

The Armenian Leopard by GREG BALAGIAN

Only three subspecies of the leopard are positively recognized.* Originally classified as *Panthera pardus ciscaucasica*, the Caucasian, (Persian, Asia Minor or Anatolian) leopard has been reclassified as *P. p. tulliana* with advancements in DNA testing.

P. p. tulliana existed in Armenia since pre-historic times. In the mid-20th century leopards were relatively common in the country's mountains. However, between 2000 and 2002, tracks of only ten leopards were found in the rugged terrain of Khosrov State Reserve. Leopards were also known to live on the Meghri Ridge in the extreme south of Armenia, where only one individual was camera trapped between 2006 and 2007.

The causes of the dramatic decline of Armenia's leopard population were numerous. The local prey base could support only four to ten individuals; also poaching, deforestation and human-induced wild fires occurred.

During surveys in 2013–2014, camera traps recorded leopards in 24 locations in southern Armenia, of which 14 are located in the Zangezur Mountains. A later survey using camera traps revealed the presence of 11 unique individuals.

The Caucasian leopards are among the largest subspecies of leopards, comparable in size to African leopards. Their coloration varies from grayish to reddish with large black rosettes on the back and flanks, smaller rosettes on shoulders and upper legs, and spots on head and neck.

Some adult males could weigh up to 150 lbs. and reach 75 inches in length.

Since 2002, a leopard protection program has been implemented by the Ministry of Nature Protection of the Republic of Armenia in cooperation with WWF Armenia. It aims at protecting the habitat of leopards and their main prey, two wild species: the ibex (goat) and mouflon (sheep).

The ministry named 2019 The Year of the Caucasian Leopard. The Armenian Leopard Conservation Society, a youth ecological group, is studying the leopard in Armenia and in the Caucasus region.

Historically, this endangered subspecies was distributed throughout Armenia, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, southern Russia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan except for steppe areas.

The Caucasian leopard population is currently estimated between 800 to 1,300 mature individuals with a steady decline. The largest population live in Iran.

Recently Armenia issued a stylized Caucasian leopard in a two-stamp set in the continuous series of endangered species. This is the third time this rare subspecies appears on a stamp from Armenia. The first time was in 1996 (Scott 569) and the second time was on the 2006 stamp commemorating the 100 year anniversary of the birth of the famous Armenian naturalist and writer, Vakhtang Ananyan, whose *Prisoners of Leopard's Gorge* is considered a masterpiece of children's literature (Scott 726).❖

*Five other leopard subspecies are possibilities.



Armenia 569 (1996)



Armenia (2019)



Armenia 726
(2006)

Right. *Prisoners of Leopard's Gorge* (book cover), by Vakhtang Ananyan.

