

Are Leopards Choosy When Scratching Trees?

by Chris and Tilde Stuart*

During the course of surveys to establish population sizes of the leopard *Panthera pardus* in the Cedarberg Mountains, southwestern Cape Province, and the Soutpansberg range in the far northern Transvaal (both in South Africa), a note was kept of those species of tree utilised as scratching posts by these cats.

The vegetation of the Cedarberg is classified as Mountain Fynbos/Macchia (Acocks 69) and consists of low to medium height scrub/bush cover with larger trees along the water-courses, with cedars *Widdringtoniacedarbergensis* scattered throughout the range. Eight scratching trees were located, namely 1 Cape olive *Olea africana*, 1 waboom *Protea nitida*, 1 oak *Quercus ruber*, 1 cedar *W. cedarbergensis* and 4 lance-leaved guarri *Euclia linearis*.

The Soutpansberg range has elements of several vegetation types but it is dominated by Lowveld Sour Bushveld and Mixed Bushveld (Acocks 9 and 18), with high forest pockets in the gorges and along river-courses. A total of 19 scratching trees were located and all were waterberries *Syzygium cordatum*. These are medium to large trees (up to 15 m) that are water-loving and form dense shade. The wood is medium hard. Despite the presence of many other trees such as the forest fever tree *Anthocleista grandiflora*, wild medlar

Vangueria infausta and leadwood *Combretum imberbe*, only waterberries were being used as scratching trees by leopards.

Without exception all the scratching trees located in the two montane areas were situated on, or close to, water-courses. In the Cedarberg, 50% of all scratchings were on one tree species and in the Soutpansberg all were observed on one species of tree. In nearly all cases trees had been used repeatedly and in some cases over long periods of time.

The above observations raise some interesting questions. Why are some species of tree favoured over others? Has this "favouritism" been observed in other areas within the distribution range of the leopard? Is each scratching tree the exclusive property of a single adult leopard, or may two or more animals utilise the same tree if their territories/home ranges overlap?

We see some potential here for using the spread and abundance of scratching trees within any given area to establish areas of leopard activity and possibly as a coarse measure of density.

In order to investigate this further we would welcome hearing from any researcher/observer who has recorded scratching trees, particularly species favoured by leopard.

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Leopard Problems

Attacks by leopards on people are occurring in several parts of India, wildlife officials told the Cat Group chairman recently.

The attacks occur especially in hill areas, such as the Himalayan foothills and the south Indian ranges, but also in other places. Leopards, which are able to make use of minimal cover, are living close to habitation, feeding on small domestic animals such as goats and dogs. Children are risk.

The officials said it was often difficult to trace leopards involved in incidents, and people often became restive and hostile as a result.

In Ranchi, in Bihar State, a leopard attacked an eight-year-old girl while she was getting water in the morning. The leopard fled when her father cried out. When people pursued the leopard it attacked and injured one man, but was speared to death.

Officials said the leopard was 15-16 years old, an old animal.

In a village in Rajasthan a leopard was trapped in a cattle pen after it had mauled four villagers. Officials from the Wildlife Institute of India went to the scene. One was bitten on the hand, but a forester secured the leopard by throwing his raincoat over it. The leopard was caught alive, but died

while being taken to Jaipur Zoo, presumably from injuries when villagers rammed it with poles in the cattle pen.

There have been two recent leopard incidents on the outskirts of Bombay city. A cub was spotted perched in a tree in a housing compound. It was darted with a tranquillizer, lowered to the ground and taken to the nearby Borivli National Park. In the second incident schoolchildren spotted a leopard cub in a gutter. It escaped police attempts to capture it and took refuge under a bus, actually climbing on top of a wheel. It was tranquillized and released in the Borivli park.

In South Africa a leopard attacked a Kruger National Park receptionist in her bungalow. Mr Johan Kloppers, head of nature management at Skukuza rest camp, said the leopard had entered the camp a week earlier. When it did not leave, an attempt was made to dart it, but it was hit in the wrong place and ran into the woman's home, tried unsuccessfully to pounce on her and then swiped her with a paw. Following another unsuccessful attempt to dart the leopard it was shot.

Earlier a leopard climbed a fence at Shingwedzi camp in the Kruger and killed a gate guard.