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TABLE OF

MARCH/APRIL 2014 | VOLUME 58, ISSUE 2

contents

Features

- 15 Leopards of Arabia
Balazs Buzas introduces us to the rarest of leopards and efforts to propagate and protect it.
- 17 Making the Most of Your Trip to Arizona
Desert native Fred Hood with good advice for Convention goers.
- 17 2014 Convention Info
Everyday there is more and more scheduled. Register now before it's too late!
- 18 Come Join Us for Convention!
A wild cat show, wildly fun field trips, and stimulating speakers sure to please. The FCF Convention has something for everyone!
- 22 Distemper, a Plague on Our Cats
Vicki Keahey hopes that sharing her nightmare experience can wake everyone up to this new, terrible threat.
- 26 What is Canine Distemper?
Everyday there is more and more scheduled. Register now before it's too late!
- 32 New Lynxes at Wildlife Prairie Park
Brenda Heron happily reports on the successful introduction of two Canada lynx to their fenced-in habitat.
- 33 Raja's Rescue
Fortunately for this feline, Deb Johnson put in the time and effort to fix its fractured femur.



Leopards of Arabia

By Balazs Buzas (balazsbuzas.com)
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The Arabian Peninsula evokes images of enormous skyscrapers towering over the desert, and a world of exuberant luxury in nearly everyone's mind, although it also has some unique flora and fauna to offer. For instance, it gives home to one of the rarest forms of big cat—a wonderful creature surviving in much lower numbers than the iconic giant panda.



Hadi Al Hikmani, a young Omani field biologist, and Balazs are checking pictures of the camera trap that was set up to monitor leopards in the Dhofar Region. Hadi was one of the first cat specialists studying Arabian leopards in the wild.

In earlier times, the Arabian leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*) might have occurred throughout most of the Middle East and the Sinai, as well as the Arabian Peninsula. However, its present distribution range is restricted to isolated specks of land within the latter. While the strongest populations are reportedly found in Yemen and Oman, the future of this subspecies is nowhere as secure as in the Jebel Samhan Nature Reserve, Dhofar Mountains, southern Oman—in part as a result of the kharif (monsoon) that regu-

larly sweeps in from the Indian Ocean. Due to this additional source of water, the area is green oasis in an otherwise dry and, for most life forms, inhospitable landscape as if it was in tropical Africa, and provides ample opportunities for grazing for prey animals and hiding for female leopards tending their cubs.

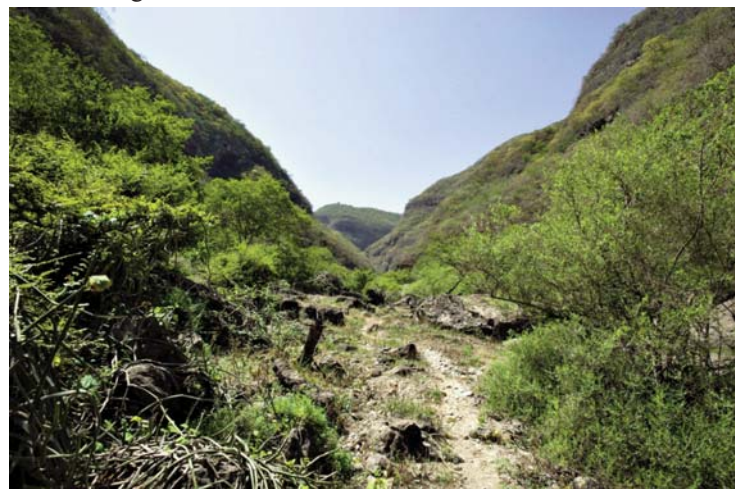
In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, researchers from the National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) and King Saud University are busily monitoring the local leopard population. According to their estimates, leopards currently number less than one hundred, even though they were once widespread in mountainous regions of this huge country.

Unfortunately, the rapidly developing economy and tourism industry all over the Arabian Peninsula may cause the remaining leopard populations to collapse soon. The building of roads traversing hills and further fragmenting habitats, the increase of vehicle traffic, and poaching make the work of conservationist ever more difficult. Similarly to the situation observed at Musandam Peninsula, northern Oman, the greatest problem is the almost total absence of natural prey. The near-complete disappearance of Nubian ibex (*Capra nubiana*) and Ara-



The captive breeding of the species started more than ten years ago, but the captive population is still under one hundred specimens.

bian thar (*Arabitragus jayakari*) formerly living higher up in the hills, as well as of mountain gazelles (*Gazella cora*) occupying lower altitude wadis (dry riverbeds), forces leopards to seek alternative food sources. However, the available quarry consists of a few free-ranging Bedouin goats, camels, or feral donkeys only, which are insufficient in themselves to sustain a viable population of big cats. Although leopards hunting domestic mammals might relatively easily be (re)accustomed to take natural prey, the



The Dhofar Mountains benefit from kharif (monsoon) that regularly sweep in from the Indian Ocean, supplying water that turns this area into a green oasis and provides ample opportunities for grazing for prey animals and hiding for female leopards tending their cubs.

reintroduction of gazelles, thar, etc., would require the eradication of livestock first and, in this case, leopards would need to survive without food for years—a virtuous circle, with no sight of an easy solution.

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the last wild Arabian leopard was spotted in the 1990s, and the observation was even reported in local newspapers. The biggest mountainous sheikhdom, Fujairah lies south of Oman's exclave of Musandam. In 2009, the Government of Fujairah declared one of the most important leopard habitats, Wadi Wurayah, the first mountain national park in the country. Now the protected area is under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad bin Mohammed Al Sharqi the Crown Prince of Fujairah and extends over 129 square kilometers, with a surrounding buffer zone of 92 square kilometers around its periphery. It is an excellent site for reintroducing native ungulates, as well as studying any reappearing small carnivores and felids.

As the effective population size of Arabian leopards living in the wild is, even by most optimistic guess-work, below 250 mature individuals, the subspecies is listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN and



Offspring from the wild Yemen population have been placed in different institutions to establish a secure breeding population.

is likely to remain in that category for a long time to come.

In order to save this taxon from extinction, a conservation breeding program was initiated over a decade ago, based on specimens live-caught in Yemen. The original stock and their descendants have mostly been placed in the zoos of Sanaa and Taiz in Yemen, as well as in the collection of the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife (BCEAW), Sharjah, UAE. Recently, two major institutions in the UAE, Al Ain Zoo and Al Bustan Zoological Centre, signed an agreement and exchanged specimens

for reproduction purposes. Also, the breeding units in the NWRC produce more and more cubs, whereas the participation of Omani and Bahrain breeding centers is another equally encouraging development.

Unfortunately, the number of institutions involved in the breeding program and of leopards maintained by them is still very low, so in the near future new partners must be found and the results improved.

To those who wish to know more about the research on Arabian leopards, I highly recommend a three-part documentary, "Wild Arabia," made by the BBC.

The pictures of the captive Arabian leopards were taken in the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife (BCEAW), Sharjah, UAE.



The Arabian leopard is one of the smallest of all the leopard subspecies.

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