



IN THE BAG: A tranquillised leopard is weighed by Cape Leopard Trust staff. Averaging just 20kg for females and about 35kg for males, Cape mountain leopards are significantly smaller than their relatives elsewhere in the sub-continent that can reach 100kg.



ON TRACK: Leopards have impressive canines .



SHADOWY: The adult male known as M6 to researchers but usually just called Max, is caught on a camera trap negotiating a Cederberg stream.

PICTURES: CAPE LEOPARD TRUST

Endangered ghosts of the Cape

The ongoing battle to protect the Cape mountain leopard from being killed has been one man's focus, writes **John Yeld**

THEY move like shadows through the rugged mountain landscapes – graceful, silent, merging almost invisibly with the shapes and shadows of the steep, rocky, fynbos-clad slopes where they spend most of their time.

And, while your chances of seeing one of these beautiful wild creatures are exceedingly remote, you can be sure that if one is around, it will have seen you. This is the Cape mountain leopard, one of the most intriguing yet enigmatic animals around because of its secretive, solitary nature.

Since the demise of the lion and the hyena to the guns of the European colonialists in previous centuries, the Cape mountain leopard has been the apex predator of the fynbos region of the Western Cape, although it is now effectively restricted to wilderness mountain areas like the Cederberg and the Boland mountains.

Until quite recently, there was a possibility this persecuted leopard would also go locally extinct because it was viewed as a serious problem animal by many farmers for its habit of taking small stock like sheep. Fortunately this negative attitude has changed significantly (but not entirely) during the past decade or so – particularly in the Cederberg, but also elsewhere in the province.

While it would never claim sole credit for this change, the Cape Leopard Trust, which celebrated its 10th anniversary last weekend, has played a major role in helping to change attitudes and ensure a future for this creature whose conservation status is “threatened” because of its low population density, large home range and limited natural habitat.

The trust came into being as a result of a serendipitous meeting between two people: zoologist and one-time nature guide and game ranger Quinton Martins, and former businessman, Cederberg property owner and conservationist Johan van der Westhuizen, who also founded the Cederberg Conservancy.

Why the Cape mountain leopard? Because it represents habitat integrity and wilderness – there’s that special connection, Martins, 42, said.



OUT: Cape Leopard Trust staff and a vet work on a Cape mountain leopard that had been caught in an illegal gin-trap.

And besides, he was personally intrigued by these animals that were then still vigorously persecuted by many farmers – in one year, as many

as 17 leopards were killed in the Cederberg, with an annual average of nearly eight. “The first time I really got to work with leopards in nature,



WELL-SPOTTED: Cape leopard cubs, Patch and Rosie, in their grassy Cederberg den at just a few days old – the first time such a photograph has been taken.

in the wild, was when I was working at Londolozi, and that was a most amazing experience. So when I came to the Cederberg, I’d already

worked in the bush for about 10 years – in Botswana, in the Lowveld, doing safaris in East Africa, seeing leopards there. “But I used to come and hike

in the Cederberg in whatever free time I had; it’s a spiritual place for me. And I would see the tracks of leopards and speak to people about them but

never get to see them – these mystical ghost-like animals that you know are there. It just inspired me, as an opportunity to come here (the Cederberg) to try and find these creatures and find out more about what they’re doing.”

It was a tough start in 2003. Martins sold everything, including his cameras and car, to fund his leopard work, and he was so poor he had to hitch lifts to the Cederberg.

“I really had nothing. I was out on my own here, doing this work pretty much for the first few years, and while the support from the farmers was really amazing, it was tough.”

Fortunately he met Van der Westhuizen, who helped him financially and lent him his old Land Rover to get around in, and together they founded the trust in 2004.

The rest, as they say, is history, although it took Martins a full year to see his first leopard in the wild, and since then he’s seen just seven in nine years.

His early work was in the so-called Red Cederberg, the eastern section of the mountain range. “It’s true wilderness, it was just perfect. I spent five years hiking this area and I never came across a single person,” he recalled. He photographed the first leopard on his extensive network of camera traps here, at Bakkkrans, on May 31, 2004.

The first leopard he tried to catch, at Drieheek farm where it had attacked sheep, twice managed to escape from the cage trap before finally being properly caught and collared in August that year. Appropriately, this male leopard was named Houdini. “And he was the very last leopard that would have been killed under the permit system because since then not a single permit has been issued by CapeNature in the Cederberg for killing any leopards, so it’s been an

amazing thing,” Martins said to applause at the celebration function last weekend.

Today the trust has 12 people working for it and while it still runs projects in the Cederberg where it has its headquarters, it also operates in Namaqualand, the Boland mountains and the Gouritz River area of the southern Cape. As well as leopards, it manages projects on, or supports research into, other species like caracal, dassies and Verreaux’s Eagle.

Martins is particularly proud of the trust’s expanding environmental education programme, managed by his wife Elizabeth. “It’s going from strength to strength, I really think it’s going to be our future. We have so much to give – it’s amazing to see what an impact this project has on people.

“And to bring children out into this wilderness and to allow them to be immersed in a place that is just so special, and have them walk away with something that will hopefully influence them for the rest of their lives, it’s amazing.”

Van der Westhuizen said the Cederberg Conservancy – a 1 710km² area of pristine wilderness interspersed with farms – is the first in South Africa to be declared a hunting and gin-trap-free area.

“It’s really an instrument and a catalyst for the conservation in the region, too. So this has been quite a remarkable story for me,” he told the celebration dinner.

Since 2003, the trust knows of just two leopards that have been killed by people in the Greater Cederberg region and only one of these was in the conservancy area.

Martins said: “It’s an incredible thing, this journey I’ve had. It really is an incredible privilege for me, I can’t describe it in words at all. And all the people who’ve made it possible – the support has been amazing.”

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ALPHA MALE: An adult male Cape mountain leopard is captured on a camera trap while patrolling his huge mountain territory.