



(as it pertains to the Cape provinces)

SPOOR (aka tracks, prints or pugmarks)

In the Cape mountains where leopards are the biggest free-roaming predators, their tracks are fairly easy to identify, although the tracks of smaller females or sub-adults may sometimes be confused with that of caracal.

Leopard spoor size – measured from the back of the footpad to the front of the toe pads – is around 65 - 85 mm. In loose sand or when the animal slipped, the tracks can appear much bigger.

Most often, people confuse leopard spoor with those made by large dogs – but there are telltale differences:

- 1) like all cats, a leopard's claws are fully retracted into the sheaths when walking, so no nail marks are usually visible in the spoor. Dogs are unable to retract their nails and dog tracks typically have clear nail imprints in front of the toe pads (except if a dog's owner cuts and grooms the nails... But then the shape of the spoor and footpads are used as identifiers).
- 2) leopard foot pads are large in relation to their toe pads and have three distinctive lobes at the back edge.
- 3) dog foot pads are more triangular in shape compared to those of leopards.

SCATS (DROPPINGS)

In the Cape mountains where the terrain is mainly rocky and hard and spoor is not easily visible, scat is the most important clue to indicate leopard presence. Leopard scat serve as territorial markers to warn neighbouring cats that an area is occupied. They will leave their droppings in prominent places, i.e. on top of low bushes, grass tufts along trails or in the middle of a jeep-track. In this way the scat is exposed, and its scent is spread far and wide.

Leopard scat may be confused with that of caracal, but caracal scats are generally smaller and contain mostly hair – if bones are present, the fragments will be relatively small.

Sausage-shaped, segmented

average 25mm
in diameter



tapered on
one end

- Typically contains large quantities of hair, fairly large bone fragments, teeth, quills, hooves and footpads.

- Older droppings turn white from lying in the sun due to high calcium content from digested bones.



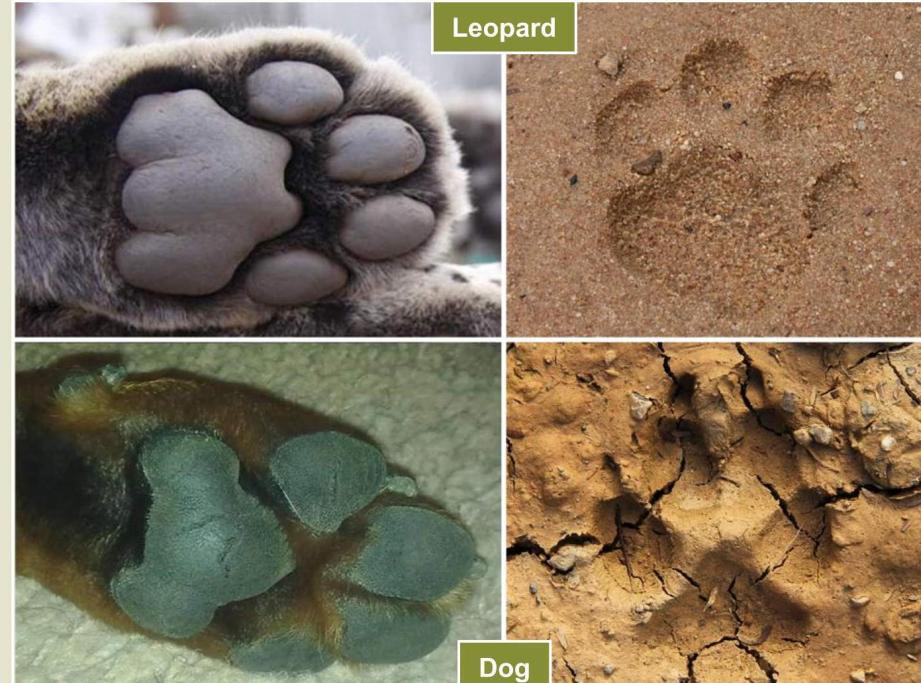
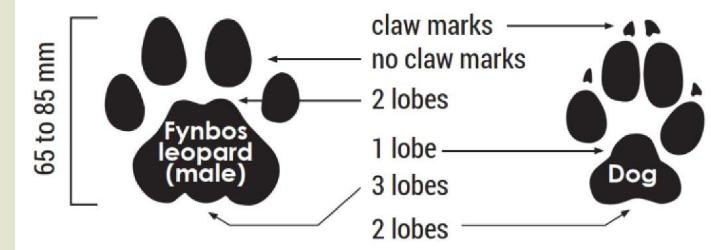
Leopard dropping



Klipspringer hoof



Porcupine quills and claws



TREE SCRATCHING

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
- to mark their territory (A gland between their toes releases a scent that other leopards can smell)



SPRAY-URINATING and SCRAPING

- Leopards spray-urinate onto prominent vegetation, trees and big rocks to mark their territory and convey messages about 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.



Male spray-urinating



Female smelling the scent

FEEDING SITES

The last sign is prey remains – in the savanna where leopards hoist their prey into trees this is an obvious clue! But in the Cape mountains these big cats simply hide their prey in thick vegetation because there are no other big predators that will steal their meal – which obviously makes it much harder for people to spot this field sign.

Leopards have exceptionally strong jaws and are known to eat almost the entire carcass, in contrast with caracal that mostly only eat the softer parts of the body and leaves the large bones. Although not encountered as often as tracks or scats, certain kill remains can be telltale of leopard activity.

If you encounter any of these signs in any of the Cape provinces, submit your record to our database!

See capeleopard.org.za/leopard-data-portal for more.



Photo examples of LEOPARD FIELD SIGNS



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