



## LEOPARD

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**LEOPARD** (*Panthera pardus*, Pers. Palang), the largest and most powerful member of the cat family still occurring in Iran ([FIGURE 1](#)). The Persian leopard is very variable in both size and coloration, depending on the conditions of the natural environment of its range. This geographical variability is quite natural, considering the great size of the country and the ecological diversity of its regions. Leopards occurring in the mountain forests of the Caspian region are larger and darker in color; those in the steppic regions are paler, and the lightest, palest, and smallest forms are usually found in the arid mountains of the central plateau and southern Iran. No doubt some of the very pale leopard skins seen in Iran in the distant past gave rise to the erroneous belief that snow leopards existed in this country.

The black spots and spots in the form of rosettes are relatively similar in the various races. The background color of the flanks and backs of leopards from the warmer and more arid regions tend generally to be sandy to white, sometimes with a yellowish tinge. In the northern and northwestern races by contrast—particularly when their range includes large tracts of forest—there is a touch of red or buff in the background color of the same body areas. The pelage of this race is denser and longer than that of leopards from the arid regions and is particularly soft and thick in winter. In general, leopards inhabiting higher elevations tend to have a paler winter coat.

These variabilities led to the recognition of several subspecies for Iran, such as *ciscaucasica*, *dathei*, *saxicolor* and *tulliana*. However, the validity of all but one of these is questioned, and it appears preferable to designate all Persian



leopards as *Panthera pardus saxicolor*.

The Persian leopard from the northern regions of the country is certainly one of the largest among the many races of leopards in the world. Height at shoulder is to 75 cm; the weight 60-90 kg. The leopard is a matchless athlete: it climbs trees or cliffs effortlessly; its leaps and spurts of speed are a marvel; it is a good swimmer; its strength (see below) is extraordinary; and even its technique of stalking game is so masterful that the prey is often unaware of its presence until captured. These talents are echoed in the adaptability and ecological flexibility of the leopard. It is not to be found in open, flat country—the cheetah's domain—but otherwise it frequents almost any type of habitat in Iran: the icy snowbound heights of the Alborz and Zagros mountains; the torrid hills in Fars or Baluchestan; dense forests and bare rocky mountains; any habitat, in fact, so long as the animals it preys on occur in sufficient numbers.

Such areas, perhaps more than half of the land area of Iran, some 850,000 km<sup>2</sup>, constitute the distributional range of the Persian leopard. However, over the past 25 years in many areas of this vast range the leopard has been exterminated and in others greatly reduced. In a survey conducted recently, the population was estimated to be between 550 and 850 leopards; 55 percent of them live in a certain number of the country's reserves, which comprise only 2-3 percent of the land area of Iran (Kiabi et al., 2002).

The drastic decline of the leopard throughout its range is primarily the result of the decimation or disappearance of the ungulates on which it preys—which, in turn, is the result of the destruction of range as well as steppic plants and forests, leading to loss of habitat. In many regions its extirpation is also due to ruthless hunting and poisoned bait; for, despite its being a protected species, man is the leopard's greatest enemy. Wild sheep, [ibex](#), and wild boar comprise the principal prey species of the leopard. In the northern forests it will also hunt the roe deer and marāl (see [RED DEER](#)). However, it is not above killing hares, such birds as pheasants and partridges, or even rodents. Unlike many felines, leopards can do without water for extended periods.

Except during the mating season, the leopard is usually a solitary animal and hunts alone. It is generally nocturnal or crepuscular, but has often been seen to hunt during the day in Iran. Its vision and hearing are excellent; its sense of smell is less developed, and hence it does not hunt by scent. The leopard will often hide in bushes or a rock outcrop, near a game trail or a waterhole, and

attack the unsuspecting prey with a lightning assault. It generally stalks its victims by crawling, becoming virtually invisible and progressing without a sound, until close enough to initiate its seven to eight meter bounds in rapid succession and at a speed which usually enables it to overtake its quarry over distances of 40 to 50 meters. Its power is such that it can carry prey equal to its own weight into a hiding place amidst rocks and bushes or up into a tree. In fact, it has been seen “jumping onto a rock 3 meters high with a mountain sheep clamped between its teeth” (Heptner and Sludskii, p. 258).

In Iran the mating season is usually in mid-winter, and is the only occasion when several leopards may appear together. Serious fights between two males may occur at this time. Gestation is generally between 92 and 95 days; the litter may consist of one to five cubs, but is usually two or three.

The leopard (*palang*) is frequently cited in Persian poetry. In fact, Dehkhoda’s entry (VIII, pp. 424-25) for this animal includes 50 verses in which the word appears, eleven of these being from Ferdowsi.

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