



CAPE LEOPARD TRUST

The Cape Leopard Trust (CLT) is an environmental NGO and non-profit, founded in 2004 and based in the Western Cape, South Africa.

Our mission is to protect leopards and leopard landscapes, support coexistence between humans and wildlife, and foster community custodianship of the Cape's unique biodiversity.

We aim to achieve this through the pillars of research, conservation, and education, in collaboration with communities, private landowners and partner organisations.

General Leopard Facts

Leopards are the most widely distributed and most versatile of the big cats; they occur in a wide variety of habitats, including forest, desert, savannah, and rocky mountain fynbos.

Despite this adaptability, they have lost more than 75% of their historical range and are listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Leopards are solitary and highly territorial animals; dominant adult leopards will establish a territory or home range and actively defend it against other individuals.

Leopards are mainly nocturnal (active during the night) but can also be active during the day

Each leopard has a unique rosette pattern by which it can be identified – like a fingerprint.

Leopards often scratch their claws on the bark of trees to sharpen and groom the nails; to rid the claws of parasites and prey remains; and to mark their territory (a gland between their toes releases a scent that other leopards can smell).

Leopards spray-urinate onto prominent vegetation, trees and big rocks to mark their territory and convey messages about their reproductive state. When urinating on the ground, they scrape the area with their hind feet so that the scent can persist in the soil for longer and may be carried even further with their feet as they walk.

Leopards have retractable claws, so no nail imprints are visible in their tracks/spoor. They also have two indentations on the back of the main pad, creating three bulges.

Leopard droppings have a very pungent smell and are used as territorial markers, i.e., individual leopards will defecate in conspicuous places to demarcate their territory.



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Leopards of the Cape

Leopards play a vital role in maintaining the functioning and diversity of ecosystems. The presence or absence of a top predator like the leopard affects herbivore numbers through predation, and the numbers of smaller medium-sized carnivores, (like caracal and jackal), through competition and conflict.



Unlike the lions, hyenas, elephants, buffalos and hippopotami that once roamed the Western Cape, leopards have managed to survive here and now fills the role of apex (top) predator in this ecosystem.

The leopard serves as an umbrella species for wider biodiversity conservation, because efforts focused on the long-term survival of leopard populations (which includes their habitat and prey species) also benefit other species and ecosystem processes.

Leopards in the Western Cape are smaller compared to those living in the Savanna Biome, being about half the mass. On average, female leopards in the Cape region weigh about 20kg and the males about 35kg.

Leopards in the Cape mountains occur at much lower densities (fewer than 2 leopards / 100 km²) and have home ranges up to ten times larger than leopards elsewhere in South Africa.

Because of these differences, people often refer to them as 'Cape leopards', but this is a confusing term. Currently, all leopards in Africa belong to the same subspecies – *Panthera pardus pardus*. Although leopards in the Cape mountains are geographically relatively isolated from other populations in South Africa, and have some distinctive characteristics, it is not enough to classify them as a different sub-species. To avoid misperception, 'leopards of the Cape' may be a better term to describe this unique population.



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Female leopards have 1-3 cubs per litter and can have cubs every 2 years or so. Females rear cubs alone, and it is very rare for a leopardess in the Cape mountains to raise more than two cubs to adulthood – usually only one survives. Cubs stay with their mother for up to 18 months and then leave in search of their own territories.

Leopards are opportunistic and adaptable hunters. In the Western Cape they generally take small to medium-sized prey like klipspringer, rock hyrax, grysbok and porcupine in proportion to their availability in the habitat. Baboons do not form a major part of overall leopard diet in the Western Cape.

Livestock is not a staple of leopard diet; however, leopards do sporadically cause substantial losses for commercial and subsistence livestock farmers. The Cape Leopard Trust supports a holistic approach of managing livestock instead of trying to manage predators, i.e. taking livestock off the predator's menu by using preventative measures as the first option.

Leopards in the Cape are threatened by agricultural and urban development, illegal hunting with snares or dogs for bushmeat, direct persecution by farmers, roads and traffic, rodent poisons and too frequent large-scale veld fires.

Natural threats to leopards in the Cape include poisonous snakes and scorpions, disease, malnutrition and sometimes other leopards during territorial disputes.

Due to their vulnerability, leopards in the Cape are regarded as a different management unit and require tailored conservation management plans and ongoing monitoring – one of the main tasks of the Cape Leopard Trust.

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