

LEGENDS OF THE ARABIAN LEOPARD IN THE HAWF PROTECTED AREA, SOUTHERN YEMEN

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The Arabian Leopard is Yemen's national animal since 2008. An iconic species and top predator of its niche, it gets its name from the range it occupies- the Arabian Peninsula. Yet the natural history of the Arabian leopard is little known due to the various threats it faces in its range. Of the four subspecies in the Arabian Peninsula, the *Panthera pardus nimr* is the sole survivor and occurs in restricted pockets. Local culture and social values combined with a lack of education and understanding of the intrinsic value of biodiversity, threaten the survival of this species in Yemen. Today, the Arabian leopard has been listed as a Critically Endangered species with a decreasing population trend, existing in the mountainous regions of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen and in isolated pockets of Israel. A camera-trap study, at the initiative of the Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen (FPALY), to assess the status of the Arabian leopard in the Hawf Protected Area was carried out over a period of 58 days in 2010. The study was successful in capturing images of 60% of the species present in the area as well as improving our understanding of the public's perception of the Arabian leopard (Figures 1-5). The one year study is funded by the Mohammed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund.

Protecting a carnivorous species is never an easy task especially when the livelihood and culture of communities is at stake. The local population uniformly fears the leopard and until now, were not concerned for the welfare of the species. It is interesting to note that their fear does not concern their own lives but rather that of their livestock. This would mean that they are aware that there is little risk of a leopard attacking human being unless the animal is in a dire situation. The Arabian leopard is half the size of the Indian and African species, and is too small to prey on large livestock such as cows and camels. The domestic animals they are more likely to prey on are goats and sheep.

Local legends and folklore are interesting in understanding the place the leopard occupies in this society. A clear lack of understanding of the natural history of the animal and its behaviour can be discerned from these stories. Some speak of "leopards which kill camels and only drink the blood, leaving the meat". Another tale speaks of the leopard having a prehensile tail and using it to anchor itself on a tree trunk so it may attack a camel without fear of being caught and swung round. When discussions of baiting arose, the villagers were clear that the smell of clarified butter or ghee is the most effective lure for the leopard. Another very common tale in Hawf spoke of the leopard going to the beach every Thursday at a specific time. On further questioning, it appeared that the animals do this to cleanse themselves for the Friday prayers. One stupefying statement by a villager was "leopards are very aggressive; when you try to shoot it, it will attack you." Lastly, villagers of Hawf were clear in their statement "a man with 30 bullets is not safe against a leopard." I was warned several times, jokingly and seriously, that the leopard was extremely aggressive towards human beings and that it would eat me.

Incidents of encounters with villagers in Hawf inevitably result in the death of the leopard. In one incident, a leopard attacked a goat; the goat herder shot the leopard but only wounded it. The leopard took shelter in a cave. The herder went into the cave to see if the leopard was dead but was charged by the leopard, bit his arm, knocking the rifle out of his hand. The herder passed out from loss of blood and as he did not return by nightfall his fellow villagers came looking for him, armed to the teeth. They pulled the man out of the cave and shot hundred rounds into the cave killing the leopard.



Fig 1. Landscape: Montane cloud forests in the Hawf Protected Area Arabian (©M. Pittet).



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Fig 2. Caracal: A caracal looks inquisitively at the camera-trap before scent marking the area in front of it.

Several elderly gentlemen are quite certain that since the introduction of firearms in the region of Mahra, leopards are rarely seen or heard. There are at least four unconfirmed records of leopards being killed in encounters with human beings but all of them more than 20 years ago. Caracals are the more recent victims of human-animal conflicts. According to herders, wolves and hyenas are common species in the region. When asked if they feared the wolves they claimed that "we poisoned so many wolves until now, so few are left that they do not scare us anymore".



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Fig 3. Hyena: A Striped Hyena scent marks a water pipe before heading into the mountains

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Fig 4. Hyena: A hyena peers into a camera-trap after having scent marked the area in front of it.

The few unconfirmed sightings of the Arabian leopard crossing the road in the Hawf Protected Area give us a glimpse of hope that this species still survives in the area. Personal sighting of a caracal, and a relatively high density of caracals captured on the camera-traps suggests that in the parts of the forest in close proximity to the village, the caracal has taken over the role of apex predator. By increasing awareness and education in the region, perhaps the attitude towards predators and wildlife in general will tip towards understanding and acceptance. The leopard will reign again in its true form and continue its role in maintaining the health of its ecosystem.



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Fig 5. Wolf: Camera-trap picture of the Arabian wolf in the Hawf Protected Area

For more information about FPALY, to join the "Friends of the Arabian Leopard" newsgroup, or to make a contribution, please contact the Executive Director, David B. Stanton, at P.O. Box 7069, Sana'a, Republic of Yemen, david@yemenileopard.org