

# Photos of Persian Leopard in Alborz Mountains, Iran

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**R**anging across the southern border of the Caspian Sea in a west-east direction, the Alborz Mountains are home to the largest population of the endangered Persian leopard *Panthera pardus saxicolor* in Iran. With more than 3,500 km<sup>2</sup>, the Central Alborz Protected Area (CAPA; Fig. 1) is one of the oldest and largest reserves in the country and holds a number of Persian leopards roaming across the Hyrcanian forests. However, because of the dense forests and low density of the species, there is an extremely low number of direct observations by game guards and local people. During a survey launched in September 2005 in the area, a family of a mother with 2 adolescents has been photographed using a camera trap in March 2007 outside of the core area of CAPA.

The leopards were killing a village cow on the evening of 5 March, just one kilometer away from a village at an elevation of around 1600 meters (36° 27' 45" N / 51° 22' 34" E). While the leopards were at their kill at 11.00 h on 7 March, the cow was found by the owner on a rocky cliff covered by forest, over



Fig. 1. Distribution of leopards in Iran (black dots) and the Central Alborz Protected Area (red) with the study site (green star).



Fig. 2. Leopard feeding on a cow in the Alborz Mountains, Iran (Photo Iranian Cheetah Society).

a deep valley. When the carcass was indicated to us on the evening of 9 March, the leopards had just left the place, covering the hindquarter of the cow by soil. The animal's neck was fully broken and the head was attached to the body just by a piece of skin. Finding the tail several dozens of meters up the cliff, it was concluded that the mother held the neck of the prey when one of the yearlings was probably trying to prevent the animal from running away by keeping it by the tail.

Since leopards return regularly to their kill during a few days to consume it, we installed a camera trap to a tree around 1.5 meters away from the carcass for two nights.

We were lucky to obtain a total of 21 pictures from the leopards and surprisingly of no other animal. It was interesting that despite abundant fresh fox *Vulpes vulpes* tracks on the snow and mud, there was no photo of a fox taken. The leopard family arrived at the kill at 22.00 h on the first night and spent less than 20 minutes feeding. Only the mother was at the

kill (Fig. 2, Fig. 3). Later, all the three leopards were recorded feeding at 01.00 h, 03.00 h and 05.00 h. It seems that the family had spent the night on and near the kill and regularly fed on it, mainly the mother, who had a large belly on all photos. Then, we spent the time between 07.30 h and 17.00 h to observe the leopards from a hidden place, just 100 meters away from the kill on the opposite slope. We saw the crows flying over the carcass and sitting near it, but



Fig. 3. A leopard kill on a steep slope (Photo Iranian Cheetah Society).

never feeding on it. No animals were observed to approach the cow. The leopards did not come back to the kill during the second night until 05.00 h when the whole family was photographed on the cow.

After five nights, the carcass was cleaned up on the chest, the hindquarters and its shoulders. The head was intact, humerus and femur bones were licked off, and the end of the ribs were chewed. On 11 March, when we returned to pick up the camera, the remainings were not covered by soil anymore, and it seemed

that the leopards had consumed the preferred parts of the cow. Since 20 March, 7 cows and 2 sheep have been attacked in an area of more than 30 km<sup>2</sup>. In a few cases, the leopard family was observed. As the wolf has been very rare in this area during the past few years, all the losses have been related to the leopards by local people. Since the kills have not been found by the herders, the leopards have been lucky not to have been poisoned by local people.

The Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS) plans to continue this leopard survey. It

seems that at least one leopard per year is killed, mainly due to poisoning of the prey by local people. It is necessary to assess the present high conflict between people and leopards by the Iranian Department of the Environment to reduce the present growing mortality of the species, particularly in Central Alborz Protected Area.

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