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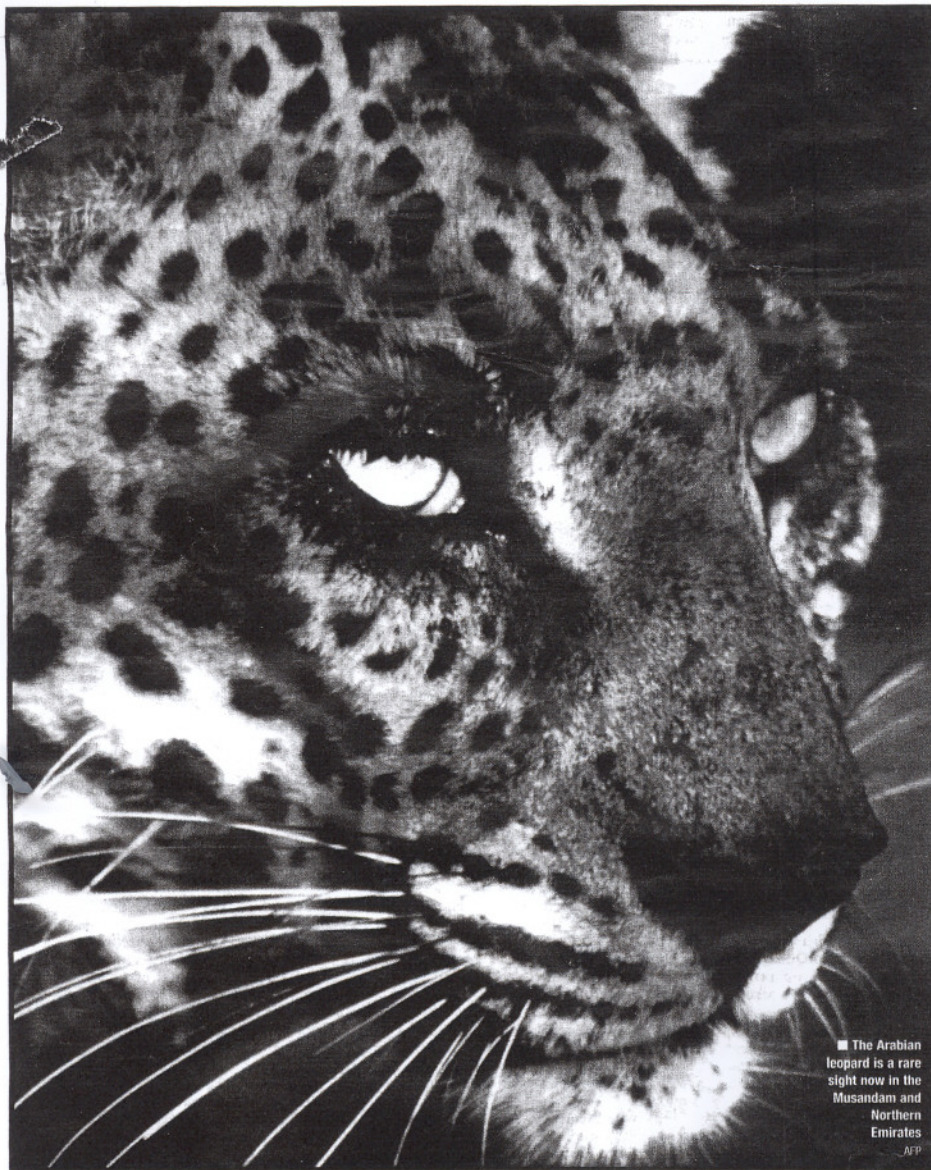
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EmiratesToday

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Back from the wilderness



■ The Arabian leopard is a rare sight now in the Musandam and Northern Emirates
AFP

A team of researchers finds proof that a handful of Arabian leopards, which were believed to be extinct in the region, continue to roam the deserts of the Musandam and the Northern Emirates

JAMES REINL
FEATURES EDITOR

Wildlife experts have found evidence of a handful of Arabian leopards surviving against all odds in a big cat range that covers the Musandam peninsula and stretches of the UAE's Northern Emirates.

The news has allayed fears of conservationists who believed the elusive predators had died out as a result of poaching, hunting and the decline of prey species like the gazelle and tahr.

But big cat investigator Tessa McGregor, the expedition's wildlife biologist, warned that the discovery of leopard tracks, faeces and feeding remnants is set to engender a heated debate about the feline's future.

"We have found evidence the animals are here, but really, we have come at a critical point in their survival; on the cusp of the leopard's disappearance from this region entirely," said McGregor.

"I am 100 per cent sure there are leopards living here. I am sure there is more than one leopard but, at this stage, I could not tell you how many. Given the scarce quantity of food that is available for them, I would imagine there are only a handful."

The Arabian leopard, the smallest of all leopard subspecies, once inhabited a massive terrain covering Iraq, Jordan and Arabia. But the animals have increasingly come into competition with humans and suffered from dwindling prey species until they were forced down to the southern peripheries of the Arabian

Peninsula, with the largest population of about 100 in the Dhofar region of Oman.

Paul Vercammen, operations manager for the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife in Sharjah, said conservationists believed the big cats of Musandam and the Northern Emirates had been wiped out.

"I'm pleasantly surprised by the survey and it is good that we still have the animals, despite all the development and encroachment of buildings and road on their territory," he said. "It has been difficult to get accurate information on their numbers, but in the 1990s there were a number of reports of leopards being killed in Ras Al Khaimah. But because we hadn't heard anything in the past four or five years, we assumed there must only be a very small population, and the chances were that none would be alive."

The survey, jointly organised by Biosphere Expeditions and Oman's Office of the Advisor for Conservation of the Environment in the Diwan of Royal Court, saw researchers scouring the region for four weeks using a fleet of Land Rovers, and came to an end on Friday.

McGregor said she hoped the feline finds will give rise to a joint effort by locals, tourist agencies and government officials to ensure the struggling leopard population survives.

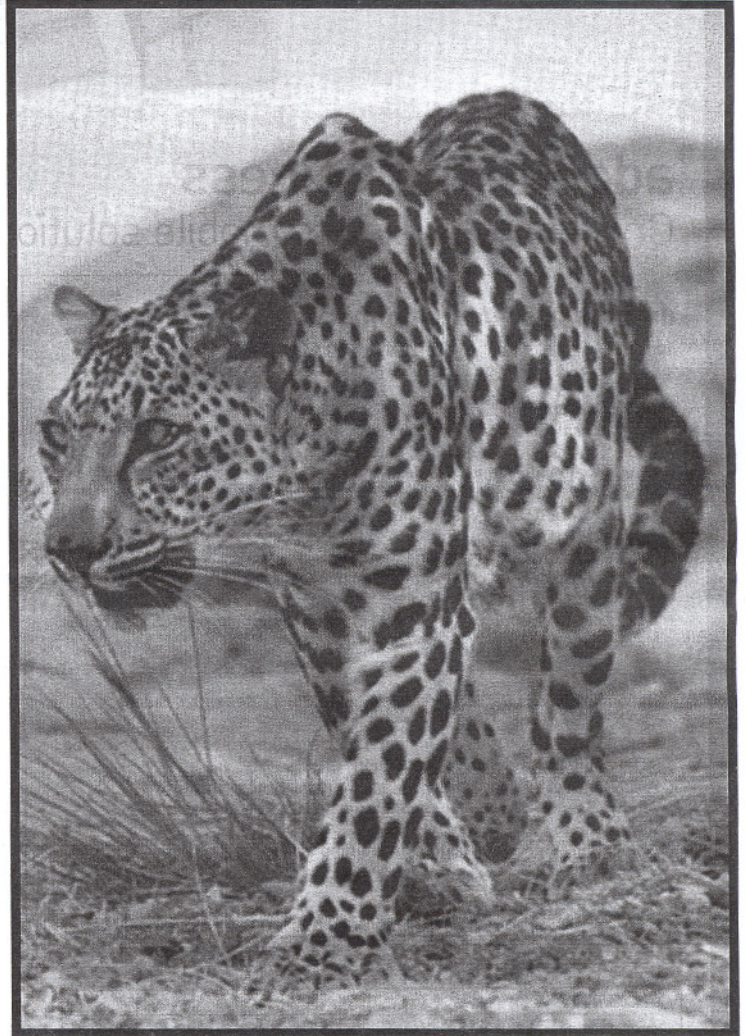
PROWLING PLAINS
TURN TO P18

FocusToday

SPECIAL REPORT» The Arabian leopard, once found roaming the region, has become a rare sight of late and many believed

Prowling the plains in search of Arabia's last big cat

The Arabian Leopard is a rare sight, especially in Musandam and the Northern Emirates where, until recently, it was believed the big cat was extinct. But, **James Reinl** meets a woman who begs to differ; she has uncovered evidence it still exists



■ The Arabian leopard is esteemed in the region's culture
SUPPLIED

When she landed in Dubai last month, big cat investigator Tessa McGregor was in little doubt that Arabian leopards had been wiped out across the Musandam and neighbouring Ras Al Khaimah areas.

Throughout decades of hunting, poaching and the gradual expansion of human activity, conservationists watched in horror as numbers of the elusive felines plummeted across Jordan, Iraq and the Arabian peninsula.

The species was dying out so fast that it was believed only 100 of the spotted animals remained in the Dhofar region of Oman and Yemen's neighbouring mountains – the final stronghold of Arabia's most powerful predator.

But a four-week expedition that ended yesterday has identified "a handful" of leopards living on the very brink of extinction in Oman's northern exclave and across the border in the UAE.

British wildlife biologist McGregor says the unexpected feline discoveries mean locals, tourism agents and officials must now make important decisions about the future of Arabia's last big cat.

FEW SIGNS OF LIFE

"We came to the Musandam [peninsula] to find out whether there were any leopards left," says McGregor. "There are records of lots of killings and shootings here in the 1970s and 1980s. The main road through the area was built in the 1980s, and this made the hunting of leopards a lot easier."

Leopard pelts make prestigious wall hangings and can fetch as much as Dh37,000 on the Asian market, says McGregor, adding that farmers have also shot many animals to protect their livestock and families.

The last leopard in Oman's Hajr mountain range was shot and killed in 1976. Killings were reported further north

in Fujairah and Ras Al Khaimah up until the end of the 1990s, but an absence of confirmed sightings in recent years led conservationists to believe the animals had been wiped out of the Musandam and the Northern Emirates.

Recently, there had only been an uncorroborated sighting in 2005 and a few tenu-

“At that point I didn't think there were any leopards left. But the sighting was niggling me”

ous signs from McGregor's two-month survey of Musandam in January last year, which revealed only partial evidence and a sample of animal "scat", or excrement, that still awaits DNA identification.

"Last year, we found a total absence of the traditional prey species of the leopard, the

gazelle and the *tahr*," says the big cat expert. "At that point, I didn't think there were any leopards left. But, there had been the sighting – and that was niggling me. After we found the scat, it was too tantalising not to come back and continue our work."

On January 14, McGregor and a dozen rookie researchers

from the leopard heartland, Jebel Samhan, in the sultanate's Dhofar region.

Known as Hadi 'bin Nimr', meaning "son of the leopard", the 24-year-old Omani has spent his adult life working with top conservationists to save the species from extinction, and was determined to track down a big cat in Musandam.

"They are the most beautiful creatures, and very important in our culture and traditions," says Al Hikmani. "But they are difficult to find and, in my life, I have only seen three. But when you see them, they are like a jewel. They have a special, amazing quality."

Researchers began the painstaking process of scouring Musandam's 1,800sq km of rough terrain, navigating through wadis and across rocky plateaus in a fleet of state-of-the-art LR3 Land Rovers complete with satellite navigation systems. More inaccessible areas were accessed by hitching helicop-

ter rides with the Royal Air Force of Oman.

Team members scoured the terrain for signs of leopard scat, scrape marks and paw prints, or "pugmarks". Others set camera traps on rocky ledges, hoping to catch a photo of a stealthy predator as it passed through an infrared beam and triggered the shutter.

'I'M 100 PER CENT SURE'

The first breakthrough came on January 16 when researchers travelled by boat to reach a remote section of the peninsula and returned with a sample of animal excrement that McGregor believes came from a leopard.

"I have seen a lot of scats during years in the field, and I think it's from a leopard," she says. "You can never be 100 per cent sure and it has to go through DNA testing – which takes a long time – but I was getting a little excited at this point. It was the first sign."

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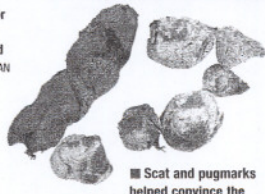
the big cat had become extinct. That was until a team of researchers embarked on a search **EmiratesToday EXCLUSIVE**

THE SEARCH FOR THE ARABIAN LEOPARD...



■ McGregor, left, inspects a goat carcass for signs of the Arabian leopard
CHANDRA BALAN

THE EVIDENCE...



■ Scat and pugmarks helped convince the team
CHANDRA BALAN



Four days later, in the dead of night, two team members heard the "heavy panting" noise of a leopard bouncing off the rocks of Wadi Rawdah while they were tucked into their sleeping bags at the campsite.

"You have to be sceptical when you get this kind of evidence," says McGregor. "But, the two team members were both serious people, and they said they heard the noise at the same time. It wasn't definite information at that stage, but I thought it was interesting."

McGregor remained uncertain as to whether leopards were living in the terrain, waiting for the evidence that would overturn the darkest fears of Arabia's big cat lovers. On January 22, the wildlife sleuth got her breakthrough. As the sun was setting, McGregor joined an Omani with good local knowledge to investigate whether a 400-metre chain of pugmarks in a nearby wadi had been made

by dogs, a wild cat called a caracal - or by a leopard.

"It was dusk and starting to rain so they were very difficult to identify," says McGregor. "We followed the tracks, there were 400 metres worth of prints. First, I thought it was caracal, but it was hard to be sure.

"But then we got to this

against all odds, the heavens opened and raindrops poured down upon the paw prints, washing away the most compelling evidence of the magnificent felines.

"Now, I am 100 per cent sure there are leopards living here," says McGregor. "I am sure there is more than one leopard but, at this stage, I

the predators' presence has been confirmed does not mean the population is safe, she hastens to add.

ALARM BELLS

"We have found evidence the animals are here, but really, we have come at a critical point in their survival. On the cusp of the leopard's disappearance from this region entirely," she says. "Of course, it does depend on the number of females that are able to breed, but I would say that the population could be gone within the next five years."

McGregor hopes the expedition will send alarm bells ringing through government offices across the region, and suggests that only the combined effort of tourism chiefs, officials and locals will enable the animals' survival.

The authorities will need to ensure poachers are punished and great swathes of land are

“We have found evidence the animals are here, but really we have come at a critical point”

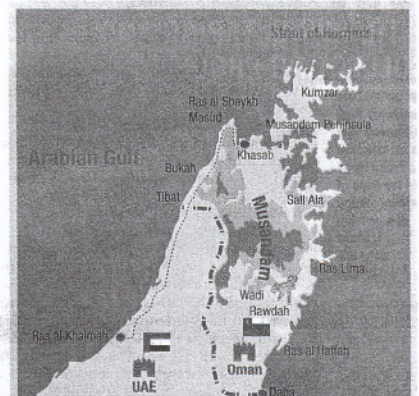
patch of the dirt track that was a bit more sandy, and there were these two pugmarks there in the sand - and it was definitely from a leopard. Nearby, I could smell where it had sprayed. That was when I knew."

At the moment the big cat investigator realised the Arabian leopards had survived

could not tell you how many. Given the scarce quantity of food that is available for them, I would imagine there are only a handful."

Days later, a goat carcass provided further evidence of leopards, having been stripped to the bone in a manner typical of big cats, says McGregor. But just because

Tracking the leopard



January 14 Set up base camp in Musandam, Wadi Rawdah	January 20 Team hears heavy panting noise of a leopard	Days later Goat carcass is found
January 16 Obtain a sample of animal excrement	January 22 Follow 400-metre of tracks	

CONTINUED ON P20

Graphic: F. SAJJAN

SPECIAL REPORT Having found evidence, the team is now certain the leopard exists **EmiratesToday EXCLUSIVE**



TRAPPING, TAPING AND COLLECTING PROOF

■ Omani field researcher Hadi Al Hikmani sets a camera trap on a rocky ledge in the hope of catching a snap of a passing leopard. **BIOSPHERE EXPEDITIONS**



CONTINUED FROM ► P19

set aside for the big cats to live in peace, she says. Although this may be expensive, the presence of leopards can prove a big draw to tourists and in turn replenish state coffers.

"Big cats have an iconic status and are culturally very important, wherever we travel. They excite people and things can happen as a result of this," says McGregor.

"From a conservation point of view, they act as a barometer for the environment. Big cats need a lot of space, and if you have big cats living somewhere then it means you have a working ecosystem."

In the UAE, big cat breed-

er Sean McKeown says he is "surprised" the expedition has yielded such positive results, with most conservationists believing the leopards had already been wiped off the Musandam peninsula and Northern Emirates.

INCREASE PUBLIC INTEREST

"I am surprised, there have been no confirmed reports for 10 years now," says McKeown, who runs a successful cheetah-breeding programme in downtown Dubai.

"It's a great surprise given the small amount of prey they have available to them there. Although it's good news, the existence of the animals over the long-term is going to be difficult without a proper

management plan being put in place."

Paul Vercammen, operations manager for the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife in Sharjah, says he hopes the expedition results will galvanise public interest in the animals and lead the way for a full-scale conservation programme before the big cats die out.

"It is good that the animals are still there, but now the real problems start," says Vercammen.

"How do we protect them? Do we provide them with food? Do we prevent further encroachment into their habitat? It raises a whole lot of issues further down the line."

Big cat detective McGregor

is currently submitting a report about future projects, saying she favours a further expedition to identify the number of surviving leopards and devise strategies to preserve their habitat.

"I do think there is space here for a conservation project," she says.

"This is an amazing area and we need to find out as much as we can now, even if only to enable us to reintroduce leopards if they die out."

"It is particularly important for this region," says McGregor. "I have been surprised by how little wildlife there is left, even in some of these remote areas. There is so little animal life in Arabia now that we have to make sure we keep what is left."

FELINE FACTS

■ The Arabian leopard is the largest and most powerfully built of all the Arabian cats but is the smallest of the 15 leopard sub-species, weighing between 20 and 30 kilos, compared to southern African animals that can reach 70 kilos in weight

■ Their coat is predominantly golden yellow and brown along the back but fades to a pale yellow or white on the belly and is almost entirely interspersed with rosettes and spots

■ Arabian leopards are restricted to rugged mountain regions, wherever there is permanent water and sufficient prey. But due to the scarcity of both throughout Arabia, population densities are always low and animals require large territories to find enough food and water

■ As traditional prey species like the Arabian tahr and mountain gazelle have decreased due to hunting and overgrazing, the leopards have been forced to prey upon goats and other domestic livestock

■ The leopards have increasingly preyed upon livestock and come into greater contact and competition with humans. As a result, farmers have shot many of the big cats, sending their numbers plummeting



■ Forced to prey upon goats GETTY IMAGES

SOURCE: BREEDING CENTRE FOR ENDANGERED ARABIAN WILDLIFE



SEARCH BY AIR AND BY SEA



■ Team members travel around Musandam in a fleet of off-roaders, courtesy of expedition sponsors Land Rover, while the Royal Air Force of Oman helped the team reach inaccessible stretches of Musandam **CHANDRA BALAN**