

THE COMPLETE  
FAUNA OF  
IRAN



ESKANDAR FIROUZ

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I.B. TAURIS

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*This work is dedicated to the memory of my father,  
General M.H. Firouz*

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Pallas's cat (*Felis manul*)

although it is occasionally seen at midday. There has been only one recent report of a sighting in Iran, emphasising its extreme rarity in the country.<sup>31</sup>

#### 70 Leopard ♦

(Palang)

*Panthera pardus*

170–280cm (67–110in);

60–100cm (23½–39½in)

50–90kg (110–198lb)

Africa, Asia

*P. p. saxatile* EN

The leopard is one of the “Big Cats”, and the Iranian leopard is one of the biggest in the world. The northern race, in particular, is half as big again as Indian or African leopards. Those in the more arid mountains of Iran are pale in colour, giving weight to the belief

that there were once snow leopards in Iran. The leopard is a matchless athlete: it climbs trees or cliffs effortlessly, its leaps and spurts of speed are impressive, it is a good swimmer, and its technique of stalking game is such that the prey is unaware of its presence until captured. These talents are reflected in the adaptability and ecological flexibility of the leopard. It is found in almost any type of habitat in Iran – arid or densely forested, hot or cold – so long as the animals it preys on – ibex, wild sheep and wild boar – occur in sufficient numbers. However, it is not found in open, flat country. The leopard has no enemies except man. In many regions its prey has been almost eliminated and this, together with the use of poisoned bait, has consequently also wiped out the leopard population in those areas.

<sup>31</sup> See Zia'i (1996).

71 **Lion**

(Shir)

*Panthera leo*

220–290cm (87–114in)

130–230kg (287–507lb)

Africa, Asia

*P. l. persica* CR

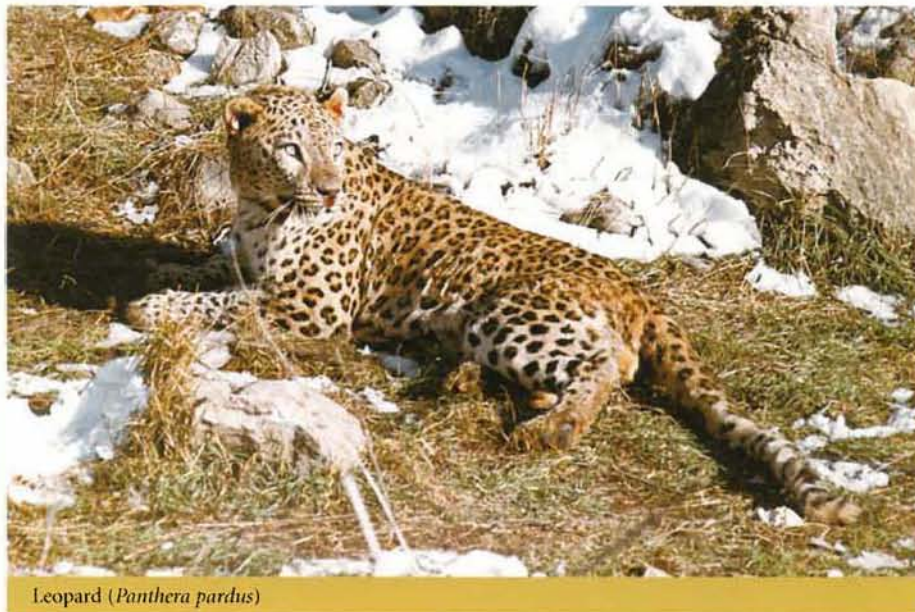
In the Middle East in the mid-19th century, the lion ranged from Mesopotamia through the Iranian province of Khuzestan to Fars. This was the Asian subspecies, *Panthera leo persica*. By the beginning of the 20th century, the lion had disappeared from Mesopotamia, but still occurred in several areas in Khuzestan and Fars. The last lion in Iran was seen by an Indian surveyor of the British Army in 1942, in an area 65km (40 miles) northwest of the city of Dezful.

The Asian lion survives in the Gir forest reserve in northwestern India where the population is estimated to be more than 200. Asian lions differ from African lions in two external features: adult males have a distinct

'belly fold' and the mane does not extend on to the forehead.

In Iran the lion frequented two habitats: firstly, the dense reed-beds, dense savanna-type bush and riparian forests of Khuzestan and the coastal plain eastwards from there towards Bushehr; secondly, the oak forests and pistachio-almond forests of the Zagros mountains. Its prey was mainly wild boar, but Mesopotamian fallow deer were probably also taken when they were more widespread. Although hunting and poisoned bait took a heavy toll, the decisive factor in the extinction of the lion in Iran was the gradual elimination and destruction of its habitat. Much of Khuzestan used to be covered by forests and dense bush, and the foothills of the Zagros range all the way to Fars. Very little of this prime lion habitat remains today.

Reference has already been made (*see p.15*) to the project for the reintroduction of the Persian lion – the historic symbol of Iran – in the Arjan National Park in the mid-1970s.



Leopard (*Panthera pardus*)