

Series: 4-002/1

Reproduction of the leopard

Sufficient food is important for leopards' reproductive health. Although females in protected areas with abundant resources can produce litters faster, they may actually produce fewer litters during their lifetime because of territorial interactions with other leopards in these areas.

Mating

Leopards usually breed only once a year, but do not have a definite breeding season. Leopard females mate for the first time at the age of 2 to 2½ years. Males start breeding at the age of 1 ½ years.

Females are in heat (estrus) for 5 – 13 days every 2 – 3 months. If a female's cubs die, she can come into heat within two weeks after their death.

A female signals that she is in heat by rubbing her head against objects, rolling a lot and a sawing call. These cues attract the resident breeding male, who will pair up with her several days later. But if she successfully raises a litter, she comes into heat when the cubs are about 10 months old.

After mating the pair rest under suitable cover and separate as soon as the next period of activity starts. Based on track evidence, mating is characterised by considerable copulation before apparent copulation takes place.

A leopard male will stay with the female for 1 – 4 days to mate. During this time, the pair will engage in a lot of chasing in a relatively small area and mate on average four times an hour.

Even in areas with abundant food and ideal habitat, females do not always conceive after pairing up with a male to mate. Conception rate, therefore, is relatively low. One study found that only 28% of adult female leopards in the Kruger National Park gave birth per year.

Whelping

Females give birth to cubs after a pregnancy of 88 – 112 days. Litter sizes range from 1 – 2 cubs (average of 1.5).

Cub development and survival

Males do not help the female to care for the cubs.

Cubs weigh 40 - 60 g at birth. Their eyes start opening when they are 4 - 9 days old and the first teeth become visible when they are 21 – 29 days

old. By the age of 2 months, cubs have all their "milk teeth". By the age of 2 years, young leopards have all their permanent teeth. The age of leopards can be determined by examining the teeth.

A female suckles her cubs for about 4 months. During this time, the female may leave the cubs alone for up to 36 hours at a time.

Cubs start emerging from the den at the age of 3-3½ months.

Cub survival depends on food availability. Still, it is relatively low, with only about 37% of cubs surviving to adulthood even in areas with abundant food. The main threats to cubs in protected areas are larger predators and other leopards.

Cubs can catch their own prey by the age of 6 months, and reach independence when they are one year old (11 – 13 months).

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Consult your local DEFF (environmental affairs) or DARDLR (department of agriculture) office for legal aspects regarding predation management