

THE GHOST LEOPARD

Tracking the fiercest and most elusive wildcat of the ancient world, our writer joins a crew of wannabe Livingstones in northern Oman on a true 21st-century wildlife trip: to prove that the Arabian leopard is *not* extinct.

by CHARLES GRAEBER



HADI AL-HIKMANI STEERS us along a bulldozed track that traces the cliff's edge like a balcony on a crumbling tower. Beyond the windshield is a 700-square-mile maze of rock-hard wadis — dry riverbeds — each chiseled into the desert by 100 million years of now-dead seas and rivers, terrain as tweaked as wadded tinfoil. Contemplating the Wile E. Coyote hairpins, our velocity, the coefficient of friction between tires and scabby track, the depth of the chasm a few inches to my right — well, there is nothing to do but sing.




Al-Hikmani, who insisted I call him Hadi, loves ballads, the plangent folk songs of love and loss in which the heart is a hunter in the night, a loner who fights and suffers and, somehow, survives. As he whips our Land Rover

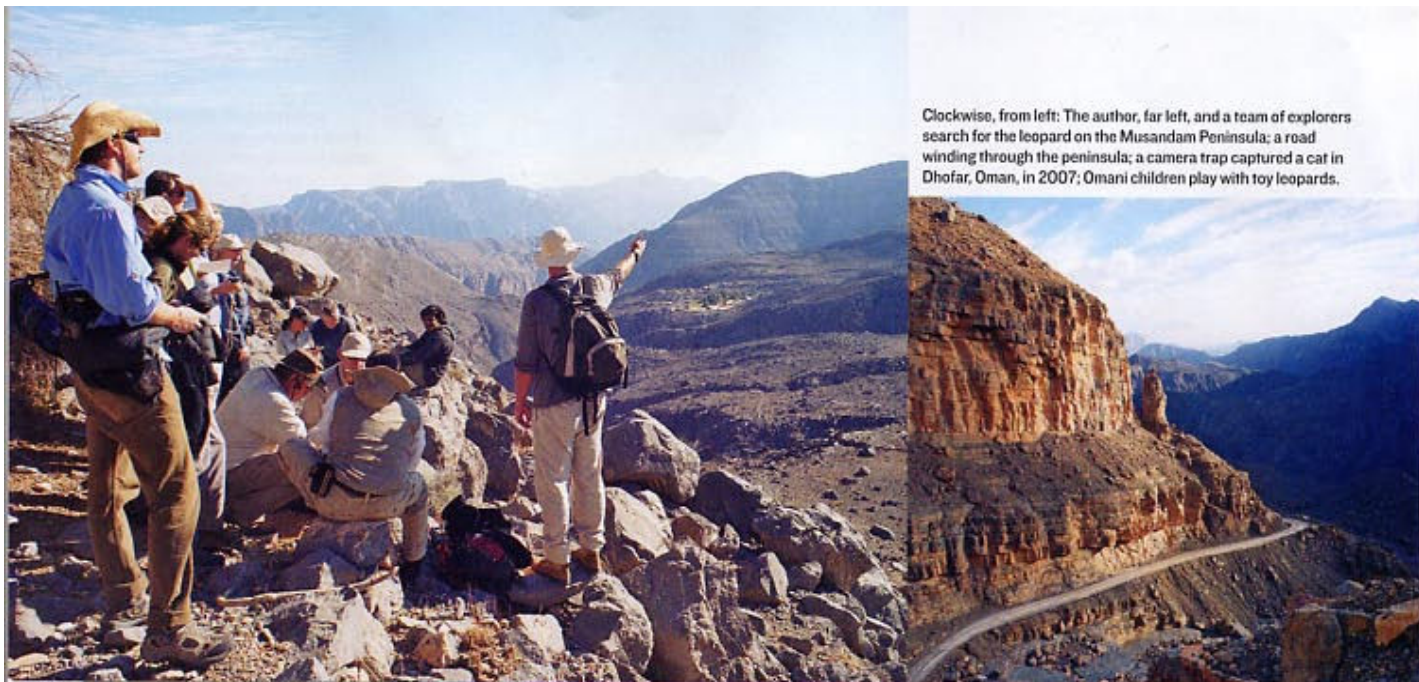
around another loose curve, he warbles his love for Oman, the desert, the day, and for the mysterious leopard we hope to find.

We're here, 15 of us in a convoy of three Rovers on a fully outfitted two-week expedition to scour the remote reaches of the Musandam Peninsula in northern Oman for signs of what zoologists call *Panthera pardus nimr* and shepherds call *nimr* and everyone calls the Arabian leopard. Hadi is our driver, our guide, our fixer, but he is also one of the first field biologists in all of Oman; he searches for the Arabian leopard, more elusive than the snow leopard of the Himalayas, even when he isn't joined by paying foreigners.

THE MAN: MOUNTAIN TOP: ANDRÉAS HOLM/LIAI; BOON: SHAMU; PICTURE: KALAMATI; LEOPARD ILLUSTRATION: HART VALLEGGIO; DEPOSIT: ANDRÉAS HOLM/LIAI

A wide-angle photograph of a mountainous landscape in Oman. The foreground shows a dark, steep slope leading down to a small valley with some greenery and a few buildings. In the background, a series of rugged, layered mountain ranges stretch across the horizon under a clear sky. The lighting suggests late afternoon or early morning, with long shadows and a warm glow on the lower slopes.

A place to hide: Oman's Musandam Peninsula, one of the few habitats of the endangered Arabian leopard, is hemmed in by the rugged Hajar Mountains.



Clockwise, from left: The author, far left, and a team of explorers search for the leopard on the Musandam Peninsula; a road winding through the peninsula; a camera trap captured a cat in Dhofar, Oman, in 2007; Omani children play with toy leopards.



The smallest of its subspecies (males weigh only 60-some pounds, females 40), the Arabian is a fierce predator. Omani tribesmen speak of the nocturnal cats as almost magic, concentrated and beautiful as lightning. Yes, this is *that* leopard, or at least its cousin. The one that cannot change its spots in the Old Testament, the one Jeremiah compares to an unconquerable army of the Lord, the leopard of Revelations that forms the body of the Beast and rules through terror.

Diaphanous gold with rosettes like blown pupils, Arabian leopards were rarely seen even before they were so scarce, but their invisibility, naturally, added to their mythic quality. If we can establish that at least a few still haunt these arid ramparts, there is a chance the sultan, Qaboos bin Said al-Said, will establish a wildlife refuge here in an effort to spare the remaining few. Given that the leopards haven't been seen in the Musandam for a decade or more, there's a very good chance, too, that we will find nothing.

"Okay, now you, crazy man," Hadi says to me. He wants an American song. My brain freezes. All I can think of is Rod Stewart. We've crested a ridge and descended into a canyon to a flat-bottom wash. I'm near the end of "Maggie May" when Hadi peels to the side of the wadi, stops the Rover, and jumps out. I know better than to take offense at having my song cut short. There's a lot to do before the light dies and the cold sets in.

We stack water bottles and set up a great can-

vas tent to house the data and food and maps. We dig latrines, and clear the area of horned vipers and other critters unwise to squat on. Hadi and I set tents hugging the wadi walls as shelter from the winds. Then we realize that a single rock slide would crush the entire expedition. We move the tents. By twilight the pots of rice and spiced chicken are ready. We find our plates and pick a flat rock on which to rest.

With sunset the desert world changes fast. Hadi and I sit with our food, watching the sky go sapphire and the ridges catch fire. The birds start, and the evening prayer call comes soon after, a song that fills the wadis like blood filling dry veins. It is impossible to know whether the singer is in the next wadi or a hundred miles away. All I hear is the muezzin calling the news that God is great, and the echoes make it sound as if the burning sky is proclaiming it.

THEY CALL THE MUSANDAM THE "Norway of Arabia," but unless you've been there, the nickname may not help you imagine it. The peninsula piles into the Strait of Hormuz like a tectonic train wreck. The cliffs are steep, the canyons deep — not unlike Nordic fjords. The mountaintops are tattooed with the fossils from an ancient sea and

capped in places with snow. In the north the Hajar Mountains meet the warm water in seawalls; from the south they rise like razors from the desert sands of the Ras al-Khaimah. For millennia these mountains kept this sliver of Oman in relative isolation, which is why the Musandam tribesmen have their own language and why the Arabian leopard, if it survives, might survive here.

Once, Arabia was so lousy with these big cats that they were a major export, shipped by the hundreds to the circuses of imperial Rome. But just as Arabian lions and cheetahs were driven to extinction (the last cheetahs were shot in Saudi Arabia in 1973), the leopard has suffered because of its status as a prestige animal. Since the 1970s pelts fetched tens of thousands of dollars on the black market. At the same time, the leopard's meal tickets, species such as tahr and ibex, were overhunted on the Arabian peninsula, much as the buffalo were in North America. Forced to turn to domestic stock for food, the once feared hunters became scavengers.

Our survey has the imprimatur of the sultan's Diwan of Royal Court and the Omani Ministry of Tourism, but our lead scientist is a British biologist named Tessa McGregor. She works for Biosphere Expeditions, an international volunteer organization founded in 1999. It specializes

PHOTO: MARIANNE SCHNEIDER; COURTESY: OMANI MINISTRY OF TOURISM

in these increasingly popular science and conservation trips, where regular joes can play Marlin Perkins for a few days.

From the start, however, our mission in Oman has had an absurd quality, less *Wild Kingdom* than *In Search Of*, and only a few degrees separated from an obsessional, cryptozoological quest for the yeti. Together, we're an unlikely bunch — Westerners and Muslims, Scottish policemen and American landscapers, Dutch pharmacists and Syrian cooks — gathered on this odd quest. Or maybe it's not so odd. These days our quest might represent the true state of exploration. We're not so much out to discover something new as to prove something's not dead and gone.

"With field biology, the more eyes you have, the better the data," McGregor says, happy for the company. "Frankly I can't imagine a more perfect group to hunt for potentially non-existent cat shit."

WE WAKE IN OUR TENTS IN A dewy dawn. Outside the tarp, as the rocks find their color, I hop around barefoot, trying to find my boots. I shiver on the ground in long underwear, banging the boots together to shake out any scorpions. My profound, pre-coffee thought this morning is, essentially, *Wow*. I'm freezing, I'm in the desert, I can see snowcapped peaks, and I'm 100 clicks south of Iran — where the hell am I again?

For almost two weeks we've traveled the length of several wadis and met with a number of locals living in intricate stone shelters built before Christ was born. We've climbed off the road only to come upon a half-dozen cut-rock houses with terraced gardens and goat-dung roofs in which women hide their beauty from strangers with catlike masks and men carry sticks topped by *girs* ax heads unchanged since the Bronze Age.

Wherever we've gone Hadi has brought out photos of the leopards, hoping for a recent sighting. Each time the advice has been essentially the same. An elder will raise his hand and ax it toward the distant mountains. Each motion flashes off a sleeve too white and clean for such a dusty place and confirms what we already suspect. If there are leopards in the Musandam, they are even deeper in the mountains.

Like these self-reliant people, leopards prefer isolated places, and nothing is more remote than the mountaintops. So our challenge this afternoon is to climb a triangular plateau bordered on one side by a stomach-sinking chasm of several thousand feet. "Perfect for leopards," Hadi says.

Though a local shepherd told us 30 minutes, tops, it takes our group four hours to make the summit. When we do we pace the rock and sand looking for signs.

In barren places close attention slowly yields infinite detail, plentiful life where there seemed nothing at all. Slowing down, bending like great sunscreened cranes over the fine sands between the rocks, we find the scat of scavengers such as fox and hedgehog, the minute crosshatch of birds and voles and insects, and, finally, in a sandy opening, three soft pad indentations clustered like a cloverleaf, with a fourth beneath.

Claudia Hosp, a Colorado landscape architect, blows a whistle and the team converges, careful not to lose sight of the print. McGregor bends to the ground to look at it sideways. "It looks like a caracal lynx," she says. She straightens and dusts her knees. "Hadi, what do you think?"

Hadi sniffs the sand and quickly stands. "Not

the leopard," he says, wagging a finger. "Caracal."

Finding any top predator is good, but this is still a disappointment. In the wild, cats are solitary species; if the caracal lynx is on this plateau, the leopard isn't.

DESPITE REPEATED FAILURES TO find a sign, or even someone who'd seen a leopard in their lifetime, as we lace up our boots each morning, there is fresh hope. Today, we say, will be different; it seems impossible to be anything but hopeful, what with our new friends and days not spent paying attention to bills or politics or work. Eager

for a sign, we take in everything — the movement of insects and voles, the shape and cry of birds, the shadows in which our leopard might be hiding. We may be fooling ourselves that we'll ever find a leopard, but at least we know why we're here.

We head out on a new search. Quickly it becomes a climb, the sort that burns thighs and rips jeans. Hours pass, uphill. Today's mountain, digestible in a single view, seems to grow only larger as we climb it.

By midday a few members of the survey team can't go on, but McGregor refuses to stop, and if she can pull herself up

along a dry waterfall, then I suppose I can, too.

"I will admit, I'm really not particularly fond of this bit," she says. She scrambles for footing, her boots sending rock fragments skittering toward oblivion. "Sometimes I think I need to choose a new animal," she laughs nervously.

Hadi, amazingly, crouches directly overhead. I have no idea how he's gotten there, only that he is perched on [continued on page 141]



Greater Oman covers 115,832 square miles; the Musandam Peninsula covers 700.

PLAN YOUR OWN ARABIAN ADVENTURE

ESCAPE TO OMAN (VIA DUBAI)

1. HIT THE VEGAS OF ARABIA

To get to Oman you fly through Dubai, the space-age capital of postcolonial excess that's well worth a trip on its own. Stay at the Burj Al Arab (BURJ-AL-ARAB.COM), the glam hotel overlooking the Arabian Gulf, and ride its simulated submarine to the Al Mahara restaurant, set alongside a shark-filled aquarium. Order the set lobster menu (Gulf lobster prepared five ways) or, if you're game, the creamy blue swimmer crab milkshake. Carve tracks year-round at Ski Dubai, a 242,000-square-foot indoor slope at the Mall of the Emirates. A 6,000-ton snow base is dusted with 30 tons of fresh powder daily; the snow is surprisingly similar to groomed slopes in Colorado the second day after a storm (SKIIXB.COM).

2. DIVE THE GULF

Thanks to a growing European expat community, Oman has solid adventure tourism resources. Base yourself in the capital, Muscat, where Brit Rob Gardner runs the Muscat Diving and Adventure Center (OMANDIVING.COM), offering everything from world-class scuba diving in the 85-degree waters of the Gulf of Oman (by far the country's biggest adventure draw) to sandboarding (pictured right) on dunes an hour outside the city. If you want to see where the author searched for leopards, hold off until fall. International hotel/spa group Six Senses is opening an 82-villa resort at Zighy Bay, a spectacular fishing village on the Musandam Peninsula's northeastern tip (SIXSENSES.COM).

3. CATCH PRISTINE SURF

With more than 1,000 miles of coastline, Oman is one of the few frontiers left in the surfing world. There's a surf school in Salalah (SURFSCHOOLOMAN.COM), an hour flight from Muscat, but you'll find the best breaks on your own. See surfersofdubai.com for leads.

4. COME AND GO SAFELY

Unlike many Middle Eastern nations, Oman is easy for U.S. passport holders to get into. You can get a one-month tourist visa on arrival at Seeb International Airport in Muscat (\$20; OMANAIRPORTS.COM). Improbable as it may seem, Omanis like Americans. The predominant form of Islam, Ibadhism, is far more open than the dogmatic Wahhabism in neighboring Saudi Arabia. It can be inhospitably hot in summer; visiting between November and February is best.

—ABRAHAM STREEP



Sandboard a dune an hour outside Dubai.

SANDBOARDING: CHRISTINE GERRITZ/LOVELY PLANET IMAGE; MAP: ALAN KRUCHI

some unseen foothold.

"Tessa, Tessa," he says.

"Yes, Hadi?" McGregor answers casually. She cranes her neck, trying to keep her balance, trying not to fall.

"Tessa, you come up, I find you a leopard," Hadi grins encouragement. "I promise, Tessa. How many leopard you want?"

McGregor glances back. "Promise, Hadi?"

"I promise."

"Ten leopards, then."

"Ten, Tessa," Hadi says. "And Tessa?"

"Yes, Hadi?"

"This rock, you see?" Hadi points out a natural handhold, above her in the rock.

"I see it," she says, and reaches.

"No, no," Hadi says. He pushes with his stick. The handhold flakes off as if it were sandstone and explodes on the rocks below. "Don't do this," he says.

"Right," McGregor replies.

I follow, stretching like Spidey, slipping like Peter Parker, then finally shinnying onto the ridge and straightening to a dignified height. Raw Musandam stretches around us as if seen through a fish-eye lens, and the distant mountains thrust up like icebergs. Compared with the ancient durability of these mountains, all animals, even ourselves, seem suddenly and incredibly fragile. In the desert it's not just the leopard that is rare; all constructions of flesh and blood are as fleeting as sparks. Was the leopard still here, somewhere between the mountains and the sea, hiding, hunting, surviving? I wanted to say yes, but I had no idea. But Hadi was sure: Absolutely, no question, it was. And he happened to be right.

A MONTH AFTER DRIVING OVERLAND FROM Khasab to Muscat and catching a flight home from Dubai, McGregor, Hadi, and the Biosphere survey team I had left behind found tracks and scat on an isolated mountain ridge — the first proof that the Arabian leopard still exists on the Musandam Peninsula. Then this spring a second volunteer Arabian leopard survey ventured farther into the Musandam. They discovered leopard tracks less than 24 hours old and set camera traps. (The image on page 86, taken in April 2007, came from one in the south.)

More surprising evidence that a few Arabian leopards endure came in late May, however, when a Dutch Israeli awoke to find one in his bedroom. Weak from hunger, the leopard was looking to eat the man's pet cat. The 49-year-old wildlife guide reflexively lunged at the leopard, grabbed it by the neck, and pinned it to the floor for the 20 minutes it took for help to arrive. Rangers took the cat to a veterinary hospital near Tel Aviv, then put it in an enclosed preserve. Though it provided dramatic proof that leopards do eke out a living in the margins of human development, the big cat's desperate act betrayed its biblical legend of invincibility. 