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Cats in Azerbaijan

by Yusif Mamedov
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Introduction

Azerbaijan, formerly a part of the Soviet Union, is located in Transcaucasia on the western side of the Caspian Sea. The country covers an area of 86,600km² including the enclave of Nakhichevan, which lies between Armenia and Iran. Azerbaijan has land borders with Iran, Armenia, Georgia and Russia (see figure). The human population was 7,625,000 in 1997. The Greater Caucasus and Lesser Caucasus Mountains occupy the northeast and southwest of the country respectively. Peaks in the Greater

Caucasus reach 4,466m and their slopes contain broad-leaved and coniferous forests and an alpine meadow zone. In between these two ranges lies a wide plain crossed by the country's major rivers, the Kura and Araks.

In the extreme southeast lie the Talish Mountains, much of which are covered in dense forest and scrub. The Kura-Araks plain is principally semidesert in character and has a dry, subtropical climate, with an average annual precipitation of 200-300mm. Steppe vegetation covers the foothills and lower mountain slopes, and a few fragments of riverine woodland remain along the Kura and Araks rivers. The Kura-Araks plain is heavily developed and contains many settlements, large numbers of domestic livestock, extensive cultivated areas and a network of irrigation canals.

Conservation Measures

The Azerbaijan State Committee for Ecology (ASCE) is responsible for protected areas and wildlife conservation. The main category of protected area is state reserve, a strict nature reserve corresponding to the former Soviet era *zapovednik*. There are now 14 state reserves covering 191,200 hectares in total and a further 20 protected areas (*zakaznik*), which are temporary reserves or ones in which more economic exploitation is allowed. However, all protected areas currently suffer from acute under-funding that affects staff and equipment and reduces the effectiveness of the protected area system.

Wild felids are protected by law but poaching still occurs. Azerbaijan signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1998. The Azerbaijan Society for the Protection of Animals and other NGOs concerned with wildlife conservation and the environment have become increasingly active in recent years.

Current Status of Cats

Tiger (*Panthera tigris*)

The Caspian tiger (*P.t. virgata*) formerly occurred in the forested Talish Mountains of southern Azerbaijan. According to (Adygezalov, 1989) it was common in the 1860s and was still often encountered at the end of the 1890s. The last known individual was killed in 1932 near Prishib (Gadjiev & Rakhmatulina 2000). There were several reports of tigers killed in the Talish mountains during the 1950s, but investigation showed that these were in fact all leopards. Confusion had arisen from linguistic similarities between local and Azeri names for leopard and tiger (Gadjiev & Rakhmatulina 2000).

Leopard (*Panthera pardus*)

Two subspecies have been reported in Azerbaijan: *P.p. ciscaucasicus* in the Greater



Figure. 1 Greater Caucasus; 2 Lesser Caucasus; 3 Talish Mts; 4 Nakhichevan; 5 Baku; 6 Shirvan NR

Caucasus and *P.p. tulliana* in the Talish and Lesser Caucasus Mountains. Former distribution covered the Greater and Lesser Caucasus, Talish Mountains, the Alazani Valley and the middle course of the Araks in Nakhichevan (Adygezalov, 1989). Their range has contracted sharply since then and leopards are now extinct on the Greater Caucasus and very rare or absent in Lesser Caucasus.

The leopard is currently on the edge of extinction in Azerbaijan and occurs in very small numbers in Nakhichevan and Talish and as an extreme rarity, if at all, in the Lesser Caucasus. The *Azerbaijan Red Book* (Adygezalov, 1989) estimated that only 10-15 remained in the country. Little confirmed information has been available for the last 10 years (Gadjiev & Rakhmatulina 2000). Leopards occur or once occurred in Girkan Reserve.

Lynx (*Lynx lynx*)

Formerly occurred in lowland and montane forests up to the treeline in the Greater and Lesser Caucasus, Talish Mountains, and Nakhichevan and also in the Kura-Araks lowland and parts of Gobustan. It is now rare, with a fragmented distribution on the southern slopes and a few northeastern spurs of the Greater Caucasus (Gadjiev & Rakhmatulina 2000), in Nakhichevan and the Talish Mountains. It has declined because of hunting and forest clearance and is listed in the *Azerbaijan Red Data Book* (Adygezalov, 1989). Formerly occurred in Zakatala, Ilisu, Turian-Chay, Ismaili, Pirguli, Gey-Gel, Kara-Yaz, and Girkan Reserves.

Wild Cat (*Felis silvestris*)

Common and widely-distributed in the Greater and Lesser Caucasus, with a few in Talish and forested tracts of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Desert Cat (*Felis lybica*)

This species appears to have always been rare in Azerbaijan. Even in the late 1930s-early 1940s only very small numbers of skins were obtained annually (Gadjiev & Rakhmatulina, 2000). It remains very rare and is close to extinction in Azerbaijan. It is now only found occasionally in the Ajinour Steppe in the north of the country. Listed in the *Azerbaijan Red Data Book* (Adygezalov, 1989).

Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*)

Known locally as the Reed Cat. This species is relatively common and is found in the central lowlands and the Lenkoran plain, ascending river valleys into the middle altitudes of the Talish, Greater Caucasus and Lesser Caucasus Ranges. It inhabits thickets of reeds along rivers, canals and lakes and *tugai* woodland. It occurs in Shirvan, Ag-Gel, Kyzyl-Agach, Turian-Chay, Kara-Yaz, and Girkan Reserves.

Pallas's Cat (*Felis manul*)

Extremely rare. There are only 2-3 records of this species in Azerbaijan, all from the Iranian border region of Nakhichevan.

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(Translated by David Mallon)

Bornean Golden Cats in Berlin

by Paul Schauenberg*

The interesting paper of Meijaard (1999) incited me to write down some observations which have been sleeping in my desk for several years. Borneo has indeed remained a mystery island as far as cats are concerned. Some species are well known already, but this is not the case for others and many questions still remain unanswered about the hypothetical presence of the tiger. The status of two other South Asian cats seems to be clear and it is generally accepted that the Asian golden cat (*Catopuma temmincki*) and the Fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*) are absent from Borneo. Are they really?

I have been very interested by the fact that L. Schlawe (1969) has listed a *Profelis temmincki badia* (N°192, p. 21) called Borneokatze, which lived in the Berlin Zoo around 1870. *Post mortem*, this cat, an adult female, has been entered into the collection of the Alexander-Humboldt Zoological Museum, Berlin, (Catalog N° 4929, as, *Felis mormonensis Borneo*, 29 October 1875). In the course of my study of the entire collection of small cats skulls of the Berlin Museum, most generously sent to me on loan by my friend Dr. Renate Angermann, Curator of Mammals, I measured this skull and prepared an endocast of its braincase. The measurements are:

- Total length: 121 mm
- Zygomatic width: 77,5 mm
- Cranial width: 51,5 mm
- Cranial capacity: 70 cc.

The identification as *Catopuma temmincki* is certain and this skull fits perfectly into my series of 25 skulls of this species. (Collections of Berlin, Paris, Copenhagen, Basle, Frankfurt and the British Museum). So the fact is that there is a Temminck's cat skull labelled Borneo in the Berlin Museum. But did the cat come from Borneo, or from somewhere else? To my knowledge, no author has ever mentioned this species as living in Borneo. But, according to E. Meijaard (1999), an informant said he had seen a captive young tiger in a logging camp, near Bengalon, in East Kalimantan. The animal was described as being different from both the Sumatran tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*) and the Clouded leopard, by being largely brown-coloured with only faint stripes. In the Central Kalimantan village of Tangiran, old people told of a large striped cat different from the clouded leopard.

Obviously there seems to be a cat which does not fit into the classical picture of either tiger or clouded leopard. To me, it looks like a golden cat.

Among the many questions concerning Bornean cat species: the marbled cat (*Pardofelis marmorata*), the Bengal cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*), the flat-headed cat (*P. planiceps*) and the clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*), all having safely walked across the landbridge which united Sumatra, Java and Malesia with Borneo some 18,000 years ago, without any physical changes, why should Temminck's cat not have crossed this long-lasting landbridge?