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First Record of Leopard in Kazakhstan

by Vladimir Shakula¹

Between 3 and 5 January 2000, an old male leopard (*Panthera pardus tullianus Valenciennses, 1856*) was killed by a local hunter in a chance sighting in a forest on the banks of the Talas river, near the town of Toguskem (43°55'N/70°25'E). This area is in the Mujunkum desert. The carcass had been stripped, the fangs broken, the head discarded and the hide given to the regional administrator.

The hide measured 1.58 m from nose to tail. The tail 1.05 m. The general colouring of the skin was light yellow to brown. The belly and inside of the legs were white. There were black spots all over the hide. The shoulder blades and flanks of the leopard were covered with rosettes, while the spots on the back, belly, paws and tail were solid. The hair cover was rich and short. The skin showed no sign of wear, showing that the animal had not been kept in captivity. From the size of the hide and especially from the hardened cartilage tissues and scars on the nose, the leopard must have been old.

The Hunting Inspectorate of Djam-bul region, the Committee of National Safety and the Police all investigated the case. So far as is known, the leopard had not been brought into the region, nor had it been kept in a zoo or privately. There had been no reports of a leopard having escaped from any other establishment (e.g. a travelling circus). The conclusion is that this was a wild leopard, killed on the banks of the Taras river.

The killing of a West Asian leopard in Kazakhstan is of great scientific interest. There are no prior literary references to leopards in Kazakhstan, nor any sightings reported. The leopard is found in the foothills and mountains in the south of Turkmenistan, in Uzbekistan and in Tajikistan. Leopards are found in Turkmenistan in the southern part of Usturt, in Large Balhan, Small Balhan, Kjuren-dag, Kopetdag and Baldyz. In Uzbekistan, leopards are found in the foothills of the Babatag range. In Tajikistan, they are found on the right bank of the Amu Darya river, in the area between the Kafirnigan, Vazh and Pjandzh rivers to the east up to the foothills of the Darvaz range and to the north as far as the Gissar Valley

(Heptner & Sludskii, 1972. Sokolov, 1963).

The Babatag range and the Gissar valley are the nearest places where the leopard was found in Kazhakstan. The distance between there and the Mujunkum desert is 600 km. From Turkmenistan, the distance is 1,200 km. It is not certain from which area the leopard came. In both cases, in addition to the considerable distances, the animal would have had to overcome many natural barriers, such as the Pamir Mountains, the Kyusylkum Desert, and the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers.

It is possible that the leopard travelled along the foothills of the Pamirs, then proceeded via the Ugam and Pskem ranges into the Talas valley and along the lower part of the Talas river. A factor favouring this theory is the mild winter of 1999/2000 when there was little snow. However, it should be noted that it is not known how or when the leopard first arrived at the Talas river.

Distant migrations of Felidae are known to science. For example, there are records showing leopards travelling more than 600 km. The ability of the species to overcome great obstacles is documented (Koshkarev, 1992).

Similarly, distant migrations of the puma (*Puma concolor*) are known (Bibikov, Karavaeva, 1976). Leopards may even have lived in the Muyunkum. The lower Talas valley is a wild and lonely place. The floodland's brushwood provides good cover, and good fodder is provided by gazelle (*Gazella subgutturoza*), saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), hare (*Lepus capensis*), rodents and birds. The leopard has a wide hunting range, and is mobile. Due to its innate caution, amazing camouflage, and habit of travelling at night, it is rarely seen (Gorelov, 1971).

The West Asian leopard is a strong, daring and clever predator. In some areas, its kills of domestic animals are significant (Lukarevskiy, 1988). Probably, if leopards were present in the Talas Valley, attacks on domestic cattle would have been known. But, on the other hand, the food base of the West Asian leopard can equally be wild animals (Korshunov, 1985). What is more, rural economic conditions in

the desert and steppe regions of the Mujunkum have changed greatly in the last 10 years.

Since the collapse of collective farms, the number of sheep pens has been drastically reduced and in many places they have disappeared completely. Cattle no longer graze there, and the cutting of *saxaul* (*Haloxylon* spp.) for wood and building has stopped. Agriculture has also ended. Reed and riparian thicket have been burned for 10 years. Periodic burning also served to limit the spread of another animal with a similar biology, the Caspian tiger (*Panthera tigris virgata*), which existed in this area in the 1880-1890s (Sludskii, 1939; the Red Book of Kazakhstan 1996). The artesian wells have stopped working, and visits by man or vehicle have been reduced. Naturally, these economic changes have had a positive effect on restoring vegetation, and on the number of wild animals.

The suitability of habitat for leopards is determined by the following conditions (Abramov, Pikunov, 1937):

1. Availability of food in the area, the presence of main prey species, places of concealment, for observation, and for storing food.
2. Limited snowfall, of brief duration.
3. Lairs for rearing cubs.

The flood plain of the Talas river in the Mujunkum desert fulfils these conditions completely. Therefore it is necessary to carry out research to determine the number of leopards in the Talas river valley; to undertake a thorough survey of the spoor of wild and domestic animals at watering places; and to question the local population. The results of such an investigation will enhance the significance of the first appearance of leopard in Kazakhstan.

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Distribution and Status of the Sri Lankan Leopard – A Short Report

By Anjali Watson¹ and Andrew Kittle^{1,2}

The leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*) is the largest of four wild cat species recorded in Sri Lanka, where it is the island's only big cat and its top predator. This population has evolved geographically separated from the mainland species *Pp. fusca* and is now recognized as one of the nine subspecies of *Panthera pardus* currently extant in the world (Miththapala *et al.* 1996; Uphyrkina *et al.* 2001). This isolation and subsequent subspeciation further heightens the endangered status of this island

The leopard has historically been found in all habitats throughout the island (Phillips 1935). These habitat types can be broadly categorized into the arid zone (<1,000 mm rainfall), the dry zone (1,000-2,000 mm) and the wet zone (>2,000 mm). The former two zones are characterized by broad lowland swathes while the wet zone is further subdivided into lowland, sub-montane and montane sections. Intermediate zones are also present and usually form gradations of habitat type. The northeast monsoon which occurs from mid-October to January and the southwest monsoon from May to July directly influence the island's ecosystems.

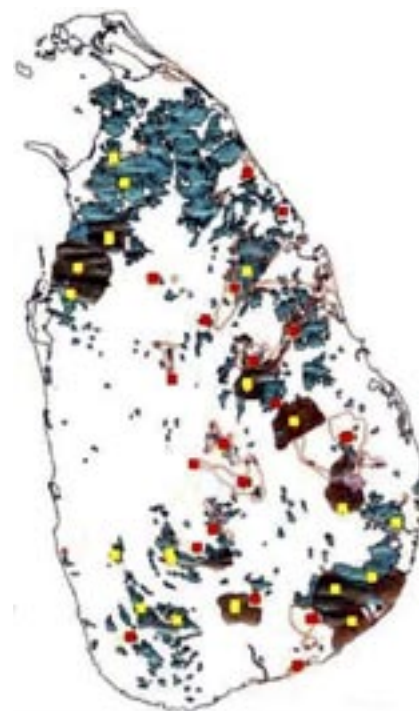


Fig. 1 Map of Sri Lanka showing forest cover (coloured and outlined area) and surveyed locations with presence of leopard (light and dark squares)