

# First Evidence of Persian Leopard From Khaeez Area, Southern Iran

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**O**n 21 December 2007 one of the Stealthcam camera traps used in the carnivore survey carried out for the Atlas of Bushehr Wildlife project<sup>1</sup> in the Khaeez free zone (40 km from the coast of the Persian Gulf) captured a photo of an adult male Persian leopard *Panthera pardus saxicolor* (Fig. 1).

This is the first evidence of leopard presence in Bushehr Province and one of only a few records from southern Iran; it is also the first camera-trap photo of a leopard outside a protected area in Iran. The camera location was in the Ashi Valley (51° 30' 38" E/28° 42' 18" N) at an altitude of 898 m (Fig. 2) in the Khaeez free zone, which has an elevation range of 300-1700 m. Recently experts from the Department of Environment DoE of Bushehr Province studied this area to protect the rich plant diversity in this arid region of the southern coast of Iran. Unfortunately the area still suffers from lack of protection status and proper conservation facilities.

Since our first visits to the area, we have focused on this valley for conducting a camera-trapping survey because of unconfirmed reports of leopards by shepherds of the Qashqai, a famous tribe in Western Iran. They also claimed leopard depredation on their animals during their winter stay at the area. There is just one old report from 1985 indicating leopard presence in Bushehr from past decades.

The team started an on-the-ground survey for leopard signs in the area. During the search of the study site no signs or remains of leopard or any other large carnivore were found, but five camera traps were deployed in suitable locations. From past experience in arid



Fig. 1. Male Persian leopard photographed by camera trap in Khaeez, Iran.

leopard habitats of southern Iran (Bamu National Park), the team selected some game tracks on the mountain ridges and likely paths in the valley.

Thirty-eight days later at one of the stations, where there had so far only been signs of the Indian crested porcupine *Hystrix indica*, a photo of a male Persian leopard was captured while rubbing its neck against a rock; surprisingly, no other photo of wildlife was taken by this camera. The camera-trapping survey resulted otherwise in photos of the jungle cat *Felis chaus*, the common fox *Vulpes vulpes* and the Indian crested porcupine.

Although there are some Bezoar goats *Capra aegagrus* present in the valley, they do not exceed 100 in Khaeez. It seems that Indian crested porcupines, wild boar *Sus scrofa* and domestic ungulates are the potential prey species of the leopard there.

The low food availability and the high risk of poaching by local nomads have always threatened this fragile population of leopards in Bushehr Province. These problems could be solved with an appropriate conservation strategy and by upgrading Khaeez to a protected area with sufficient facilities. To understand the presence of this elusive species in this part of the country in the context



Fig. 2. Ashi Valley, Iran (Photo H. Moshiri).

of its overall range, more surveys are needed in the southern Zagros Mountains and along the coasts of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman as part of a concerted effort to protect this endangered subspecies of leopard in Iran.

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