

Spotting the elusive leopard



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay



The most intelligent, and arguably the most dangerous of the Big Five in Africa, the leopard, is doing well. (Wikimediacommons/Thomas Fuhrman)

Everything in Africa bites, stings, tears, or gets you one way or another in the end. The animal kingdom there is full of critters that bite back. The most famous is called The Big Five.

The Big Five are the top of the food chain, the animals that hunt you, and take a really dim view of mankind.

These animals are the most dangerous on earth. The Five include the elephant, the largest mammal on land, cape buffalo, the angriest mammal on earth, lion, king of beast, the rhinoceroses, who is coming back nicely thanks to hunter's dollars and the leopard.

Many people go on photo safaris in the National Parks of South Africa, with the hopes of seeing the Big Five. Other people go to areas of the continent with the hopes of hunting them. The most difficult to see and even more difficult to hunt, is the leopard.

He is known as Chui in East Africa, Ingwe in the South, Panthera pardus in the scientific world, and sometimes just called "spots." Pound for pound, he is the most powerful, sneaky, elusive, bold, and dangerous animal in the world. He is very similar in size, behavior, and general makeup as the mountain lion here in Colorado.

Other than appearance, the biggest difference between the two is the leopard can make vocal noises a mountain lion can't. Leopards have a square shape to their throat, a floating hyoid bone, and a specially adapted larynx that give the cat the ability

to produce a deep, guttural vocal, a kind of cough or sawing sound, that can carry for miles.

Leopards are mostly nocturnal, having eyes that see seven times better in the dark than humans.

They can run close to 60 mph, climb trees dragging a fresh kill twice their weight, can kill animals like an elan, that top the scales at over a ton, and are an accomplished maneater. Not bad for an animal that may reach seven feet head to toe and weigh in at 195 pounds if he is not watching his carbs.

If you listen to the World Wildlife Fund, and other animal rights group, you will believe that spots is hanging on by a thread. This could not be further from the truth. Because the leopard is so shy, nocturnal, and seldom seen, even in the national parks, folks think he is doing poorly. Leopards are the most widely distributed African big cat, found widely in Africa, the Caucasus, India, and Asia.

Worldwide estimates put their numbers at over

700,000. Like all members of the animal kingdom, man is rapidly encroaching on their territory. Over the last 20 years, development has reduced their territory by one third.

Leopards breed all year round and the female can have a litter of up to six cubs, but two is closer to average.

It takes almost two years for the cubs to strike out on their own. In the wild, a leopard can enjoy a relatively long life of up to 20 years. Spots have variations in coat colors, depending on habitat.

Mostly they are a pale yellow with dark rosette spots on the tail, flanks and back. Solid spots appear on the face. Even though they are the most common cat in Africa, they are seldom seen, because these colors blend in perfectly with the terrain they call home.

Solitary animals, the males and females only come together to mate, after that it is back to reclusiveness. All of this makes them the hardest of the Big Five to see. Leopards are carnivores, hunting small

antelope, warthogs, hyraxes, birds, and one of their favorites, the baboon.

Of all the animals that consistently place man on the menu, just about any professional hunter, or sport hunter with field experience will testify, the leopard is the most difficult and dangerous of all.

Jack Denton Scott wrote of a leopard in India, in his book *Speaking Wildly*, that had killed over 100 women and children. The cat had also killed and eaten four professional hunters that were sent into the bushveld after him.

The famous Col. Jim Corbett sorted out several famous man-eating leopards in his time, the Rudraprayag Leopard, with 125 confirmed kills, and the Panar Leopard, with 400 kills. Today, there are about 30 confirmed kills annually by leopards.

The number is quite misleading. Rural Africa is still remote and lacking communication and contact with the outside world. Many natives simply "go missing." The person just disappears, never to be

seen again, and these often times go unreported.

While it is true that crocodiles and hippos take a lot of people near the water annually, often leaving no trace, leopards take a fair share and similarly, the crime scene never found in the bush. I have never hunted leopards, and have little desire to, but I have hunted in their territory.

The first time I saw one was in some very thick acacia scrub brush. The leopard busted out of a small bush he was probably napping under and ran across my bow some 10 feet in front of me. Had he felt like launching an attack, he had me dead to rights, pardon the pun. He scared me so bad, I must admit, that hunting him was the furthest thing from my mind.

The speed that spots exhibited as he ran by me was proof that in his territory, man is definitely the bottom of the food chain. I would have been nothing more than a neatly wrapped Hickory Farms salami to him, as he would

have had me down before I even identified what he was. Mountain lion attacks and confrontations appear to be on the rise, as we encroach more and more on their territory.

Being in the same family as the leopard, mountain lions have many of the same abilities and characteristics. One day down the road, we might see ourselves on their menu too. We had best do a better job of protecting their habitat, and like the leopard, give them some space.

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Slaughterhouse timber sale operations extended

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests' Gunnison Ranger District announces the extension of timber harvest operations on the Slaughterhouse timber sale near the town of Tincup. Summer logging operations will be authorized for the month of June and may be re-evaluated after June 30.

The Slaughterhouse timber

sale is part of the overarching Taylor Park Vegetation Management project. The project's primary objectives are to improve forest health, enhance forest resiliency to insects and disease, reduce the risk of wildfires and sustainably provide wood products to the local economy. Commercial timber sales facilitate responsible vegetation management while contributing to the economics of surrounding communities.

Operational challenges and market fluctuations have strained the timber industry. To provide relief to logging operators and partners, the Gunnison District Ranger will extend the Slaughterhouse timber sale contract to allow one month of summer operations, including cutting, decking and hauling timber on National Forest System Road (NFSR) #764 and #765.

"Vegetation management is vital to forest health," said

Gunnison District Ranger Dayle Funka. "My goal is to strike a balance between commercial timber production and the extensive recreation that occurs in Taylor Park."

Logging operators will be responsible for traffic control measures on NFSR #764 and #765. Visitors are advised to pay close attention to all road traffic signs and be cautious of log trucks and heavy machinery when traveling near the area. Logging oper-

ations may occur at any time. However, hauling operations will cease during weekends and federal holidays.

For more information, contact the Gunnison Ranger District at 970-641-0471 or visit the Taylor Park Vegetation Management project website.

For information on current fire restrictions, conditions, and recreation opportunities, visit the forest website or www.westslopefireinformation.com.



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