



Cape Leopard Trust Boland Project – Southern Survey

Background

The CLT Boland Project Southern Survey study area stretches all the way from the Jonkershoek Nature Reserve near Stellenbosch south through the mountainous Hottentots-Holland NR to the coastal towns bordering the Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve. This vast area forms part of the larger Boland Project study area going north as far as Beaverlac Nature Reserve in the Groot Winterhoek Mountains.

The CLT Boland project aims to:

- establish the first rigorous population estimates for leopards in the Boland mountains;
- obtain baseline data necessary for ensuring the survival of leopards in the Cape mountains (ie. estimate home range size, movement patterns, habitat use and diet);
- identify areas of and alleviate leopard-farmer conflict;
- establish the presence/absence/relative abundance of resident mammal populations.

How do you find such a secretive animal in such a vast and untamed area?

The short and general answer is: You don't! Cape Leopards are notoriously shy and elusive; extremely few people have been lucky enough to see one – and when they do it is usually only a short glimpse. Fortunately, there is a solution – digital cameras, containing an infrared sensor triggered by motion and heat (referred to as a “camera trap”). Camera-trapping has proved to be a very effective way of estimating the numbers of elusive and nocturnal animals such as large carnivores (e.g. tigers in India). It is a non-invasive and comparatively affordable option, since it does not require the capture, handling, or immobilisation of animals.

Photographs of leopards are an exceptionally useful tool, since each leopard has a distinctive spot pattern – almost like our fingerprints – by which it can be identified. Camera traps can be deployed singly, but ideally a camera station should consist of two cameras opposite each other. Such double stations are used to compile “leopard identikits” – photos of both an individual's left and right flanks – which are crucial in estimating the number of individuals in an area.

Results from the Southern Survey study area

For the four month period from mid December 2010 to April 2011, 82 of these cameras dotted the landscape collecting data in all weather conditions. A total of 20 different mammal species (including Cape clawless otter, honey badger, Cape fox, striped polecat and African weasel) were recorded and no less than 18 individual adult leopards and two cubs were identified.

Of particular interest to visitors of the Green Mountain Trail will be one specific adult male leopard – Popeye (BM17). This individual was photographed on several occasions along a section of the trail close to the Houwhoek Inn. Popeye seems to be a dominant individual and has been photographed at a number of other sites within and adjacent to the Groenlandberg, Houwhoek and Hottentots-Holland Nature Reserves.

Research done on collared leopards in the Cederberg has revealed that the Cape leopard is much smaller than their Bushveld cousins, with healthy adult individuals reaching only half the average weight of leopards in the Kruger. Furthermore, Cape leopards are very elusive and notoriously shy of people and will readily retreat if encountered. Hikers therefore need not be afraid to hike in the area and should consider themselves very fortunate should they see one of these majestic cats..

For further information please visit the Cape Leopard Trust website (www.capeleopard.org.za) or contact Anita Meyer and Jeannie Hayward at boland@capeleopard.org.za

The Cape Leopard Trust

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