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The wild leopards of Oman and Nepal – And how to see them

Leopards in Oman and Nepal. By Stephanie Sears.

Photo of a leopard in Oman's captive breeding centre - Copyright Stephanie Sears.



The common leopard (*Panthera pardus*) has played second fiddle to the tiger in the hearts of most wildlife tourists, but may at last be coming into its own. While in the past the death of a leopard often went unnoticed they are now getting the attention of authorities. The spotted cat's beauty is undeniable; the stealth with which it appears and vanishes like an apparition seems magical; its strength with respect to its size is staggering; all qualities which enhance our sense of nature with a graceful though threatening mystery.

Highly elusive

To see a leopard in the wild is one of the great rewards of wildlife watching, yet one of the rarest, except perhaps in Africa. Long considered common, the leopard has also been thought of as troublesome and disposable. In reality its distribution is uneven: while still in good numbers in sub-Saharan Africa and relatively numerous in parts of subtropical and tropical Asia, it is on the verge of extinction elsewhere.

Oman & Nepal leopards

Both Oman and Nepal have leopards but the two countries illustrate opposite ends of the animal's survival spectrum. In Oman at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, the Arabian leopard is the largest feline in the area and is classified as rare and critically endangered by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature). In Nepal, the exact population, though unknown, is regarded as satisfactory and classified by the IUCN as merely 'near threatened'.

Threats

Despite obvious differences the two countries have in common a fast growing human population supplemented by ever increasing grazing livestock. These two factors, though fundamentally detrimental to the leopard, result in more frequent sightings and conflict with the cat. The absence of census surveys in both countries, combined with increasing encounters between leopard and man, have led to increased persecution, particularly in Nepal, where - as in India - it is replacing the much scarcer tiger as a target for the poaching of skins and body parts.

Oman leopards

Oman is mountainous, coastal and mostly arid except for its southern woodland Dhofar region which benefits from monsoon rains in June, July, when lush vegetation grows. Here, a questionable estimate of two hundred leopards at most survives, concentrated in the 4500km² Jabal Samhan Reserve. The northern region of Musandam has a hypothetical nucleus of two to four survivors after systematic slaughters in the 1980s by tribesmen hunting and protecting their herds. Oman's conservation laws now punish the shooting of a leopard with a fine of up to 5000 rials, (\$US 13,000) and five years imprisonment. Poaching of skins may be a minor threat in Oman despite the high price of \$4000 to \$8000 for one pelt, but the poaching of live leopards sold to private wildlife collectors in neighbouring countries is a threat to a much reduced gene pool. Despite hopes that strict protective laws and environmental education will help the leopard population has not significantly augmented since the 1980s'.

In 1997 Andrew Spalton, environmental advisor to the Royal Court, began the Leopard Survey project that has helped to promote the leopard as one of the three flagship species in the country along with the Oryx antelope and the Tahr mountain goat. Jabal Samhan Reserve is the main focus of these efforts, despite setbacks such as the construction of a double lane road running through the park between Hasik and Shuwmiyah where Oman has oil reserves.

Herders and frankincense gatherers are the most likely people to see leopards in Jabal Samhan, and also the most likely victims of rare attacks. Environmental campaigns, school education, special training for individuals wishing to pursue an environmental profession within these communities help to avoid retaliatory actions, and to implement this trend a number of social scientists will be invited to Oman in 2009 to study the relations between man and wildlife.

Jabal Samhan Reserve

For now the leopard is so rare that a drive up to a thickly fogged Jabal Samhan Reserve with Salem al Mashni, Director of Veterinarian Services in Salalah, leaves no reasonable hope of even glimpsing a trace of an animal that at about 32kg for a male and 18 kg for a female is half the size of the African leopard. Though the landscape is open, punctuated by scattered Tein trees and shrub, the land rover vanishes as we walk some twenty metres away to sit on a rock and are



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On elephant back safari in Nepal. Copyright Wildlife Extra.

midday. The elevation provided by riding an elephant gives a broader view as does sitting in a machan or observation tower usually planted in an open area. Walking through the jungle on foot limits the distances one can cover and access

to some areas but provides a more intimate and quieter experience than on elephant back and may in the end give a better (and more thrilling) chance to see the leopard. A sighting in the jungle demands a complex and fragile combination of factors: Silence, good eyesight, appropriate timing and density of leopard population, luck and perhaps intuition. More often than not, however, even the most determined efforts are met with disappointment.

Village sightings

The thwarted leopard lover may be tempted to take advantage of the cat's less elusive behaviour when, no longer the invisible spirit of the jungle, it approaches a concentration of houses and becomes an inopportune caller at the door. In this case a likely place of observation will be a much frequented path near a settlement whose domestic stock and dogs attract the predator like a well-supplied and well-displayed self-service.

But is there not something fundamentally wrong in this kind of sighting? Does it not undermine the enigmatic character of the leopard, sully unfairly its reputation and frequently lead to its demise? Far better, perhaps, is to fail in seeing the leopard in its unspoiled and protected territory but to know that it lives safe from our own depredations.



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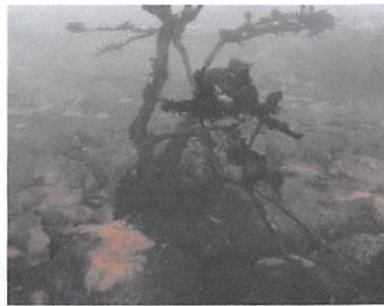
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Mist in leopard country on the Dhofar Plateau in Oman. Photo credit Stephanie Sears.

concentrated in nature sanctuaries one's best chance to glimpse its fleeting shape may well be in unprotected areas bordering human settlements and by following herders and their grazing charges at dawn and dusk.

Nepal

Nepal, in contrast to Oman, is land-locked and well watered, and most of its leopards are found in the sub-equatorial plains of the southern Terai and forested mid-hills, although the cat can also be found up to 3000 metres where it shares the snow leopard's Himalayan territory. Its situation is, to an extent, the opposite of that in Oman, as its future is affected by the popular idea that it is widespread throughout the country.

The population, though undetermined by a census survey, has, according to Ghana Gurung of WWF Nepal, grown since the mid 1980s' thanks to the regeneration of degraded forest areas. However poaching for skins and body parts has been intense in the last five years of civil war when parks were not at all or poorly protected; additionally human populations are dense, particularly in the regions favoured by leopards. In **Chitwan National Park** in the Terai, best known of all eight national parks in Nepal, there are estimated to be thirty to sixty-five leopards, and in Bardia, in the western Terai, there may be sixty.

Rooms outside protected areas

Unlike the tiger which tends to remain in protected areas, the leopard may be in greater numbers outside parks, partly in order to avoid competition with the larger predator. In a roundabout manner the widespread concern for the tiger may have adversely affected the future of the leopard in a country where nature tourism is predominant. Because the leopard is seen as so prevalent and adaptable, feelings towards it are ambivalent and depend greatly on the amount of space, and therefore safety, that separate it from man, as plainly expressed by Uttam, a Nepalese police superintendent: "People admire the leopard until he gets too close and they get scared of him."

Suburban leopards?

Since the year 2000 the leopard's aura of mystery has been damaged by recurrent appearances in suburbs, even in houses in the heart of old Kathmandu. Stories of goats and dogs taken by the leopard are almost commonplace anecdotes. Since 2005 people have encountered the cat and been attacked generally in built up areas at the edge of forest or shrub land, in several regions of Nepal including the Kathmandu Valley.

Click **"Three leopards 'removed' from Kathmandu in the last month"** to read more.

Human encroachment

The question is: who is overrunning whom? While urban sprawl may seem inevitable to people, by moving into the leopard's territory it diminishes further its chances of finding traditional prey and increases the temptation of preying on domestic animals predictably found in those areas.

And yet some sightings and encounters with the leopard are depicted with a touch of sympathetic humour. In the high village of Nagarkot facing the Langtang Mountains, just an hour and a half from Katmandu by car, villagers regularly see leopards during the rainy season in June, July, August when the cats seek high ground. As locally described these seasonal visits sound less like a threat and more like the return of a group of humdrum and health-conscious tourists intent on eating newly grown grass for its purgative effects, drinking fresh water, and all in all enjoying the high altitude sun and the relative absence of human tourism at that time. As I look down on the agricultural terraces etched into the steep hills I visualize a group of complacent leopards, un-bothered and un-menacing, enjoying Nagarkot's Himalayan views. Could this really be?

Bardia National Park



In the fairytale-like 968kms² Bardia National Park, in the western Terai, the sight of a leopard wrapped over a tree limb is wished for and expected. Yet here, paradoxically, in its natural terrain of intricate and undisturbed jungle, may be the most difficult place to see one. It requires incessant watching of the ground and the branches above, for unlike the tiger, the leopard is a climber which likes to eat and sleep some fifteen feet up in a tree away from any disturbance and, if opportunity allows, to pounce on a passing prey.

Here again the leopard's hunting hours occur usually before daybreak and at dusk, with a three or four hour rest in

surrounded by an eerie, insubstantial world of mist made to measure for the elusive cat. Yet suddenly it is easy to imagine its close presence, stone still and undetectable, listening to Salem's subdued voice as he tells me that villagers living on the fringe of the reserve occasionally hear the cat's growls and rasping coughs.

How to see the Arabian leopard

So what can be done to increase one's chances of seeing this rare feline that until the beginning of the twentieth century roamed freely up and down the whole western flank of the Arabian Peninsula? The Arabian leopard is not overshadowed by the tiger but the country's fledgling ecotourism does not yet offer specific trips to sight the big cat. Biospheres Expeditions runs trips combining moderately rugged tourism with field research, by which means it is now trying to determine the existence and size of the leopard population in Musandam. But until the Arabian leopard becomes more

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