Bhitarkanika An Eco tour
www.bhitarkanikatour.com/pa

Botswana Wildlife Safari

10 Day Botswana 4x4 Lodge Safari Okavango, Moremi, Chobe, Kalahari
www.lathita.co.za

Poverty and political strife

Poverty and political/military strife are, if not directly so, major enemies of nature conservation. Odd as it may first seem, greater value placed upon conservation and actions taken towards improvement of the environment are stimulating collaborative efforts and could transform political hostilities into international cooperation. If the Caucasus became a region of environmental interest to the wider public, the mere thought of leopard presence and the chance of seeing this flagship species in the wild could become a major draw. As an umbrella species, a stabilized Caucasian population would imply that the environment has become healthier for animals and therefore also for people living in the region. Under the driving force of the international Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) the Caucasus is now considered as an eco-region of utmost value and yet degradation is still taking place at a great rate.

The Eco-region conservation plan (ECP) must be given a chance to work as though there were no political hostilities between countries in the Caucasus or areas may not be properly preserved. Poverty is a key element that may prevent people from being sympathetic to measures taken to improve the environment. One way to make things more attractive to locals living near protected areas is to have different types of control over the environment allowing for a more flexible use of it. The ECP must include an alternative means of livelihood that will enhance or sustain a certain environmental quality. The varying status of protected areas, from strict reserve to national park to sanctuary to protected landscape to multiple-use area allows for a controlled flexibility in the use of the land that could help reach the ultimate goal of harmonious co-habitation between human society and wildlife.

Force for political change

The leopard, as one of the larger mammals in the region; perhaps the most beautiful and certainly as one of the most endangered, may become a figure head for a process of political and economic change, with wildlife no longer marginally valuable but part of a country's and a region's most tangible assets. As such, the magnificent feline could encourage a kind of emulation between the six countries of the Caucasus, of which the goal would be to have the most thriving leopard population.

If this Caucasus trans-boundary plan prevails over a narrower perspective for the future of the region, one may begin to dream of a Caucasus that is not only a haven for its big cat but may become one day a point of diffusion towards regions further west and closer to Europe where once long ago the leopard also lived.

VASHLOVANI NATIONAL PARK - GEORGIA.

