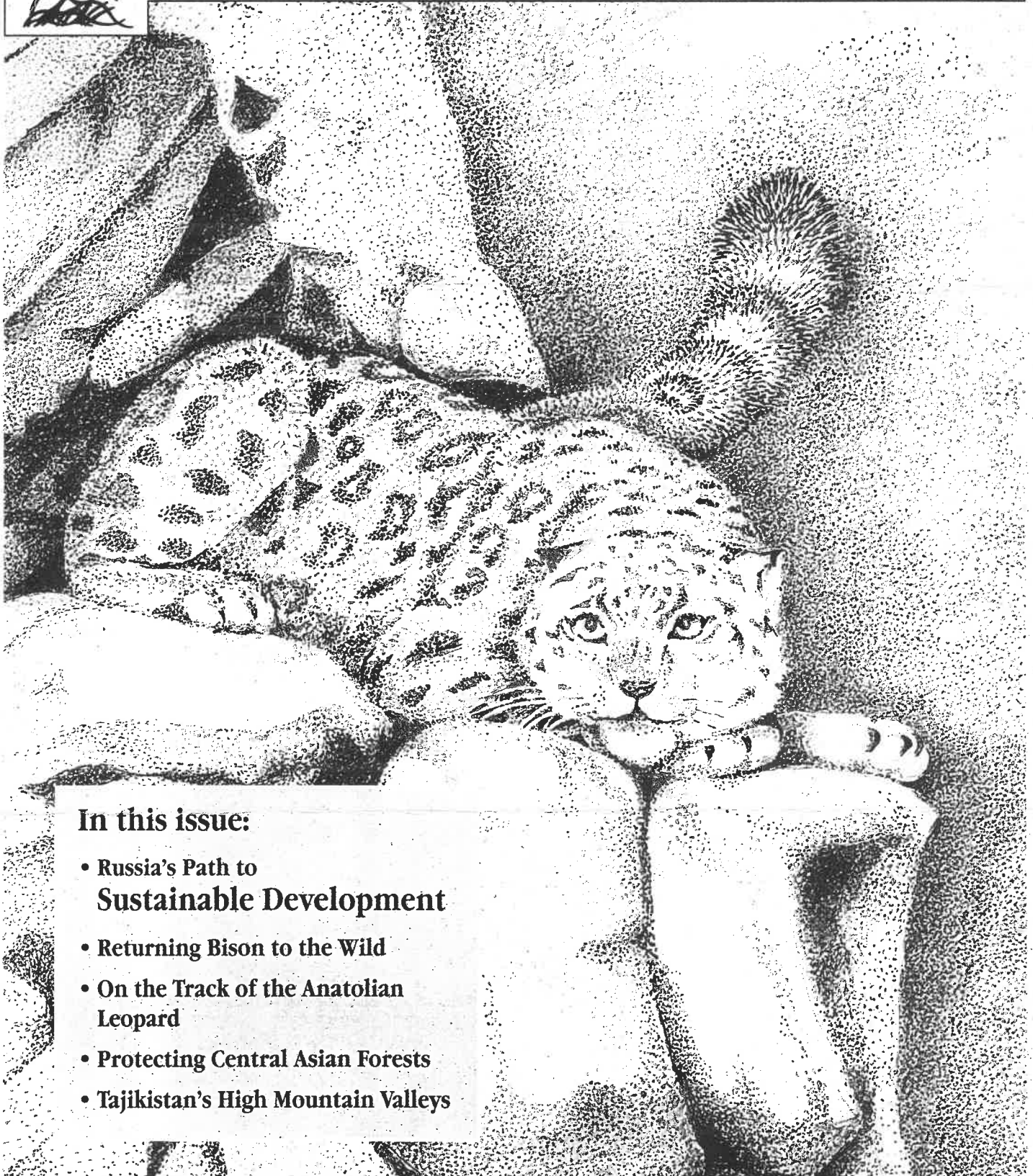


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In this issue:

- **Russia's Path to Sustainable Development**
- **Returning Bison to the Wild**
- **On the Track of the Anatolian Leopard**
- **Protecting Central Asian Forests**
- **Tajikistan's High Mountain Valleys**

PROMOTING BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION IN RUSSIA AND THROUGHOUT NORTHERN EURASIA



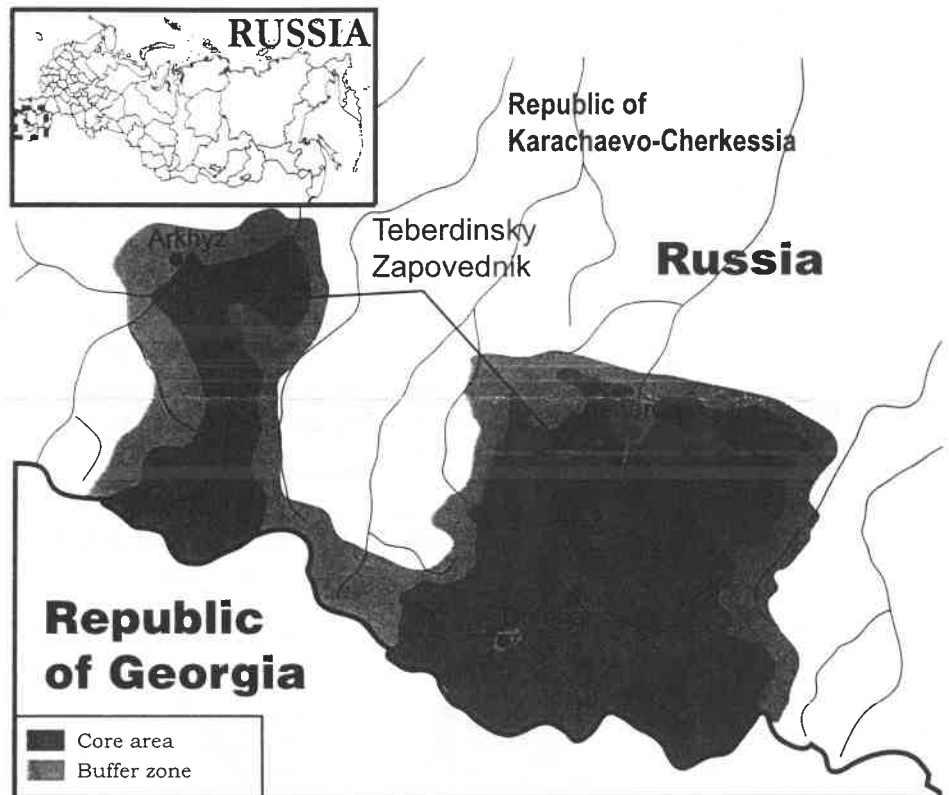
Tracking the Anatolian Leopard in the Western Caucasus

By Umar Semenov

A note from the editors: Declared a critically endangered species by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the Anatolian leopard (*Panthera pardus tulliana*) survives today in severely fragmented populations, predominantly in western Turkey, but may still range as far north and east as the Russian Republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia, in the Western Caucasus. Estimates place the number of surviving Anatolian leopards at 250, although, as the following article suggests, our knowledge of this secretive animal is currently too limited to provide an accurate count – or to ensure this endangered species' survival.

Among the fauna of the Caucasus, there exists an uncommonly beautiful, strong, and bold beast of prey – the Anatolian leopard (*Panthera pardus tulliana*). A slender cat with an elongated body, strong legs, and hooked claws, it stands at a height of between 50 and 75 cm at the shoulder and rarely exceeds 60 kg in weight. Its ears are short, rounded, and lack the tufts that characterize other breeds of wild cats. Its coat, though neither lush nor glossy, is thick and spotted in the leopard's classic pattern. Brownish black rosettes with lighter brown centers spot its bright coat of smoky yellow or rusty tones.

Though currently a critically endangered species, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Anatolian leopard inhabited a wide territory. Leopards roamed the Western Caucasus from the Karachai Mountains of Karachaevo-Cherkessia to the banks of the Black Sea. Particularly large populations were found to the west of the Karachaevo-Cherkessia, in the mountains around



Teberdinsky Zapovednik may be one of the last refuges of the Anatolian leopard.
Map by M. Dubinin

the Little Laba River and at the headwaters of the Kisha River. By the 1930's, however, the leopard population had declined to such an extent that some believed it had disappeared from the Caucasus entirely.

Evidence to the contrary was supplied in the mid-1930s, when two leopards were spotted on the territories of Teberdinsky Zapovednik, located in the mountainous southern reaches of Karachaevo-Cherkessia, along the valley of the Teberda River, which flows from the steppes of southwestern Russia to the Black Sea. The first sighting, in 1934, traced the leopard to Arkhyz, a secondary site of Teberdinsky Zapovednik located to the west of the Teberda. Its tracks led west to east, from Kavkazsky Zapovednik deep into Karachaevo-Cherkessia Republic. Three years later,

a leopard was spotted on the zapovednik's main territory, its tracks again leading west to east, this time across the Teberda River toward the Gonachkhir Ravine. On September 22, 1955, the Anatolian leopard was glimpsed for a second time in Arkhyz.

Whether the leopard still roams Karachaevo-Cherkessia and the Western Caucasus remains an open question. Teberdinsky Zapovednik receives local reports of leopard sightings quite frequently, but no one has been able to verify these with any certainty. Most likely, the Anatolian leopard sporadically appears in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, crossing in from neighboring regions. Considering that the hunting grounds of each individual can comprise up to 100 square kilometers, this hypothesis seems quite plausible.

Endangered Species

With its rocky gorges and thick forests, the Western Caucasus provides the inaccessible, mountainous habitat that the Anatolian leopard prefers. This species inhabits dense, remote mountain forests 1,000 to 3,500 meters above sea level, where the relief is convoluted by rocky areas, deep ravines, and mountain rivers. Avoiding open plains, the leopards descend occasionally to piedmont woods and build their dens in fissures in the rock, in caves, or often in dense woods or brush.

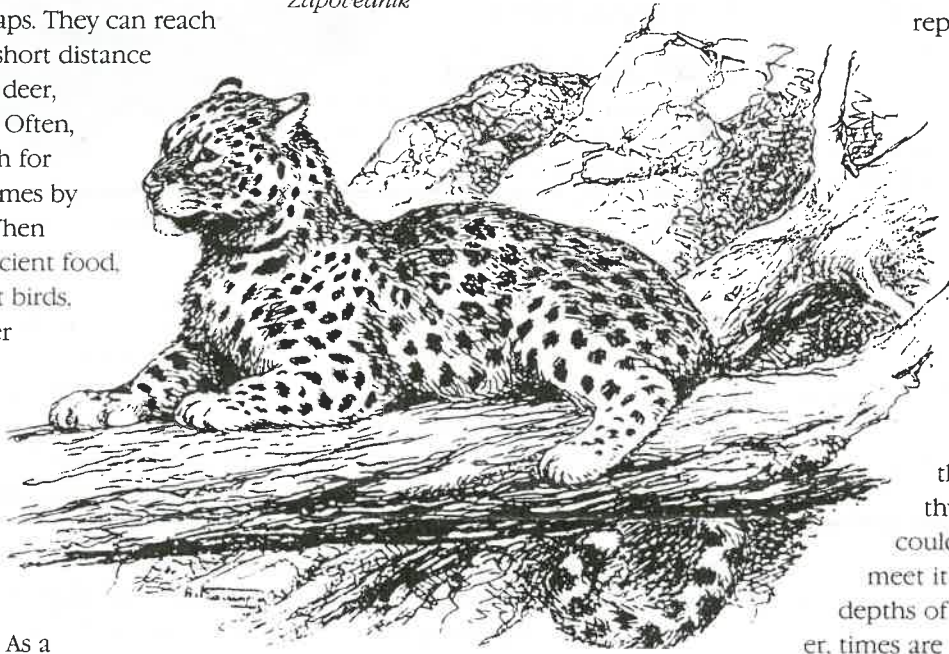
Strong and agile predators, Anatolian leopards hunt primarily during the night hours, feeding on wild ungulates such as roe deer, chamois, deer, boar, and Caucasian tur (a mountain goat). These large, beautiful cats climb gracefully over rocks and in trees, and make fantastic leaps. They can reach high speeds in a short distance and overtake roe deer, chamois, and tur. Often, they lie in ambush for their prey, sometimes by hiding in trees. When faced with insufficient food, the leopards hunt birds, rodents, and other animals, and in some cases even attack bears. In pastured areas, they will attack live-stock and, more often, dogs. As a predator, the Anatolian leopard can be quite dangerous to man as well: it has been known to attack humans unprovoked, though this happens quite rarely.

The fragmentation of Anatolian leopard populations in the Western Caucasus and throughout Eurasia, though in part due to habitat destruction, is largely a result of poaching. Possessing a beautiful coat, the Anatolian leopard has always

been considered an enviable trophy for hunters. In the past, the animal's secretive life and the danger of possible attack made leopard hunting especially difficult, colorful, and prestigious. Among mountain dwellers, the status accorded to leopard hunters served as an additional stimulus to hunt this majestic cat, and successful hunters were surrounded with an aura of fame and universal respect.

In the mid-nineteenth century, leopard pelts were in high demand by Cossacks and provided communities in the Western Caucasus with a valuable object to trade in exchange for

Anatolian Leopard (*Panthera pardus tulliana*). Courtesy of Teberdinsky Zapovednik



salt. Research in the archives of the Karachaevo-Cherkessia Republic recently led to the discovery of original copies of official trade records entitled "List of Goods and Products Exchanged for Salt with Mountain Dwellers" for the years 1848 and 1950. These documents reveal that during those two years, Caucasus mountain dwellers sold the Cossacks fifteen Anatolian leopard pelts for a total of 300 silver rubles, or 20 rubles

apiece. At that time, the pelts of bears, wolves, and fox sold for just 1 ruble, and marten for 2 rubles.

Although the Anatolian leopard is now legally protected from hunters, lack of knowledge about the leopard's actual area of distribution continues to stand in the way of conservation efforts. Researchers at Teberdinsky Zapovednik are therefore planning a scientific expedition for 2003 to investigate all the ravines in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, in order to determine whether the leopard exists in the Western Caucasus. To conduct this expedition, the zapovednik hopes to secure the participation of scientists from different countries, as well as the financial support required for their work. Names of participating

researchers will be published in a report of the expedition and will, of course, be closely linked to the history of the Anatolian leopard in the Caucasus.

In far off times, leopard hunting emphasized the daring and courage of the mountain dwellers. At that time, the animal was a worthy adversary, and few could bring themselves to meet it face to face in the depths of a ravine. Now, however, times are different, and we must respect the courage and the aggressive daring of this consummate predator. Any shot fired at it could turn out to be the end of the leopard's history in Karachaevo-Cherkessia. Without its presence, the Caucasus would not seem quite so high, so beautiful, or so mysterious.

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