

# CAT

N° 62 | SPRING 2015

# news





**CATnews** is the newsletter of the Cat Specialist Group, a component of the Species Survival Commission SSC of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It is published twice a year, and is available to members and the Friends of the Cat Group.

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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome

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**CATnews** is produced with financial assistance from the Friends of the Cat Group.

Design: barbara surber, werk'sdesign gmbh  
Layout: Christine Breitenmoser  
Print: Stämpfli Publikationen AG, Bern, Switzerland

**ISSN 1027-2992** © IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group

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# Camera trapping of Arabian leopard in the Nejd region of Dhofar Mountains

Little is known about the current presence of the Arabian leopard *Panthera pardus nimr* in the Nejd region of Dhofar Mountains. We report here the first camera trapping records of this critically endangered subspecies in Wadi Amat.

The northward draining valleys of the Dhofar Mountains, known as the Nejd, would once have been part of the range of the Arabian leopard. However, in the 1980s as the area was increasingly utilized by people and their livestock, disturbance and illegal killing seemed to have pushed the remaining leopards southwards towards the southern escarpment of the Dhofar Mountains. However, by the early 2000s the local people, except for a few camel herders, had moved from the area and settled in nearby villages. This may have provided an opportunity for the return of wildlife including the Arabian leopard to their former ranges in parts of the Nejd.

In 2004, as part of the Arabian leopard survey programme, several camera traps were placed in these rugged arid areas to determine if the Arabian leopard had indeed returned. Although the cameras recorded a number of mammal prey species including the Arabian gazelle *Gazella gazelle*, the Nubian ibex *Capra nubiana*, and the rock hyrax *Procapra capensis* they failed to record the leopard.

The presence of a healthy population of herbivores was encouraging and thus further

surveys in collaboration with Biosphere Expeditions (Not-for-profit NGO) were conducted in the area during each winter 2008-2011. The expeditions recorded over 13 mammal species and one confirmed record of the leopard as a result of DNA recovered from a scat sample collected during the 2011 expedition in Wadi Uyun (Mazzolli et al 2013). The leopard seemed to have returned but the otherwise absence of sign and failure of camera traps, used with great success elsewhere in Dhofar (Spalton & Al Hikmani 2014), indicated that it was uncommon (Mazzolli 2009, Mazzolli et al. 2013).

However, following a sighting of a leopard by a local camel herder in Wadi Amat we set five camera trap stations in December 2013. This was successful and for the first time camera traps showed that the leopard was once again roaming in this part of the Nejd. The cameras recorded leopards on two different occasions on 1 (Fig. 1) and 21 January 2014 and once on 9 May 2014. On one occasion the male leopard was accompanied by a female.

These records of the Arabian leopard in the Nejd region (Fig. 2) of Dhofar indicate that the leopard range may have expanded

north, at least in the central-western Nejd. However, time will tell if this is the case or if this is a temporary expansion made by dispersing animals from a population that is elsewhere contracting south. Given that the adult population has been estimated to number only 44-58 animals (Spalton & Al Hikmani 2014), any recovery is of great significance.

## Acknowledgment

The Arabian leopard programme is funded by the Diwan of the Royal Court of Oman so the authors would like thank His Excellency the Minister of the Diwan for his ongoing support of the Arabian Leopard Programme and the General Director of the Office for Conservation of the Environment for his leadership. We would also like to thank Dr Andrew Spalton for his scientific advice, and Ramas Zaabanoot and Mabrook Zaabanoot for their field assistance.

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**Fig. 1.** Photograph of Arabian leopard in Wadi Amat on 1 January 2014 (Photo H. Al Hikmani).



**Fig. 2.** Habitat of Arabian leopard in the Nejd region (Photo H. Al Hikmani).