

VISIONS

MAY - JUNE 2013

of Azerbaijan

ISLAM AND SECULARISM

GOD'S DRINK -
VOYAGE TO THE LAND OF AZERBAIJANI TEA

BERTI VOGTS
ON FIVE YEARS IN AZERBAIJANI FOOTBALL

CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE
CAUCASUS LEOPARD



Caucasus leopard, photograph copyright Levan Patarala

by Anne Thompson

CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE CAUCASUS LEOPARD

The magnificent leopardess opposite was photographed by a trap camera in the early hours of 2 June in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. She is a rare Caucasus leopard, one of only a handful known to be living in the region. Elshad Askerov, the World Wide Fund for Nature's leopard expert in Azerbaijan, has confirmed to *Visions* that not one but at least two leopardesses are living in the Hasan Aliyev Zangezur National Park and surrounding areas. He has identified the two big cats by studying the markings on their coats in photographs taken in September 2012 and February, March and June this year.

PANTHERA PARDUS SAXICOLOR

The Caucasus leopard, *Panthera pardus saxicolor* (also known as *Panthera pardus ciscaucasica*, the West Asian leopard, Persian leopard and Central Asian leopard), is one of the biggest of the leopard subspecies. Like other leopards, the Caucasus leopard has a stocky body with comparatively short legs and a large head. Its total body length ranges between 125 and 171 cm and weight can reach 60 kg. Male leopards are up to three times larger than their female counterparts. The Caucasus leopard has a soft, furry coat, the base colours of which range from grey-ochre to golden brown. The leopard has black spots on the head, limbs and belly and spots arranged in rosettes across the back and flanks.

Animals reach sexual maturity at the age of two to three years and can live up to 20 years, according to specialists from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and World Conservation Union. Young leopards become independent at the age of 13–18 months. Siblings may remain together for several months before separating. Adult leopards are solitary animals except when mating or rearing their cubs. They have their own range of territory which can be anything from 8 to 450 km².

Adult males usually live entirely or partially on the territories of two or three adult females, according to Dr Viktor Lukarevsky, a Russian expert who has done a lot of work for the WWF. Since adult males are also more mobile than females and often change their hunting grounds, it is not surprising that the Nakhchivan cameras have so far photographed only females. When the leopardesses are on heat, they actively search for males, intensely marking their territory. In this period, both males and females patrol almost their entire territory or range.

Leopards are mobile animals and choose trails with a good view when moving from one hunting ground to another. Such trails often pass along ridges with panoramic vistas and visibility up to several kilometres. The leopard is one of the swiftest animals in the Caucasus. It can run at more than 60 km/hour, can leap three metres from a standing position and six metres when running. Leopards are also good swimmers.

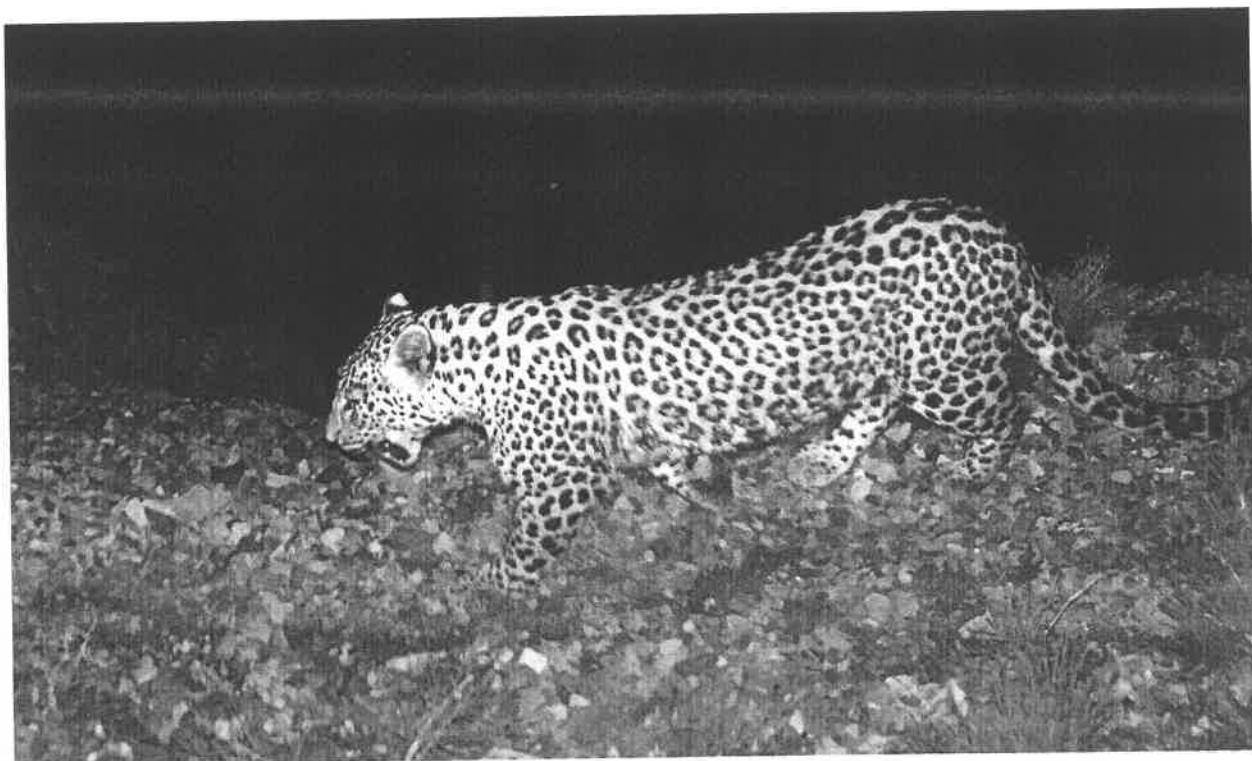
The Caucasus leopard's main prey is wild (bezoar) goat, wild boar and roe deer. If the supply is plentiful, then the leopard is highly unlikely to make attacks on domestic animals, but when wild prey is scarce, attacks on cattle, sheep, horses, donkeys, dogs and poultry are reported.

NUMBERS

The leopard used to be widespread throughout the Caucasus. Numbers fell dramatically in the 20th century, largely because of hunting, persecution, trapping and poisoning. By the 1950s and 60s leopards had disappeared from large parts of the eco-region and, with the exception of Iran, their former territorial range had been reduced to isolated patches.

Soviet researchers wrote in 1972 that the Caucasus leopard population was close to the brink of extinction. The same year the authorities included the Caucasus leopard in the Soviet Union's *Red Book of Endangered Species*, giving it special protection.

According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN's) *Red List of Threatened Species*, the total number of Caucasus, Persian or West Asian leopards in 2008 lay between 871 and 1,290. Most of these – between



Leopardess caught on WWF trap camera in Zangezur National Park, 2 June 2013

550 and 850 – were in Iran, while Afghanistan was thought to have 200 to 300 and Turkmenistan 78 to 90. Numbers of the species in the Caucasus itself, however, were much smaller. There were thought to be 10 leopards in the Russian North Caucasus in 2008, five in Georgia, 10 to 13 in Armenia, five in Turkey and 13 to 17 in Azerbaijan, of which three to four were in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Iran is the leopard stronghold in the Middle East and supports the viability of the small leopard subpopulations in the Caucasus, eastern Turkey and, possibly, in Turkmenistan through transboundary emigrations, the IUCN notes. However, leopard densities even in Iran are believed to be very low.

LEOPARDS IN AZERBAIJAN

Leopards live in four different parts of Azerbaijan, according to a 2007 report compiled by experts from the WWF and the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group.

Signs of three to five leopards were identified at an altitude of 700-1500 metres in the Talish Mountains in the south-eastern corner of Azerbaijan. This occurrence is adjacent to the leopard range in the neighbouring ridges of Iran.

Probably no more than three to four leopards were thought to be living in the Zangezur range of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in south-western Azerbaijan. The distribution of leopards here was consistent with their presence in Armenia and Iran, the experts noted. It is in the Zangezur National Park that our two leopardesses have more recently been photographed. Their territorial range probably includes southern Armenia and north-western Iran. The WWF in Armenia is in the process of installing cameras on the Armenian side of the border with Nakhchivan to monitor the progress of these leopards. As they are both young females, conservationists hope that they will find a mate and that the cameras will photograph them soon with one or two cubs.

It was difficult to assess the presence of leopards in the occupied Azerbaijani territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2007, the experts thought that no more than three to four animals lived in the western part of the Karabakh and Murovdagh mountains.

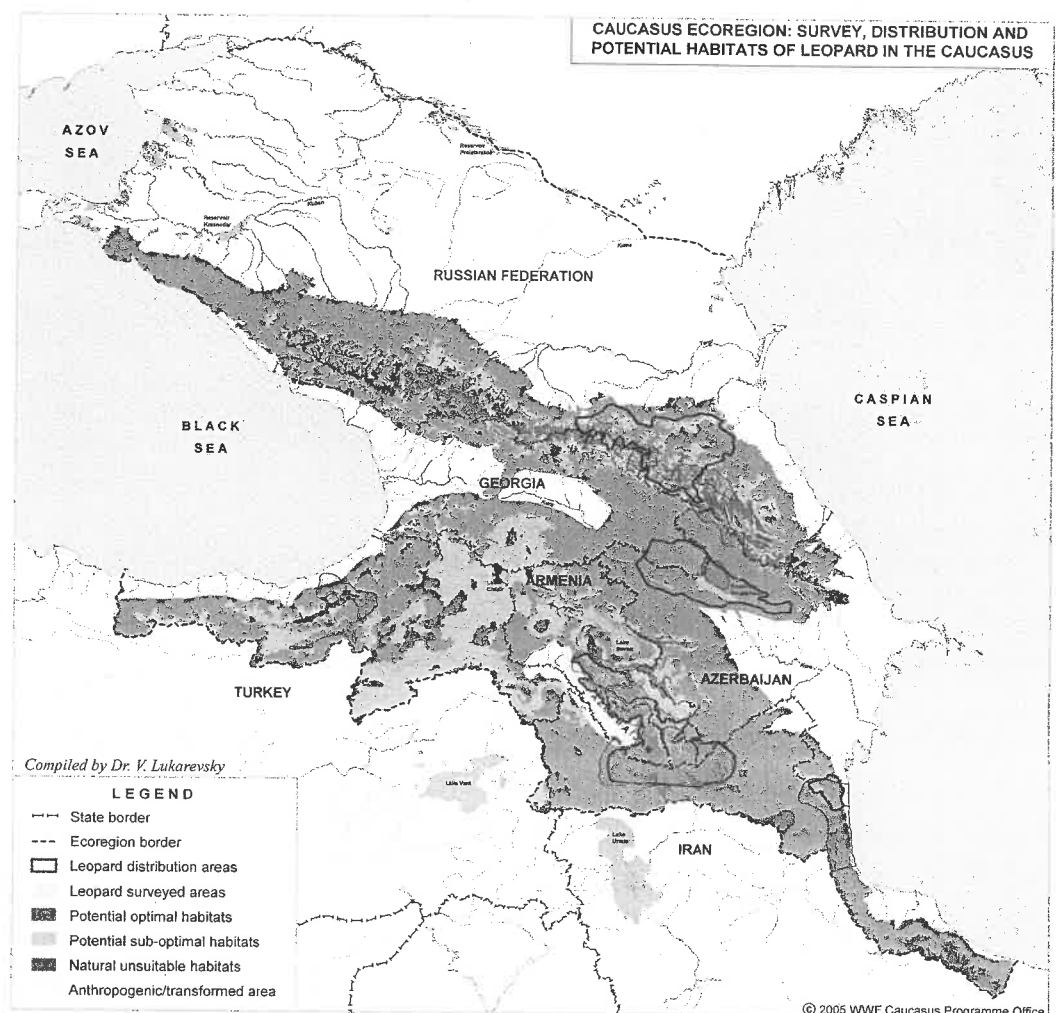
Finally, traces of three to four leopards were also found in the transboundary corridor which covers arid landscapes around the Mingachevir Water Reservoir in Georgia and Azerbaijan. This occurrence in the Greater Caucasus interested the experts because of its potential connection with adjacent leopard areas in Georgia and Russia.

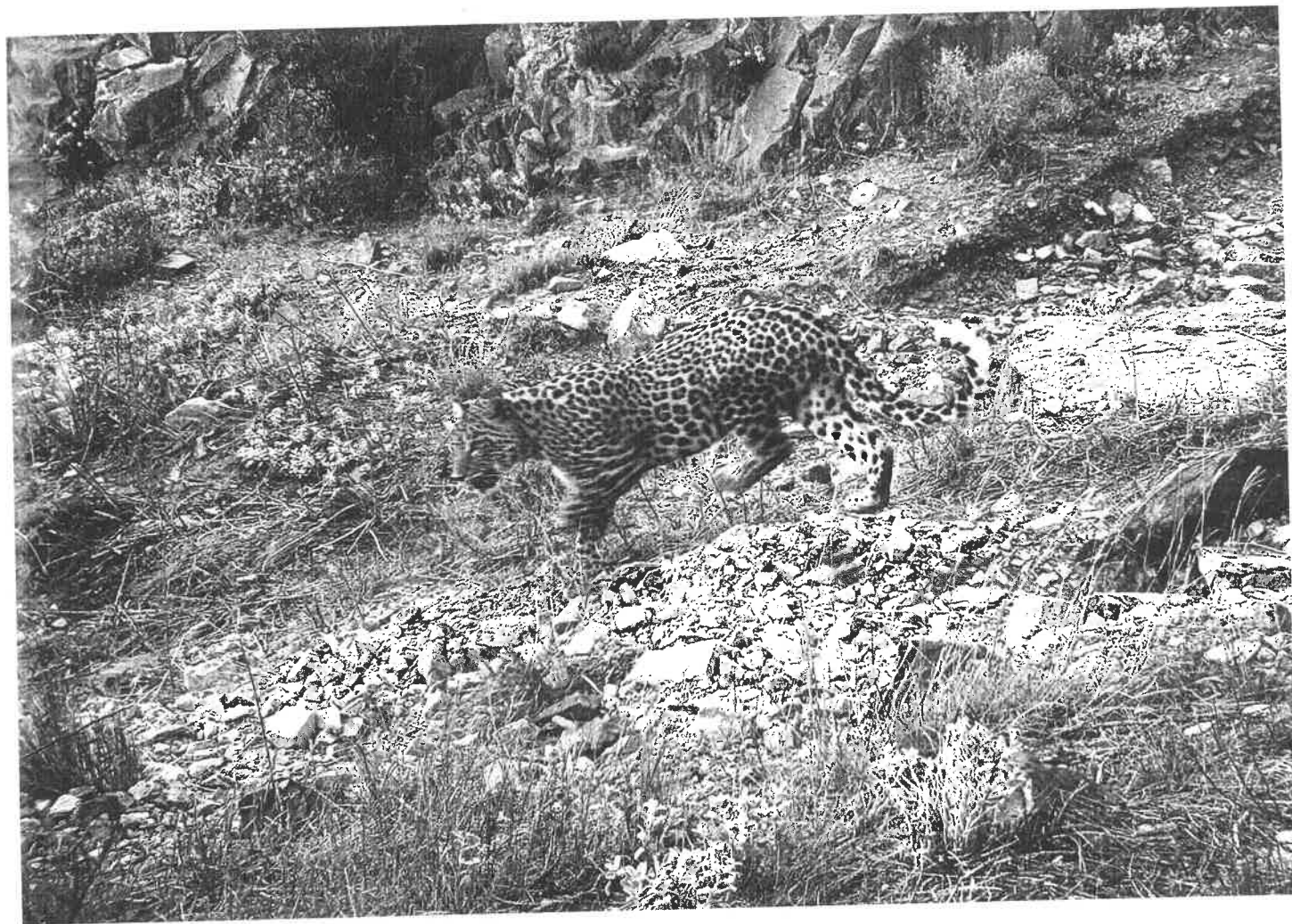
Leopards in the south of Azerbaijan like the steep ravines with old-growth forests (maple, beech, hornbeam, linden, oak, walnut, etc.) and rocky cliffs and outcrops of the Istisuchay valley in the Talish Mountains. Evidence of leopards has been found in areas with good visibility and with high numbers of wild boar and roe deer.

CONSERVATION ACTION

Conservation organization the World Wide Fund for Nature set up a regional office in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 1992 and started projects specifically in Azerbaijan in early 2000. Its Azerbaijani office was officially registered in 2006. One of the Fund's first and most important ongoing projects in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan is the conservation of leopards.

The WWF hosted a regional workshop in Tbilisi in 2007 to thrash out a comprehensive Conservation Strategy for the leopard in the Caucasus. Wildlife scientists, representatives of





Leopardess caught on WWF trap camera in Zangezur National Park, 6 September 2012

agencies from most of the range countries and of conservation organizations developed a vision: *Leopards and all wildlife prosper in natural habitats across the Caucasus eco-region in harmony with people.*

To achieve the vision, the mid-term goal was set: *Ensure the conservation and sustainable management of viable metapopulations of leopard and wild prey and their habitats and build sustainable coexistence mechanisms with local communities across the Caucasus eco-region.*

On the basis of the Conservation Strategy, a National Action Plan to preserve the leopard has been drawn up and adopted in Azerbaijan. The action plan is being implemented by the WWF with the cooperation of Azerbaijan's Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources. Similar action plans are in place in Armenia and Georgia.

The cameras which photographed our leopardesses in Nakhchivan were installed as part of the National Action Plan in order to monitor the number of leopards and their prey. Scientists from the Institute of Bioresources of the Nakhchivan Branch of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, under the supervision of Prof. Tariyel Talibov, helped the WWF

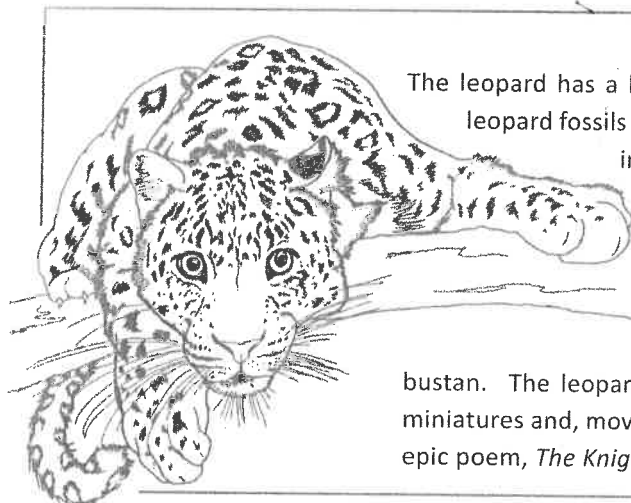
with the installation of the cameras in the Zangezur National Park. The cameras caught their first photo of a leopard in June 2012. This caused a sensation, as it was the first actual sighting of a leopard in the area for 50 years.

Trap cameras in the Hirkan (Hyrcan) National Park in the Talish Mountains in the far south of Azerbaijan caught a leopard on film on 13 May this year. This was the third sighting in the park after photos taken in October 2012 and February 2007. Interestingly, these are daytime shots, which implies that the leopard does not feel threatened in the area.

TARGETS

The WWF and IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group no longer consider a lack of prey to be the greatest threat to the survival of the Caucasus leopard. The two greatest threats are the fragmentation of the leopard's habitat, meaning that potential mates are kept apart, and poaching.

The WWF Caucasus Programme Office is concentrating its efforts on reconnecting leopard habitat by providing wildlife corridors. The Fund has set the mid-term goal of ensuring that at least two wildlife corridors are established and well man-



HISTORY AND CULTURE

The leopard has a long history on the territory of Azerbaijan. The oldest leopard fossils in the country, some 300-400,000 years old, were found in the Azikh Cave in Nagorno-Karabakh. More recent leopard skulls, from circa 3000 BCE, were found in caves in Qobustan and Agstafa.

The earliest people of this land also left a record of the leopard. The animal is depicted in Stone Age rock drawings in Gamiqaya (Nakhchivan), Kelbajar and Qobustan. The leopard is shown in hunting scenes in Azerbaijani medieval miniatures and, moving west, features even in the title of Georgia's national epic poem, *The Knight in the Panther Skin*.

aged in Hirkan National Park and the Akhar-Bakhar section of Ilisu Reserve in northern Azerbaijan by 2016.

The Fund's goal by 2021 is to have at least one breeding female in each of the four priority areas for leopards in the Caucasus, with total population size exceeding 30 individuals. The priority areas are the South-East Lesser Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic), the East Greater Caucasus (the Russian Federation's Dagestan Republic), the Talish Mountains in the south of Azerbaijan and Iori-Mingachevir in northern Azerbaijan.

Poaching poses a great danger to the conservation of the leopard, as the loss of just one animal can ruin the chances of survival of a small population nucleus. The WWF is supporting governments in their efforts to combat poaching but simply does not have the resources required to enforce anti-poaching legislation.

A boost to the conservation of the leopard came when the organization IDEA (International Dialogue for Environmental Action) declared a Big Five of Caucasian animals in need of protection. They are the Caucasus leopard, wolf, bear, eagle and gazelle.

DON'T BE FOOLED

Efforts to conserve the leopard may be hampered by the popular imagination about the animal and misinformation in the media. Reports that a leopard attacked and dismembered an 18-year-old girl in a village in Lerik District in March were met with laughter and incredulity by villagers, local authorities and the Lerik branch of the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, Gun.Az news agency reported.

Following previous reports of leopard attacks, the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources made clear in a 2009 press release that it is very rare for leopards to attack humans. Stressing that leopards avoid human contact, the ministry said that the big cats would attack only if provoked in some way, for example, if shot and wounded by a hunter. The ministry recalled that the penalty for killing a leopard is 3,300 AZN and two or three times that sum for killing a leopard in a protected area.

CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

The leopard in the Caucasus remains critically endangered. The new surveys have produced the spectacular photographs on these pages, but all the latest evidence confirms that only small and isolated population nuclei remain in the whole eco-region. Urgent conservation action is needed to ensure the survival of the species in the Caucasus, the WWF stresses.

The Fund is keen to see significant investment in the conservation of the leopard as: *...this charismatic large cat is both an umbrella species – its conservation will also include the preservation of the prey species and their habitats – and a flagship species – the leopard is the symbolic carrier of the conservation idea to the local population, between the range states, and to the international conservation community.*



Leopardess prowling the Hirkan Forest, caught on WWF trap camera on 25 October 2012

I know my chances of seeing the leopard are slim during my two-day stay in Azerbaijan's Talish Mountains. However, the one thing I know for sure is that I will spend these two days with the man known to everyone at the Worldwide Fund for Nature Caucasus Programme offices in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan as 'Babakhan – the Leopard Man'.

I'm thinking about how it's going to be as our car crosses the semi-deserted landscape on a rainy day from Baku to Zungulash. This is the village where Babakhan will pick us up for an additional four-hour horse ride to his village. My companion is Elshad, a colleague from our Baku office. He knows this area well so, seizing the chance, I ask Elshad numerous questions about Babakhan, the Talish Mountains, the Hirkan forest, his work in Azerbaijan and his people. Surprisingly, after almost 70 years of living back to back in Soviet republics, we still don't know much about each other. A five-hour car drive seems as good an opportunity as any for filling in the gaps in my knowledge.

I came to Azerbaijan to do some film shooting for WWF's Caucasus leopard conservation project. The Caucasian leopard is on the critically endangered list in this region. The latest investigations have shown that the small remaining number of this extremely cautious and highly-mobile large cat survive in the Armenia-Nakhchivan border area and in Azerbaijan's Talish Mountains.

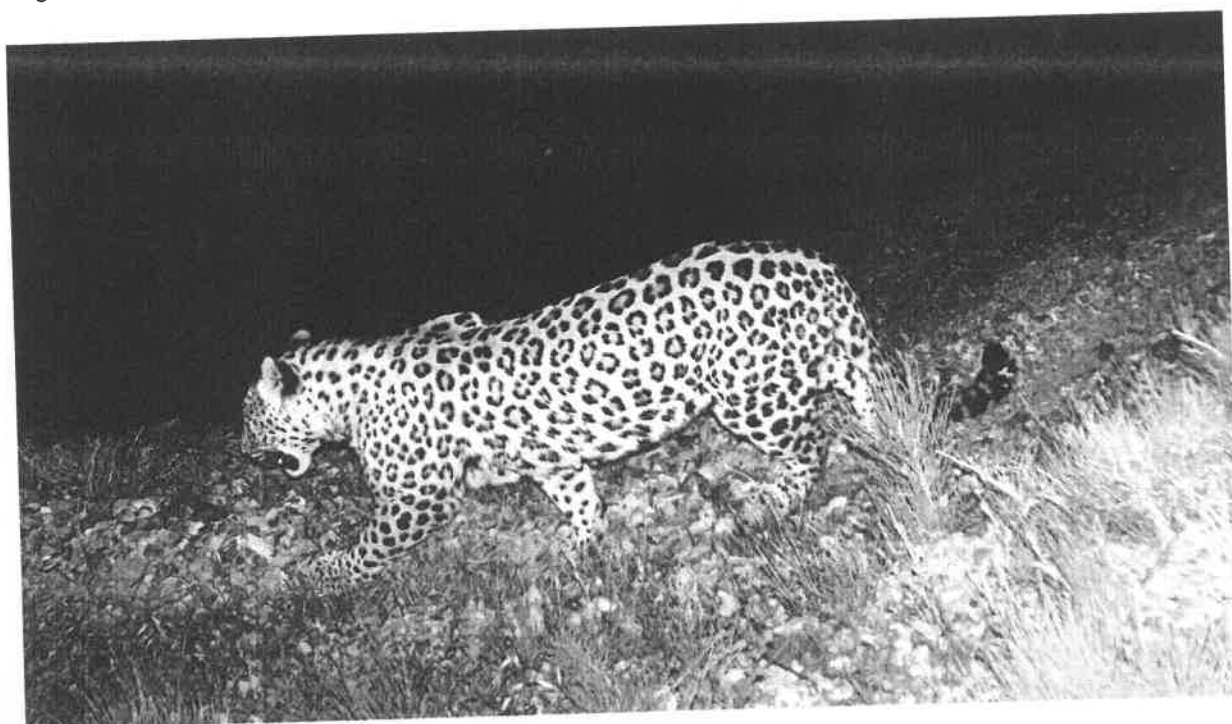
I watch the scenery miraculously transform before my eyes as we get closer to Zungulash. Now it's tropically green everywhere.

The Talish Mountains, part of the Lesser Caucasus, are along the southern border of Azerbaijan. They divide Azerbaijan and Iran and are a separate range in the south-east of Azerbaijan. The Lenkeran lowland stretches in a narrow band between the foothills of the Talish Mountains and the Caspian Sea.

Elshad tells me to 'get ready and after a while our driver indicates that the first leg of our trip is over. Our car stops at a crowded village centre. The rain has stopped but the clouds still hang low. The air smells of wet earth, grass and smoke. People watch us as we sort out our bags and equipment. 'Here they come,' says Elshad, and points at two men approaching with broad smiles on their faces. Both are slim, short and muscular. Both sport moustaches and look alike. The one on the right is a bit taller. One of them is Babakhan but I don't yet know which. Then they greet us. We shake hands. The taller of the two introduces himself – as Babakhan, 'and this is my brother Raphael.' We speak Russian, a language that has united us for so many years. They don't speak Georgian, I don't speak Azerbaijani and, in addition, Elshad doesn't speak Talish, the Iranian-rooted language of the area.

They have horses waiting for us and while we get ready Babakhan and Raphael talk to the gathered locals in front of a chaikhana, a teahouse. Soon Elshad joins them and by the time I have attached myself to the crowd they are engaged in heated conversation.

'Is anything wrong?' I ask Elshad. 'No. One guy says his cow was attacked by a leopard and we're trying to find out whether



A Caucasian leopard in Zangezur National Park, photographed on 21 March by a WWF trap camera

ENVIRONMENT

it really was or not. It often happens that people blame the leopard when a domestic animal vanishes, but it's not usually the real culprit.'

I watch Babakhan while Elshad is telling me this. His childish eyes are fixed on the listeners, he uses his hands while speaking. Soon it's over. People pat each other on the shoulders and shake hands. We say goodbye to them and our tiny group leaves the village square.

HIRKAN FOREST

After a kilometre or so I'm already convinced that this is how Paradise must look. A mere description just cannot convey the beauty of the Hirkan forest. For those who need a more scientific portrayal here's an excerpt from the UNESCO web site:

Hirkan, bearing the ancient name of the Caspian Sea, is a tertiary flora centre and represents a huge unique diversity of flora and fauna. Hirkan forests are the most important refuges for relict forest vegetation. The Hirkan forests are the main climatic barrier and watershed between the Caspian Sea and the arid Iran-Turan plateau. The steep ridges of the Talish mountain system and Elbruz serve as an insuperable barrier of moist air accumulated above the Caspian Sea. As a result, the precipitations feed most of the rivers that roll down all along steep slopes and mountain gorges and into the Caspian Sea.

Of course, this is physically accurate, but how to describe the emotions of a person there for the first time? Fairytale! That's the word that came to my mind and then just refused to leave. 'Let it be,' I told myself. 'A fairytale is not a bad place to find yourself for two days.'

We ride and talk. Babakhan is planning a raid the next day. 'I just wander around the sections I call the Leopard House. There aren't many of them, but they are there, these cats know how to be invisible. They love playing games with people. They know us better than we know

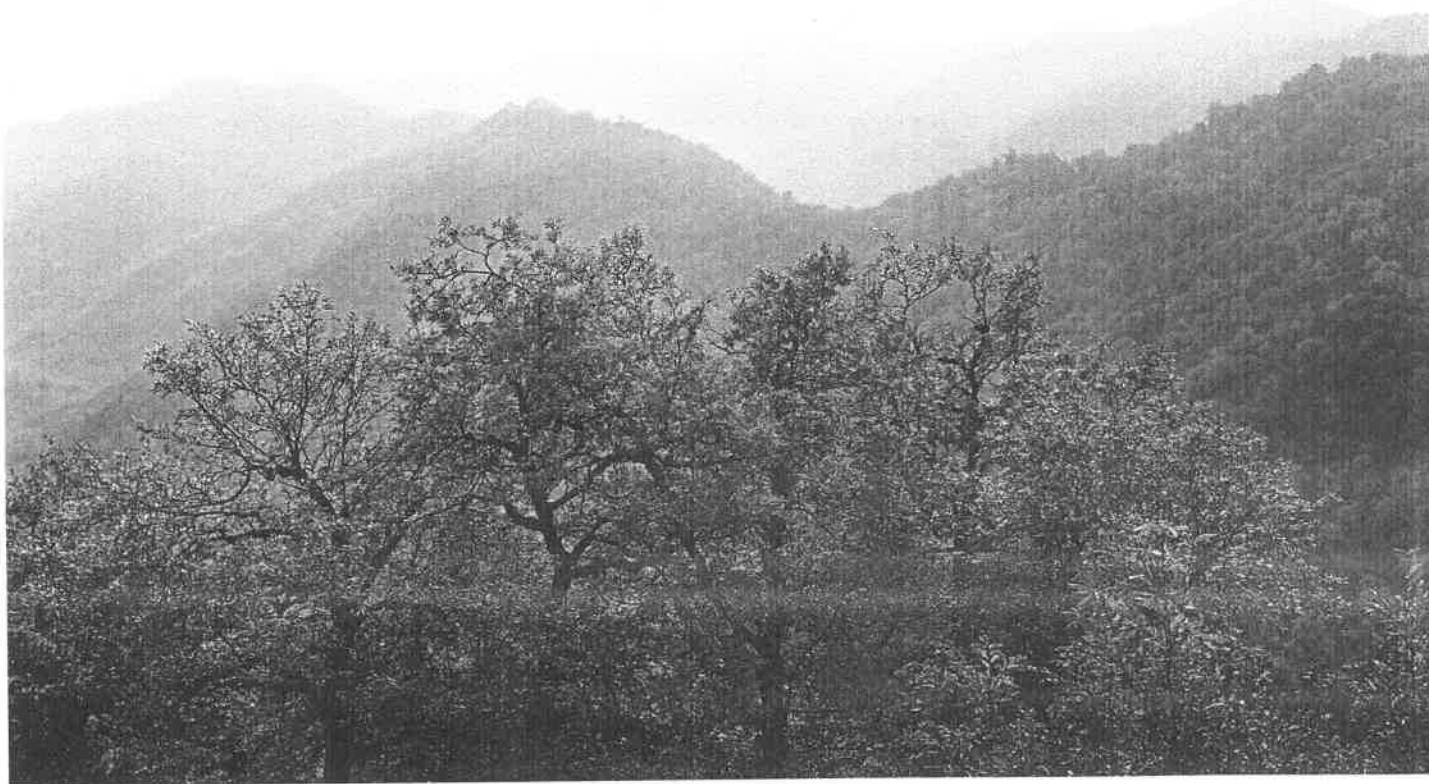
them.' Raphael nods and smiles, 'Yes,' he says, 'but they are unaware of how much you know about them.' Babakhan smiles back. 'Do I have a chance to see the leopard?' I ask. 'You never know,' says Babakhan. It has started raining again.

PANDEMONIUM

After a three-hour ride we are drawing closer to Siyov, the tiny village where Babakhan and his big family live. He has three brothers and six sisters. His mother and a collection of his own and his brothers' and sisters' kids also live there. The house they live in is remote. But then Siyov is not your average village, but rather a settlement. In fact, their house is the only one in the area. The closest neighbours (including some of his brothers and sisters) live two or three kilometres away.

We are definitely expected, but nevertheless our arrival causes pandemonium. Babakhan's household comes out to greet us: sisters, brothers, wives, kids, grandmother, everybody. It is late and we are fairly tired and hungry. Frankly, I'm expecting a light snack followed by a good sleep; but apparently they have other plans for us. After dinner – chicken in walnut sauce, some bread and tea – the hosts suggest watching a video of Babakhan's wedding. He and his wife are newly-weds so the enthusiasm has yet to wear off. I hand over some presents I've brought for them. We sit cross-legged in the guest room. From time to time, either Elshad or Babakhan explain some obscure details of the Talish wedding ritual to me. Every appearance of either Babakhan or his wife on the screen triggers floods of laughter. I laugh with them. Not because of guest/host etiquette but because their laughter is contagious. During the night, crammed between Elshad, Babakhan and Raphael on the floor, my sleep is dreamless.

I wake up early in the morning of the next day to discover that the weather has changed from rainy to super-shiny. Babakhan and



The Hirkan Forest in the Talish Mountains. Photograph copyright WWF and Vaso Gabunia



Babakhan with his family.
Photograph copyright WWF and Vaso Gabunia



At home in Siyov. Photograph copyright WWF and Vaso Gabunia



Babakhan and the WWF's Elshad Askerov.
Photograph copyright WWF and Vaso Gabunia

Raphael are performing the morning Namaz. I don't want to disturb them so I wake Elshad, check the equipment and take a thorough look at the house and yard. Actually, there are several houses: tiny white buildings standing close to each other, plus a hen house and cattle shed. There are also beehives. I already know from Elshad that they have the best honey here. By the time the brothers are finished and we have had our breakfast, the whole household is engrossed in 'morning duties'. There is plenty to do but they make no objections to me charging about with a camera. Raphael explains that first we should go to the cemetery where all the relatives gather to mark the end of Ramadan.

LEOPARD ENCOUNTER

We are back in the fairytale. Today, the forest is another. Rays of sun shining through the trees make it look different. It smells of childhood. We pass the ruins of an ancient cemetery. Tombstones, half submerged in the ground and almost covered by moss, still reveal their engraved swastikas, axes and bows. Babakhan kindly answers all my questions but I notice that he is also trying to study the area closely. Mostly he looks down, sniffing the air as if he doesn't trust his eyes alone. I'd heard about his encounter with a leopard years ago and also about the scar that the encounter left on his leg. As soon as he looks back at me I ask him to tell me the story. I even

ENVIRONMENT

joke that he's the only man I know who's actually seen the leopard. Here's what he tells me:

When I returned from the army I would hear neighbours and relatives grumbling about a leopard killing domestic animals in the neighbourhood. Some said they even knew the animal's whereabouts but they didn't dare to find it and kill it. I was impetuous and hot-headed back then. Besides, all the neighbours thought the army should have made me braver, so I said I'd give it a go. I persuaded one of my relatives to come with me and we set off armed with rifles and knives.

It took us two days to find the den and more than 24 hours in ambush... but all in vain. The animal wasn't there. We were both 'green' and knew nothing about leopard behaviour, or indeed anything about leopards at all. We just wanted to kill it and that was that. Anyway, after a prolonged wait, we decided to leave because we were fed up with sitting there in the cold without decent clothes or sufficient food. And that's when it happened. We were descending rocky terrain when it appeared from out of the blue. No noise. Nothing. I can't quite recall now how I managed a shot, but the next thing I remember is this huge dotted body coming closer to me. It jumped on me and we both flew off the rocks. It continued to chew on my leg while we were flying. Luckily, the animal landed first with me on top of it. And that was it. It let me go and vanished as fast as it had attacked. All this time my relative had been standing there motionless without realizing what had just happened.

You know something happened that day; something very important. I don't even know how to explain it; not because I don't know what it was but because it is not one thing but many things at once. It's difficult to articulate. Of course, initially I was so livid that I planned to go back and kill the animal once and for all. But the wound gave me time to think about the incident. And then one day I suddenly realized that the anger had left me and I didn't crave revenge any more. I didn't want the skin of that animal on my wall anymore, and I didn't want to walk around bragging about how I'd killed a leopard. I just wanted to leave it where it belonged. It was so beautiful and brave. It had dignity. It had tried to protect its home.

'That's how he turned into, as I put it, self-appointed wrath of illegal hunters,' Elshad added jokingly, 'and then he met a young university post-graduate who was studying the species. And that was the second encounter that changed his life.'

'So who was that?' I asked.

'Me,' smiled Elshad. We all laughed.

EYES AND EARS

Of course, Babakhan didn't know much about environmental organizations or even that the leopard was almost extinct in the Caucasus. He was a local who lived with the same hopes and fears as the people living in the area, and for them the leopard was a threat. It attacked their livestock and it had an almost legendary reputation for being a merciless killer. Until recently, in talks with the locals, it was almost impossible to separate the fact from the legend. The leopard was mentioned in the same breath as every disappearance of a domestic animal. Today, three years into the WWF Caucasus project, things have changed in some ways. Now the locals know far more about the animal, its behaviour and its importance. But clashes still occur from time to time. 'Clashes?' asks Babakhan, 'of course we have clashes with the locals occasionally and it is natural. I can understand what one might



Caucasus leopard tracks in the mud. Photograph copyright WWF and Elshad Askerov

feel when a cow or other domestic animal vanishes, but they must understand that it is not only the leopard which could be responsible. There are plenty of other capable predators.'

'Babakhan is our eyes and our ears,' Tale Shamchiyev, director of WWF Caucasus's Baku office, told me before I'd embarked on this trip. Not a single meeting with the locals or with WWF's project monitoring group is conducted without him. He usually brings invaluable information with him, on leopard appearance, poaching cases, footprints found, and how locals feel about certain things within the project.

It's amazing watching the 'eyes and ears' doing his job during the raid. We are riding through the woods after the cemetery ceremony and, believe me, one simply cannot take one's eyes off this man. It is not only the leopard's domain, but Babakhan's domain as well. He moves around so quickly that I can hardly follow him. Of course he knows he's being watched and his comments are much appreciated, but he's so engrossed that only after he's sure there's nothing to look out for – then he turns to me and that's when the performance starts. Every animal he mentions comes complete with an impersonation.

He puts on a show for us to better illustrate the things he's saying. One minute he's a wild boar, the next – either a roe deer or a porcupine. All prey for the leopard. He even uses the quills of porcupine, found everywhere in the forest, to illustrate his story more vividly. *The porcupine is not an easy target for the leopard, he explains, which is why it prefers other animals. When a predator approaches, the porcupine will proffer its back, raise its quills and lash out at the threat with its tail* [he demonstrates all of this with a pair of quills he picks up from the ground]. *If the quills become embedded in the leopard's paw* [now he sticks a quill between his clenched fingers and makes a torturer grimace] *it may remain there and prevent the leopard from hunting other prey. This means it will try to find an easy target and that's when it attacks domestic animals.*

BETWEEN SKY AND EARTH

Then suddenly Babakhan vanishes. He walks deeper in the wood and I lose sight of him. Elshad and I talk in his absence. At that moment Elshad points to something in the air. I follow his finger with my eye but cannot see anything out of the ordinary.

'There,' Elshad smiles, 'see that big tree over there?' I try again and when I at last spot a familiar figure in a striped shirt I almost gasp in awe. Of course it is Babakhan, but this time he is literally hanging between the sky and the earth.

At least that's how I see him. He is crouched, suspended on a thin branch, and looking down. I can only see his back. We approach and closer-up I can see that Babakhan is almost on the top of a tree that is hanging over a cliff. He is looking down into the abyss. 'Please, Babakhan...' I shout as carefully as I can, 'get down, please, you might hurt yourself!' I say this while I'm trying to concentrate on my camera viewfinder but I'm so scared I can hardly find it. Babakhan obliges, and in a couple of minutes he's already standing beside us. Smiling, as if nothing had happened. 'I have a bit more tree-hanging to do,' he warns me, 'but don't be afraid; it's part of my job. Besides, this is something I've been doing all my life. I can get the area in better perspective that way.'

For the following hours I'm in the 'animation film' phase of my trip. I mention animation here for one reason. I've only ever seen tree-climbing like this before in animation movies. It seems like gravity has no impact whatsoever on this man. He's wearing rubber shoes and it was raining yesterday, yet somehow the trees accept him naturally. Now I know why they call him the Leopard Man. He moves up and across branches with abandoned grace like his feet had never stepped on flat ground. And not only this, he manages to write in his notebook while crouched upon a branch. Things continue in this vein for a while – Babakhan moving up the trees and us following him on the ground. Then I'm shown my first leopard track.

PAW PRINT

It happens when we are almost ready to go back. Babakhan is by now walking on the ground with us, but occasionally he vanishes from sight like he's been doing the whole day. Then he reappears and gestures to come closer. 'Here he was,' he switches to a whisper, 'a big male one, saying, This is my land and I'm the king of this place!' We look down at the print closely. Elshad positions a lighter beside it to show me how big the print is. Somehow I'm not sure that I want to see the leopard today. And, in fact, we are not going to see it. We know it's around here somewhere, and maybe it knows we are here too. But we are unwelcome guests, so it prefers not to come out in greeting.

The next morning, the whole family sees us off. Babakhan and his elder sister even hold races in my honour. She is definitely his riding match. We all laugh and shake hands. Smiling faces wish us a smooth trip. When I look back to the house I spent two nights in I see all of them getting back down to their everyday duties. Smoke from the chimney puts a picturesque finishing touch to the whole scene.

'May I come back?' I ask Babakhan before we leave.

'Of course. I hope you see the leopard next time,' he smiles at me.

'Maybe it's better to leave it be?' I suggest.

'Sure, but what if it wants to show itself to you?'

'You mean to attack me?' I ask.

'No. Why to attack? Just to let you know how beautiful it is.'

Ah, but I do want to come back.

This article has been reprinted from the World Wide Fund for Nature Caucasus Newsletter, with their kind permission - www.panda.org/caucasus



Inside the Hirkan Forest. Photograph copyright WWF and Vaso Gabunia