

The leopards within the 16000ha area

Written by AJ Rousseau

During 2009 we did a population density study on leopards within the area that was going to become the NEW PRIVATE, OKONJIMA 16000ha NATURE RESERVE.

The aim was to try and establish the amount of leopards that are in the area and to get an idea of how many cheetahs we would be able to be put in the reserve. The study was done by putting out bait throughout the area and monitoring leopard activity at the bait by motion-trigger trail cameras. At the time of the study the boundary fence of the reserve was not completely finished and the electricity was not activated, therefore the leopards were able to move freely across borders between the protected reserve and the more hostile commercial farms surrounding the reserve. The end estimate was about 22 leopards identified across the park with about 40% overlapping the boundary on to farmland.

Of the initial 22 there are 7 cats that are seen on occasion and we are sure that their territories fall within the now fenced-in Okonjima Reserve. They are made up of 4 females and 3 males. But it must be said that we estimate a total of between 12 and 16 cats live in the reserve now, but cannot 100% confirm that figure yet. The study will be redone in 2011 and 2012 and that will give us an exact total. Seeing as the leopards are able to breed freely we will have to repeat the study regularly to keep an eye on the population so that it does not exceed the capacity of the reserve. One has to keep in mind that the reserve was created not only for leopards and cheetahs, but also other carnivores that need rehabilitation. Therefore the densities of different predators have to be closely monitored to make sure that the predator/prey balances, as well as different predator's interactions stay healthy.

Of the 7 cats seen, 3 are radio collared - all female. Of those the most followed is a female named MAFUTA. She holds a prime territory full of rivers and gullies. There are also 5 water points in that area which in turn supports a lot of prey species. We have also recently discovered that she has two new cubs which are about 5 months old. At the moment we only have video footage of the cubs and should in time get some photographs which we can use as identification later. They should stay with her for at least another 12 months and I am sure we will start to see them more regularly in the future.



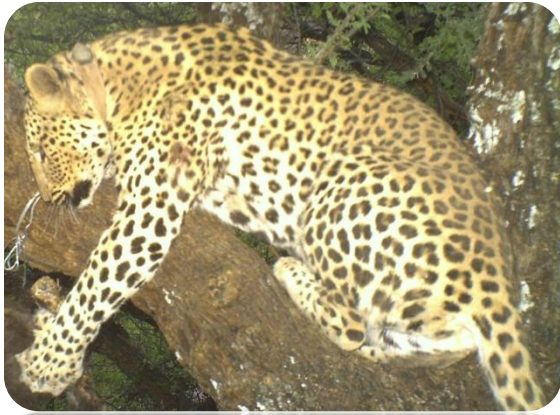
These 2 pics show mafuta coming and going at a waterhole at two different occasions

The other female is named ELECTRA - and is in fact Mafuta's daughter from 2008. She shares half of her mother's territory and you sometimes still find them close together. They tend to hang around the area of the Okonjima Villa and sometimes drink water at the dam in front of the Lodge. Electra's territory stretches into the mountains and that makes it a bit difficult to find her. She tends to spend half her time in the hills and the other half around the entrance of the park stretching all the way to the Villa. She is one of the few cats that does not react to a spotlight and seem to be very relaxed if viewed at night. She is also one of the girls we are keeping an eye on for cubs.



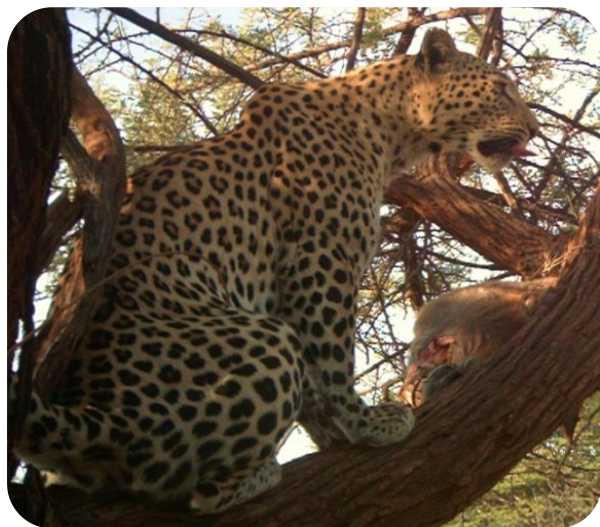
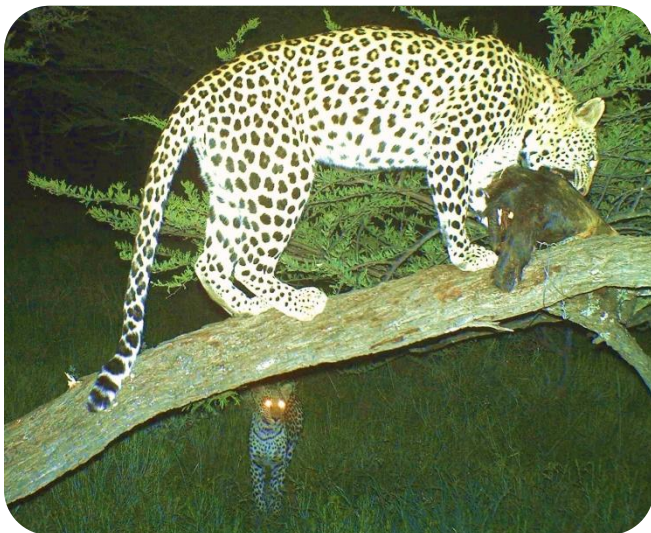
The photo on the left is Electra at a dead eland which she found, and on the right is her before she was collared. The picture on the left was taken via a camera trap.

The other female lives in an area we call the "Poort". Her name is LUNDU which means mountain and which explains exactly where she spends 95% of her time. She is a very difficult cat to find as the terrain is impossible to drive in. The good thing about her is the fact that she is often seen at the Bush Camp night-hide and has become very relaxed around lights and flash photography. At the time of the initial study she had 2 male cubs with her, but we do not know where they settled in the end. Being males they will move around a lot until they find an unoccupied territory.



Both pictures of Lundu were taken via camera trap, on the left at a bait, and the right on a road.

Another female seen on some occasions is named LADY MARATHON after the property that makes up a large part of her range. Although you don't often see her by car, she is seen often spotted around baits and on camera traps. At the moment she is not collared but probably will get collared in 2011. She was the first leopard to be caught on camera, and even after the initial study she still comes past bait sites on a regular basis. At the time of the study she also had a single cub with her but we were not able to see whether it was a male or female. On some occasion we do see a young male in the same range and we think it might be the cub we saw in 2009. Of all the leopard I have mentioned so far she has the largest territory overlapping with at least 2 other females. We hope to do a DNA study later on to try and see who is related to whom. This will shed a lot of light on the theory that female leopards do make space within their own home range for their daughters. If you look at the photo on the left you can see the cub in the background.



The 2 males we see also have slightly overlapping territories and between the 2 of them they cover all 4 females mentioned above. The first one we named SKITTISH, because of the fact that if you do find him he disappears into the bush in a heartbeat. The other we named MONSTER because of his size. Monster I have seen on a few occasions and his range falls mostly in drive-able terrain. Skittish on the other hand holds most of the mountains and the foot hills running up to the mountain. Their territories seem to overlap around the Okonjima Villa area and that makes it difficult to know who fathered which cubs. None of the males have radio-collars, so bumping into them is pure luck. Whether we will collar them still needs to be decided.

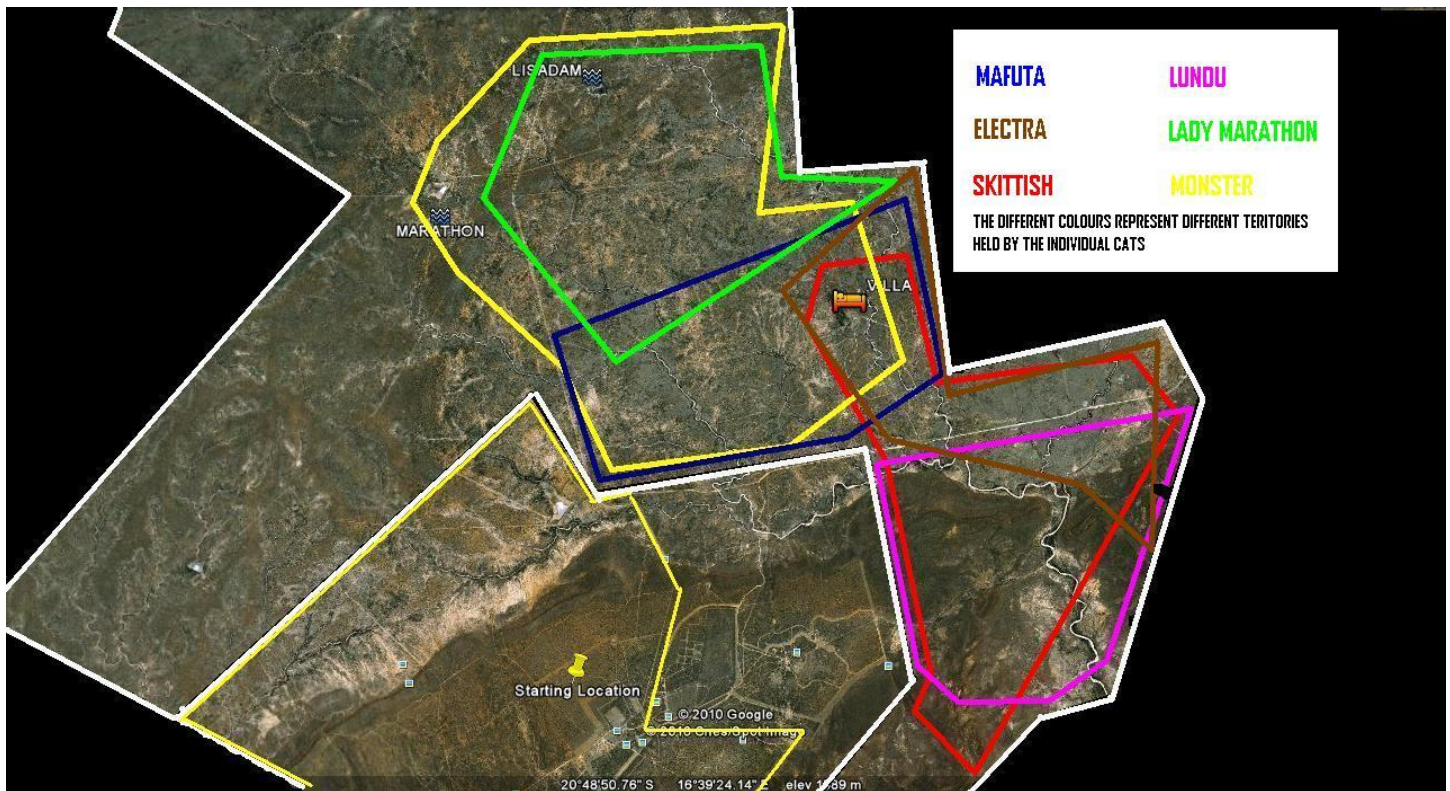


The male on the left is Skittish and the one on the right is Monster.

Of the positively identified leopards we see, we will concentrate mostly on the cubs to get more relaxed around vehicles. When they are very small they tend to react the same way as their mothers, hiding away from vehicles. Around the age of 7 months they are left on their own a lot and that is the time they are very curious and bold. This is the time you need to spend as much time with them as possible and try to build trust between them and vehicles. The only thing is finding them, mostly that is pure luck, but when young they tend to not move around that much and stay in a small area where their mother can find them again.

Since the initial data collection exercise with bait and cameras, we now monitor leopard activity by putting cameras on every leopard kill we find to establish who the kill belongs to.

If you look at the map below showing the different territories you will see that there is a large overlap around the villa for a large number of cats. It is most properly due to the large number of game that live in that area.



The aim is to continue monitoring the leopards and over time develop a bloodline which can be followed and also traced back to its origins; a leopard family tree.

March 2011: The 22 000ha reserve is now complete (17 May 2010) and all the leopards within the OKONJIMA NATURE RESERVE, are protected against any farmers that might want to shoot them. We will soon plan to follow up study to verify exactly how many leopards live in this protected area.

SADLY we have lost 5 of the 17 recently released, captive cheetahs – 4 to leopard attacks and 1 natural cause that developed after a warthog injury. It is important to try and identify which leopard are killing the cheetah, or were the cheetah trying to stupidly and ignorantly defend their kills. Perhaps they tried to chase a leopard, which could have been the case with Frankie – the first fatality. Frankie and his other siblings got away with that crazy act the first time and this was witnessed by myself, but perhaps the 2nd time the leopard was bigger, or not put off by the 4 other siblings?

All interesting questions we are looking into. Keep reading the OKONJIMA and AFRICAT news updates on

www.okonjima.com www.africat.org