

Series: 4-001/1

LEOPARD

Scientific name: *Panthera pardus*



Photograph taken by W. Combrinck

Description

- The leopard is a large spotted cat with a muscular body and relatively short legs. The fur is soft and thick, and fur colour can vary from pale yellow to deep tawny, with solid dark spots on the legs, head, throat, chest and sides. The shoulders, back, rump and tail have characteristic dark, rosette spots. The leopard does not have the “tear-drop” markings on the face or the rings around the end of the tail like the cheetah. Individuals can be identified by unique whisker spot patterns.
- It is mainly active at night or at dawn and dusk. In protected areas, it can also be seen during the day, especially in cloudy or misty conditions.
- Adult leopards are solitary, except when females have cubs to take care of. Males and females are seen together only briefly (1-4 days) when mating.
- It is the most widespread of the large carnivores of South Africa, mainly because it can survive in rugged terrain unsuitable for agricultural development. It is also the widest-ranging species of the wild cat family and can be found in most habitat types, from forests and mountains to semi-desert environments. It prefers densely wooded and rocky areas, and often sleeps in trees.
- The size of individuals varies according to the region in which they are found. Individuals from the Cape Province are typically smaller (males

weighing around 30 kg) than those in drier arid areas (up to 90 kg).

Size of adult	Male	Female
Total length	210-218 cm	185-198 cm
Body mass	20-90 kg	4.8-11.5 kg

- Home ranges may be as small as 15 km² in forested and rocky areas with high prey density, or as large as 2 000 km² in dry areas with low prey density. Males usually have larger home ranges than females. Although home ranges may overlap with those of neighbour leopards, territories do not overlap. Territories are marked with scat middens, urine-spraying and tree-scratching.
- Leopards are extremely aggressive when threatened or provoked.
- They can reach a maximum speed of 60 km/h and are good swimmers. They are capable of jumping 6 m far and 3 m high. Sight and hearing are well-developed.

Track/spoor/other signs

- Leopards have 5 toes on the forefeet and 4 toes on the hind feet. The first toe on each forefoot is located on the inside of the foot above the wrist, and is used for bringing down prey. Claws are extended only when alarmed or when charging. Therefore the tracks usually do not show any claw (nail) marks. The profile of the track is round (as wide as it is long) and can measure 55-90 mm.
- Scat (faeces) is a cylindrical or sausage shape, 20-30 mm in diameter, containing undigested hair and bone.



Leopard scat (with pieces of bone visible) and spoor. Photograph taken by Q. Kruger

Role in landscape

Leopards may play an important role in regulating ecosystems by influencing prey and smaller predators' behaviour and numbers. Caracal and black-backed jackal numbers are much lower in areas where leopards are still found.

They can provide economic benefits through ecotourism and trophy hunting, and play an important role in cultural practices.

Like other predators, leopards keep prey species alert and ecologically fit.

Reproduction

Leopards breed at any time of the year. There are usually two to three cubs in a litter, and the female raises them on her own. The cubs become independent at 12-18 months of age.

Feeding behaviour

Leopards are stealthy, powerful hunters and will prey on a variety of game species.

Diet

They feed mainly on small to medium-sized (10-40 kg) hoofed animals like impala, grey duiker, and bushbuck, but can also take larger prey.

The diet also includes:

- Rodents and other small mammals
- Monkeys and baboons
- Insects and other arthropods
- Reptiles
- Birds
- Fish
- Smaller carnivores
- Domestic livestock (sheep, goats, cattle,

They normally hunt alone, except when a female is accompanied by her cubs or an adult male during the mating period.

Sometimes they return to their kills or even steal other leopards' kills.

The large, well-defined muscles in their forelegs, shoulders and neck enable them to drag their kill (even carcasses up to twice their body mass) up into trees. This behaviour is common in areas where competition with other large predators is high.

In some regions, scarcity of wild prey may drive leopards to kill livestock. But livestock predation in areas where wild prey is abundant may be due to competition for suitable territories. Such

competition forces inexperienced animals to move to the fringe of these areas and onto grazing lands, where they take the easiest prey.

Hunting technique/feeding signs

Leopards stalk their prey until they are only a short distance from it, then pounce on it or rush and knock it over. They kill smaller prey with a bite on the nape of the neck, breaking it, or by puncturing the skull with their canines. Larger prey is bitten on the throat, avoiding the horns. Because they have retractable claws, scratch marks may be seen on the rump or shoulders of larger prey.

Kills may be dragged into dense bush cover, down a hole or among rocks to hide it. In such cases, drag marks will be visible.

When preying on livestock, they may occasionally kill more than one animal but will only feed on one carcass.

Fur or wool is often plucked from the prey carcass before feeding on it.

The inside of the hind legs is usually eaten first. The shoulders and internal organs are also eaten, but the intestines are left intact.

1 kg to 2 kg of meat is usually eaten per sitting.

Rib ends may be chewed. In smaller prey, the long bones may also be eaten, leaving almost no remains.

Management methods

Camera traps can be used to monitor leopard presence. Leopards are listed as vulnerable; therefore, measures should be taken to limit or prevent damage by these animals as far as possible. These include:

- Predator-proof and/or electric fencing
- Kraaling
- Deterrents - noise, light and scent
- Shepherd
- Collars
- Guard animals - particularly Anatolian shepherd dogs.
- Leghold traps
- Cage traps can be used to tranquilise and relocate damage-causing individuals.

If leopards cause damage or loss despite these measures being taken, it must be reported to the local DEA office, which will then determine the steps to be followed.