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New records of Persian leopard in Bashagard area, southeastern Iran

During a carnivore survey carried out from 2009 to 2010 in the Bashagard area, southeastern Iran, new records of the endangered Persian leopard *Panthera pardus saxicolor* were obtained. These records include: one carcass of a young female leopard (Fig. 2), first camera-trap photos of leopards in Hormozgan Province (Fig. 1), and some tracks and scrapes. The results show that despite the harsh environment and scarcity of prey, Persian leopards still survive in one of the most remote areas of Iran.

Bashagard is a mountainous area between Hormozgan, Sistan and Baluchistan, and Kerman Provinces in south and southeastern Iran. Because of its remoteness from major urban centers and difficulty of access, this area is undeveloped and relatively intact. It has a hot and humid climate and in summer it is affected by the monsoon climate that is formed over the Indian Ocean. From 2009 to 2010 this area was monitored for large carnivore presence, especially the Asiatic black bear *Ursus thibetanus gedrosianus* and the Persian leopard. After interviews with local people, some localities frequented by large carnivores were chosen and then field investigations started by means of an on-the-ground survey for carnivore signs in the area. We used Stealthcam camera traps in localities where we found footprints of leopards or Asiatic black bear scats, tracks and dens. Unfortunately, we were unable to install camera traps in many promising sites because of a lack of security due to the presence of opium smugglers.

The first evidence of a leopard (recorded on 23 April 2009) was a young female involved in an accident with a car on the Jask-

Jakdan road (26°05'32.1" N / 57°44'46.8" E, 199 m). Unfortunately, before the arrival of Department of Environment personnel responsible for biometry, the skin and tail were removed by unknown people. Also, on 18 August and 12 September 2009 one of our camera traps, 70 km inland from the Strait of Hormoz, captured five photos of two individual Persian leopards, identified from their individual coat pattern. The camera was installed near a number of carnivore scats close to a wild almond tree *Amygdalus scoparia*. The camera location was on Estin Mountain (26°29'46.0" N / 57°48'54.2", 1,134 m) in the Bashagard area. A few years ago we were told that local people had killed an Asiatic black bear in this area because it had been preying on livestock. Surprisingly, just two hours after the installation of the camera the first leopard was captured three times and after 25 days the second leopard was captured twice. Amazingly, no other photo of wildlife was captured by this camera trap. After due consideration of the time of installation and sunlight conditions, it appeared that both individuals were active in the afternoon. Leopards probably use this location

for scent marking on the adjacent rocks and ground (Fig. 1). These are the first camera-trap photos of leopards in the Hormozgan province and some of the few records from southeastern Iran.

There is dwindling number of wild goats *Capra aegagrus* surviving in this area, and it seems probable that these, together with the Indian crested porcupine *Hystrix indica*, wild boar *Sus scrofa* and domestic ungulates, comprise the diet of the leopards. So far no study had been done on wildlife in this part of the world, so the status of the leopard and of its prey is still unknown. However, the photos of the two individual leopards taken in an area without any conservation measures offers some hope for the future of this subspecies in this region, as it seems that this habitat is fairly suitable for leopards, although for conclusive evidence on the status of leopards in this area we need to investigate further and to understand the presence of this elusive species, particularly with regard to its range, in this interesting locality. Fully equipped and well-funded surveys need to be undertaken in southeastern Iran and along the coast of the Gulf of Oman to protect this "Endangered" subspecies of leopard in Iran.

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Fig. 1. Two individual Persian leopards photographed in the Bashagard area (Photo Plan for the Land Society).

leopard in Iran



Fig. 2. Female leopard carcass after the road accident in Bashagard .

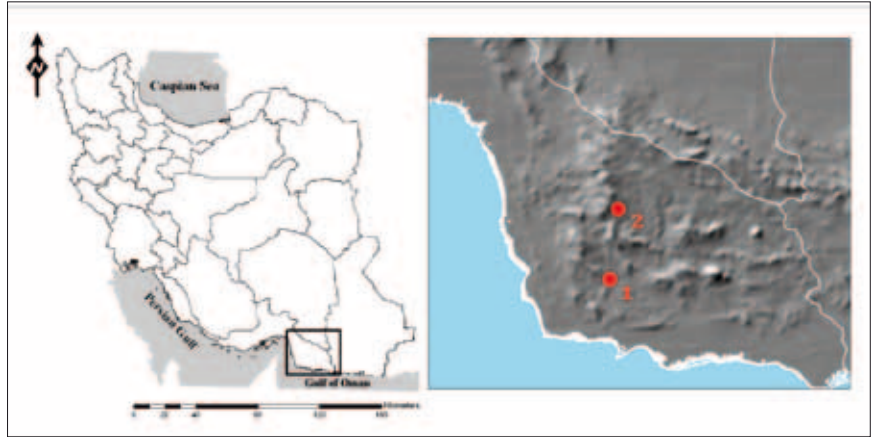


Fig. 3. Location of the Bashagard area in Iran (left) and leopard records in this area (right, 1- accident, 2- camera trap)