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# Amur Leopard

The Amur leopard, (Panthera pardus Orientals) also known as the Far Eastern leopard, is a leopard subspecies native to the Primorye region of southeastern Russia and the Jilin Province of northeast China. It is classified as Critically Endangered since 1996 by IUCN. In 2007, only 19–26 wild Amur leopards were estimated to survive. Recent data published by the World Wildlife Association indicates that there are roughly 57 individuals in the wild today.[1]

## Information[]

Amur leopards differ from other subspecies by a thick coat of spot-covered fur. They show the strongest and most consistent divergence in pattern. Leopards from the Amur River basin, the mountains of north-eastern China and the Korean Peninsula have pale, cream-colored coats, particularly in winter. Rosettes on the flanks are 5 cm × 5 cm (2.0 in × 2.0 in) and widely spaced, up to 2.5 cm (0.98 in), with thick, unbroken rings and darkened centers.

Their coat is fairly soft with long and dense hair. The length of hair on the back is 20–25 mm (0.79–0.98 in) in summer and up to 70 mm (2.8 in) in winter. The winter coat varies from fairly light yellow to dense yellowish-red with a golden tinge or rusty-reddish-yellow. The summer pelage is brighter with a more vivid coloration pattern. Compared with other leopard subspecies, they are rather small in size, with males larger than females. Males measure from 107 to 136 cm (42 to 54 in) with an 82 to 90 cm (32 to 35 in) long tail, a shoulder height of 64 to 78 cm (25 to 31 in), and a weight of 32.2–48 kg (71–106 lb). Females weigh from 25 to 42.5 kg (55 to 94 lb).

Amur leopards have long limbs and are well adapted to walking through deep snow.

The distribution of the Amur leopard has been reduced to a fraction of its original range. It once extended throughout northeastern ("Manchurian") China, including Jilin and Heilongjiang Provinces, and throughout the Korean Peninsula. The species range in Russia was dramatically reduced during the seventies, losing about 80% of its former range.The northern boundary of their existence commenced on the coast of the Sea of Japan at 44°N and ran south at a distance of 15–30 km (9.3–18.6 mi) from the coast to 43°10'N. There it turned steeply westward, north of the Suchan River basin, then north to encompass the source of the Ussuri River and two right bank tributaries in the upper reaches of the Ussuri. There the boundary turned westward toward the bank of Khanka Lake. In the 1950s, leopards were observed 50 km (31 mi) north of Vladivostok and in Kedrovaya Pad Nature Reserve. The association of Amur leopards with mountains is fairly definite. They are confined more to places where wild sika deer live or where deer husbandry is practiced. In winter, they keep to snow-free rocky slopes facing south.

Today, the Amur leopard inhabits about 5,000 km2 (1,900 sq mi). The last remaining viable wild population, estimated at 57 individuals, is found in a small area in the Russian Province of Primorsky Krai, between Vladivostok and the Chinese border.[citation needed] In adjacent China, 7-12 scattered individuals are estimated to remain. In South Korea, the last record of an Amur leopard dates back to 1969, when a leopard was captured on the slopes of Odo Mountain, in South Kyongsang Province. Along with leopards crossing between Russia, China, and North Korea across the Tumen River despite a high and long wire fence marking the boundary. Ecological conditions along the border in the mountains are not yet monitored. In China, Amur leopards were photographed by camera traps in Wangqing and Hunchun, east Jilin Province, China.[citation needed] The only official North Korean government webportal reported in 2009 that some leopards were in Myohyangsan Nature Reserve located in Hyangsan County. It is likely the southernmost living group of Amur leopard.

Amur leopard numbers have been reduced via over hunting of prey and poaching combined with habitat loss from agricultural and urban development. However, both camera-trapping and snow-tracking surveys indicate that the population has been stable over the last 30 years, but with a high rate of turnover of individuals. If appropriate conservation actions are taken, there is great potential for increasing population size, increasing survival rates and habitat recovery in both Russia and China.

Amur leopards are crepuscular and usually start hunting shortly before sunset. They are active again in the early mornings. During the day, they rest and hide in caves or dense thickets, but rarely hunt. They are solitary, unless females have offspring.

They are extremely conservative in their choice of territory. An individual's territory is usually located in a river basin which generally extends to the natural topographical borders of the area. The territory of two individuals may sometimes overlap, but only slightly. Depending on sex, age, and family size, the size of an individual's territory can vary from 5,000–30,000 ha (19–116 sq mi). They may use the same hunting trails, routes of constant migration, and even places for extended rest constantly over the course of many years. At places where wild animals are abundant, leopards live permanently or perform only vertical migrations, trailing herds of ungulates and avoiding snow. In the Ussuri region the main prey of leopards are roe and sika deer, Manchurian wapiti, musk deer, moose, and wild pig. More rarely they catch hare, badger, fowl, and mice. In Kedrovaya Pad Nature Reserve roe deer is their main prey year-round, but they also prey on young Eurasian black bears less than two years old.

During a study of radio-collared Amur leopards in the early 1990s, a territorial dispute between two males at a deer farm was documented, suggesting that deer farms are favoured habitats. Female leopards with cubs are relatively often found in the proximity of deer farms. A large number of domestic deer is a reliable food source that may help to survive difficult times.

They can run with a speed of 37 mi (60 km) per hour, and are able to leap more than 19 ft (5.8 m) horizontally and up to 10 ft (3.0 m) vertically.

Sexual maturity sets in at the age of 2–3 years and ability to reproduce continues up to 10–15 years of age. Estrus lasts 12–18 days, and in exceptional cases up to 25 days. Gestation requires 90–105 days, but usually 92–95 days. The weight of a newborn cub is 500–700 g (1.1–1.5 lb). The young open their eyes on the 7th–10th day and begin to crawl on the 12th–15th day. By the second month, they emerge from their dens and also begin to eat meat. Cubs begin to be weaned at three months and taught to hunt. Lactation continues for five or six months. Cubs reach independence at approximately two to three years old. They stay with their mother until they are around eighteen months to two years in age. Juveniles sometimes stay with their mother until she comes into estrus again. Until the 1970s, cubs were seen in Kedrovaya Pad Nature Reserve, Primorsky Krai, and in northeastern China most often from the end of March through May; litters comprised two to three cubs. In captivity, some individuals have lived for 21 years.

Amur leopards breed in spring and early summer. The breeding season is in the late winter months, usually around January or February. The gestation period for the mother is 90–105 days. So their cubs are usually born April through June. One to four cubs are born. They are weaned at the age of 3 months. The young usually leave their mothers at the age of one and a half to two years. During a population census in 1997, four females found with young had only one cub each. Results of radio telemetry studies confirmed that young stay with their mother for two years. In Kedrovaya Pad Nature Reserve the young of two different litters were observed with their mothers at the same time.

Breeding can take place year round, and the average litter size is 2-3 cubs. Amur leopards can live up to 20 years in captivity, but the average lifespan in the wild is unknown. A male leopard radio-collared at 2–3 years of age by WCS scientists in 1994 was photographed during camera trapping surveys in 2003, proving that leopards can live more than 10 years in their natural habitat. Results of WCS camera-trapping research, however, indicate that mortality rates in the wild may be very high.[citation needed]

Amur leopards are threatened by poaching, encroaching civilization, new roads, poaching of prey, forest fires, inbreeding, possible coexisting with disease carriers and transmitters, and exploitation of forests.

Due to the small number of reproducing Amur leopards in the wild, the gene pool is so reduced that the population is at risk from inbreeding depression.

Tigers can eliminate leopards if densities of large and medium-sized prey species are low. Competition between these predators supposedly decreases in summer, when small prey species are more available. In winter, conditions are less favorable for tigers and the extent of trophic niche overlap with that of Amur leopards probably reaches its peak.

Poaching of leopards is the main threat to their survival. There are rumors but no evidence that Chinese traders buy leopard skins; no skins were confiscated at borders to China. In 14 months from February 2002 to April 2003, seven skins or part of skins were confiscated, six in Russia and one in China. Leopards are most often killed by local Russians from small villages in and around the leopard habitat. Most of these villagers hunt entirely illegally; they have no licenses for hunting nor for their guns, and they are not members of one of the local hunting leases.

In 1999, skins of poached Amur leopards were offered for $500–1,000 near a protected area in Russia.

Human-induced fires are the main threat to the survival of the Amur leopard. Setting fire to fields is a habit of rural farmers who start them for a particular purpose such as improving fertility for livestock grazing, killing ticks and other insects, making scrap metals visible so that they can be easily collected, culling vegetation along the train tracks, and stimulating fern growth. Young ferns are sold in shops, served in restaurants and also exported to China as a popular dish. Surveys using satellite images and GIS techniques revealed that on average 19% of south-west Primorye burns annually, and a total of 46% burned at least once in six years. Due to long and frequent fire history, much of the land in south-west Primorye has been converted to permanent grasslands. These frequent fires cause degradation of suitable leopard habitat into unsuitable habitat. Repeated fires have created open "savannah" landscapes with grass, oak bushes and isolated trees that leopards seem to avoid, again probably because of low ungulate densities.

The Amur Leopard only exists in an area in the wild smaller than 2500 km2, smaller than Dorset. This border area is located between far east Russia and northeast China.

## References[]